Reprise III

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Summary

The third arc of the Reprise AU. Eleven years ago, Ben Kenobi emerged from death and into his own past, sent on a mission by the Force itself to reclaim balance. The galaxy has been forever changed by his presence, and he does not work alone. With every ally that joins Ben’s cause, the stakes rise higher. Now, as Anakin Skywalker comes of age, Ben must reconcile his own mission with that of the Chosen One. The Jedi, the Republic, the Galaxy, and everything Ben has ever held dear depend - once more - on the boy from Tatooine.

Notes

I said something about taking a break, didn't I? Looking back, that feels strangely like a New Year's resolution. Welp, don't expect lightning fast updates, but here you go. Enjoy.

EDIT: The first time around my copy/paste function got screwed up and put some of the bigging bits on the end. Some sharp-eyed commenters and my beta noticed before I did. Thanks guys - sorry about that!
Chapter 1

Ben elbowed his way past a gaggle of junior padawans in the commissary, set his tray of food down on the table next to Qui-Gon, and took a seat. Across the table, Obi-Wan gave him a small wave. Qui-Gon was in the middle of saying:

"-they're ready for that kind of involvement with any interplanetary government, let alone the Republic. I say they should stay away. The fewer cronies that have their eye on it, the better."

"What are we talking about?" Ben asked, spreading a napkin on his lap.

"Qui-Gon's just returned from Comra, where he's been moonlighting as an anti-salesman for the Galactic Republic," Obi-Wan supplied.

"Anti-salesman?" Ben looked to Qui-Gon for explanation.

"Jedi are not meant to sell anything, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon reprimanded his young friend.

The ginger-haired knight snorted. "It's a good thing, too, you'd drive us into bankruptcy." He took a huge bite of his sandwich.

"I only said this planet wasn't ready for an interplanetary alliance," Qui-Gon said in an aside to Ben. "It's hardly got its own affairs under control, and the majority of the population is as of yet too xenophobic to reap the benefits of Republic membership. They need time. I convinced their rulers of their own best interests."

Obi-Wan chewed and swallowed quickly to tell Ben, "Chancellor Valorum isn't very happy about it."

"Chancellor Valorum can be as unhappy as he pleases," Qui-Gon said, chin lifted. "He does not write my mission mandates."

"He did in this case," Obi-Wan said around a mouthful. "He told you to be a salesman."

Qui-Gon glared. Obi-Wan raised his brows in a silent 'tell me I'm wrong'. Ben shook his head. "Anyway," the bearded Kenobi interrupted, finally tucking into his own meal, "It's good to have you back, Master."

"And you as well," Obi-Wan nodded at his older self. "Where have you been? I haven't seen you in days."

Ben laughed at this. "Oh, this and that. Bail's been swamped to the neck with meetings on the Accords. The first generation of Clones are due for immigration in a few months, and there are enough committee meetings about it to keep him booked until then. And with Mace away, I've been playing senate liaison for the Council."

"Still off chasing droids, is he?" Qui-Gon asked.

"Yes. He didn't say when he'd be back."

Obi-Wan shrugged, considering the second half of his sandwich. "When he's kicked all their arses back to Cato Neimoidia, I assume," he said, and bit off a corner. In the past, where Qui-Gon would have chided Obi-Wan for inappropriate commentary, the master laughed softly.
Obi-Wan continued to inhale his food with youthful enthusiasm. Eventually, he finished his meal, drank a gulp of water, and said, "Ben, you might be interested to know that I saw Anakin training in the initiate dojos earlier today."

"Oh?" Mention of the boy never failed to lighten his mood. "How was he? Hasn't hit his growth spurt yet, has he? Last I saw he was dwarfed by a head or more."

Obi-Wan chuckled. "No, still a runt, but held his own and then some, quite the show. Not so sure he enjoyed it."

This went against everything that Ben knew. "How do you mean?"

"He looked bored," Obi-Wan shrugged. "As I said, he's very good. His age mates weren't really offering much of a challenge."

Ben was not sure what to make of this. "Ah," he said, and frowned into his soup.

Qui-Gon's mind was preoccupied with other questions. "What were you doing in the initiate dorms?" he asked, and raised a curious eyebrow. "You weren't threatening to take on an apprentice, were you?"

Obi-Wan gave his former master a withering glare. "I was running an errand for Master Garoon," he explained.

Mention of his old clanmaster made Ben break into a smile. "Lor Garoon? How is that old rascal?"

Obi-Wan smiled back. "Oh, as domineering and beloved as ever. I admit, the Dragon Clan is far… smaller than I remember."

Qui-Gon chuckled. "I'd wager you're far larger than Master Garoon remembers."

"True. He likes talking about me, apparently - I hardly made it out of there alive."

Ben nodded sagely. "Lor Garoon's stories can turn younglings into truly vicious creatures."

"Mmm," Obi-Wan hummed agreement as he finished off his water. After he'd set the glass back down, he said, "One of them asked how I got my scar."

"Oh?" Qui-Gon glanced up with a different kind of curiosity, "What did you say?"

Ever since his fight with the Sith that had taken the vision in his right eye, it had been Obi-Wan's special dilemma: what to tell others about the scar? It was a particularly thorny problem with younger inquirers. He could hardly tell them about the grisly horrors of the Sith when they'd not yet learned that that the Sith existed. That would not be until their initiate days, and far be it from Obi-Wan Kenobi to corrupt the innocent minds of the crèche.

Years ago, he'd begun making up stories instead. It was a running joke now, as practically every group in the temple below the age of twenty had a different impression of how Knight Kenobi had lost his sight. He'd lost track of how many pretend situations he'd concocted so far; especially in the creche, he tried to never use the same one twice. It was a fun game, and took the edge off of haunting memory.

He replied to Qui-Gon's question straight-faced: "I told her that you were knighting me, and missed."
Ben suddenly choked on his food and turned his head to hide his smile. Qui-Gon sighed heavily.

"That's not funny, Obi-Wan."

Obi-Wan's smile was irrepressible, dimples shining with morbid humor. "Her face certainly was."

Qui-Gon rolled his eyes. Obi-Wan continued to laugh, tossing his hair out of his eyes. Qui-Gon watched him with a scowl, wondering where along the way he'd gone wrong. "Are you ever going to cut that off?" he asked, eyeing Obi-Wan's long ginger locks.

The young knight crossed his arms nonchalantly. "Master, imitation is the highest form of flattery." They'd had this argument dozens of times before.

Qui-Gon resisted the urge to brush back his own hair. He didn't appreciate how thick and wavy his apprentice's hair became when grown out to his shoulders. "Parody is the lowest form mockery," he quipped. "You can flatter me by getting a haircut."

"Are you..." Obi-Wan feigned shock, leaning back and putting a hand to his chest. Ben was eating his soup without looking at it, eyes alternating between his younger self and his old master with rapt amusement. "Are you jealous, master Jinn?"

"I am, in fact," Qui-Gon said in perfect deadpan, "I'm incredibly jealous of those masters whose former apprentices don't embarrass them with poor self-awareness and hygiene."

Obi-Wan snorted. "I see. Perhaps you and Master Dooku could commiserate."

Qui-Gon glowered at him, but any verbal retaliation was cut short when the commlink on Obi-Wan's belt began to chirp at him. "Excuse me," he said, picking it up. "Kenobi."

"Knight Kenobi," said a well-spoken protocol droid on the other end, "The Council requests your presence at the South Spire tomorrow at eleven hundred hours."

"They've an assignment for me?"

"Yes, Master."

"Alright. I'll be there." He cut the transmission.

"They really oughtn't call you master," Qui-Gon said, picking at his food. "Not until you cut that shaggy mane off your head."

Obi-Wan seemed to ignore the jibe until he stood and said, "I only seek to honor your example in all things, oh my venerated Master." He bowed mockingly, almost to the floor, and came up with a flourish, hair falling in waves. Qui-Gon watched him, expressionless.

"I suppose looking like a grown man didn't make your list of priorities."

"Perhaps you never set a good enough example," Obi-Wan flashed a smile and swept away. Qui-Gon scoffed and bit into a leafy wrap with irritation.

"You set yourself up for that," said Ben, quietly collecting soup in his spoon.

"I'll cut off more than his hair if he doesn't watch his mouth," the elder grumbled. "He was never this bad as an apprentice."

Ben laughed. "I wouldn't expect so. But he's a knight now, thinks he can throw his weight around,
"Talk back to you and get away with it. It's what mine did to me."

"He will learn the error of his ways in the dojo. How hot does a saber need to be to cut hair?"

"Low power ought to do it, if memory serves."

"Hmm," Qui-Gon chewed his lunch with a pensive air. "I'll have to remember that."

They finished their meals in silence, and for once it was Qui-Gon who brooded. At length, the older man crumpled his napkin and tossed it on his plate. "I suppose he'll be off on some errand this time tomorrow. Nothing dangerous I hope. I don't want to feel bad about kicking his arse when he gets back."

Ben snorted. "And what about you? Just back from Comra, he's off to… wherever they send him. I thought they were giving you two joint missions still."

Qui-Gon waved a dismissive hand. "No, he's got more of his own these days. Besides, Master Drallig has roped me into teaching Ataru this quarter."

"Oh?" Ben was pleasantly surprised. "I had no idea. Have you met your class yet?"

"I have," Qui-Gon said, and shook his head. "The apprentices get younger every year, I swear."

Ben laughed and stood to his feet. "I know what you mean."

Qui-Gon watched him as he stretched and collected his tray. "You know Ataru," he said with understated interest, "how do you feel about demonstrating for a class full of wide-eyed teenagers this afternoon?"

Ben laughed. "Normally, I would jump at the opportunity to beat up my dear old master," Qui-Gon made a soft noise of derision, "but I'm afraid I have commitments elsewhere."


Ben's face cleared in surprise. "How did you-"

Qui-Gon's laugh was the pleased, smug sound that Ben recognized from his padawan days. "He's the only thing you ever make excuses for," the master told him. Ben compressed his lips in chagrin and looked away. "I don't know why you're so ashamed of it."

Ben shrugged, dropping his tray onto a conveyor that would take the dishes to the cleaning droids. "He's not my apprentice."

"He's not anyone's apprentice," Qui-Gon pointed out.

"Yes but he's not my apprentice. He could end up with another master."

"You mean Dooku?" Qui-Gon lifted an unimpressed brow. "You know he shouldn't. No matter how much he wants to, no matter how great a master he might make for the boy, Yan's getting far too old for that sort of thing - as am I, I might add." They exited the commissary and walked together down the large, carpeted halls. Fellow Jedi milled about in twos and threes, talking quietly with each other about missions and scholarship and everyday nothings. Without needing to coordinate, former master and apprentice folded their arms into opposite sleeves in unison.

"Perhaps, in this instance, history should repeat itself," Ben mused, examining a light mote floating in through one of the great temple windows.
Qui-Gon almost tripped from shock, but checked himself and kept moving. "You mean Obi-Wan?"

Ben shrugged. "He's a knight, and old enough for it. Been on his own for several years, now."

Qui-Gon bristled. "He's only just now dug himself out of the pit his Trials left him in, you know that." In the three - almost four - years since Obi-Wan's injury and subsequent knighting, he had been living and working alongside his former master. The arrangements had not been made lightly.

Qui-Gon expected a defense, an airtight argument for Obi-Wan's suitability worthy of a seasoned diplomat. It never arrived. Instead, after the briefest of hesitations, Ben shrugged again, less confident than before. Qui-Gon looked him up and down, examining the creases in his brow and the unfamiliar tension in his shoulders.

"If you haven't put in a request for the boy already, you should," Qui-Gon said. Ben looked even more uncertain than before. "Why does that bother you? I thought it should be obvious."

It took several quiet minutes of walking for Ben to find an answer. "I'm an old man, Qui-Gon," he lamented quietly. "An old man with old fears and too many memories. I failed him once. Who's to say I won't do it all over again?"

It was not often that Ben's seniority was brought up between them. It was an odd sensation for Qui-Gon to be younger than Obi-Wan. Years ago, such paradoxes would have been too alien to make him feel anything but squeamish. But after eleven years, he'd learned to love this man as a friend and a brother, and the unbridgeable gap hurt his heart. "I would give you a pile of evidence citing all the things you've changed for the better, but frankly, I don't know the entire list."

"No, nor do I - the better or the worse."

A fork in their path approached, where Qui-Gon's duties would lead him one way and Ben's another. The taller man brushed his companion's shoulders encouragingly. "Then do not think on it. Keep your mind on the present, and let the future worry about itself for once," he instructed gently, aware he was treading on scars he did not understand. "And tell Anakin hello for me."

Ben mustered a smile. "I'll make sure that I do."

"Master Ben!" Anakin grinned broadly and hopped off the climbing block, cushioning the three-metre drop with barely a thought. He rushed over to the master, stopped, bowed respectfully as he'd been taught, and then rushed forward for a quick hug.

Ben laughed. "So energetic. I'm surprised to have found you here, don't you have class?"

"Not right now," Anakin said. A newly lost canine made his breath whistle as he spoke. "My next class isn't for another hour, so Master Zyrha said I could come play with Sar and Mira." He pointed back up to the climbing block, where a gangly Zygerrian and a small Pantoran clung to the colored grips. Mira dislodged a hand to wave at him.

"Hi master Ben!" She smiled, and Ben couldn't help but smile back. Mira was small, quiet and sweet, and could've melted the heart of a warlord. She swung deftly up to where Sarsan crouched on the top of the block and shoved him forcibly over so she could claim it for herself. Ben snorted softly. Sarsan made room and swung his legs over the side. He waved at Ben.

"Hello Master Ben!"

"Hello Sarsan - does Master Zyrha still have you in charge of your library?"
"Yes - I get to pick the books for storytime now, too!"

"Good for you. I'm sure you'll set a good example for the littler ones." He looked back down to Anakin. "Do you come back to play with them often?"

Anakin's smile faded. "Yeah," he said, fiddling with his hands. "I don't..." He looked uncomfortable. "I don't know who else would want to play. You know, between classes, or whatever." It was a poor excuse, and Ben saw right through it.

"I see," he said. "Perhaps you would like to play with me?" He drew something out of his sleeve. "Obi-Wan was cleaning out his rooms earlier this week, and found this. He thought you might enjoy it."

"Woah," Anakin grinned as he took the small starship model. Paint chipped and small electrics hanging out in places, it was a testament to Obi-Wan's age if nothing else. Sarsan and Mira peered from the block to see the gift, but did not make the effort to come to the ground.

"He used to keep it in his room," Ben explained, "when he was your age. It's supposed to fly; perhaps you could fix it up."

Whether he would be able to was a question Anakin did not need to ask. More pressing on his mind was: "Obi-Wan kept a droid ship?"

Ben was amused and offended. "And what if he did? Don't you?"

"Yeah, but he hates droids and flying," Anakin insisted, eyeing the ship and turning it over in his hands. "He's weird." A pause. "And cool, I guess. Did he make this?"

"I believe he did, yes."

"Woah..." he turned it over in his hands again, as if he would see Obi-Wan's signature etched somewhere.

Ben laughed again. "Come on, then, I'll show you how it's supposed to work."

They moved to a corner of the room and sat together. While Ben sat poised with crossed legs and arms, Anakin splayed his legs in a wide V and tinkered with his ship. Ben inquired after Anakin's classes and exercises, how he was getting on in his new dormitory rooms and new classmates. At ten years old, Anakin was the youngest human initiate in the entire temple. Leaving the creche for the dormitories was hard for all; but for Anakin, it had been an especially alienating experience.

"Obi-Wan says he saw you practicing sabers earlier today," Ben said. He had not had to explain anything about the starship model; Anakin hardly needed a lesson in rudimentary electrics. Still, the task provided a convenient distraction.

"Yeah, we were training with Master Pallo today."

"Ah," Ben nodded, "Is she introducing you to Form VI?"

"Yeah," Anakin seemed disinterested, having dismantled his new toy and laid out the wires carefully to reconnect them to their proper ports.

"Obi-Wan told me you were doing very well, that you won all of your matches."

"Yeah," Anakin said in the same dispassionate tone.
The lack of enthusiasm made Ben frown sadly. "Do you like your saber classes, Anakin?"

For a moment, Anakin said nothing, twisting his mouth in concentration as he untangled two thin wires. "I guess," he said. He picked up a circuit and wiggled a loose connection. He spread his fingers and used the Force to put it back into its mount. "Sar and Mira are more fun, though," he muttered.

"How do you mean?"

He shrugged again, head lolling to one side. He did not like talking about his feelings, and normally he would find a way to ignore the question. Fingers occupied with familiar and comforting tasks, he found it easier to explain: "They don't like me."

"Who doesn't?"

"The other 'nitiates." He said. He'd not yet learned that there was a vowel at the beginning of the word. "They don't like me because I'm small and I beat them." He manhandled two circuit boards against each other and their frames snapped together.

Ben frowned. "Did you gloat about winning?"

"No," Anakin insisted quickly. "I mean… I did at first, but then the masters said that was bad, so I stopped, but they still hate me."


"I wish they would win more," he confessed quietly. Ben considered it.

"Do you want to let them win?"

"No," the boy muttered, now reassembling the ship's electronics into its miniature hull. "I just want them to…" he trailed off as a tiny screw began giving him trouble. Ben watched the struggle calmly.

"Want them to what?" He prodded.

Anakin conquered the metal and moved onto the last fixtures. "To like me more. I know I shouldn't."

"Why not?"

"Because Jedi aren't supposed to want admiration"

"Admiration."

"Admiration," Anakin repeated. "Master Zyrha says that seeking admiration and fame is bad."

"Perhaps it is, for its own sake. But wanting friendship is a good thing. Everyone needs friends, Anakin," Ben explained. His heart ached. "I'm sorry you are lonely."

"Sar and Mira are still in the creche, I can go see them," Anakin said in a hopeful tone, and looked up to see his friends, only to find that they were happily playing on without him. "Sometimes." He gripped the side of the tiny ship and snapped the last corner into place. He flipped a switch hidden behind the pilot's canopy and the thing whirred to life, tiny repulsors allowing it to hover over the floor and flit about.
"There's a switch that controls the height as well," Ben pointed. "You can leave it flying around your ceiling, if you like." It was what he remembered doing with it - until he got tall enough for it to smack his forehead.

Anakin got up and fiddled with it some more and set it to wander about. He cheered when he found that he could steer its movements with the Force and sent it wheeling up and down in manic dives around them. Ben remained sitting, eyes and mouth wrinkled into a smile watching Anakin pull complicated maneuvers on a miniaturized scale. Eventually, the boy sat down by the master and leaned slightly toward him, aching for some kind of human contact. "I wish you could play more," he told the man. Ben laughed, but put an affectionate arm around the boy.

"I have duties to attend to, you know that."

Anakin huffed.

"Sarsen, Amira, it's time to go," Master Zyrha appeared in the door. "Ah, hello Master Kenobi, and Anakin too."

Sarsen and Amira clambered down from their exercise and departed through the doorway to join their clanmates, giving smiling, "Bye Ani!"s and "Bye Master Ben!"s as they left. Zryha lingered to greet her former clanling.

"Hello Master!" Anakin rushed over to her. Although he was growing older and had been an initiate for months, he still thought of her as a mother. He held out the ship Ben had brought him. "Look at what Master Ben gave me, isn't it cool?"

"It is," she grinned at him, giving him affectionate but brief attention. "I'm sure the other initiates will find it fascinating as well."

Anakin's smile faltered. "Maybe," he said, looking at the chipped paint and worn wings. His eyes darted up at her, big and begging for comfort, hands itching to reach out and cling to her like he had as a younger boy. Zyrha's heart ached. Weaning the little ones off the creche's coddling was painful.

"They will," she said confidently. "And you ought to go put it away before you have class, shouldn't you?"

"Okay," the initiate lingered for a few more seconds as if waiting for some further assurance, but Zyrha held her own and eventually Anakin drew away. He went back over to Ben, even as the master was walking toward Zyrha. "Thank you Master," he bowed gratefully, cradling the ship against his chest. "Please tell Obi-Wan that I appreciate the gift."

"I will," Ben smiled, and reached down to ruffle the boy's hair. "Now run along, you don't want to be late."

Anakin nodded and scurried off. When he was gone, Zyrha sighed. "He's too young to be an initiate," she said, sounding weary. "But he's too powerful to stay with the little ones."

Ben watched the bouncing mop of blond hair disappear down the corridor. He turned to his colleague and plucked at his beard. "I'm afraid he's too powerful for the other initiates, too. They're not taking to him. He's lonely."

"It's not his fault," Zyrha said softly. It had been her job to see Anakin through every one of his mishaps for the past seven years; now that he was experiencing trouble outside of her jurisdiction, she could practically feel her whiskers turning grey.
"No, it's not," Ben agreed, "but it's the way things are."

"He'll start repressing himself to get friends, you know," Zyrha confided. "He's done it before, he'll do it again." She heaved a mother's sigh. "And then he'll crack, and he'll explode something on accident or hurtle someone across the room when he's surprised, or have a vision and disturb the entire creche in his sleep, the list goes on." She rubbed a paw over her face, smoothing down the fine fur on her snout. "He needs a master."

Ben was surprised. "He's only ten years old," he said. "He won't even be eligible until next year."

"He needs a master," Zyrha repeated. "It doesn't matter how old he is. His powers are too much for a ten year old to handle alone - much less in a group of eleven and twelve year olds." She had a point, Ben thought. He bit his lip.

"Have you told the Council this?"

"Yes. But except for Yoda, they never come down to see him. Only you do that." She smiled at him, and then fixed him with a steely gaze. "If you ever intended…" she paused, not wanting to presume. "He needs a master now, Ben. I'm doing what I can, but… he needs guidance."

Ben swallowed. "I'll bear it in mind."

She watched him, trying to find an answer to the unasked question. She found none, and eventually turned away. They could both hear the muffled crowd of younglings chittering and laughing on the other side of the wall. "Have a nice afternoon, Master Kenobi."

"And you as well, Master Zyrha."

The following day, Ben went to the Jinn/Kenobi apartments to wish Obi-Wan well on his mission, but found Qui-Gon and Aola instead. The latter was covered in raised welts.

"Force, what's gone on here, then?" Ben asked, as Qui-Gon carefully wrapped his grandpadawan in medicated bandages. Aola glanced up at Ben, keeping herself as still as possible.

"Master Gard upset a hive full of Endorian bees," she related bitterly. "I told him not to use his saber on the brush - the smell upsets them something fierce - but did he listen? No." She huffed, and stifled a wince as Qui-Gon had to clean a swollen cluster of stings by her collarbone. The grandmaster glanced up from his work, silver hair falling over his shoulders.

"Feemor's still in medbay," he explained.

"Ah," Ben said, stepping around to see Aola's poor state. Her right side had suffered the most damage.

"As soon as he wakes up I'm going to smack him." She glanced down at her swollen right hand, and then at her less damaged left. "With this hand," she said, flexing it.

"When he wakes up?" Ben asked, concerned.

"He's the one who made them angry," Aola explained, aggravated tone making it clear that Feemor was not, in fact, in any grave danger. "They went after him the most, sent him into anaphylactic shock. Oaf."

"Padawan," Qui-Gon warned, "watch your tongue. He is still your master." Aola was unperturbed.
"He is, but if he makes another stupid mistake like that with something more dangerous, he won't get to be anyone's master." And there was the worry that her tone had missed before.

"But he's alright?"

Aola huffed. She was unable to cross her arms, so she glared at the far wall with a severity that conveyed similar sentiment. "I suppose," She said, "from a certain point of view."

Ben chuckled softly. "And so the apprentice must teach the master. He ought to put you through your trials after this," he joked. Aola only ticked an eyebrow. At twenty-two years old, it was not unthinkable. But they all knew she had a few years yet.

"Is there something you came for, Ben?" Qui-Gon asked, working gently as he removed old bandages from Aola's lekku and applied new ones.

"I was looking for Obi-Wan, actually, to wish him well, and relay a message from Anakin."

"Oh? Well, I'm afraid you missed him. He left nearly as soon as the Council was done with him."

"Oh. To where?"

Qui-Gon shrugged. "Not sure. I expect he'll comm me in transit if it's not too short a journey."

"Of course. If he does, let him know that Anakin appreciates his gift."

Qui-Gon chuckled. "Of course."

After Ben made a polite but swift exit, Aola, staying as still as she could to avoid itching, asked, "Where do you suppose he's off to?"

"The Senate, I expect," Qui-Gon told her. "He's been tied up as our Order's representative there."

"Hmm," Aola hummed, looking out the windows on the far side of the room, where she could see one curved edge of the Republic Senate building. "I think I prefer the bees."

Qui-Gon laughed aloud, and she smiled to feel the deep rumbling reverberate in her own chest. "Yes, I think I would as well."
Unwelcome Surprises

Chapter Notes

A bit of a short chapter from what you all might be used to seeing, but hopefully it'll prove no less exciting.

Obi-Wan crashed roughly through the brush and into a giant rock, his sopping robes slapping against the dusty surface with an undignified *squelch*. Checking his breathing, he shimmied along the boulder and turned over slowly, silently, to peak his good eye out from behind the cover.

He didn't need any sort of refined depth perception to see that he'd fallen neck-deep in it. He looked around himself as if he'd find a very big, very powerful shovel made especially to dig Jedi knights out of steaming piles of chssk like this one. None presented itself.

He looked back at the army standing just around the bend, and cursed. He looked back around his surroundings, as if the shovel would appear upon his vulgar summonings. He found none; but in his mind's eye, he was beginning to see a colossal fan which this mess was set to hit in five… four… three…

"Chssk," he said again.

His companion was unimpressed by his petulance. "Well, what do we do?"

He glared. "I'm working on it," he said, fiddling with his comlink. He sighed, groaned, and swallowed his pride. "Yes, terribly sorry to bother you," he said into the piece with biting politeness, "but I'm going to have to put in a call to Coruscant." The sounds of blasterfire echoed from beyond their hideout. "*Right now,* if it's not too much trouble."

Ben let himself into the meeting room half an hour late. He exuded a suggestion of *ignore me* as he found a seat next to Mon Mothma.

"...the second phase of the immigration process, the clones are proceeding through the first of their annual comprehensive medical evaluations, as per the research agreement detailed in the Kamino Accord," the speaker was saying, not looking up as he scrolled through the lengthy updates.

Ben frowned at the empty seat to his other side, where Bail Organa should've been sitting and giving him pointed *where have you been* looks. The Alderaanian was nowhere to be found. On Ben's left, Mon Mothma glanced at him and tapped suggestively on her datapad. Ben reached under the table and pulled out the provided datapad. He opened it, and within seconds there was a silent message notification blinking on his screen.

"*You're late,*" it read. He glanced up at Mon, who was giving him a serenely vicious side-eye. He quietly typed back,

"*I'm not the only one.* Where's Bail?"

"*We do not know.* He hasn't sent anything about it. I haven't seen him today."
They paused their surreptitious conversation out of respect for the speaker. "...-thousand have already passed their examinations and received vaccinations. After the mandatory two-week waiting period, they will be cleared for immigration into the Republic."

A notification popped up on Ben's screen. He tapped it. "Have you seen him?" He glanced again at his neighbor, but her face was impassive and unreadable.

"No."

Mon's face flinched, just slightly. She set down her 'pad and folded her hands elegantly across her lap. Ben exited the messaging program and began taking notes. He glanced around the room. Garm Bel Iblis sat across from him, and next to Garm, Terr Taneel of Senex. Garm Bel glanced at Bail's empty seat, and then at Ben. The Jedi shook his head just slightly. Garm frowned, and returned attention to the speaker, who was so preoccupied in reading his report he missed the entire silent conversation happening at the table in front of him.

"...open the conversation to the committee and other items on the agenda." The speaker finally looked up, and saw Ben for the first time. He nodded. Ben nodded back. Then, as he had many times in the past, the speaker proceeded to ignore him completely. "Senators?" he asked. The committee shuffled their things and sat up straighter before diving into the items on their agenda. Questions of deadlines. Problems. Exceptions to rules and extenuating circumstances. Various worlds opposing immigration, various clones still without homes or employment.

Ben, of course, had no say on anything. He was here as an impartial observer, meant to relay updates and formalities to the Jedi Council - the Clones were the Jedi's doing, or so the logic went. The committee itself consisted of only five members, Ben excluded. Originally nearly sixty members strong, it had dwindled over the years, especially after the Accord had been signed by Chancellor Valorum. It had passed through the senate with flying, if not entirely homogenous colors. Sheev Palpatine had originally voted against it, and Ben had since relished the fact that the Nabooian Sith had never been voted onto the committee. And he never would; the committee's work was nearly done. Now, their jobs were reduced to listening to periodic updates, asking the right questions, and dealing with logistical problems as thousands of Clones prepared to become Republic citizens.

There were still rumors floating around about an alternate Accord composed by Palpatine, something to do with rehabilitation camps and systematic assimilation into vetted worlds. Thankfully, they had never seen the light of day. Bail Organa simply wrote too quickly for his opposition to compose a rebuttal. Ben smiled at the thought, and then frowned again when his eye caught on the vacant spot to his right.

Bail's trusted friends on the committee continued his work while he was away. The first party of Clones were due to immigrate in a few short weeks, and the committee meetings had begun to adopt a sort of restless urgency, like a staff of wedding planners trying to execute a massive party to perfection. Ben watched the inquiries and problem solving with admiration and not one single iota of envy.

At length, the meeting drew to a close. All worn, all hopeful for the light coming into focus at the end of the years-long tunnel, the senators stood and collected their things. Ben scrolled through the notes he'd composed on his borrowed datapad. He slipped the device into an inner robe pocket.

"You said you haven't seen Bail all day?" he asked Mon.

"No," she said, shrugging.
"I saw him this morning," Garm put in from the other side of the room as he donned a jacket, "but stars know where he's gone to. I checked his office before the meeting, door shut, lights off."

"Hmm," Ben said, entertaining a faint bad feeling. He did not let it show. "I'll just drop this by his office, then."

"Alright," Garm shrugged. "See you next time, Ben!"

Ben smiled at the senator's informality and took his leave. He wound his way through the endless, plush halls. Serving droids and anxious interns zipped past this way and that, genuinely surprised when Ben took the time to step aside and let them by. He took the turbolift up to the familiar office levels and followed the gentle purple-trim of the hall until he came upon the Alderaanian suite.

As Garm had said, the door was shut and the lights were off. But as he drew closer, Ben began to frown. Garm could not see through the Force; he could not have felt the waves and waves of pain radiating through the walls. Bail's quiet blue presence wallowed in the room beyond.

Ben tapped gently on the door. "Bail? I've come to drop off the notes from the meeting." He paused. It was unlike Bail to ignore anyone, let alone him. "Bail, I can tell that you're in there. Are you alright?"

Nothing. Pain. Concern mounting, Ben opened the door and peeked his head inside.

Bail Organa sat at his desk, both elbows propped up on the table, one hand on his head and the other holding a very full glass of whiskey.

Ben stared at him for a moment, silence ringing in his ears. "Bail?" he said again, quietly. He stepped inside and closed the door behind him. "What's happened?"

Bail sat back, glanced quickly at Ben, and the door, and then away. For a moment, it looked as though he would clamp his lips shut and hold his silence, but then he drew a shaky breath and said, "Breha's miscarried."

Ben's heart froze in his chest. The shock tore down his shields and Bail's pain overtook him. When he moved to speak, he found his jaw hanging open. "I had no idea she was..." his whisper stopped short. Bail shook his head. There was a long pause while Bail absorbed the words he'd spoken aloud for the first time, and Ben watched his friend like he might shatter at any moment. Bail's mouth fidgeted helplessly as he said,

"No one knows. No one will, now. We kept it a secret. We... We were supposed to announce it tomorrow," the senator's voice wavered, eyes glimmering in the soft afternoon sun. He couldn't look at Ben. "It was a little girl." He planted a hand over his face, silencing the sobs that threatened to overtake him.

Ben sat down. What could he possibly say? "Bail, I'm so sorry." It was insufficient. Bail took a drink. "When did this happen?"

Bail swallowed the burn of his alcohol and replied hoarsely, "This morning."

"You should go home," Ben decided immediately.

Bail stared at his desk, as if he could not comprehend the words. Ben's appearance had sparked a memory. "There was a meeting today about the Accord," the senator realized.

"Go home, Bail," Ben repeated. "Be with your wife."
"What if it's my fault?" Bail burst, looking up to Ben with desperation in his eyes. "What if it's…
genetic somehow? Or… or…" He shrugged, helpless for words. "Or… if it's her? What if I've just
drawn out her pain by denying it?"

Ben was no expert on the subject, but life and death were merciless themes in the Force's plan for
his own life. "Sometimes these things just happen, Bail," Ben said, grasping at the notion of
change and resolution. "Especially with a first child."

Bail closed his eyes against a wave of grief. "Third," he corrected.

Ben's breath left him.

"It's so absurd." Bail leaned forward on the desk and buried his head in his hands. "If the problem
were only getting a child… we can conceive, but then... Breha is convinced that it is her fault, that
she's not strong enough to carry to term. Her heart is absolutely broken, Ben, and I can't…” He was
at a loss. "There's nothing I can do."

"You can go home and be with her, Bail."

"And tell her what? I can't tell her to hope, I won't do that to her again."

Ben could hardly imagine what the Princess was feeling. Marriage, let alone children and family
was a luxury he would never enjoy - but then, he would never have to endure this pain, either.
Eventually, he found the words to say, "Then grieve with her. You both deserve that much. I will
look after things here until the Clones are all here in Republic space."

Bail sighed, and raised his glass to his lips. Ben gently reached out and took it from his hands.
Their eyes met. "This is not a habit either of us want for you," the Jedi said, frowning to see how
much of the whiskey was gone. He took the decanter as well.

Bail watched him put it away, listless. "We both want children," he confided, closed his eyes. "So
badly." He stared at the grain of the faux wood on his desk. "My family's mausoleum was not
meant to be so full so quickly."

Ben's heart was breaking for a child he'd never known existed. "The Force will provide a solution,"
he said reflexively, forgetting that Bail was not used to such Jedi-isms. "Please, Bail, go home."

The repetition finally drove the senator to stand, wavering like leaf in the wind. As he shuffled to
the door, Ben stopped him and offered a silent embrace. Bail did not have the strength to return it.
He ducked his head, heart heavy as a galaxy, and left Ben alone in the office.

The oppressive weight of grief crushed his chest, compounded by that familiar, haunting itch of the
Never-Was and the Could-Be on his conscience.

Leia. We've always talked of adopting a baby girl. He hadn't known why they'd wanted to adopt.

Would Leia even…?

He could not think so far ahead. He pulled a hand over his face and heaved a single sob. The
afterimage of Bail's grief hung in the room like a fog, misting his eyes and his senses with palpable
sadness. It was only through years of practice that he was able to collect himself. He found Bail's
datapad, copied any information pertinent to the Accord and forwarded it onto himself. He
messaged the committee to say Bail would be away on personal leave, and offered to play note-
taker until a replacement could be found. It was not his job. But it was the least he could do.
He would have to inform the Council that he would be even less available than before. His shoulders sank a little deeper.

As if the universe could hear him, no sooner did the office door slide shut behind him than did his commlink buzz. The frequency was a familiar one. Ben sighed, gathered himself, and answered.

"Master Windu," he greeted.

"Good, Ben, I've been searching for a signal for hours."

Ben frowned. "Where are you?"

"The middle of absolutely nowhere, as far as I'm aware. We're wrapping up here, thankfully. But that's not why I called. I am assuming you know that Obi-Wan has been sent on a mission."

"Yes, why?"

"Did he tell you where he was going?"

"No," Ben frowned, ignoring that tickle on the back of his neck that spelled bad feeling. "Why?"

Mace breathed out slowly. "I've been off the grid for days. I did not know until about an hour ago, or I would have told you sooner. They've sent him on a droid hunt in the mid rim."

More Federation droids? The things were like bloody cockroaches. "Force, how many stashes can they have?"

Mace neither laughed or attempted to answer. Instead, he announced: "Obi-Wan's been sent to Naboo, Ben," he paused to let that slap sink in before he backhanded: "Queen Amidala requested Jedi intervention."

Ben was struck dumb for a moment. "They sent Obi-Wan?" His heart was pounding.

"Yes."

"Why? Does the Council know?"

"About Naboo and Padme last time around? No. It's never been relevant. Kenobi's involvement is coincidental, or else the Force's hand itself."

Never relevant - until now, perhaps. Ben ran a shaky hand through his hair.

"Earlier this morning, Obi-Wan sent in a request for backup," Mace continued, "apparently there is a sizable droid stockpile on Naboo, and the Federation has finally gotten wise about protecting their merchandise with heavy artillery."

Ben's mind whirled. He thought of Padme, and Bail, and the clones, and the droids, the droids he knew how to kill, better than anyone else alive. "Mace… I would go - I should go, but I'm swamped. Bail has had to leave Coruscant, and I promised him I would-"

"I'll be going to provide backup personally, Ben. I'm almost done here anyway. But I wanted you to know that Padme Amidala is getting herself wrapped up in this mess, and you're sure to see or hear of her eventually. When the time comes..." A softer tone interrupted Mace's normal business. "I didn't want it to catch you by surprise."

Ben's thoughts were a blur. He thought of Naboo, and the Gungans, and Theed, and Maul, and
Qui-Gon, and Tatooine, and Anakin. Anakin was safe at the Temple, away from the rest of the Galaxy. But the Galaxy was coming back to him, ricocheting toward Coruscant. It was a familiar dread barrelling down at an unpredictable angle.

"Thank you, Mace," Ben said, somewhat shakily. "May the Force be with you."

"You as well, Master Kenobi. I'll keep you apprised on the situation as time allows."

"Thank you."

As he left the Senate building, Ben passed by the Naboo office suites. Through the frosted glass door panels, he thought he could make out the silhouette of Sheev Palpatine, sitting at his desk and busied by some unreadable business. Ben tried to remember how old Amidala was at this point in time. Surely too young to see through the farce of her senator. But then… he pictured her, stubborn as stone and painted like a flower, refusing to leave her people while still just a teenager. Mace had said that it was Padme who'd asked for Jedi intervention - not Palpatine.

Ben wondered suddenly what Obi-Wan's first impression of the Queen had been. Further, he wondered if she were any different than the young girl he'd first met on Naboo years ago.

"This…” he said to himself, a company he'd grown accustomed to on Tatooine, "...is going to be very interesting."
Rain fell in a steady, pounding stream as the ship made its final approach to the planet surface, ducking into a copse of foliage where their Republic insignias would draw little attention.

"We can shuttle you closer to his location, Master," the pilot said as he closed off the landing sequence. The Jedi Master standing behind him ducked his head to peer out of the viewport. Water beat down on the transparisteel in a calm, even tempo.

"That won't be necessary," the Korun decided, and turned away. The pilot cast an uncertain look over his shoulder as the Jedi took up a backpack and hoisted it onto his shoulder.

"Are you sure, sir?"

"Their scanners will pick up on the shuttle long before they'll pick up on me. I'll go on foot." Mace hit a switch behind the bulkhead and hidden hydraulics whirred to life. The landing ramp lowered slowly on its hinges and hit soil with a wet *squelch*. The rain dribbled into the surrounding puddles and *pinged* against the ship's hull.

"They'll have lifeform scanners, sir," the pilot reminded him.

"Yes," Mace said, drawing up his hood, "and by the time they know that *this* lifeform is a threat, it'll be too late. Thank you for your help, Riion. I'll comm you when we're ready to go. Stay dry."

Riion opened his mouth to protest again, but eventually settled for a sigh. He watched the Jedi master descend into the rain, waiting for him to step off before bringing the ramp back up again. As the door drew shut, he said, "Good luck, Master."

The ramp locked back into the hull with a click, and the sounds of the ship dissolved into the rain. "Why do they always say that?" Mace wondered aloud. His feet plunked across the soaking ground, following the direction that his scanners - and the Force - told him would be most fruitful. "Luck." He chuckled to himself. "This Galaxy is far too messed up to rely on *luck*."

And that was the real problem, wasn't it? All these people running about in the Senate and even in the Order, waiting for things to go the right way and turn out just so. Even Ben, much though he'd come to admire the man, was guilty of it. The Force would guide them, of this Mace was certain, but if they weren't willing to trudge through the rain to get there, they'd rot in their seats. He hadn't become Master of the Order by sitting on a cushion with hands in sleeves all day. Mace Windu had a job to do.

That job had been dragging him to the edge of the galaxy and back again for nearly three years, now. The Federation was up to its neck in investigations following the fallout from Alaris Prime, and posed no immediate threat to the Republic. Unfortunately, the rest of the galaxy, ignorant of the conspiracy that could have cost them their livelihoods and very existence, immediately turned and began pointing fingers. Oddly enough, very few fingers fell on the Federation itself. Conniving and greedy as they were, the Neimoidian conglomerate did provide goods and services to the galaxy, and their sudden absence from the intergalactic marketplace had begun to show. In the far mid-rim and outer rim territories, prices for Coreworld imports had skyrocketed. There were bacta shortages in rural systems, and food so expensive it was unobtainable. The mercantile caucus had been harrying Valorum for days on end. Piracy was on the up, and in many sectors gangs of local thugs had taken up where the Federation had left off. Unlike their predecessor, however, the gangs did not bother hiding their corruption behind the veils of bureaucracy. Law and order was
crumbling along the Federation's old trade routes, and the Republic was left scrambling.

Every few months the Senate would have a spat about the whole debacle, debating whose fault it was that the Federation remained inoperable, if they even had any more droids, if the droids were a threat, when the Neimoidians could be allowed to begin work again. Could they forgive corruption if it meant business as usual? Should the droids really be that big of a concern? Should the Federation be placed under Republic oversight?

It was a convoluted excuse for politicians to sit around and do nothing. For as long as they had been arguing, Mace Windu had been volunteering for any and all missions that involved Federation droid hunting. It was hard work, but in between missions he made sure to keep his ear to the Coruscanti ground. He knew Palpatine was trying to maintain the status quo. He never denied that the Federation had hordes of battle droids, but he had no problems deflecting; he would remind his colleagues that it was the Jedi who'd opened this whole can of worms in the first place, wasn't it? And shouldn't the Jedi be put to task for all the problems they've caused - like the tens of thousands of Clones set to immigrate on the Republic's dime? If the Senate was looking for an institution in need of oversight, well, they've got one right there, haven't they? He'd mustered a grumbling following, who would climb out of the woodwork whenever he had opportunity to talk for too long.

Every few months, Mace would send a report replete with detailed accounts and still holos of droids to Chancellor Valorum's desk, which would cause a new stir of conversation in favor of the Jedi's efforts. Inevitably, the report would move from hand to hand and eventually land in Palpatine's inbox. Mace liked to think that they made him mad. The hardships and exhaustion of these missions would be a small price to pay if afterwards he could rest in the knowledge that he'd royally pissed off a Sith Lord. In some small way, his obsession over the Federation droids was a one-man campaign to make Sheev Palpatine's life miserable.

Also, in this case, to rescue Knight Kenobi and his plus-one. Obi-Wan hadn't been specific when describing his company - understandable considering he was trying to send out a long-distance comm without being detected by the garrison, but Mace had his suspicions.

He put his hand up over his eyes and scanned the horizon. He had to hand it to the man, Obi-Wan was gifted in the art of stealth. He'd shielded himself and his companion in the Force, making it difficult for Mace to pinpoint their location. Difficult, but not impossible. Mace picked his way through the forest until he came to the ridge of a giant embankment. A brown river roared below, engorged with fresh rainwater. Amid the din, he could hear voices.

"I never said that," said a familiar male voice.

"You said you would sort it out," griped an unfamiliar female one.

"I will. Just have a little patience, will you?" the man snapped back with evident impatience.

Mace stepped carefully down the slope toward the root ball of a towering perlote tree. The giant roots arched cage-like through the air, half-exposed by water erosion, blanketed by moss and lichen. Inside, he could spot two huddled, soggy figures. One of them was bigger than the other, and clad in familiar shades of brown.

"Knight Kenobi," he called, causing both figures to jump and turn to look at him. Obi-Wan's face melted in relief. His companion turned to reveal a petite, surprised face that confirmed Mace's earlier suspicions. He checked his own sense of shock and said, "I don't suppose you have room in there for one more, do you?"
Obi-Wan scooted to one side to let the older man climb into their makeshift shelter. "Master Windu, am I glad to see you."

Mace smiled. "I'm sure. And who's this?" he asked politely, already knowing the answer.

"This is Padme, one of Queen Amidala's handmaidens," Obi-Wan explained, looking none too happy about it. "The Queen insisted on sending a representative with me."

Padme smiled at Mace, then turned a steely glare Obi-Wan. Dressed sensibly in boots and a vested shirt, brown hair damp from the rain and clinging to a sweaty face, she was a picture of determination. She was far smaller than Mace had expected. "Pleased to meet you, Padme," Mace said, reaching out to shake her hand. "I'm sorry you've been mixed up in all of this."

"I warned the queen it was a bad idea," Obi-Wan put in. Padme shook Mace's hand gracefully before jutting her chin a bit higher.

"I assumed the risk myself," she said firmly. "Now that you're here, Master Jedi, I think we have a job to do."

Mace cast a look at Obi-Wan, and was surprised to see the usually-composed knight scowling like a child. Mace remembered Ben's fond, soft recollections of Padme and tried to connect them to scene set before him. Padme and Obi-Wan refused to meet each other's eyes. Mace shook his head softly. "That we do. Knight Kenobi," he used the title intentionally to remind Obi-Wan of his responsibilities, "bring me to speed."

Thus chastised, Obi-Wan smartened up and brought out his datapad. A holomap of the surrounding area appeared in the air between them. "This is where we are now," he indicated a curve in the river. "And this is where the droid garrison is located." He pointed to a spot downstream, where the land rose up high above the waterfront. "They've dug into the bedrock along the riverbank, hiding the structure in plain sight. I estimate they have about a thousand droids down there."

"A thousand?" Mace's eyebrows rose. "All along the river? That's horrible planning, on their part."

"We believe there's a rear entrance somewhere back here," said Padme, indicating the high ridge that ran out from the bank. "This forest is on top of a rock plateau. If they have their facility carved into the bedrock, they could've gone back all the way to the drop off," she pointed.

"That's nearly two klicks," Mace frowned, hand moving to his chin.

"As I said," Obi-Wan sighed, "they have a lot of droids. For all we know, they could have multiple entrances back there. A scouting droid spotted us a few hours ago, we've been lying low since."

Mace considered this. "I didn't see any droids patrolling on my way in, I assume the alarm has died down. But they'll know you're here." He looked to Obi-Wan. "Do they know you're armed?"

The knight shrugged. "They were firing cannons at us. I had to deflect them. Padme took a few shots at them as well." Mace's eyebrows raised.

"You have a blaster?" he asked Padme.

"Yes."

"Good, that might come in handy." Somehow, Obi-Wan seemed irritated by this. Mace ignored it. "They'll be on guard now that they've seen you. We need to act before they can relay your presence back to their masters - wherever they are. We need a plan."
At this point, Obi-Wan was happy to defer leadership. "I gather you are the expert in this area, Master," he said with a small smile. "Any ideas?"

Mace indulged in a smirk. "I've learned a trick or two. This ought to help." He brought out his pack and began distributing its contents. "Now, once things get started, we're going to have to move fast."

Eyebrows raised, Obi-Wan examined the spherical grenades Mace had just handed him. "I can see that," he said. Padme was already shoving bombs into her pockets. Mace examined the map once more. "Alright," he said, leaning forward to consider their target. The projected river shimmered blue under the shade of moss. "Here's what we're going to do."

The trio walked together through the forest, a small girl flanked on either side by a Jedi knight. Obi-Wan cast a look over his shoulder, thankful that the rain had slowed enough for him to remove his hood. The canopy of trees far overhead shielded them from the residual showers, leaves shuddering as they caught the rain and sent it trickling down their branches in unrushed streams. There were no droids in sight.

"Take this," Mace was saying to Padme, handing her a spare comlink. "Don't use it until things are in motion. We can't risk them catching our frequency until we have them cornered." Padme nodded, and pocketed the small device.

"What exactly are we looking for, Master?" Obi-Wan asked, eyes scanning the ground and the treeline. "Surely if they have a back door, it will be guarded as well."

"I'm sure it will be, but probably not with canons."

"Should we split up to search for it?" asked Padme.

"If we can't communicate over distance, splitting up would be unwise," said Obi-Wan. Mace nodded.

"Obi-Wan's right. We'll find the door, scout it out, and then split up to complete the plan."

Padme regarded the dark-skinned Jedi with equal amounts respect and apprehension. "You've done this a few times before, then."

Mace shrugged nonchalantly. "A few." Twenty-four times, to be precise.

"And do you always use such..." Padme eyed the pack on Mace's back and drummed her fingers against a grenade pocketed next to her holster. "...direct methods?"

"There are a thousand droids down there," Mace said reasonably. "We have to be direct."

Padme frowned at this, chewing on her lip. "But surely, we should-"

"Stop!" Obi-Wan shot out his arm to block both Padme and Mace from walking any further. Padme looked down at his arm and back up at him with an annoyed expression. Mace only stopped and looked around.

"What is it?" Obi-Wan was staring at the ground. He didn't say anything right away. "Do you sense something?" Mace asked.

"Yes... I... hold on." Obi-Wan stepped carefully in front of the two and bent to study the ground.
Padme attempted to follow him, but Mace held her back.

"Give him a moment," he whispered.

"What is he doing?"

"Seeing things we can't," Mace replied quietly, watching the Knight shuffle forward with care.

Years ago when Obi-Wan was still learning to overcome his injury, Bant had told him that Tahl got these sorts of feelings after she'd been blinded. Obi-Wan had only lost half of his vision, but even in that measure he shared the peculiar experience of handicapped Jedi in discovering a new sensitivity to the Force. He could not see with his right eye, so he leaned into the Force instead, more heavily and more regularly than he ever had with full sight. It did not always make up for his ocular deficiencies, but it attuned his senses and let him pick up on disturbances that even some Jedi Masters might not see.

"Here," Obi-Wan pointed to a spot just a steps in front of Padme. Using the Force, he gently brushed a blanket of leaves and mud away to reveal the stone ground. A large circular tile lay separated from the rest by a half inch perimeter. "Pressure plates."

Mace's eyebrows rose. "Good catch," he ducked his head to inspect them. "Are there more?"

Obi-Wan did not look up, but paused to think. "I think so," he said. "There's an electric network connecting them together. They're scattered around like mines. We must be getting close."

"Good. You take lead, then. Padme, follow directly in his steps. We'll go single file."

And so, they proceeded in a slow-moving line, Obi-Wan directing their every step across the pressure-sensor minefield.

"What happens if we step on them?" Padme asked once when Obi-Wan paused to deliberate. "Will they explode?"

"No," Mace reassured, "but I wager they have cannons or guns that would show up just the same."

"Oh," Padme replied, and decided to not ask more questions.

"Aha," Obi-Wan said at length, picking his way through a zigzag path that his companions unquestioningly followed to the step. "Here we are."

This time they could see the durasteel formation jutting up from the rock. Obi-Wan dusted the leaves off the circular hatch door and examined the latch. "It doesn't seem to have a secure lock," he said aloud. "It just doesn't have a latch on the outside."

"Then there must be a security camera somewhere."

Obi-Wan looked around and spotted a small lens peeking out from one side of the hatch. Luckily, it was pointed away from them. With a wave of his hand, a swirl of leaves and mud obscured its view. "Unlucky weather, that," he said. Mace snorted softly.

"So can you open it?" Padme asked.

"Of course I can," Obi-Wan stood and turned to look at the shorter girl. "But on the off chance that there is a droid down there waiting to blast my other eye to oblivion, I'm not going to."

"Can you not sense if there is one?" she asked. Obi-Wan glared at her.
"We need to know more," Mace interrupted the imminent squabble. "Kenobi, you said you could sense the circuits that connect the sensors. Can you sense the network on this door?"

Obi-Wan sighed. "Maybe," he said, and crouched by the door. He closed his eyes and pressed a palm to the metal panel. He spread his senses, following the minute electrical charges that glowed like streams of chittering insects along their designated routes. "That way," he pointed eventually, indicating a path toward the back of the ridge. "There is a larger door that way. It does have a lock, and is probably guarded."

"Right. So this is our weak spot," Mace said, regarding the door. "We have a front door with canons by the river, and a back door with…"


"...right. And this door, with pressure sensors and a camera covered in mud." They all three looked down at the thing. A breeze tossed more leaves up against the base.

"Now, we need to make sure this tunnel connects to the control center."

"Control center?" Padme asked.

Mace nodded. "These droids aren't yet advanced enough to operate independently. They're programmed with military-level protocols, but can't act as a unit without constant feedback from their superiors. It's a failsafe that makes them incredibly easy to dismantle. So long as you can get to the control center and knock out their communications, they can't respond cohesively. If we destroy the connection altogether, they should just shut down."

"I am assuming that is what the bombs are for," Obi-Wan said. Mace gave him a smile.

"They seem to understand that method best, yes."

"So what, you just blow the whole place to smithereens?" Padme said frustratedly.

The Jedi shared a look. "It usually does the job," Mace said.

"But then how do you persecute the Federation for their crimes?" she demanded.

"This is the persecution for their crimes," Obi-Wan pointed out.

"No, this is hunting down evidence. Or it should be." She looked between the two Jedi. When they did not respond, she grew angrier, and huffed. "The Queen called you here because no one in the Senate believed her when she said there were droids here. But aren't you curious as to why they're here?" she demanded. Obi-Wan was nonplussed.

"We already know why - the Federation has split up their assets and hid them all over the galaxy in an attempt to cover their trail."

"But why?" Padme asked again. "If they knew the game was up, why not just liquidate their resources and avoid these investigations? What do they have to gain from a garrison full of droids on a peaceful Republic system like Naboo?"

Obi-Wan, who was new to this line of work, said nothing. Mace, who was so entrenched in this line of work he'd stopped thinking about it beyond spiting Sheev Palpatine, also said nothing.

"What are you saying?" asked Obi-Wan.
"I'm saying we need evidence. Before you blow them all up, we need to get information from these droids. We need to know why they're here."

"You want to perform reconnaissance?" Mace said.

She shrugged. "Why not? We have to get in there to place the charges, don't we?"

As a matter of fact, Mace had found that if you packed enough firepower into a bag and tossed it into a convenient doorway, it oftentimes found the control center without much searching involved. "Not necessarily, but I see your point," he said. "The databanks should be in the control center. We can copy them and then set the charges."

"But if we're caught, we can't go through with the plan. You can't set off the charges if we're inside."

"We can't all go," Mace said. "One person is less likely to be caught than three."

"I'll go," Padme volunteered immediately.

"What?" Obi-Wan exclaimed. "No. You can't. The Queen put you under my protection, I can't let you assume that risk."

"I assume it myself," Padme snapped at him. "Besides, I'm smaller than you are, less likely to be noticed."

"Are you sure?" Mace asked her gravely. "It will be very dangerous. You would have to get in and out completely undetected, and droids run everything inside their garrisons. They're likely to be manning the databanks and control center as well."

Padme swallowed and pressed her lips into a fine line. "I can do it," she reiterated. "I can hide in plain sight. We're trained for it."

Mace had to work very hard not to smile. I bet you are, he thought smugly. The spitfire queen in disguise was standing as tall as she could, which put her head just level with his shoulder. "Very well," he said. "Let's get to work, then."

Obi-Wan looked absolutely incredulous, but said nothing. They gave Padme the pack and all of the bombs. Mace gave her a datachip to copy the intel, and showed her how to set her commlink to its recording setting. "These droids are annoyingly chatty," he explained. "You never know what you'll pick up." After she was set, Obi-Wan put his hand on the door and found the electronics on the other side. With a slight nudge from the Force, it slid open to reveal a long metal ladder descending into a narrow hallway.

"Judging by the electrics, this door is at the perimeter. You'll want to head south in a straight shot," Obi-Wan pointed. "There is a pool of activity about two hundred yards that way."

"Alright," she said, taking deep breaths to calm herself.

"Are you sure about this?" Mace asked one last time.

"Yes," she said, and clipped her commlink, now recording, to her belt. "Be right back." She stepped onto the top rung of the ladder and climbed down. Obi-Wan shut the door behind her.

The two Jedi sat down right there at the door, backs pressed against opposite sides to keep watch.
"I have a bad feeling about this," Obi-Wan said after a while.

"You seem to have those fairly often, Kenobi." Mace observed.

"Yes, well last time I lost an eye," the knight quipped angrily, and then blushed at his outburst. "I'm sorry, Master."

Backs to each other, Obi-Wan could not see Mace smile. "I take it you don't like Padme much," the master said.

The younger Jedi sighed. "It's not that I don't like her so much that... Well, she's fifteen, Master."

"And?"

"She's hardly more than a girl. The Queen let her come with me, and I swore I would protect her. And now what? What happens if she doesn't come back? That's on me."

"I think you underestimate her, Obi-Wan. Even the Queen is only a teenager. Her entire cabinet, though they may be young, are highly trained. As diplomats, as bodyguards, as warriors. Padme will be fine."

Obi-Wan seemed unconvinced. "Not in the art of self-preservation," he grumbled. "Or of holding her tongue."

Mace cast an unimpressed look over his shoulder. "Ignoring your own track record for holding your tongue, need I remind you what you were doing at fifteen, Kenobi? And younger, if memory serves. Picking fights with Hutts, involving yourself in a civil war, proposing actual suicide to save a mission. She's only doing exactly what you do all the time."

Obi-Wan scoffed. He knew in his heart that Mace was right, but there was still something about it that just set his teeth on edge, that made it wrong. "But she's not a Jedi," he decided at last.

"And Jedi do not hold a monopoly on compassion or bravery, Obi-Wan, you should know that by now. Queen Amidala does not appoint cowards to protect her. "He paused, and smiled to himself. "And from what I've seen, I must say she is no coward herself."

Obi-Wan frowned, and looked over his shoulder at the man. "What is that supposed to mean?"

Between them, the door hissed open, and an empty backpack came shooting up through the air to land at Mace's feet. The sound of a klaxon rang out from below ground. Padme, blaster in one hand, ran up the ladder. "Close it close it close it!" she said, as a blaster bolt ricocheted off the tube behind her. Mace closed the door as soon as her boots were clear.

"Going well down there, then?" Obi-Wan asked, using snark to mask his genuine relief upon seeing her whole. Rattled, Padme did not register sarcasm.

"Yes and no. Got the data, dropped the charges, but," a hole opened up next to the door and a miniature blaster cannon appeared. It was outfitted with an optical lens that was not covered in mud or leaves. "They know we're here."

"Right," Obi-Wan drew his saber and deflected the blasts just in time. Mace was doing the same.

"Well this shortens the plan," Mace grumbled to himself. "Obi-Wan, do you think you can find the back door?"
"I think so, yes," Obi-Wan ducked beneath a bolt. Nothing like working under pressure.

"Good. Go there, stay low, and wait for the signal. Padme, you come with me - don't drop that detonator!"

Padme nodded and rushed from behind Obi-Wan to behind Mace, whose saber provided much-needed cover. They began running back the way they came, disregarding the pressure plates.

"Signal?" Obi-Wan yelled back, "what signal?"

Mace looked back at him as they ran. There was no time to explain. "Boom!" he said, and continued running.

"Right," Obi-Wan said to himself. Blaster bolts bounced off his saber and zinged past his ears with threatening heat. "I have a really bad feeling about this," he told the blaster cannon just before he sliced it in two.

Obi-Wan ducked down below the brush as he came around to the back entrance. It was guarded, as he suspected. Four droids - two at the door, one scouting around the perimeter, and one manning the ion cannon mounted above the door. He could hear alarms blaring even from this distance, but the droids remained at their posts. He could hear them talking to each other in basic. Why would anyone teach battle droids basic?

"Should we go and help?" asked one.

"The Commander said to stay at our posts. Those Jedi might be back." So they knew he was a Jedi - clever programming to recognize the saber, Obi-Wan supposed. And apparently Padme was a Jedi by association. Terrific.

"Come back?" the first droid seemed alarmed. "Wh-what do we do if they come back?" Awfully skittish for battle droids, weren't they?

The second was more taciturn. "They're Jedi; find them and shoot to kill."

Obi-Wan's eyebrows raised in stunned surprise. Kill on sight? Was that the order they'd been given for Jedi? They hadn't said they're trespassing, or even they're a threat. They'd only said they're Jedi.

Absently, Obi-Wan wished he'd had his commlink set to record that conversation.

BOOM! The thought disappeared as the entire ridge bulged with the weight of an explosion deep within the bedrock. Scorching bits of granite plummeted to the ground, smokey tails tracing their path.

"They're back!" said the skittish droid. "The Jedi are attacking!" The droids all grasped their blasters tighter, and the ion cannon keened in an upward pitch as it primed its charge.

"Are they?" Obi-Wan said, stepping out of hiding. He drew his saber and gave it a flourish, curved hilt twirling in his hand with practiced ease. Where the blade of his youth had been a deep, violet blue, his mikashi saber was a brighter, sharper shade. The droids spotted him.

"There he is!"

"Fire!"
They shot at him all at once, three blasters and one cannon firing in quick succession. Obi-Wan twirled through the onslaught, advancing in a circle of defense before slicing one of the droids neatly in two. Another stood right behind it, ready to take its place.

"Die, Jedi!" The blaster clicked, ready to fire.

**BOOM!**

Just as Obi-Wan raised his saber, the droid slumped, dropped its blaster, and curled its head downward. The other droid did the same mid-stride, and fell over.

"Well," Obi-Wan said, lowering his saber slowly, "I suppose that's the communication center down."

**Pe-PEW!**

"Chssk!" Obi-Wan ducked and brought his saber up just in time to catch the blast from the cannon. "What the-?" There was still a droid manning the cannon, now aiming a second shot right at Obi-Wan's head. He brought up his saber to catch the blast, and the force of it sent him backward. Frantic, he ran back into the treeline and snatched up his commlink. "It didn't work!" he shouted to the others. "I've still got a live droid and a cannon over here." There was a sudden, screeching creak. He looked up to see the thick durasteel blast doors sliding open. A dozen droids in formation stepped out, and then a dozen more. "And a lot of company on the way."

"They must have more than one command center, we only got one of them. Those were all the charges," Mace Windu said over the comm, blasterfire in the background. "We'll have to fight our way through."

Through five hundred droids or more? Obi-Wan gave an absurd scoff.

"Not the last charges. I have one more," Padme said. "I'm going back in."

"What? Padme, no, we can regroup and go in toge-"

**ZIIING!**

"There he is!"

"Aim - fire!"

Another round of blaster bolts hailed toward him, and it was only Ben's Soresu lessons etched into muscle memory that allowed Obi-Wan to dart from one cover to the next. He cursed. "Padme," he said into his comm, "Padme do you copy? Do not go in there alone!"

Padme did not respond. Obi-Wan cursed again.

"Red alert! Red alert! All units report to your battle stations. This is not a drill. Red alert! Red alert!" the electronic notice broadcasted over the PA system as red lights blared. Padme ran headlong into the bunker, blaster up, head low. She barrelled down a hallway. Around the far corner, she could see shadows. She threw herself into the nearest doorway.

Pressing herself as far into the storage closet as she could, she waited for the droids to pass.

"Jedi on both entrances - they've taken out half our communications!"
"Restore contact as soon as you can. We need to get that center back online."

"Oh, no you don't," Padme said quietly. She peeked around the doorway to make sure they were gone. She did a double take on her surroundings, and realized she'd been hiding in a rackful of long-range blaster rifles. "Huh," she said, picking up a gun that was nearly as tall as she was. She slung it across her back and started running down the hallway.

Mace whirled in an angry circle, hitting one, two, three droids in a fluid sequence before grabbing a fourth by its neck and shoving it into the water. It sparked and sputtered out. Robes half soaked from river water, he deflected more blasterfire as the droids continued pouring out of the blast doors.

Force, there were so many of them. They should've all shut down when the command center blew, but there swarming out of the bank like ants from a drowned hill. However, even outnumbered, he had a job to do. "Kenobi!" he shouted into his comm. "Keep them occupied, take down as many as you can and keep them coming! We need to get as many droids out here as we can so Padme has a clear shot."

There was a vague noise of exertion that might have been a curse. "The hells do you think I've been doing?" Obi-Wan demanded. Mace smirked. That's the spirit.

Padme crouched and shuffled forward on hands and knees beneath the dimly lit console room. It looked just like the other command center she'd seen earlier that day, save for the fact that this one was not currently buried in shrapnel. Looking up through the catwalk-grid floor, she could see wires leading to and from the main console. She followed the ropelike web to its epicenter, right beneath the central computer. Carefully, as quietly as she could, she pulled the last bomb out of her pocket and placed it on the main support beam. She depressed the small oblong button on top and the device gave a confirmation beep!

"What was that?" the shadow of a droid fell over her, and she froze. A battle droid stood right above her, blaster at the ready.

"What was what?"

"There was a noise."

"Back to your station, soldier."

Slowly, carefully, Padme slid backward so she could turn around. As she did, the long blaster rifle she carried on her back swung at an unruly angle and hit the durasteel catwalk above with an enormous CLANG!

"There! Down there!" the droid opened fired on her from above, and she shrieked, crawling as quickly as she could out of the cramped access port. She tumbled out into a hallway just as her pursuer turned the corner.

"You there! Freeze!"

She pulled the rifle back like a bat and swung, bashing the droid's head in with a satisfying noise. The droid fell in a heap, but another was right behind it, and it fired three shots in quick succession. They missed Padme by an inch, scorching the wall behind her. She returned fire with her pistol and ran.
"After her!" the droid shouted, and the echoes of droid feet pounding the ground behind her grew larger and louder. She could see daylight up ahead - that must be the back door, where Obi-Wan was. She cast a look just as she turned the corner, and read headlong into a droid.

"Oomph!" She landed face first on the ground and came up with a bloody nose.

"Wooah," the droid wobbled. Something had shot out of Padme's pocket and landed at the droid's feet. It picked it up. "What is this?" it turned over the buttoned panel as Padme struggled to her feet. "A detonator?!" it looked at her and recoiled, as if just realizing she were not a droid. "Aah!"

"Give me that," she grasped toward the device, but was still off-balance. Instead of pointing a blaster at her, the droid looked between the detonator, and her, and the detonator again, before fleeing toward the door.

"A bomb! The Jedi have placed a bomb!" it shouted to its comrades.

"Uuugh," Padme growled, wiped her nose, picked up her rifle, and charged after it.

Two dozen blasters and one lightsaber was the ambient soundtrack as Padme charged out of the bunker. Obi-Wan was fighting for his life, and was doing rather well, but for every droid he dispatched there were two waiting to take its place.

"A bomb! The Jedi have planted a bomb!" The droid continued to cry as it ran headlong into the fray. Padme bared her teeth, eyes not leaving it for a second. She dropped her pistol and hoisted the rifle to her shoulder. Ducking her head to see through the sight, she watched the light crosshairs fixate on the silhouette of the frantic droid, which was waving the detonator in the air.

"A bomb! Bomb!" The droid ran for its commander, who was currently busy being skewered by a lightsaber. The droid came to a halt in front of Obi-Wan, who looked just as baffled as it did. "Ahh! Jedi!"

"Obi-Wan!" Padme shouted, taking aim. The Jedi turned to look. "Duck!"

It was a tone of voice any sensible person knew to obey. Obi-Wan ducked, Padme took her final aim and squeezed the trigger. The bolt powered through the air and shot the detonator straight out of the droid's hand. Milliseconds later, the bunker exploded. The ground reverberated with the shockwave, sending Padme once again to the ground. She crawled to the relative safety of the treeline, where Obi-Wan had dived behind a bush.

They waited for the noise to cease, then, in unison, peaked around their cover to see the droid army. The garrison stood, arms limp and head bent, motionless. In the ringing silence following the blast, a lone droid creaked and fell over in a heap, its durasteel rump bent high in the air. High above, fresh rain began to batter the leaves in a musical tune.

"Well," Obi-Wan broke the quiet. "I think that went rather well." He cast a look at Padme. Nose pouring blood, hair half undone and covered in loose foliage, she smiled.

"Yeah," she breathed.

"One thing, though," Obi-Wan said, working desperately to speak normally while catching his breath. He picked up the detonator, which was now a shredded, melted crescent around the hole left by the rifle. He flipped it around for Padme to see and gave her an admonishing look. "Master Windu said specifically not to drop this."

Padme stared at him, and then at the detonator, and then burst out laughing. Obi-Wan laughed with
"Oh, ow," She clutched at her nose and tried to stop laughing. Obi-Wan's commlink clicked.

"All clear over here - good work, Padme. Are you two alright?"

Obi-Wan's chuckles died down, but he continued to smile. He swept his hair up out of his face and picked up the comm. "Yes, Master, we're just fine."

"Good. Take as many still holos as you think you need and meet me at the front gate. We'll let the cleanup crews deal with the rest of this."

"We'll meet you there."

Obi-Wan knelt and offered Padme a wad of gauze. "Here. We'll get that patched up on the way home."

"Thanks," she said, nasally, and pressed the pad to her nose.

"Master Windu was right. You did good." He gave her a hand up. She remained significantly shorter than him.

"Coming from you, Master Kenobi," she said, looking up at him past playful brown brows, "I consider that the highest compliment."

"Hmm," he regarded her with a squint. "Don't get used to it."
Obi-Wan shifted his shoulders again, trying to find a comfortable spot in the clothes the palace staff had graciously given him. It was difficult to look natural in a silky smooth shirt when you'd worn three layers of linen and wool all your life. Rusty red wasn't really his color, but it was close enough to brown that he didn't do a double-take whenever he spotted it in his peripheral vision. Even so, he preferred whites and creams. He hoped his robes would dry soon.

The knight felt eyes on him, and looked over to see Mace Windu giving him an admonishing side-eye. Of course, Master Windu was the embodiment of regality in his borrowed blue outfit. It fit him perfectly, and the high-collared neckline did not compel him to fidget. Without the lightsaber clipped to his belt, he would've looked like a local - a noble, even. Obi-Wan pulled at his too-tight collar again.

The tall double doors in front of them slid apart, and an attending droid stepped out and bowed. "Her Highness and her Council will receive you now, Masters Jedi," it said in a prim voice. Obi-Wan yanked at his shirt one last time and followed Master Windu into the room. The Force washed over them in purple-red waves of tumult and confusion. Ahead, the Queen and her Council were seated at a long oval table, embroiled in discussion.

"If this is some gambit to recoup their losses from the Plasma Trade agreements, it will not stand. It cannot!" insisted Sio Bibble, the governor of Naboo. Obi-Wan had met him briefly upon his first arrival to Theed, and had been given the impression of a short, homely man who would much rather sit home and write plays than administer a planet. Now, however, it seemed that the claws had come out. A fleck of spittle flew from the regent's lip as he continued, "They have gone too far this time. An army! In the bedrock, too - there's bound to be a mine."

"We do not know that for certain, governor," Queen Amidala said stoically, still and poised as a heron, blue-grey cowl drawn up around her painted face. "The information recovered from the droid's databanks has yet to be decrypted."

"It's not even within our territories - that's Gungan land," said a helmeted man standing slightly behind the Queen with her retinue of handmaidens. The monarch looked to him.

"The Gungans have no monarch standing between them and the Federation, Captain. I must speak for Theed and Otoh Gunga both."

The captain gave a slow nod and stepped back. The gold lattice headpiece the queen wore around her hood glittered as she turned and looked up to the Jedi. "Master Windu, Master Kenobi, welcome." She graced them with a rare, small smile, and they bowed. "I must give you my undying gratitude for your service today, and for returning my dear Padme to me in one piece." She spared a look at her handmaiden's bandaged nose, and her smile developed a playful tilt, "More or less."

The Jedi bowed again, just slightly. "We come to serve, Your Highness," Mace said in the easy way of a man who'd uttered those words a thousand times or more, "we thank you for your hospitality and generosity."

"Of course," the Queen said, "you saved the life of one of my most trusted attendants."

"Actually, Your Highness," Obi-Wan interjected. He looked back at Padme, who'd cleaned up nicely and was picturesque in a demure burgundy robe - save for the reinforced bandage she had on
her nose. He gave her a smile, forced crooked by the puckered scar on his lip. "It was Padme who saved my life, and Padme who recovered the data from the droid's servers, and who deactivated the droid's comm centers."

The only evidence of the Queen's surprise was the slight raise of her eyebrows. She turned her neck to look at her handmaidens. "Is this true, Padme?"

Padme flushed. The Queen - and the rest of the handmaidens, Obi-Wan noticed - were all looking at her with interest. "Yes, Your Highness," she said, and gave a quick curtsy. The Queen watched her for a few moments, some unreadable message passing between her and her attendants.

"I'm glad to hear it, you are very brave." the queen said at last.

"Thank you, your highness," Padme curtsied again. Amidala looked back to the Jedi. As if reading the Queen's mind, Captain Panaka gestured to the assembled council.

"Please, gentlemen, take a seat. We have much to discuss."

They stepped forward to claim the two last seats around the table. Mace took the one closest to them, halfway between the councilors and the Queen. This left Obi-Wan with the chair directly opposite. He stepped around the Queen to get to it, and brushed past Padme on the way. He gave her a friendly smile, and she had to fight back her own grin. The rest of the handmaidens ducked their heads and shot her amused glances, trying to look as though they hadn't. Mace watched the exchange, and the maidens, and then Obi-Wan's utterly oblivious expression, and heard himself sigh. He wanted to give the younger Jedi a snide look, but it was not the time.

"Yes, I think we do."

"Your Highness, you said the intel we recovered was still in decryption?" Obi-Wan spoke up.

"That is correct, sir," answered Captain Panaka for the queen.

"Any word as to when that will be done?"

"Our engineers are making process. They've already uncovered some of the files, but nothing of note. Their full report will be done in a few days - they are under orders to report any notable finds immediately."

"Of course," Obi-Wan nodded.

"If the Federation is behind this… this army, we will appeal the matter to the Senate."

"I have no doubt that these droids belong to the Federation, governor," Mace Windu said confidently. "The real question is, what are they doing here?"

"And what are they doing on Gungan land?" Obi-Wan added. "If they are after your plasma mines as you suggest, sir, they ought to be stationing themselves closer to Theed and the veins in this sector."

Bibble frowned. Beside the Queen, Captain Panaka looked as though he was holding his tongue. Obi-Wan glanced at the other two councilors who had remained silent by the governor's side. He could not recall their names, but he did remember that the royal council of Naboo consisted of ministers of art, music, and cultural affairs. It's no wonder the Federation chose Naboo for such a huge cache, Obi-Wan thought to himself, this planet was built for peace. They're helpless. He looked back to Panaka, who seemed to be one of the few people in the room who trod boots past
The guard cleared his throat and explained, "The Gungans are a vulnerable people, master. The Federation knows that. They don't consider themselves a part of the Republic, and have no sway with the Senate's watchdogs. They don't look after the land, they stay under water, and they fight amongst themselves too much to watch their forests."

"The Gungans are a free sentient people," Queen Amidala cut in firmly, "They cannot be treated this way, especially now." She paused, and, if Mace watched her exceptionally closely, he could see her eyes flicker to Padme, see her nod, and flicker back so quickly he could've missed it with a blink. "I will meet with their leader. They were put in danger - they could still be in danger, and they have a right to know."

"Your Highness, relations with the Gungans are still tense, at best. You must consider-"

"Theed and Otoh Gunga have kept each other at arm's length for too long, governor. If the Federation's threat is more extensive than this one garrison alone, we must stand together. Captain," she turned and looked at Panaka, who nodded immediately.

"I will prepare a missive immediately, your Highness." The Captain took his leave, accompanied by two of Amidala's handmaidens. Padme remained, and took a subtle step forward, not quite filling the space where Panaka had stood.

Across the table, Bibble was plucking fretfully at his prim white beard. "Your Highness, we must consider that we have no jurisdiction over the Gungans' lands," he said.

"A foreign standing army stationed on a Republic world is a reportable offense, no matter what part of the world they're on," Mace told him. "This is a matter to put before the Senate immediately. I will see to it that the Chancellor gets my report, but if you wish to make an appeal yourself, I would encourage you to do so now."

"We will send word to Senator Palpatine at once," Bibble decided. Padme quietly tensed beside the Queen, and the Queen eyed her.

"No," she said with authority. "I will go myself."

Bibble looked put into an awkward spot. "With respect, your highness, Palpatine has more authority in the senate. Even if you go to Coruscant, it would be the wiser choice to have Palpatine plead the case in your stead. We'll send him all the evidence we've gathered."

A penny dropped, and Mace's opinion of Padme Naberrie skyrocketed. He turned to look at her, and then forced himself to look at the not-Queen Amidala when he said, "I would advise you go to Coruscant personally. Senator or not, Palpatine will let you speak."

"Thank you, Master Windu," Amidala accepted the encouragement as someone already resolute to do the thing they'd been encouraged to do. Her eyes strayed toward Padme. "I will see that he does."

At that moment, a door opened behind governor Bibble and a frantic young messenger jogged into the room. "Your Highness," he said breathlessly, stopped, bowed, and resumed jogging until he came to the table. "Councilors -er, Masters," he added upon seeing the Jedi, "we've just uncovered this on the datacards you brought us." The young man placed a round holodisk in the center of the table and turned it on. A marquee of holographic text filed by. The assembly read together in silence, punctuating the air with gasps and murmurs.
"This is criminal," Bibble breathed.

"Yes." Mace watched the text loop around to its beginning and felt a pang of guilt. Surely, over the course of his one-man campaign he'd destroyed dozens of pieces of evidence like this, all without a thought. He'd been so focused on spiting Palpatine that he'd forgotten to go about the whole thing properly. He silently cursed himself for his blindness. "The Senate will be very interested to see this." As will Ben Kenobi.

"And the Chancellor," Obi-Wan added.

Amidala stood, and her councilors stood with her. "Master Jedi," she looked to the two knights with steely determination running through every manicured inch of her. "How soon can we leave for Coruscant?"

"As soon as you are ready, your Highness," Obi-Wan said.

And so, within the hour they were packing up enough equipment, fuel, and clothing (oh, so much clothing) for a week's trip to Coruscant. Obi-Wan, now back in his Jedi robes, was busy helping the handmaidens lift the heavier pieces of luggage onto the ship when the Queen arrived in the hangar, accompanied by Captain Panaka and Governor Bibble.

"You must convince Rugor Nass to see reason," the Queen was saying. "If we are to scare off the Federation once more, we must stand resolute."

"I would prefer it, but I have a duty to my people, Governor. This cannot wait. Rugor Nass is a ruler; he will understand that urgency. See to it that he receives the full holo transmission I have given to you."

"Of course, your Highness," said Bibble with slight hesitation.

The Queen approached the ramp of the ship, where her maidens were waiting in neat lines. Obi-Wan stepped up beside her. "Senator Palpatine has been informed that you are coming, your Highness," he told her. "He's requested that you comm him as soon as possible."

"I will speak to Palpatine when I arrive on Coruscant," she said, and began ascending the ramp. "He has been fully briefed on the situation. He cannot want anything further with me now."

Obi-Wan watched her go with some admiration. The handmaidens began to file up the ramp after their queen, and Obi-Wan walked up behind them. He fell into step with Padme as they headed to their seats. "Your Queen is a strong-willed ruler," Obi-Wan said quietly. "I admit I underestimated her."

Obi-Wan's eyes were fixed ahead, so he missed Padme's small, gratified smile. "You underestimate too much, Knight Kenobi," she said, and moved past him to join her sisters, who were gathering in the luxurious cabin. "You even underestimated me, at the start."

"Ah," the Jedi tipped his head, pausing just before he opened the door to the bridge, "that is a mistake I am sure to not make again, for fear of retribution." He tapped his nose along the same lines on which Padme had broken hers. "And perhaps a very large blaster rifle." He gave her a smile and disappeared into the bridge. Away from male company, the handmaidens all giggled...
freely, and Padme shooed them away.

"Master Jinn," said the young Cerean padawan, crested forehead smooth with childish wonder. Qui-Gon drew in a very slow, careful breath and looked down at him.

"Yes, Ni-Tal?" he asked patiently.

"Did you really fight a Sith on Kamino?" the child asked. Kamino had become a recurring theme in Qui-Gon Jinn's saber courses. Usually, he ignored the questions and assigned the inquirers more katas for their trouble. However, Ni-Tal's contribution was a new arrangement of the prevailing melody, as he had omitted the refrain which had been repeated so many times now it was likely engraved in the salle floor. Refreshed by the student's originality, Qui-Gon opened his mouth to answer. Before he could, the nervous boy felt compelled to add: "I mean, S'Iora said that Master Obi-Wan killed the Sith, but you were his master, weren't you? And he was still an apprentice then, right? So you had to be there too."

Ah, but there it was. Delayed, but not omitted after all. Qui-Gon's reply aborted itself and he let out his breath as a sigh. Too. And so the pupil outshone his master. Ah well. All was same in the Force. "Yes, I was there. I fought the Sith."

Ni-Tal's blue eyes grew wide in wonder, and something in his upturned face looked familiar. Qui-Gon wondered if this was one of Ki-Adi's descendants. Hadn't he a gaggle of grandchildren by now? Surely some of them had ended up in the temple. "They are real," Ni-Tal whispered, almost as if he hadn't meant to.

And there was that look again. Qui-Gon suddenly knew the familiarity had nothing to do with genetics. It was that childish gleam in his eyes, the mixture of awe and fear and hope, dusted with confused hormones and encased in a shell of innocence that showed signs of molting. It was a look Qui-Gon had seen, years ago, on Obi-Wan's face. Though the story was a tired one, some tug on Qui-Gon's heart told him to say,

"So they are, little one."

Part of the shell cracked and fell away, but Ni-Tal braved through it. "What was it - I mean, what was he like?"

"The Sith?"

Ni-Tal nodded. Qui-Gon glanced around himself to find that his entire class, all dozen of the junior padawans placed into his care, had stopped their exercises and were watching him with rapt attention. He looked up at the chrono on the wall. They had another hour to go. They were meant to be performing level three Ataru moon katas right now, but the Living Force approached like an old friend and reminded him that sometimes, saberwork of the mind was just as important as that of the body.

"Well," he began, looking around at his young audience, "what have your masters told you about the Sith?"

A round of uncertain glances took flight. Sith was a dangerous word to use in the Jedi Temple, especially for one under the age of eighteen.

"Well," said one brave girl, "my master said that no one has seen one for a thousand years - um, I mean, until Master Kenobi, that is."
These children had still been in the creche when Ben had killed the Darth they called Maul. They did not know a world without the Sith, but true darkness had a way of making even the most acclimatized soul squirm. "Your master is correct," Qui-Gon nodded, and the girl flushed with pride. "None for a thousand years, and in the past ten years, we've seen - and killed - two of them."

"Both of them by Master Kenobi," an exuberant human boy said with a grin. "I mean, uh… not the same one. Master Kenobi and Master Obi-Wan."

Some of the children laughed at this amusing twist of fate, but Qui-Gon remained somber. "And neither of them take any pride in the fact, I can tell you. There is no glory in killing, not even in killing a Sith."

A contemplative pause. "But…” ventured a curious Mon Cal. "If we do not kill them, won't they kill us?" She fiddled with her fins. "...that's what my master told me."

"Ah," Qui-Gon raised his brows and nodded. "I wish your master were right. If we do not kill the Sith, the Sith will kill not just us, but everyone else, too. Destruction is their goal. Such is the Dark Side of the Force."

A darker silence. Eggshells of innocence littered the floor. "But Master Jinn," spoke up a tiny Iktotchi girl, the smallest of the class, "why can we not bring them back to the Temple? My master says the Sith were once Jedi, who fell away from the rest. Can we not bring them back to the light?"

The concentrated aura of childish optimism could've cured plague. However, at sixty-one standard years, Qui-Gon's heart was already dismissing her naïveté. Then, he suddenly remembered Yan Dooku, and Ben's comments on what could have been. The Living Force hovered by his side, patiently waiting for him to see the puzzle. "Some Jedi might agree with you," Qui-Gon told her, which was a heresy. "But no matter what the possibilities, we must always be attentive to the Force, and more now than ever, to the Light." Joints creaking, he lowered himself to the floor and crossed his legs. His students followed his example unquestioningly. "Come, we will meditate on it now."

Some of the students shuffled and glanced at each other, confused as to how their saber class had devolved into a philosophy lesson. However, the majority were more than happy to follow the venerated master's example and delve into a meditative trance. They created a loosely formed circle, like they had in creche, crossed their legs and closed their eyes.

"And then you'll tell us about Kamino?" Ni-Tal asked quietly. Someone chuckled. Eyes still closed, Qui-gon sighed - something he hadn't done this frequently since Obi-Wan's padawan days.

"Hush, Ni-Tal," he reprimanded. A few moments passed. Ten, fifteen years ago he would have left it at that, but that was then. Nowadays, his hair was growing in silver. "Maybe later," he amended. Qui-Gon could see Ni-Tal's excitement with his eyes closed. He sighed again; his own personal refrain amid the chorus of the youth. The Force giggled, and invited them to bathe in the light.

Ben breathed in slowly, letting the light wash over him from within and without. A small fountain burbled nearby, accompanied by the low hum of floating bronzium and the sound of soft, distant footsteps. But here, deep in the center of his meditation, Ben could only hear the cries of a world he'd snuffed out of existence.

He'd always known he was going to change things - saving Qui-Gon, introducing Obi-Wan to the Old Code, saving Dooku. It'd all been the dearest wish of his heart ever since he realized he had
the power to change things for the better. But he'd become so absorbed in his task, he hadn't realized how he was changing things for the worse.

_Leia._ Ben's heart still ached with every beat to think about Bail and Breha, mourning over a child-no, children - that they had never had time to know. He remembered the look on Bail's face, so many years ago but so many years ahead, when he'd taken Leia in his arms for the first time. He'd stood there in the ruins of the Republic and held his daughter, and for a moment, the galaxy had been put to rights. But now… now, the Republic was standing, but Bail was not. And even if that was a mathematical victory, the blame fell squarely on Ben's shoulders. They sunk a little deeper toward his toes.

Change was impossible to fully comprehend. It was a hard lesson he'd learned as a child, when Tahl had been ripped from his life. But now, given a chance to live it all again, the meaning of change itself tormented him. What had been the point? If he had been forever destined to be here, to change the past, what had been the point of him suffering through the Empire? What had been the point of Leia, and Luke - Force, Luke, whom he still saw in his dreams - and Bail and Breha so happy? What was the point of nineteen years in the Tatooine desert if he was meant to end up here once again, bursting with joy and guilt all at once?

_Change_, the Force whispered to him. But change was the enemy, wasn't it? It was the reason his head bowed low, the reason his heart felt heavier than a galaxy. Change for the better, or so he'd thought. But now, he looked back on the once-and-never-was and saw flecks of light that he'd snuffed out for sake of change.

_Change_, the Force said again. He grit his teeth.

"This isn't your usual haunt," said a familiar voice, footsteps drawing near. Ben opened his eyes and looked up to see Qui-Gon Jinn walking toward him, backlit by a hall of windows and shining planets. Legs still crossed on the floor, Ben sat back and sighed.

"No," he said, "I'm afraid I've usurped your spot. I can leave, if you like."

Qui-Gon chuckled and waved it off. "I've no claim to it. I've only come up here for some peace and quiet from the exuberant youth," he said, which made Ben smile. Disguising his grunt as a sigh, Qui-Gon lowered himself onto the ground next to his old apprentice and relaxed, enjoying the atmosphere.

The planetarium had always been one of Qui-Gon's favorite spots of the temple. It was large and airy, and fortunate enough to have a spot along the base of the northwest spire, where sunsets poured in through the windows like liquid gold. It was an ancient place, bedecked in old bronzium statues and reliefs, all shining in the mid-evening sun. Faded tapestries hung from the ceiling along the hall's length, swaying softly in the air currents above pedestalled artifacts and heavy granite tablets engraved with the Jedi Code. Ben had fond childhood memories of this place. Qui-Gon would take him here to meditate, and they'd sit beneath the great bronze planets and watch them hover over the repulsor platform, orbited by shining blue moons in an endless dance.

Qui-Gon glanced to his side, studying the green and blue reflections on the floors. "I don't normally come to this side," he admitted, looking up around the great rotunda, admiring the stained glass windows and the circular fountain in the middle of the room. "I should."

It made Ben smile; it was somewhat bittersweet. "I used to come up here all the time as a young knight," he said.

"Oh?"
"Well, it was your favorite spot for thinking," Ben shrugged, looking bashful. "I suppose I… came to visit, as it were."

"Ah." Qui-Gon looked touched, but it was not a topic he felt comfortable breaching.

Ben glanced back at the fountain. "By that time they'd replaced the fountain, though."

"Replaced it?" Qui-Gon looked back at the quiet water sculpture and frowned. He had always harbored a love of fountains. "With what?"

Here, Ben smiled. "A statue of you, actually."

It caught Qui-Gon completely off guard. "What?" he asked, bewildered. Ben laughed at his incredulity. Qui-Gon glanced again at the fountain. "Why?"

"You were the first Jedi killed by the Sith in a thousand years, Master," Ben explained in a calm tone. "The council voted for it unanimously."

Qui-Gon absorbed this, looking at the fountain and up at the windows, trying to imagine it. "The first time they would've voted unanimously on anything I'd done - save censure," he grumbled. Ben snorted.

"I admit, it was nice coming up here after they put it in. They got your face right, for one thing, which was always good to see. And if anyone saw me up here, they'd leave me well alone." Qui-Gon wasn't sure if this was supposed to make him feel glad or sad for the man. He watched Ben's face, which soon lightened considerably. "I must admit," he said, "I'm thrilled it's no longer here."

Qui-Gon smiled. "I suppose I am too - although I'd love to see what they came up with."

"It was very stylish, very tall." Ben darted an amused glance at his old master. "They put you in cassocks."

"Cassocks?" Qui-Gon suddenly looked offended. "You said I died in battle, not doddering about in the archives like some stuffy old prophet." He scoffed. "Cassocks, what were they thinking?"

Ben was laughing, "Oh, but you were in the archives, master. They gave you a bronzium bust there, too."

Qui-Gon scoffed again. "Force," he exclaimed under his breath, shaking his head. "Unbelievable. Remind me never to become a martyr."

"I shall make a note of it."

They fell into wordless companionship, high spirits ringing in harmony in the Force. The massive bronzium spheres continued to turn on their appointed paths, singing with quiet resonance. Idyllic as it was, Ben's spirits fell quickly, resuming their trek to the place he'd found in his meditation, a spot set some distance beneath the floor. Qui-Gon watched him quietly.

"Happy to see me and not my statue, and yet still troubled," he observed. A lifetime of separation did not alter Qui-Gon's sensitivity to his pupil's temperament. "What's wrong?"

Ben sighed. There was no way to communicate it to anyone - even if Mace Windu had been here, it would have been too complicated an emotion for someone who'd only lived once. "Things have started happening again," he said, which was code for things I recognize from the past are happening again, "but this time I have no way to fix them."
Qui-Gon entertained a moment of alarm. "With the Sith?" He asked. Ben shook his head.

"No. Just... more... personal things." He looked down. "There are people I knew who I might never meet in this life. They might not ever meet anybody. And I'm just not sure why it was necessary that I know them at all if I was always meant to come back here, now, where I'd never know them. It's all changed, so what happened then doesn't matter." Ben gave a short, forceful sigh of annoyance. "Do you know, after all that happened - after losing you and everyone else, after the wars, after the Sith, I waited around for nineteen years to die?" He asked, casting a look at Qui-Gon, who was taking in the outburst silently, trying very hard to understand. "Nineteen years of nothing, for what? None of that matters now. I'm here, and I'm missing people I'll never know." He slouched, propping his chin on his fist.

After a while, Qui-Gon said, "Surely nineteen years gives you time to do something."

Ben considered this. Something, yes. Talking to his dead master in whispers, that was something, something which now made no sense, because they were talking in person. Guarding Luke, who no longer existed, for nineteen years, that was something. Living with the ghosts of everyone he'd killed and everyone he hadn't saved for nineteen years, that was certainly something. He said none of these things out loud. Instead, he muttered, "Like what?"

Qui-Gon studied him. After a while, the master said, "Maybe those years taught you something." he said. "You are not the man you were. Everything else may be gone, but you remain, with everything you learned in those years."

Change, the Force whispered to him again. You've changed. Ben closed his eyes. "But what is the point?" he asked the air. Qui-Gon shrugged easily.

"The Force will guide you to it. Until then," he nudged Ben so he opened his eyes, "enjoy the scenery."

Ben appreciated the gesture, but sighed. "It's not always so scenic," he said.

"No. But if you stay in the present, you'll always be looking ahead."

Fleetingly, Ben almost wished that it was Qui-Gon's statue sitting there with him. The statue had never given such irritatingly apt advice. "I'm not sure what I learned in those nineteen years that's worth keeping," he said. "Unless learning to be a cranky old man counts."

Qui-Gon let out a laugh. "Obi-Wan," he said the name kindly, patting him on the knee, "you were a cranky old man by the time you were ten." Which, Ben had to admit, was true.

But if not that, then what?

His commlink began to chirp at him, echoing in the vast, empty planetarium. Shaking off his thoughtful airs, he drew a fresh breath and answered it.

"Kenobi."

"Ben, hello. I thought I'd let you know, we are currently en route to Coruscant,"

"Ah," Ben smiled to hear Mace's voice. "Wrapping up so soon?"

"Queen Amidala is with us," he said, and Ben's smile disappeared. "We're going straight to the Senate. If you're not already there, you'll want to be. She'll be making a case before the assembly, and if I'm not much mistaken, Senator Palpatine is going to try and grab the spotlight from her."
Ben's face slowly drained of color. "Right," he said, businesslike and somber. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

"I'll meet you there. Windu out."

Ben stood and brushed his robes smooth. "I need to go."

"Senator Palpatine…” Qui-Gon said with distaste. "...is this about droids?"

It was about a great many other, much more important things, but, strictly speaking, "Yes," Ben said.

"And who is Queen Amidala?"

Ben considered lying to him, but with Qui-Gon, that was a habit that had lost its charm ages ago. "As I said, things are beginning to happen again," he told the older Jedi. "Just not quite the same as before."

He left his old master to enjoy the planetarium alone.
Chapter Notes

Today being what it is, I feel like I ought to say something. It's been oddly therapeutic – now more than ever – to be writing a story about political corruption, upheaval, and uncertainty, even if it's happening in a world and with characters I did not create. I am not so foolish as to think anyone in real-world politics has the heart of Bail Organa or the unstoppable soul of Padme Amidala, but I'd like to think that we connect with these unrealistically perfected characters because it's not only what we want, it's what we strive for. So, to everyone reading these fics, no matter what side or middle of the current political spectrum you fall on, I hope you can take comfort with me in these stories that put the best of people into the darkest of times, and strive to see them come out of the other side better for it. Reprise is far from over, and I can tell you that there will be some dark chapters up ahead. But I'll allow myself a slight deviation from my no-spoiler policy to tell you: the ending will be brighter. We can't wrap up the next few years in a neat 350,000 words, but we can continue to strive to love and care and learn. Even Ben Kenobi can't see the future anymore, but he can see hope. We love him for that.

May the Force be with you.

Upon their arrival to Coruscant, Mace Windu parted ways with the Nabooian delegation to bring his report in person to the Jedi Council. This left Obi-Wan as the sole Jedi representative to witness Queen Amidala send waves hurling out across the proverbial pond. One rather disgruntled pond occupant, Senator Palpatine, was currently jogging alongside her, trying to make her see his brand of reason.

"Your Highness, nothing is to be gained by haste. You have not secured a hearing with the Speaker, and hardly anyone knows why you are here. Your sudden arrival will bear no impact if you do not-"

"I do not need a hearing if you allow me to take your stand in a Senate meeting," Amidala said, eyes fixed straight ahead as she marched. "If I have read the Senate Rules correctly, at your behest I am granted at least half an hour of undisturbed speaking time, and more if the Speaker allows."

Palpatine huffed. "My Queen," he said in a placating tone, "those rules have not been updated since before your predecessor was born. I mean no offense, but I know the temperament of this assembly, and I know you will not have the desired effect on them or the Lord Speaker. Let me present Naboo's case on the floor."

"Can you do that, Senator?" As a fifteen year old girl, her innocent tone had a particularly vicious effect.

Palpatine was irritated, Obi-Wan could tell. He managed to hide it. "If you could have communicated the details while you were en-route, I would be more than prepared to-"

"As I've told you, our ship's communications were faulty. There is no time. I know everything there is to know about this situation, and my appearance will convey the urgency my people feel on this
matter. Naboo will not be ignored, Senator." _Naboo._ A crucial inclusivity. Obi-Wan's heart swelled with admiration, and he watched, fascinated, as Palpatine fiddled with his mouth. By now the senator was realizing that if he continued to contradict Amidala, it would cease to read as a contradiction of the monarch, and stray very quickly into the realm of contradicting Naboo's interests as a whole. Obi-Wan knew little of Palpatine, but he knew that he was a man of humble beginnings who held strong sympathies for local administration. Deviation from that brand would invite distrust.

Eventually, the senator sighed. "Of course, your Highness."

"Lead the way, Senator," said Amidala, dress swishing in a commanding rhythm, moving her and her trail of handmaidens onward like a freight train. "Session will be starting soon."

Palpatine sighed again and took the lead. Bringing up the rear, Obi-Wan leaned forward to whisper to Padme, "I don't envy him. She's incredibly good."

Padme said nothing, but smiled to herself.

The hearing itself was a condensed and less fraught version of the meeting Obi-Wan had witnessed on Naboo. The Queen added in some pleading looks and flourishes for the Senate's benefit, but the concerns remained the same. The Federation, once again over-reaching on Naboo. The Gungans and their lack of protection against insurgents, the weakness in Theed's defences should there be more droids.

Eventually, it came to the point where Amidala announced that she'd brought eyewitnesses with her, and called them to testify in front of the Senate. "Jedi Knight, Obi-Wan Kenobi, and one of my most trusted attendants, Rabé."

It was only through years of training that Obi-Wan kept his face from flinching. As he stood he shot a look at Padme. She very subtly shook her head, eyes boring into him. He glanced at Palpatine, who was watching Amidala without reservation, completely oblivious. Obi-Wan gave Padme one last look before joining Rabé on the repulsorpod, which floated out to stand by the Chancellor's stand.

She recited her account flawlessly. It was deeply unnerving. She got every detail right, down to the weather, and the color of the droid's armor, and the number of bombs they'd had with them. Obi-Wan avoided saying any names, as the temptation to say 'Padme' was too great. Once, he'd nearly slipped, but managed to turn "Pa-" into "Amidala's handmaiden" in a believable fraction of a second.

They did not address the contents of the databanks they'd uncovered at the garrison. Mace had been very insistent about that. When Obi-Wan escorted Rabé off the stand, he turned slowly, expecting to meet the senator's irritated stare for not presenting such a huge portion of their case, but Palpatine only gave him an encouraging smile. Obi-Wan realized that Palpatine could not be irritated by the exclusion because Palpatine did not know about the databanks at all.

Once Naboo's pod docked in its larger waiting booth, Rabé went to sit next to Padme. Amidala watched them both. Palpatine watched none of them, and stood to take his stand for closing remarks. Obi-Wan watched them all and wondered what he wasn't seeing. There was a lacuna in his vision, larger than his blind eye would ever allow, and it was growing. He took a seat and frowned, pondering the problem.

When the session dismissed, the delegation filed out of the Senate chamber. One of Amidala's handmaidens - Eritae, Obi-Wan believed her name was - left down a hallway almost as soon as
they were out of the chamber. The rest of the group continued on down the wide access tunnel that connected the Senate building with the smaller Offices complex. When they emerged into the main lobby, various senators were milling about in twos and threes, discussing the items of the session.

"Master Kenobi," said Senator Palpatine. Obi-Wan looked up, mouth open and ready to reply, but he stopped when he saw the brown-robed figure waiting in front of them.

Ben Kenobi turned away from his conversation with Chandrilian Senator Mon Mothma and smiled at the group. "Senator Palpatine," he bowed, and bowed again, lower, "Your Highness." He straightened and eyed his nephew. "Ah, Obi-Wan, I didn't know it was you they'd sent on this mission." Obi-Wan said nothing, but had the sneaking suspicion that Ben did know.

"Greetings, Master Jedi. Your colleague has been most helpful to us," said Queen Amidala, which prompted Obi-Wan to bow his head gratefully in her direction.

"Is there something we can do for you, Master Kenobi?" asked Palpatine icily.

"Me? No. I'm here on unrelated business." Which was a lie, Obi-Wan could tell, "But I believe Senator Mothma wishes to speak with you," he glanced at his companion, who took a graceful step forward and smiled.

"Indeed, Master Jedi. Your Highness, I represent a coalition within the Senate, we stand for sentient rights in the Republic. If it pleases you, we would like to speak with you and Senator Palpatine about Naboo's plight, particularly that of the Gungans."

Palpatine opened his mouth to respond, but Amidala beat him to it. "We would be pleased, Senator." Mon looked to Palpatine, who followed up with a tight smile.

"Indeed we would," he said, and gestured for Mon to lead the way. The senators walked side by side, followed closely by the Queen and her handmaidens. Ben fell into step at Obi-Wan's left side at the back of the procession.

"I hear Mace made it back to the Temple," Obi-Wan said quietly.

"Yes, I heard that too."

Obi-Wan frowned. "Did you not come because of his report?"

"No, as soon as he told me you were back from Naboo, I came here."

Obi-Wan shot him a sharp look. "You knew about this," he whispered so the handmaidens would not hear. "You were on this mission."

"Qui-Gon was, too. It went very differently last time."

Obi-Wan thought on this, and then looked horrified. "That wasn't when..."

"Yes."

The younger reeled. "Then they're... they're mixed up in this?"

Ben eyed the nearest handmaiden, who was looking a bit too innocent as she walked along in front of them. They stopped talking. Up ahead, an attending droid opened a large conference room and the group took their seats around a large table. Ben hung back. "I have to go. Stay alert, hold your tongue. It's far more political this time." He stepped away, had a thought, stepped back quickly and
put a hand on Obi-Wan's back. "And do as Padme says," he hissed, before rushing off with all the
dignity of a Jedi Master. Unsure of what to make of that, Obi-Wan continued on into the room and
took up a spot in the corner, standing behind the Queen. They were joined by half a dozen other
members of the Sentient Rights Coalition.

Shortly after Mon Mothma began reciting the coalition's mandate and their proposal to ally with
Naboo, Eritae quietly entered the room. She went to the Queen's side and whispered something in
her ear.

"Master Kenobi," the Queen fixed her eyes on Obi-Wan, "The Supreme Chancellor has asked to
speak with you."

Obi-Wan had never been asked to give a report to the Chancellor directly. He wondered if it was a
common occurrence. No one else in the room seemed particularly surprised. "Of course," he said.
Amidala turned her head slightly to look at her maidens.

"Padme, please accompany Master Kenobi and give the Chancellor my regards."

"Yes, your highness." Padme curtsied and moved to the door, where she waited on Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan's felt his feet moving him to the door, but his mind was struggling to wade through a sea
of confusion. As he passed, he cast a look at the Queen. Was she trying to curry political favor?
Surely it was too on the nose to have Padme accompany him and put in a good word for her. There
was something about the request that seemed off, but no one else seemed to notice.

As soon as he reached the doorway, Padme turned to walk with him side-by-side. The door shut
behind them. Once they were away from the delegation, Padme's stride picked up speed, until she
was practically marching down the hallway. Obi-Wan sped up to keep pace with her. They retraced
their steps back to the Senate building, where the Chancellor kept his offices. It occurred to Obi-
Wan that it should be him leading the way, not Padme.

With the Assembly adjourned, the halls were practically empty. When there was no one else in
sight, Obi-Wan finally gave into his frustration. "Padme," he said, "something is going on that
you're not telling me."

She said nothing.

"Padme," he said again, more commanding this time. She continued to march down the long,
circular hall that circumvented the Senate chambers and would eventually lead them to the
Chancellor's office. She continued on until an empty hallway presented itself on the left. Without
warning, she grabbed the Jedi's arm and dragged him into it, turning him to face her. "What is
going on?" he asked, alarms blaring in his mind.

"The Chancellor hasn't asked to speak with you," she told him. "I had Eritae request an audience
for me, and you're escorting me there."

"What?" he said, baffled. Padme looked from side to side, verifying they were alone.

"The one you've been calling 'Your Highness' all day is my most senior and trusted handmaiden,
Sabe."

"Your handmaiden?" Obi-Wan asked, realization slowly dawning. He was unused to the sensation
of being fooled. Padme set her jaw and tilted up her chin, and the sight would've made Obi-Wan
back away if his back weren't already pressed to a wall.
"I am Queen Amidala," she told him. "My handmaidens will deal with the Senators. But right now, you and I have important matters to discuss with Chancellor Valorum."

She went back out into the main corridor and resumed her warpath. In the back of Obi-Wan's head, he heard Ben's suggestion echo: *do as Padme says*. He looked around and realized she was gone. Lurching into action, he left the hallway and jogged to catch up.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he hissed at her, abandoning Jedi reserve.

"No one knows," she explained in a hushed tone, "no one but the six of us and my head of security."

"The Prime Minister?"

"No."

"Senator Palpatine?"

"No."

A pause. They reached the turbolift that would take them to Valorum's office suite. Two armed droids stood on either side of the door, unmoving but listening. Obi-Wan held his tongue, mind stewing over the ploy he should have seen ages ago. Once they were in the privacy of the lift, he said, "Sabe takes your place as monarch and Rabe takes your place as eyewitness, leaving you free to move as you please."

"Yes."

Obi-Wan was impressed, but he'd also been a made a fool. He set his jaw. "But you sent Eritae to request an audience. Why not just go yourself? Why include me? You were there, after all." The last observation came out in a bitter tone. If he had known he was protecting a *Queen* all this time, he would have put up more of a fight when Panaka had insisted she tag along. *Which is why no one told you*, said his inner voice of reason, which had always sounded annoyingly of Qui-Gon. He ignored it.

"Because you are a Jedi, Master Kenobi, and your Order holds the ear of the Chancellor. You are my alibi as well as my ally." The lift whirred ever upward past the floors and floors of the congressional chambers. It slowed as they neared the epoch. Padme glanced at her feet. "Also," she broke the silence between them with a surprisingly vulnerable tone, "I think you may be one of the few people I can trust right now." She glanced up at him, and he glanced down at her. Their eyes met. "Can I trust you, Master Kenobi?" Amid the tumult of his own frustration and embarrassment, Obi-Wan foresaw that this decision would be an important one - for him, and for her. *Do as Padme says.*

"Of course, Your Highness."

In the Jedi Temple, Qui-Gon had abandoned the planetarium and was wandering the halls in contemplative isolation, hearing but not listening to the bustling lives around him.

He was trying to wrap his mind around everything that Ben had said. A statue, of him, of all people. A young Obi-Wan, knighted and alone. People who were supposed to have met, but wouldn't? He wasn't sure what that last one was supposed to mean. He rarely understood all of what Ben said. He sighed.
To die, and to come back again. Now that must be a real adventure. Qui-Gon had long studied the wisdom of the Whills, a heretical order of Force-users who considered immortality something to be grasped. He wondered if Ben knew about them. Even if he did, it would hardly be the same. Immortality was a linear thing. Ben's second chance was life in the round, haunted by ghosts of the dead as well as the living - at least, those who should be living. It was enough to drive anyone to madness, Qui-Gon was sure. He wondered, not for the first time, if Ben ever struggled with his own sanity. It was hard for others to see, of course. Obi-Wan had always been exceptionally good at hiding his own emotions, but Qui-Gon knew better. Still, it just wasn't the sort of question you asked a person. If they hadn't already wondered if they were going mad, you didn't want to be the one to have given them the idea. He decided the question could wait for another time. Better to focus on the Here and Now.

In the Here and Now, the initiate salle doors were open, and echoes of activity wafted to his ears in the hums and grunts of a lively lightsaber battle. He peeked into the wide room, lined with students and instructors. A pair of masters strode onto the balcony, nodding politely at those who were already gathered around the railings. Master Drallig welcomed another master onto the salle floor.

Was it really a tournament day already? Memories of Obi-Wan's initiate days flooded back and Qui-Gon almost smiled, but a wince arrested the expression before it could arrive. He had come a long way since those days, as had young Kenobi, thank the Force. If someone had told him back then of the man that Obi-Wan would become, he would never have believed them. And yet, here they were. Nostalgia compelled him to step into the salle and take up a spot in a corner of the room.

They really did get younger every year, he thought to himself. He didn't know how Yoda didn't see them all as infants - or maybe he did. Or perhaps his relative height put things in a different perspective. Although Qui-Gon dwarfed the combatants by multiple feet - save for the towering wookie initiate in a far arena - the Jedi younglings were all giants compared to their venerated grandmaster, who watched the proceedings with a gimlet gaze.

"See anything you like?" Master Drallig sidled up to him with a poorly suppressed grin.

"You and I both know I'm far too old for that kind of talk," Qui-Gon said. Cin laughed.

"That's what you said last time. And would you look at how that turned out?" he turned his gaze back to the room of initiates. "They all idolize Obi-Wan, you know."

Qui-Gon would not let the pride show, and opted for an annoyed expression instead. "Then you should be pressing him to take on an apprentice."

Cin shook his head. "You're the man who trained their hero, Qui-Gon. They idolize you as well." The saber master pointed subtly to the pair of sparring partners nearest to them. "Sonji wasn't fighting this hard two minutes ago." The Cathar girl in question landed an unnecessarily complicated Ataru triple flip and cast what she thought was a surreptitious glance at the masters.

Qui-Gon regarded her warily. He'd never trained a girl before, not one-on-one. The prospect was daunting. Perhaps it was the unjust sentiment of an old man, but girls tended to be... complicated. Emotionally, and biologically. It was better to leave that hurdle to braver, younger men whose hair was not yet so grey. "I'm not here for an apprentice," he reiterated.

"You should watch how loudly you say that - here comes Master Yoda. History may yet repeat itself, Master Jinn," Cin gave Qui-Gon a mirthful pat on the back before moving away, allowing Yoda a private audience.
"Last padawan, he said," Yoda grumbled aloud as he settled to a stop near Qui-Gon's knee. "Last padawan, he always says. A hypocrite you are, Master Jinn, or else very lost." Qui-Gon resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

"Can I not take an interest in the younger generation without you pestering me?" he asked irritably.

"No," was the impish reply. Yoda smiled and allowed a slight pause so Qui-Gon could scowl. Then he said, "Know where your last padawan is, do you?" And added, "Either of him?"

"It is not my job to keep tabs on either Kenobi," said Qui-Gon with no small measure of exasperation. It was customarily the young knight's responsibility to be annoyed when others constantly connected him with his former master. In Qui-Gon's and Obi-Wan's case, the situation was reversed.

"Your job, no. Your habit, yes."

Unfortunately, the troll had a point. "They've both been at the Senate today, I believe, or so Mace tells me."

"Hmm. Yes, returned from Naboo they have." Yoda pondered this, and looked up to Qui-Gon. "Also returned from his investigation, Master Dooku has."

Qui-Gon's eyebrows rose. After three years, the unceremonious announcement was an anticlimax. "Has he?"

"Yes. Unsettling news he has uncovered on Kamino." Yoda paused, and looked up to meet Qui-Gon's eyes. "There, you were. Understand his findings, you may. Attend the debriefing, you should."

"Of course, Master," Qui-Gon said, wondering if Yoda had meant to include him all along, or if he was only the third choice after Obi-Wan and Ben.

"Good." The finality of the word demanded movement, but the two masters remained standing where they were, watching the youthful display of raw energy play out in four simultaneous sparring matches spread across the salle.

"Talented, young Skywalker is," said Yoda after some time. Qui-Gon followed his gaze to the opposite corner of the room, where the junior initiates had been queued up in pairs slightly away from the more urgent competition of their elders. Anakin was enmeshed in the current melee, and was leading his opponent around the small arena with a wicked smile on his face. Qui-Gon watched him, and developed an odd feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"Yes, he is," he said after a while. The two masters watched in silence until the fight ended. Anakin lost by a narrow margin, having goaded his opponent just a little too much.

"Much to learn he still has," Yoda gave a soft chuckle. "Come. We have much to discuss with Master Dooku." The grandmaster led the way out of the room. Half a dozen initiates watched Kenobi's former master leave and sagged in disappointment.

Finis Valorum leaned back in his seat, regarding his guests with mustered composure. Per the Queen's request, he'd had his bodyguards wait outside while he met with the monarch and her Jedi escort. Apparently, the Chancellor had been under the impression that Obi-Wan would be escorting Amidala and her whole retinue, not just Amidala in disguise while her handmaidens held court with the Senate elsewhere. When Padme had introduced herself and explained that she was the queen,
and that she had been the eyewitness at the garrison, he’d fallen silent. Now, he was able to find his tongue.

"I assume you have a reasonable explanation for this subterfuge."

Padme was not intimidated. Sitting ramrod straight in a chair big enough for someone twice her side, she said, with pointed authority, "You must understand, Chancellor, what we're about to show you is very sensitive information. I'm not sure who in the Senate we can trust - that is why I wanted to deliver it to you personally, without anyone's knowledge."

Valorum looked to Obi-Wan for clarification. The Jedi nodded. "The Queen is right, Your Excellency. Pad-" he paused, "Queen Amidala infiltrated the garrison and was able to make a copy of their central databanks before we dismantled their communications."

"And you let her?" The accusatory tone hit at Obi-Wan's pride. He remembered rather suddenly that Finis had a daughter about Padme's age. The Jedi exerted all of his willpower and managed not to flounder when he said,

"I did not know the Queen's exact identity when I agreed to her plan, sir." There was a brief pause in which Finis found time to look first surprised, then amused and finally, vindicated. Luckily for Obi-Wan, his face resumed its serious hue in short order and redirected its interrogative rays onto the Queen.

"What was on these databanks?" he asked.

"Radio transmissions," she replied. "Nabooian Intelligence was able to decrypt most of the uncorrupted files earlier this morning." Out of a pocket on her belt, Padme produced a small drive and placed it on Valorum's desk. He plugged it into his console and projected the contents for viewing.

A window of text appeared line by line in short, concise segments, each one timestamped. It appeared to be the transcript of interstellar communications between two parties. The three onlookers fell silent as they watched the text scroll by.

09:00
REPORT REQUESTED
REPORT RETURNED: ALL CLEAR

10:00
REPORT REQUESTED
REPORT RETURNED: 09:42 TWO TRESPASSERS SPOTTED ON EASTERN PERIMETER. SPECIES UNKNOWN. RADIO SILENT. OVER.
RETURN RECEIVED. MONITOR CLOSELY. OVER.
WILCO.

11:00
REPORT REQUESTED
REPORT RETURNED: ALL CLEAR

12:00
REPORT REQUESTED
REPORT RETURNED: ALL CLEAR

13:00
The Chancellor watched in silence. The Jedi and the Queen watched watched the Chancellor. The transmission ended and the projection closed. Valorum stared at the empty space for a moment. "Who has seen this?" he asked.

"My cabinet, my intelligence officers, Knight Kenobi, and Master Windu. And you."

The chancellor considered this. "Who was this garrison communicating with?"

"We do not know," said Padme. "I spoke with the head of cryptology, and he believes the commanding unit was in open space when the transmissions were given. They seem to have rerouted their signal through multiple ports to avoid tracing."

Valorum rubbed at his chin with growing anxiety. "Who is this Lord S?" He asked. "Is it code for something?"

This time, it was Obi-Wan who leaned forward to anser. "Sir, these droids are of Federation origin, but we believe 'Lord S.' refers to a separate authority. Namely, the Sith."

Valorum's head shot up. "Sith?" he said. "Surely 'Lord' could mean anything. The Viceroy's of the Federation use the title. It could mean one of them."

"But none of their names begin with S," Padme pointed out. "And that does not explain why they would want to specifically kill Jedi."

Obi-Wan set his face into grave lines as he said, "The databanks archived multiple years worth of communications. There is another file on that drive," he pointed to the small stub plugged into the holodesk. "I suggest you open it, Sir." Valorum did. He read it carefully.

"Lord I. killed on Kamino, future permissions defer to Lord S." he read aloud. He looked at the timestamp, which dated it not quite four years ago. Across the desk, Obi-Wan tucked his hair behind his ear to expose his scarred face.

"I remember that day rather vividly, Sir." He let Valorum remember the incident, the report. The Chancellor's eyes darkened. "Lord means Sith," Obi-Wan concluded.
After a long silence, Valorum seemed to reach a decision. "Your Highness," he said in a clipped tone of determination, "you must not let this information go beyond any of your cabinet members."

"Yes, Your Excellency," Padme nodded.

"Has Master Windu made his report to the Order?" he asked Obi-Wan.

"Only at the highest levels, sir. This portion of his report has been classified."

"Good. I want it to stay that way."

"Will you tell the Senate?" Padme asked. Valorum sighed and rubbed fervently at the bridge of his nose.

"The Alaris Prime investigation is ongoing. I get a report every month on all the droids the Jedi have uncovered. The Federation has been suspended, but allowed to keep their representation in the Senate, and I have their allies breathing down my neck, lobbying for their full reinstatement. War is brewing in their wake in the outer Rim and moving quickly Coreward, and now, you're telling me they've been tied to the Sith - and on Kamino, no less, just days before the clones are set to immigrate." He let his hand thud to the arm of his chair and regarded his audience. "If that information finds its way to the Senate floor, it will be bedlam."

A delicate web strained across the galaxy, dangling the Republic above a starless chasm. "The Jedi are inclined to agree with you, Sir," said Obi-Wan. Mace Windu had certainly agreed, last they spoke. In these matters, Mace Windu was the Jedi Order. Valorum gave a curt nod and turned to regard Padme.

"And you, Your Highness. What do you suggest I do with this information?"

The Queen squared her shoulders. "If we cannot pursue the Sith openly, we will pursue their dogsbodies. Our first order of business is to pursue the rest of the droids. Cut off the limbs, and the body can do nothing," she said.

"I agree." Valorum studied her, blue eyes sharp and calculating. "You understand, I am unused to dealing with those who are not senators. I must take you at your word that you will not speak of this matter to anyone, Your Highness."

She didn't miss a beat. "And I must take you at your word that you will not speak of my true identity to anyone, Your Excellency."

The two rulers looked at each other for a long time before they came to an unspoken accord. "Very well." The Chancellor stood, and the Jedi and the Queen stood with him. "Master Kenobi, I will need a redacted version of this information to distribute to the Senate. Omit all mention of this 'Lord S'. The KOS order was given as soon as you were spotted. We will make it sound like Nabooian Intelligence only just deciphered it. Let the Council know - in person, if possible."

"Of course, sir."

"Thank you for entrusting me with this information," Valorum said, plucking the drive from his console. He took out a device from his desk drawer and inserted the drive into it. He hit a power button, there was a high pitched noise, a light, and some smoke. He emptied out the ashes into a wastebin. "I will bear it in mind."

Obi-Wan and Padme both bowed. As they walked to the door, Finis said, "Master Kenobi,"
Obi-Wan turned. "Sir?" The Chancellor was fixing him with an inquisitive squint.

"Why is it that whenever there is a Sith, I look up to see a Kenobi standing there behind it?"

Obi-Wan raised his brows in a way that suggested he'd wondered the same thing. With his hair still tucked behind his ear, Valorum could see his sightless eye convey the same exasperation as its seeing partner. "I suppose it must be the will of the Force, sir," the Jedi said. Valorum nodded, the slightest of smiles on his lips.

"Of course," he said. "Then may it never leave either of you."

Obi-Wan smiled back, scar pulling it crooked. "Thank you, sir."

The Jedi and the disguised Queen left the suite and wound their way back to the Senate Offices.

"You've dealt with Sith before?" Padme asked while they were still alone in the abandoned halls.

"I killed one, once," he said, which made her look up at him in surprise. He gestured to his scar. "He gave me this on Kamino."

Padme remembered his comment to Valorum about Lord I. "Oh," she said. "I'm so sorry." She dared a glance up at his eye, which was usually covered by a thick fringe of hair. The white scar of his cornea gleamed in the low light, framed on either lid by a jagged line of pink. "Can you see through it?"

"No," he answered plainly.

"Will the Jedi not allow you to have a cybernetic put in?"

Obi-Wan gave a derisive snort. "Let me, yes. Convince me to, no."

"Oh," Padme nodded, and looked away. They walked in silence down the darkened corridor. After a while, she remembered something else. "What did he mean by 'a' Kenobi?"

"The only other Sith the Jedi have ever encountered was killed by my uncle, who is also called Kenobi."

"Your uncle?" she said, smiling. "You have an uncle?"

"Yes, he's a Jedi too. Don't look at me like that, Jedi have families. You met him earlier, in the lobby."

Padme lifted her head as she connected the dots. "I had wondered why Palpatine called him that."

She smiled. "I should like to meet him personally." She glanced up at Obi-Wan coyly. "I wonder if he'd underestimate me as well," she said.

"I highly doubt it, Your Highness," Obi-Wan said dryly. He did not explain Ben's advantage of precognition. "He's a bit more perceptive than his nephew. And even if he were half blind, I don't think he'd mistake you for a second. You leave something of an impression."

Padme scoffed at this. They walked in silence. "You can't call me that, you know," she said eventually. "So long as Sabe takes my place, you can only call me Padme."

Obi-Wan nodded. "Well, If I'm going to call you by your first name, so long as no one important is listening, you ought to call me by mine."

"Fine," Padme replied. The halls around them were empty, but at the end of the tunnel, they could
hear the bustle of the offices. "Come on then, Obi-Wan. You walk too slowly."
Rising Opposition

Qui-Gon squirmed in his seat. It felt like sitting on a block of stone. Uneven stone, at that. It didn't look like a block of stone. It looked like an overstuffed throne, or as close to a throne as one could get in the austere Jedi Order, but it was a lie. As soon as you looked at the thing and supposed that it would be comfortable, you doomed yourself to disappointment. How did they do it? They spend whole days in these chairs. He'd only been here half an hour and already he'd lost feeling below his waist. He leaned to one side in an attempt to restore blood flow. It didn't work.

"Something wrong, Master Jinn?" asked Mace Windu from across the room. The Master of the Order had his legs crossed one over the other, lounging at a comfortable angle. His blank expression was somehow more irritating than any other expression he could have selected. Qui-Gon clenched his jaw and made a point to not glare.

"No." When was the last time they'd been reupholstered, anyway? Surely this hideous orange was a recent fashion. Qui-Gon frowned, trying to remember a time when the chairs had not been orange. He cast fruitlessly about his memories for some time, until he realized he was asking this question of the same Order that had taken two centuries to allow holonet browsers inside Temple walls. Ten generations of pensive wear pressed up on his backside. He fidgeted.

The doors to the Jedi High Council room slid open. Masters Windu, Yoda, Jinn, Galia, Mundi, and Ti sat up a bit straighter. Yan Dooku strode inside and took stock of the sparse company in the time it took him to reach the center of the starburst medallion. He was in a rare smiling mood. "Qui-Gon, what a surprise. I hadn't realized I'd been gone that long," he intoned meaningfully, looking his old student up and down. "That side of the room suits you." Qui-Gon replied with a scowl not seen since his padawan days. Dooku's wrinkles twitched with thickly veiled amusement.

"Thank you for coming, Master," Mace Windu interrupted the reunion, "and welcome back."

Dooku took in a clean breath, washing his attentions of petty humors. "As the Force willed, it was high time. I trust the council received my report?"

"We did, and we've brought Master Jinn up to speed," Mace explained. "We're hoping he might offer some insight on Kamino and their… practices."

"Ah." This revelation seemed to comfort Yan in some way. Whether it was pleasure that his former padawan was here to help or relief that his former padawan had not actually been appointed to the council, it was impossible to say.

"Disturbing news you bring," Master Yoda cut to the matter at hand, "from Kamino."

Dooku gave his old master a slight bow. "Indeed, Master. It appears as though Sifo Dyas might not have defected to the Sith after all - at least, not knowingly." He pulled a small device out of his pocket. Mace waved a hand, and the window shutters closed, leaving the council room in darkness. A small projection stand extended from the floor, and Dooku placed the device on it. The other Jedi leaned forward to watch as an image sprung to life, suspended in the air by light.

"As you may remember from my last report, Masters, Sifo Dyas claimed that the Kaminoan cloners were implanting cybernetic biochips into each of their creations, equipped with program that he was unable to decipher. After three years of searching, I was finally able to locate evidence of his claim. Sifo Dyas hid the stolen chip in an old Jedi safehouse near Wild Space." Dooku produced a tiny object from his pocket and held it up to the light. It was a cybernetic chip
suspended in a tube of viscous fluid. The councilors glanced between it and the projected image of the same object. It was of an indeterminate shape, pink, and utterly unremarkable. Dooku pocketed the original.

"After I recovered it, I went to Kamino to speak with the cloners themselves. I was able to… persuade them to consult me on this project." Qui-Gon quietly put his hand over his mouth, trying to keep himself from saying anything too trite. He wondered if Dooku's methods of persuasion had changed since his padawan years. He doubted it. "The use of biochips in clones is not new. From what I understand, the chips are implanted in the neural network controlling the limbic system, interrupting brain signals at their most basic level. They use a combination of electric stimulation and engineered hormone release to… well, to perform what is essentially mind control."

"Mind control?" said Adi Gallia. The technology was not new, but neither were the ethical dilemmas. "Why would Master Dyas allow such a thing?"

"From what the Kaminoans were able to tell me, the chips usually operate on such small levels that 'control' is too harsh a term for it. The basic purpose for the chips was to prevent insanity. Apparently, genetic engineering performed on a scale of thousands and millions is not without its neurological hazards," Dooku explained with dark contempt. "The Kaminoans learned to supplement clones' mental faculties years ago. It was Sifo Dyas who had them adapt the designs to accommodate a more rigorous input system. According to my sources - who wish to remain anonymous, considering their clientele - Master Dyas developed a program, a code to upload to the chip before its installation. It was a dormant process, that would lie undetectable on the chip until some situation or command triggered it. Apparently, the purpose of this program was to make sure the clones took orders from Jedi, and no one else." He caught Qui-Gon's disturbed expression and shrugged. "He wanted an army, after all." There was a disturbed pause as the Masters considered the implications.

"If Sifo Dyas designed the program," said Mace Windu, fingers steepled into a concentrated point, "then why was he so disturbed when he travelled back to Kamino?"

"Because Sifo Dyas' program was not the program installed on the chips," Dooku announced. He waved a hand, and a new image rippled into focus. It was a block of text, written in a language that only a computer, or maybe a droid would have been able to understand. "This is code that can be found on all of the Kaminoan clones at present. Not a single one received the code written by Sifo himself."

"Do the Kaminoans know this?" asked Ki Adi.

"Not as such, Master," Dooku allowed. "The Kaminoans were under the impression that this code was an updated version of Sifo Dyas' own creation. They received it in a transmission from Dyas' ship attached to a message claiming that the previous version was faulty. I've had a look at the archived transmission, and I believe Dyas' frequencies were hijacked while he was away from his ship. Unfortunately, it is impossible to trace the sender."

"Hmm," Yoda hunched his shoulders thoughtfully. "The Sith."

"I suspect so."

"What does the code actually do?" Qui-Gon spoke up. "If the first code was to keep the clones from disobeying Jedi, what is this one for?" Dooku gave his former protege an almost apologetic look.

"Unfortunately, I do not know. It is written in a programming language that neither I nor any of my
contacts nor any of our droids have ever seen before. I only know about Dyas' original code from what the Kaminoans could tell me about it. They did not have a copy of the original version, and Sifo did not think to leave one behind. I think he must have been too disturbed by the contents of this chip to think that far ahead." It was a harrowing thought.

"Give this to our cryptologists we will," said Yoda. "In strict confidentiality, it will be kept."

Dooku bowed. "Of course, Master." Dooku plucked the data chip from its stand and handed it and the biochip to the grandmaster. The projector retracted, and the window shades raised. Light spread across the room, but the dark mood lingered.

"The clones are set to begin immigration into the Republic within the week," Mace Windu observed solemnly. "Do these biochips pose any threat to others - or to them?"

"I understand that Master Kenobi has been lobbying for the removal of the chips to be a requirement on the physical exam prior to immigration. Has he not been successful?"

In some unspoken cue, the assembled councilors looked in unison to Master Jinn. Qui-Gon shifted in his seat. "If he has been, I haven't heard about it."

Dooku looked fully around the room, as if noticing a gap for the first time. "Where is Master Kenobi?"

"They're both at the Senate today," Qui-Gon told him, "I understand they've been cooped up with more pressing matters than biochips."

"More pressing?" Dooku's eyebrows shot up. Qui-Gon glanced at Mace, and the Master of the Order sighed.

"An encounter on Naboo," he explained, face surly and longsuffering. "If the information we've gleaned about these Federation droids over the past week are any indication, I might have a guess as to what is in that biochip program of yours."

"We cannot delay," the words echoed around the vast dome of the Senate chamber, projected on loudspeakers for all to hear. Ben Kenobi watched the transcript whirl past on the display in front of him. Floating holoscreens projected larger than life views of Senator Palpatine's earnest expression. "For too long, we have allowed the Federation's crimes to fade into the background of our daily lives. For too long, we've ignored their standing armies hidden across the galaxy. Now, the largest garrison encountered to date has been found on Naboo, a peaceful world." He looked imploringly at the congress around, above, and below him. "The Federation must be brought to task. I do not say this for Naboo alone, but for all the worlds, Republic or not, who have been subject to these incursions. Plagen. Taris. Ansion. These are just a few of the systems who have fallen victim to the Federation's underhanded schemes. It has to stop."

_He's burning the bridge_, Ben thought to himself, absently wondering what the Neimoidian Viceroys were doing about now. _So where is he building a new one?_ Palpatine's words blurred in his mind, overridden by a vortex of thought. The Sith couldn't just abandon the droids, could they? Surely they should be putting up more resistance. They'd been planning this war for years. Decades, for all Ben knew. How could they just give up? There was an ulterior motive here, but what? It occurred to Ben that not only did he not know, he had no idea how he could find out. The future he knew had been derailed, and they were hurtling beyond the boundaries of his mental map.
Palpatine's speech surfaced in Ben's consciousness. "The Jedi Order has already valiantly pursued the Federation to all of these worlds, but their resources are stretched thin. We cannot call upon our friends in the Order to face this invasion single-handedly. Every encounter without our support puts them in terrible danger." Ben scoffed. "We must help them in any way we can. For this reason-"

"Here I thought Obi-Wan had it all tied up in a bow," a quiet voice spoke up from behind Ben. Bail Organa came to sit next to him and gave a nod. "With Master Windu's help, of course."

"Bail," Ben turned to his friend, utterly surprised. "What are you doing here? I thought you were…" his brow softened with compassion. "Is everything alright?"

Bail gave a small shrug. There was not always something to be done about 'alright' or 'not alright'. "The first immigrants from Kamino are set to arrive today, to take their citizenship tests," he said. "I have to be here." He looked up to Palpatine and nodded in the general direction of Naboo's booth. "I see you Jedi have been up to your usual trouble-making in my absence."

Ben smiled and shook off the tease. After a pause, he asked, "How is Breha?" Bail drew in a long, steady breath.

"She and Shmi have taken a solitary vacation to the Southern Mountains," he said. "No doctors, no media, no well-wishers… no me." He said the last almost as a joke, though the skin between his eyebrows flickered in momentary doubt. "I promised to return after this whole Accord business gets fully underway and I can hand it off to someone more qualified."

"More qualified? I doubt it. But I'm sure the rest of the Coalition will understand."

"Yes," Bail nodded, not looking at his Jedi companion. "You know, I've told Mon she should run for chair when my term is up. I'd be relieved to hand the helm over to her."

"You'll leave very large shoes to fill," Ben warned.

"And she'll leave larger ones," the senator assured.

They let the conversation drift away so they could watch Palpatine deliver his piece. His words, expression and manner all dripped with honey. It wasn't the sickly sweet honey that made you grimace at the last dregs of your tea, it was the sort of nondescript honey that tasted mild and stuck to your mouth like glue. Even Ben couldn't look away. As a child, he'd read ancient stories of the Sith controlling minds. The stories had never explained how it had worked - not with dark forces, but with words and ideas served up in sugar-coated poetry.

"We cannot answer this threat world-by-world, or through legislation alone. We cannot harry the Federation to voluntarily give up their armies; we know this does not work. We must hunt down and destroy the droids before they attack. We must fill the void left by the Federation before war breaks out. We must replenish the Republic's potency in the outlying regions, we must provide relief to those worlds suffering from the Federation's misguidance, we must help our Jedi allies, we must restore law and order to our Republic." As he spoke, applause rose up around the Senate Chamber until he was forced to pause for the noise. He gave a humble smile and put out his hands. Mas Amedda slammed his staff and called for order.

"That is why," the Nabooian senator said, hands patting the air for quiet, "that is why we must act immediately. We must give assistance to the Jedi. Therefore, I propose we create a joint committee with the Senate, the office of the Chancellor, and the Jedi Order to continue to hunt down these droids and see to it that they never pose a threat to any other world." Another round of applause.
Ben watched the chamber buzz with excitement; it felt surreal, and a cold, bitter feeling wormed its way into his chest. There was no particular word or idea that actually bothered him - it was only the man who said them, and what Ben knew about him. Palpatine continued speaking.

"Furthermore, as we fight for our physical security, we must also ensure financial security to those worlds cast into economic crisis by the Federation. We must ally ourselves not with the broken promises of the Federation, but with a stronger, honest entity that can provide the same service and dependable commerce to the Galaxy. That is why I propose to the Senate, the Lord Speaker, and his Excellency Chancellor Valorum," Palpatine nodded to each respective party in turn, "that the Republic transfer all rights and representation of the Federation to the Intergalactic Banking Clan." Responsive noise rose like a tide. It was impossible to tell if the majority of the murmuring was positive or negative. The speaker pounded his staff for quiet.

"The Banking Clan has operated in the shadow of the Federation for generations, with a heart for integrity and dependability. Now, although the Federation is gone, they are unable to fill the void. The law forbids them." Palpatine surveyed the crowd. "It is up to this body to decide when to remove the regulations that prevent them from serving this Republic as the Federation failed to do. So I ask you, colleagues, when will you stand up for change? When the outlying colonies are dying? When inflation in the mid-rim sends trillions into poverty? When your own core worlds fall into financial crisis?" He let the guilt steep for a moment. "We must act now. We must find solutions. We must unite. We must eradicate the Federation's evil once and for all - for Naboo, and for the Galactic Republic."

The whole chamber erupted into cheers. This time, Palpatine did not attempt to quiet them. Mas Amedda pounded his staff to little effect. Ben watched the tail end of the transcript file pass.

Bail Organa had been thumbing through the datapad that contained the full text of Palpatine's proposal. He frowned. "He didn't mention that he wants the Banking Clan to help fund and staff this droid-hunt of his," the senator magnified the relevant portion of text and reread it. He looked up at Ben. "Shouldn't that be a Federal responsibility?"

Ben was looking straight ahead, scrambling to feel anything particular beyond foreboding. He watched as Palpatine smiled graciously at the chorus. Mas Amedda continued to call for order. "Normally, yes, but who would they call on?" he said. "It's not as though the Republic has an army." The irony physically pained him.

Bail shook his head uncertainly and looked again at the file. "No," he said, "I suppose you're right," though he continued to shake his head.

"I have a horrible feeling about this," whispered Padme.

The Senate's cheering was dying down, and the Nabooian representatives were staring out into the fray with very carefully trained expressions. Everyone would be looking at them - the senators, Valorum, Palpatine. Padme was standing stoic and straight behind her decoy, Sabe. Obi-Wan Kenobi, who'd promised to accompany the queen until she left for Naboo, stood at her side.

As Padme was on his blind right side, he could not see her face without turning his head fully around. Through the Force, however, he could almost feel the furrow between her eyebrows. Without moving, he said, "Why?"

"You're not bothered by any of this?" Padme shot back in harsh whisper.

"I never said that," Obi-Wan replied. "I only asked why you are."
She glared out at the hall, glancing at Sabe and the other handmaidens. Though their expressions were blank, she knew they would be listening. "The Banking Clan is the most powerful extension of Damask Holdings, a conglomerate that worked with the Trade Federation to extort my people and steal from our plasma mines for years."

"They worked with the Federation?"

"They are no different than the Neimoidians. They're more secretive. If the Senate believes that they are harmless, they will become even more powerful than the Federation ever was."

"With Republic backing and alliance with the Jedi," Obi-Wan realized. The bad feeling congealed in his stomach. Padme drew in a breath and let it out in a long, angry sigh.

"Palpatine should know better." The young queen wrinkled her lip and looked down, fighting for composure over her rage. "I do not trust him."

Obi-Wan stared straight ahead, eyes boring into the back of Palpatine's collar. He'd felt nothing when Palpatine was talking, but now that Padme had pointed it out, he could see the dark tendrils wafting through the room. Mas Amedda called for a vote, and chambers lit up with the green lights of yea.

Very quietly, gaze unmoving from the scene before him, Obi-Wan ducked his head and told the queen, "I think that is wise, milady, but you appear to be outnumbered."

Padme sighed, and set her shoulders like granite pillars. "So I am," she said.

Qui-Gon and Dooku walked out of the council chambers together. They descended in the lift in silence. When they stepped out into the communications center, Qui-Gon was the first to speak.

"I don't understand how they could've let this happen," he confessed, hair swaying at an aggravated tempo as they marched down the darkened halls, matching each other stride for long stride. "When I spoke with the cloners, they took great pride in their work, and were very particular." He recalled the rows and rows of identical young boys, running through their studies at marathon speeds. White walls, spotless tunnels of glass. A white room full of DNA pods, the floor stained with bright red - stop it.

"The whole facility was like a laboratory, clean and sterilized. Why would they accept this program, no questions asked, and propagate it to every last one of their clones?"

It was a good question, Dooku thought, but as ever, Maser Jinn was too much an idealist for the rest of the galaxy. "You must remember, Qui-Gon, the Kaminoans may be prideful, but they are also earning a considerable amount of money. As the industry maxim goes, the customer is always right." Dooku let his former apprentice ponder this, then added, ruefully, "When the customer is a Sith, of course… well, it all goes a bit wrong." He was gratified when Qui-Gon snorted.

They emerged from the comm center and strode through the gardens, headed to the northwest quarter where Dooku's rooms were located. Trapped on all sides by greenery and an air of tranquility, the towering pair slowed their gait, trying not to upset the atmosphere.

The scenic shift seemed to clear the air between them. "I hadn't realized I'd been gone so long," Dooku confided, glancing around at the gardens and then back at Qui-Gon. "Your hair wasn't nearly so grey last time I saw you."

Qui-Gon raised his eyebrows. "Shall I find you a mirror, master?"

Dooku chuckled. "Oh, there's no need for that. I know exactly how ancient I am, believe me."
"Not so ancient. Running around to Wild Space and back, you may yet give your old master a run for his money." This made Dooku laugh. It was odd, Qui-Gon thought. As a young man he'd never expected to ever have a convivial relationship with Dooku, especially not an aging Dooku. But here they were, both slowly humbling under the weight of years.

"And what about young Obi-Wan? Is he still under your charge?"

"My charge? No. My roof? Yes. He's been off on his own missions more these days. Still gets into just as much trouble without my help."

Dooku hid a smiled. "I gathered as much. With Master Windu, apparently?"

"Yes, I don't know the full story. I haven't seen him since he got back, he's been acting as attache to the Queen of Naboo while she is in the Senate, from what I understand."

"Yes, I heard there was some commotion going on there today. Konstanza was on-planet today for the session. We're having dinner tonight, if you'd like to join us. I'm sure it will be most informative." Yan's widowed sister-in-law, as acting regent of House Dooku, was exceptionally well connected.

"I thought I might wait to hear Obi-Wan's take on it," Qui-Gon replied, "he has been more intimately involved in the whole affair, anyway."

"That may be true, Qui-Gon, but he is not a politician. A Jedi's perspective is valuable, of course, but Jedi do not write the laws. We're only called upon to enforce them." There was a hint of bitterness in his tone.

"True," Qui-Gon had to admit. "Perhaps we can divide and conquer. You can regale me with your discoveries over tea."

Dooku scoffed. "As long as you don't serve me any of that wretched soot-water you're so fond of."

"Roasted black teas are a delicacy, master."

"As is broiled gwerp tongue, in some sectors," Yan rebutted with distaste.

"I'm sure I can find something of that caliber for such a refined palette as yours."

Dooku opened his mouth, a scathing remark on his tongue, but was interrupted.

"Master Dooku!"

Their path had led them through a group of children, gathered around to study plants in what appeared to be a horticultural lesson. A blond-haired initiate, the smallest of the bunch, had stood up and jogged over to greet the passing masters.

"Anakin," his teacher called after him, her dark eyebrows drawn in a longsuffering look.

"Anakin?" Dooku repeated, looking down at the boy, whose head now reached up to his chest. "Skywalker?"

Anakin grinned, adult teeth shining in happy rows. "Glad to see you again, Master," he said, gangly shoulders fidgeting in uncontainable excitement.

"Force, boy, you've grown like a weed," Dooku said, putting his hand up to Anakin's head and measuring his height against himself. "I would've hardly recognized you if you hadn't so recklessly
abandoned your class," it was a sharp reprimand, but spoken in a tone soft enough that Anakin only partially registered it.

"What are you learning about today?" Qui-Gon asked, slightly more tactful.

"Master Tatinya is teaching us about medicinal plants," Anakin said, casting a smile back at his classmates and teacher. Tatinya, patient but annoyed at her charge, eyed him critically.

"Perhaps you could tell Master Dooku and Master Jinn about the plants we've discussed, Anakin," she suggested. Some of the other initiates grinned wickedly, amused to see someone else put on the spot.

"Uhh," Anakin's face went pink as he looked down at the innocent foliage, arranged in clusters corresponding to homeworlds. "Well," he said, concentrating, "there's the the Millaflower," he pointed to a group of handsome red blooms in a bed of green leaves, "the oils on the leaves and the petals can help relax people, but too much can be really bad for you. Then there are the, uh…" he glanced at an out-of-place patch of white in the garden, a snowy biosphere contained beneath a small glass dome. "Uhh… ice mushrooms," he remembered, "which have analgesic properties, which means they can be used in place of traditional painkillers. And that's a gimer bush," Anakin pointed to a small woody plant in the center of the medicinal garden, "which is full of nutrients that help speed up recovery when you're sick." He grinned, and went off-book to comment, "Also, as any Jedi knows, the branches are really good for whacking people with."

The children erupted into laughter - even Master Tatinya smiled at that. Anakin ate up the reaction with a cheeky grin.

"Very good, Anakin," Dooku said, mustache betraying no hint of mirth, though Qui-Gon knew better. "Don't let Master Yoda hear you say that, he may be compelled to give you a demonstration." A few more scattered chuckles. Behind Anakin, Master Tatinya went back to lecturing her class. Anakin ignored the implicit call to return to his seat and stayed by his elders to ask,

"Where are Master Ben and Obi-Wan?"

"That's Master Obi-Wan to you, Anakin," Qui-Gon corrected in a tone that said they'd had this discussion before. Anakin did not roll his eyes, which was an improvement.

"Where are Master Ben and Master Obi-Wan?" he amended, thinking privately that if Obi-Wan were here, he would insist that Anakin just call him Obi-Wan. Masters were weird about things like that.

"They're both at work, as I think you should be," Dooku said.

"Are they at the Senate again?" Anakin asked.

Qui-Gon frowned. "How did you know that?"

Anakin shrugged. "Master Ben complains about the Senate a lot."

Dooku chuckled. "I don't know if I've ever heard Ben Kenobi actually complain about anything."

"He doesn't think he's complaining, but he is. I can tell."

"Can you?" Dooku was impressed. "We may make a diplomat of you yet, young Skywalker."

Anakin swelled with pride. Dooku looked pointedly up at Anakin's classmates. "But first, I think
you should harken to Master Tatinya's wisdom. You never know when you may need to tell a bubse from a barenth."

Anakin returned to his class, and Qui-Gon and Dooku resumed their path through the gardens. Yan looked over his shoulder at the attentive group of youths. "Surely I haven't been gone that long," the master reiterated quietly, "he can't be an initiate already."

Qui-Gon laughed at the quiet alarm in his voice. "They let him go to the dormitories early. There were some… concerns with him remaining around the younglings."

"What kind of concerns?"

Qui-Gon shrugged as mildly as he could. He tried not to dwell on the implications of Anakin's uniqueness. It was a foggy trail of thought. "His powers are growing faster than that of his peers, but his control remains on par. His creche master hopes pairing him with more experienced students will help him develop the necessary control faster."

Dooku considered this, reading the subtext of the decision. "He needs a master," he said. "The Council knows it, but they think he's too young."

Dooku's perceptiveness sometimes made Qui-Gon uneasy. He sighed. "Yes."

Dooku looked back at the class, now farther away. He watched Anakin's clear expression as he listened to his teacher, head and shoulders sitting several inches lower than the bigger, older initiates around him. "Perhaps I should have a word with them," he said, and turned back around. Qui-Gon fixed him with a supremely skeptical look. Dooku scoffed.

"I'm not so grey as all that, Qui-Gon. Honestly."

The former apprentice continued to look uneasy. There was a time and place to flatter his master's seniority, and there were also times to confront reality. "I should think you're well past grey, Master." When Dooku had no ready response, Qui-Gon knew he'd hit his point home. "It would be ten years at very least. Are you sure that's wise?"

It took a moment for Dooku to respond. When he did, it was in the icy tones Qui-Gon had known for decades. "I do not take directions from you, Qui-Gon Jinn."

"No, but you do take orders from the Force, and it does speak to all of us."

"Not always in the same way," he retorted. "That much has been clear for as long as we've known each other. Excuse me." Dooku brushed past him and carried on toward his apartments. Qui-Gon sighed heavily and watched him go. He tried to imagine Anakin Skywalker being trained by the same man who'd trained him nearly fifty years prior. He was no visionary, but he could foresee how that might go.

His commlink buzzed, and he answered it, glad for the distraction. "Jinn." A pause. "Ah, it's been a while. What can I do for you?" another pause. "No, is he not answering? Oh. Well, I can certainly relay a message, if you like. Of course." A longer pause. Qui-Gon stopped walking altogether and listened. His face split into a smile. "I will be sure to let him know as soon as I can. And might I be the first say, Master, congratulations."

After the vote, the queen and her entourage returned to their guest suite, where the Queen conferred with her cabinet via hologram. At a large, richly appointed conference table, shimmering blue councilors sat projected onto eight vacant chairs. Sabe, still in full regalia, occupied the ninth
at the head of the table.

"The Banking Clan?" Bibble was beside himself. "Palpatine wouldn't dare."

"I'm afraid so," said Sabe in the monotone alto that made her a perfect royal stand-in. "The Senate has made their decision."

"They likely feel as though they have little choice," said Horace Vancil, a white-haired councilman with a mind for economics. "There are only so many intergalactic trading conglomerates in the galaxy. Without the Federation, there are more commercial and financial deserts than the Senate can handle on their own. Outlying systems are already in dire straights."

"Did he not discuss it with you beforehand, your highness?" asked Lufta shift, the willowy, yellow-haired Education Regent.

"No," Amidala replied thinly, "he did not."

He had it all prepared, Obi-Wan thought to himself. He rubbed his chin and watched the tense conversation from the side of the room. He had it all prepared and didn't let any of them know. Palpatine should know better, that's what they'd said. It's almost as if… a familiar presence appeared. The Jedi turned to face the door seconds before it slid open.

"Senator." He bowed politely to Bail Organa, and spotted Ben following close behind. "Master." Ben gave the younger man a weary smile and went to stand beside him while Bail stepped forward and bowed to the queen. Amidala looked up at him, and the handmaidens behind her bowed. She bid her cabinet farewell and ended the call. The blue projections fizzled and disappeared, leaving the arriving males surrounded by very young, very serious female company. Bail gave a penitent smile.

"Your highness, I apologize for interrupting."

"There is no need, Senator…" she waited.

"Bail Organa, your highness," he bowed slightly again.

"It is good to meet you, Senator Organa. And… Master Jedi?" Amidala looked past Bail at Ben.

"Ben Kenobi, Your Highness," Ben gave a bow.

"Kenobi?" Sabe exclaimed, a tiny smile teasing at the corner of her mouth. She sent Obi-Wan an inquisitive look.


"I see. Well met, Master Kenobi."

"You as well, your highness." Padme stepped forward and escorted Bail to one of the many empty seats. Sabe shifted gracefully in her seat, headdress jingling and glittering in the light, rich velvet robes shimmering in iridescent waves. Against the plain black frocks of the handmaidens, it was a visual show. Yet, Obi-Wan saw out of the corner of his eye that Ben was looking more often at Padme than at Sabe. Obviously, the man knew who was really in charge here. There was something else in his gaze, too. Obi-Wan tried to identify it. It was... affection. A very fond, very sad affection. He looked away from his older self and tried not to frown.
He found distraction in listening to the conversation, which Bail was moving along at a businesslike clip. "Queen Amidala, I am a representative of Alderaan, and Chairman of the Sentient Rights Coalition. My colleagues tell me you've expressed concerns over the Gungan's lack of representation in the Senate," he said.

"I have," she nodded, taken off guard. "They led me to believe you were off-planet, Senator."

"I was. I only arrived just in time for Senator Palaptine's proposal."

"You cast your vote on the bill?" she asked.

"Yes." He kept his face stony. She kept hers stonier. After a politi pause, he relented. "I voted nay, your highness."

Her only show of surprise was the slight uptick in her left eyebrow. "You are in sparse company, Senator Organa."

"That may be, but I stand by it - the Banking Clan should not be granted so much power. It would only tempt history to repeat itself."

Sabe shared a quick, surreptitious look with Padme. She looked back to Bail. "I agree."

Bail acted more surprised than he was. "You disagree with your senator, your Highness?"

"Most of my cabinet, and most of my planet does. We have long memories concerning the allies of Hego Demask." Waiting for his reaction was a test. After the briefest moment of thought, he gave an understanding nod.

"As you should, Highness."

Sabe's eyes bored into him, as did Padme's. "Have you come to speak with me about Gungans, or my Senator?"

"Perhaps both," Bail said.

Amidala thought on it. "Perhaps."

The door slid open. Obi-Wan hadn't felt it coming, and had no idea who it might be, but he did feel Ben's reaction. From this information was able to deduce the answer before he turned around.

"Senator Palpatine," Queen Amidala greeted him first. "How good of you to join us." Truly, Obi-Wan thought, if there were an award for delivery of the driest, most passive of all passive aggressive tones, Sabe would be a finalist in a trice. "I was just speaking with your colleague about the Sentient Rights Coalition."

"Ah," said Palpatine with his plastic smile, framed by multiple layers of laughter lines, "Senator Organa, so glad to see you again." All three politicians saw past the facade; votes were not private in the Galactic Senate. None of them mentioned the bantha in the room. All of them smiled.

Bail stood to shake Palpatine's hand. "I've arrived on-planet rather late today, I wanted to review her Highness' conversation with my colleagues. I am interested to hear your thoughts on possibly electing a representative for the Gungans of Naboo," Bail explained. "If you care to join us?"

"Actually," said Palpatine, "my mind has been otherwise occupied." He turned away from Bail and faced the Queen. "I wonder, your Highness, if you would join me for dinner with the Chancellor
and Lord Speaker - we're discussing potential members of the new joint council. Chancellor Valorum is also very interested to hear a more detailed account of the events on Naboo. Your handmaiden, Rabe…” he looked up at the mass of young women, who waited in unimpressed silence for him to recognize the correct face. He failed, and settled for looking back at the Queen, "has been invited as a guest as well," he said. "I'm sure her account of the garrison will be of most interest to the Chancellor."

Obi-Wan saw the furtive look between Padme and Sabe only because he knew to look for it. "Of course, Senator," said Amidala. It occurred to Obi-Wan that the thick, opaque makeup on the Queen's face worked to disguise her expression as well as her surreptitious communications with the real monarch. He wondered if this was by design. The queen stood. "Rabe, would you care to join us?" she asked as a matter of show. The maiden stepped forward and curtsied to the Senator.

"I would be most honored, your excellency," she said.

There was another volley of looks as Sabe and Rabe began to follow Senator Palaptine out of the room. She paused and looked to her handmaidens.

"Please answer all of Senator Organa's questions to the best of your ability." She turned to the Alderaanian and gave him a small smile. "I hope to speak with you another time, Senator."

"Of course, my lady," he bowed.

Obi-Wan watched Padme carefully, waiting to see what she would do when they were gone. He was so engrossed in his study, he jumped slightly when Palpatine turned and called, "Master Kenobi?"


"Yes, Senator?" the younger replied. The elder spectated with growing unease.

"You were there are Naboo, I would appreciate your company as well. After all, this joint committee will involve the Jedi Order as well. We would be honored to have a representative in our midst."

Obi-Wan glanced, just briefly, at his older self for some kind of permission. Ben had no advice to give. He looked back at Palpatine. "Of course, Senator, I would be honored." He tried not to glance back at Ben, who he could tell was silently panicking, but did spare Padme a smile as he passed her to follow Sabe and Palpatine out of the room. The doors hissed shut.

It was quiet for a moment. Ben tried his hardest not to think about Obi-Wan walking side-by-side with a Sith lord, tried not to imagine what kind of conversations they'd get up to. It had been his job to handle Palpatine all these years. He'd hidden the senator's identity from his younger self, thinking it was safer that way. Now, he began to wonder if it had been the right idea.

He made himself refocus on the present. The Nabooian handmaidens stood together in a stoically arranged group. Ben watched them in silence. They were exceptionally good at their jobs, but they were still teenaged girls. If you knew where to look, the body language was clear. They deferred to Padme. She looked like she was bracing herself for something.

Bail was on the brink of saying something polite when Ben spoke up, "Perhaps we should take a seat. I gather there is much to discuss." He fixed Padme with a look that was meant to be reassuring, but may have surprised her enough to spur her into action. She stepped forward from the group with an assured gait that took Bail by surprised.
"In fact, Master Kenobi," she said, in a rushed tone, "there is."

Bail took in the authoritative look on Padme's face and glanced at Ben for clarification. The Jedi did his best not to smile, even while his heart burst at the seams with pride. Peeking out from the edge of his beard, the dimples gave him away.

The dinner went on for entirely too long, by Obi-Wan's estimation. He ended up spending the night in the Senate Offices, something he had never wanted to add to his list of experiences. The fitful rest had fogged up his mind, and even now, while dawn broke over the vast Coruscanti skyline, he was struggling to comprehend the more unsettling things he'd heard over the past twelve hours. He needed to talk about it with someone who would understand, someone like Ben or Mace, but they were occupied with their own duties, at the Temple or elsewhere.

Temple. It would be good to go back to the Temple. Obi-Wan rolled his shoulder, which creaked in protest of his overnight lodgings on a hard couch. It didn't make any sense. He could live in the rough for weeks on end without trouble, but one night on a poorly stuffed couch made him feel like death warmed over. It had only been one day, for Force's sake. What could one day do?

A lot, his inner self reminded him. *It could pass a bill, or form a committee, or send you halfway across the galaxy to kill some droids.*

His commlink chirped, and he annoyed himself by jumping at the sound like a hungover university student. He picked it up.

"Kenobi," he said, resenting the hoarseness of his voice.

"Obi-Wan," it was Qui-Gon. "*You're on planet, aren't you?*"

"Yes. Unfortunately, I've been cooped up in the Legislative District all day… night? Morning." He sighed. "When they say politics don't sleep, they really do mean it."

Qui-Gon chuckled. "*I suspected as much. Well, if you can keep your eyes open long enough, I'd recommend heading back right now and stopping by landing dock I9 on your way.*"

Obi-Wan frowned. It was an unusual request of unusual specificity. "Why?" He asked, suspecting a ruse.

*"You are always thinking about the future, Obi-Wan. Concentrate on the here and now, and you'll find your answer."* Qui-Gon cut the call short, and Obi-Wan scowled. He pocketed the device.

Typical mystic Jinn advice. Despite his exhaustion and irritation, Obi-Wan dutifully extended his senses and focused on the *now*. I9. What was in I9? The J-P sectors were reserved for long-distance vessels, weren't they? Odd numbers were arrivals, not departures. So… I9… I9… what could possibly be in I9?

A pinprick of familiarity shone at him from the edges of his awareness, and Obi-Wan came to a sudden halt mid-stride. It'd been… what, a year? A year and a half? Slowly, a grin split his face and Obi-Wan ran for the door.
"You're not going to tell me how you knew, are you?"

Ben smiled, and said nothing. Bail shook his head. They were sitting in Bail's office, Bail at his desk and Ben lounging in the chair opposite. Bail dusted off a pile of flimsi memos that had been left waiting for his attention and set them aside. "You Jedi are all tricksters, deep down," he said.

"Not all of us," Ben corrected.

Bail looked up at his friend with an expression so dry it nearly cracked. "Just you, then?"

Ben did not react, and instead said, "Her allegiance could be valuable in the future. You have a common enemy."

"Palpatine isn't my enemy," Bail said, very pointedly not looking at Ben as he sorted paperwork. "Just because you've had a vendetta against him since that debacle on Herdessa - which was ten years ago, by the way - doesn't mean I agree with you."

"You voted against his proposal."

"Yes, I did. Against his proposal. Not against him." Bail tapped a stack of flimsi against the table to even out the edges, and set it aside. "It's what senators do, Ben."

"Not all senators," Ben muttered.

"Just me, then," said Bail in an icier tone than before.

This was one particular battle Ben wished he didn't have to fight. Just because he could see the giant flashing warning sign above Palpatine's head didn't mean that everyone else could - at least, not yet. He wondered when he would have to show his hand. Not yet. "Even so," he placated, "Queen Amidala is a shrewd and wise ruler, in spite of her age. And when she's grown, she's sure to be even more capable."

Bail gave a shrug, signing his name on a tablet and filing it away. "I do agree with you, but Palpatine still outranks her in the Senate."

"On Coruscant, yes. But Amidala is adored by her people, and Palpatine has always run as an advocate for the local affairs of Naboo. If he contradicts her too strongly, Naboo will brand him a traitor and rebel against him - and remember, there's an election coming up."

Bail scrubbed his chin. "It's a good point. The Coalition will certainly ally with her to gain representation for the Gungans - but I will not team up with a monarch to undermine her Senator out of spite."

Ben shrugged, giving up the fight. Bail went back to his paperwork. On a short table by the window, an electric kettle clicked off, and Ben rose to prepare a drink. "Tea or caf?" he asked.

The stack of datapads and flimsi booklets on Bail's desk reached nearly to his chin. He sighed. "Scotch," he said. Ben looked out the windows to the sun, just barely over the horizon, and looked back at Bail. The Senator met his gaze and had the sense to look guilty. "Fine. Caf will do."

Ben brought the drinks over and pulled over the stack that Bail had set out for him to peruse. He
scanned a few to his own datapad but for most items, he merely relayed their contents and disposed of them. About halfway through his cup of tea, he came across a list of numbers, names, dates, and locations. There were thousands of them. "What's this?" he asked. Bail looked up and tilted his head to look.

"That's the roster for the immigrating clones. Who they are, where they're arriving, the like." Bail turned back to his work.

"Oh." Ben read on, and the next lines of data made more sense.

2858 - Pike Kaminoan - 12/9/25023 - Mezzileen Spaceport, Coruscant - View Itinerary

1385 - Halt Kaminoan - 12/9/25023 - Mezzileen Spaceport, Coruscant - View Itinerary

"This is tomorrow," Ben exclaimed, scrolling through more entries which sported the same date. "I thought the Accord isn't set to ratify until next month."

"Yes, and no," Bail said. "It's a complicated business. They're all up for Republic jobs, and our vetting process is fairly ludicrous, even for applicants as squeaky clean as clones. A handful of the most promising prospects have been allowed to come to Coruscant early to begin their miles of paperwork. OrbitSec is housing them in the meantime."

"Oh." Ben didn't know what else to say. "A handful" turned out to be nearly five hundred. Most of them would be arriving tomorrow - some of them were arriving today. Most of the clones seemed to have adopted the surname "Kaminoan", thought there were a few outliers. When he looked at the first names, his heart swelled. Some of them were familiar to him.

He spotted one and froze. "Bail," He said, lifting the pad and turning it for the Senator to see. "This can't be right," he pointed. Bail looked at it.

"Oh, no, I remember that one." He squinted at the line, interrogating his memory for details. "That is right. I got a call about that. There was a solar storm near Nanth'ri that rerouted his trip, and his layover was overbooked. Poor guy got stuck on Lantillies for three days waiting for a pilot with special clearance. As it happens, one of your knights was passing through on his way home and offered him a ride."

Ben flipped the 'pad around and looked at the location again, and then the name, and then the ID number. The location, the name, ID number. What are the odds? "I wonder who it was," he thought aloud, and continued scrolling, mouth fighting off a smile, "I'll have to thank them."

"Mmm," Bail agreed absently, eyes riveted to a file. He drank without looking up, and slurped the dregs of his caf. "I don't suppose there is more of this over there, is there?" he asked, eyeing the drinks shelf. Behind the kettle, the sun shone at an infinitesimally higher angle than before.

In landing dock I9 at the Jedi Temple, a two-seater Jedi starfighter was still steaming from its re-entry while a blocky towing droid navigated it into a free hangar. As service droids descended onto the wings and doused the engines with coolant, the transparisteel canopy lifted with an airy hiss.

The pilot ripped off his headset and sucked in a long, appreciative breath. "Force, I never thought I'd miss the smell of smog."

"Ugh, that is ripe," coughed his passenger upon his first lungful of Coruscanti air. The pilot's grin could've lit up space.
"No, that's home." He lifted himself out of his seat and hopped to the ground. He turned to help his companion, but then, a voice shouted from across the deck:

"It's about damned time your arse turned up!"

He whipped around and spotted the speaker, who was sauntering toward him with a familiar gait. His smile, if possible, grew wider. "Miss me?" the pilot asked, spreading his arms.

"Not a bit," beamed Obi-Wan Kenobi, now jogging to close the distance. He grabbed the other Jedi in a neck-crushing hug.

Garen Muln laughed and patted his friend on the back, face all teeth and laughter lines. "You bastard."

Obi-Wan pulled away and picked teasingly at the scraggly black thing growing on Garen's face. "The hell is this?" he asked.

"It's a beard, not that you could grow one."

"I could do - but you can't."

"And what the hell is this supposed to be?" Garen yanked at Obi-Wan's luscious locks. "Force, it's gotten worse. You're turning into your master, except uglier."

"I'll be sure to tell him you said that."

"He'll probably agree with me."

"And he'll agree with me when I say you can't grow a beard worth pittance."

Breaking with a lifetime of bickering tradition, Garen looked self-consciously down at the floor. "Yeah well… there's not a whole lot of places to buy razors in Wild Space."

Obi-Wan's smile faltered, and he noticed for the first time the dark purple circles under Garen's eyes, the multiple burns on his clothing, the dents and scratches all over his starfighter. He gave a gentle shrug. "Well, I'm sure we can rustle something up here." He glanced at Garen's long, black padawan braid which was mussed and tangled from long months of travel. He gave it a tug. "Not sporting this for too much longer, I guess."

Garen tried not to smile, he did, but it peaked through anyway. Obi-Wan laughed and gave him an excited nudge. "Congratulations," he said, giddy like they were children again.

"Shut up Kenobi, it hasn't happened yet," Garen replied, still smiling despite himself.

"I didn't realize you were out for your trials, sir," said a new voice. Garen turned to find his Kaminoan companion standing on the ground by the wing of the starfighter.

"I didn't know you knew what trials were, to be frank." The clone chuckled.

"I didn't know you knew what trials were, to be frank." The clone chuckled.

"Who's this?" Obi-Wan asked.

"A hitchhiker from Kamino," Garen explained as the clone joined their circle of conversation, "here to fill out his job paperwork. I'm taking him to OrbitSec once I get my hands on a speeder."

The newcomer gave a polite smile. "Nice to meet you, sir, I'm-"
As the clone offered his hand to shake, the edge of his sleeve slid back to reveal a four-digit tattoo. Obi-Wan's eyes went wide. Within the span of a few seconds, neurons fired and memories charged back; he could smell blood and smoke, hear sabers and klaxons, feel the emergency lift surge up beneath him, and now, he could see the last number of the four digit code he'd just barely glimpsed before it all happened.

"Cody," he blurted.

The clone was nonplussed. "Uh," he frowned, hand hovering in mid air.

"You know each other?" Garen's eyes alternated between them.

"Cody," Obi-Wan said, too stunned to realize he ought to shake hands. "Two two two four, that's the one I couldn't see - you said they called you Cody, just before you shot the lift - on Kamino. With the Sith."

Cody remained frozen for several more seconds, hand up, brows drawn. His eyes darted to the Jedi's scar. Realization dawned, and his jaw and hand dropped. "Stars above, you're alive?"

Obi-Wan burst out laughing. "It is you!"

"Wh- I thought you were dead!"

"So did everyone else, for a while."

Cody's face was a picture of surprise and elation. The clones of Jango Fett boasted handsome smiles, and this one was made particularly infectious by the fact that neither Jedi had seen it before. "I hardly recognized you," he exclaimed.

"Understandable," said the Jedi, subconsciously fiddling with the fringe of hair over his eye. "I'm Obi-Wan, by the way," he offered his hand.

"Obi-Wan," Cody shook his hand, grin lingering, "Nice to see you alive," he said. "Never thought I'd have the chance."

"Yes, we're all rather glad it turned out that way," Garen cut in with a smile. "And it'll be Master Kenobi to you, I'm afraid. He's so very high and mighty these days - and schmoozing with royalty, or so I hear?"

Obi-Wan let go of Cody's hand and glared at his agemate. "You're just jealous, Padawan Muln."

The taller man scowled. "Enjoy that while you still can."

"I will, Padawan Muln."

"Prick."

Cody snorted.

A comlink began to chime, and all three men looked at their belts. It was Obi-Wan's. He answered.

"Is this Jedi Knight Obi-Wan Kenobi?" asked a mechanical voice.

"Yes, who is this?"

"This is SR-9 from the Office of Supreme Chancellor of the Galactic Republic." Garen Muln's
eyebrows shot upwards. "Chancellor Valorum wishes to speak with you in his office." Garen's eyebrows disappeared into his hair.

"Oh," said Obi-Wan, trying to ignore the staring. "When?"

"Right now, if it is convenient."

"Oh. Um. Of course," Obi-Wan said, not sure how else to respond. "I'll be along shortly."

"Thank you, Master Kenobi, I will inform the Chancellor presently. Goodbye." The droid ended the transmission, and Obi-Wan replaced the device to his belt.

"Kriff me," Garen said in a lofty tone to fill the silence, "You are high and mighty these days."

"I don't know what he wants," Obi-Wan confessed. "I just saw him yesterday."

Garen was too surprised to curse this time. "You- you've been invited to two meetings with the Supreme Chancellor?"

"Well, three, actually, but one I'm not allowed to talk about."

Garen gaped. After a shocked pause, he raised his head and asked the air, "How long was I gone?" He stared at his friend and shook his head. "Force, Obi, twenty years they've been saying you're going to be a diplomat, I guess they were right. Well, you can have him all to yourself. I will stick with ships." He gave the hull of his battered starfighter an affectionate pat. "Hyperspace has never called me for fancy-ass meetings, but it sure as hell-" he cut off suddenly, and his face went slack in boyish surprise. Obi-Wan followed Garen's gaze and looked over his shoulder. He smiled and stepped aside.

"Tell you what," he told Garen, who was no longer listening. "The Senate district is right by OrbitSec. I'll take Cody there for you."

"Okay," agreed the dark-haired apprentice without looking. Clee Rhara, red hair just beginning to show gray, was marching toward them with a badly suppressed smile on her face, eyes wrinkled and shining with pride. Garen moved toward her like a ship toward a lighthouse. When she reached out to grasp his arm, her apprentice bent down and enveloped her in a tight hug, lifting her fully off the ground. She returned the embrace with laughter, and maybe, if Obi-Wan looked close, a few tears.

Cody was standing at an unobtrusive distance, arms crossed in polite reserve. Obi-Wan went over to him and gave him a pat on the back. "Come on. They probably have you on a tight schedule."

When they were a ways away from the other Jedi, Cody asked, "Was that his master?"

"Yes. He's been away for over a year - she's been worried sick." Something in Cody's expression made Obi-Wan ask, "What?"

The clone shrugged. "I thought Jedi were a bit more… reserved, sir."

Obi-Wan considered this, thinking on his own relationship with Qui-Gon and his extended lineage. It certainly did not conform to the taciturn persona the Council liked projecting to the rest of the Galaxy. He glanced down at Cody's left arm, which swung as he walked and gave fleeting glimpses of his tattoo. "You clones have all given yourselves names, haven't you?" he said. Cody frowned sternly at him.
"Yes, what about it?"

Obi-Wan shrugged. "We Jedi have given ourselves families - of a sort." He looked back up again and slowed his step. "Speaking of which," he muttered, face teasing out a smile.

"Sir?" Cody glanced at him. Obi-Wan cupped his hands around his mouth.

"Feemor! Aola!" he called across the hangar. The other Jedi stood some ways off by a recently-landed starcraft, backlit by the open hangar doors behind them. The pair looked back at him, Aola's lekku casting an animated silhouette against the glinting Coruscanti day. Even in shadow, Obi-Wan could see her smile burst open like a star. She jogged toward him, Feemor following at a more casual pace. Aola lunged in for a hug when she finally reached him. "I thought you'd be gone longer," he said.

"Aye, so did we," Feemor admitted, strolling to meet his young friend, "but I flatter myself when I say that I have a soothing effect on prickly politicians."

Aola pulled away, allowing Feemor to give Obi-Wan a fond handshake. "He got the delegation to shorten talks from five days to two," Aola bragged. Obi-Wan looked at the master, impressed.

"Well done, Master Gard," he nodded in pronounced respect. Feemor nodded back with mock solemnity.

"Why thank, you, Master Kenobi."

Beside and slightly behind her master, Aola was bouncing. Feemor did not have to look at her to see her impatient expression. "I did not work alone, of course," he said.

Aola took this as her cue to burst, "Half the royal menagerie escaped into the palace, and they let me take care of it while Master Gard was busy," she beamed.

"Force," Obi-Wan was utterly nonplussed. Aola continued to smile like a lothcat.

Years ago, Feemor would have rolled his eyes and rubbed at his temples, but now his smile, though marred by wrinkles and pockmark bee-sting scars, was unshakably genuine. "And so we each wrangled our own monsters," he put a fond hand on Aola's back. The apprentice was already looking for something new to study, and her eyes fell on Cody.

"I'm sorry, I didn't see you there. You are?" she asked sweetly.

"Cody, Miss," the clone reached out to shake hands with the Jedi.

"A clone from Kamino, come in early," Obi-Wan explained.

"What?" Aola's hand paused in the air, face suddenly fallen into a serious expression. "You're Cody?" She looked at Cody, and then Obi-Wan. "That Cody?"

Obi-Wan smiled, and nodded. Cody was frowning again - he'd found himself doing that a lot since meeting Jedi - but could not get a word out before Aola looked at him seriously and said, "You saved their lives." She lurched forward and wrapped him in a hug. He froze. "Thank you."

Cody was not an affectionate sort of person, so he opted to stay completely still until Aola sensed his discomfort and let him go. "I, er, you're welcome, I suppose." he managed. She gave him a grin. He eyed Obi-Wan. "I'm assuming you mean him, right?"
She nodded, long silka-bead braid jingling. "And Master Qui-Gon."

Cody looked to Obi-Wan for clarification. "My master," the knight explained. "He was there on Kamino, too. I'm sure you'll meet him eventually. We really ought to be going."

"Where you off to?" asked Feemor.

"Taking Cody to OrbitSec, and then I'm back off to the Senate."

"It's a busy week you've been having," the master chuckled, "When did you have time to pick him up?"

"I didn't, actually, he came in with Garen, I just-"

"Garen?" Aola interrupted, "Garen Muln is back?"

Obi-Wan chuckled. "He just landed," he jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

"What!" Aola's smile resurfaced. She looked at Feemor, eyes beseeching. The master smiled, and shrugged, gesturing for her to go. She gave a small noise of victory and bounded off in the direction Obi-Wan had indicated.

"Be nice!" Obi-Wan yelled after her. "He's had an emotional day - you can kick his arse later!"

Feemor chuckled, and began walked after his apprentice at an unrushed pace. He turned briefly to give Cody a polite grin. "It's good to finally meet you, Cody. Hope to see you around again."

"Thank you, sir."

Leaving Feemor to follow his exuberant apprentice, Obi-Wan and Cody continued on down the hangar.

"Who were they?" The clone felt compelled to ask. He cast his gaze down the enormous dock of ships where they would, he hoped, find a speeder eventually. That is, so long as no other overly affectionate Jedi turned up in their path.

"My master's first apprentice and his padawan," Obi-Wan explained, and caught Cody's look of momentary confusion. "As I said, we have our own families, of a kind." They turned into a new dock where smaller atmospheric vehicles waited in neat rows. "Do you drive, Cody?"

"Of course, sir." The Jedi took a sharp right and came upon a republic issue speeder.

"Good, you can take the helm." Obi-Wan hopped into the passenger seat.

"I don't have a Republic license, sir."

"Eh," Obi-Wan waved a hand and settled into his seat, "I'm sure it's fine."

"I'd really feel better if you drove, sir," Cody said from the ground, shifting uneasily in his perfectly polished boots.

Obi-Wan leaned over too look at him. "Would you? I am half blind, you know. Had to take a special test. Took me four goes to get my license renewed." He was saying all this like he'd won a prize. Cody squinted at him.

"You don't like flying, do you sir?"
"Not a bit."

Cody shook his head, sighed, and climbed into the driver's seat. "If you insist, sir."

"Thank you. And Cody?"

"Yes sir?"

"Don't call me sir."

"Of course s- Master Kenobi."

Obi-Wan shrugged. "We'll work on it."

Once he'd left Cody in the capable hands of Orbit Security and promised the clone twice that he would see visit him as soon as the Accord was ratified, Obi-Wan took over the driver's seat with great reluctance and returned to the great dome of the Senate. Deja vu settled into his bones as he strode through the wide halls. He wondered if this was how Ben felt all of the time.

There was not too much activity to interrupt his journey to the Chancellor's suite. Session was out and aside from droids and interns, most everyone else was either at lunch or holed up in their offices. Chancellor Valorum had managed to be both at the same time. When Obi-Wan stepped into his office, the chancellor dabbed at his mouth with a napkin.

"I apologize," said the politician, swallowing the last of his meal, "it's been a busy day."

"Of course, sir."

Obi-Wan waited. Valorum refilled his water. He took a long drink. He stacked his used dishes in a neat pile at the end of his desk, and watched while an attending droid collected them. Obi-Wan watched it whir out of the room and then turned his eyes back to the Chancellor. "You wanted to see me, sir?" he asked dryly.

Valorum did not answer immediately. He took in a deep breath and looked around his desk, now cleared of clutter, and flicked off a crumb of bread. "Master Kenobi, as you are aware, Senator Palpatine is pushing to staff this committee of his as soon as possible, and he's dead-set on having a Jedi representative on board."

"Yes, sir."

Valorum took another leisurely breath and folded his hands atop his desk at a precise angle. "In a perfect world, I would put off this committee as long as possible. It doesn't smell right. But this is not a perfect world, and Palpatine's majority is a very vocal one. I cannot stop him, but if I work quickly, I can pick my own players on this committee before he can stack the deck. Do you understand?"

Unlike his older counterpart, Obi-Wan's political experience existed largely downstream from the Senate, much less the Chancellor. Still, in theory… "yes sir," he said.

"And you understand that you occupy a rather… unique position, given what you know about the incident on Naboo."

"I suppose," Obi-Wan began to fluster, losing sight of Valorum's intended destination.

The chancellor paused again, and looked up to make sure that they were alone in the room. "I
understand that Senator Palpatine was never read in on the intel you received."

"No sir."

"Why is that?"

Obi-Wan froze, mouth open. His throat made a start and he cleared it. "I do not know, sir. You would have to ask Master Windu."

"I could ask him, of course. But he would never give me an answer. He is like that, you know."

Obi-Wan kept his mouth shut this time. Valorum seemed to recognize his rationale and smiled. "I need to know that I can trust whatever Jedi end up on this committee, Master Kenobi. Moreover, I need whatever Jedi end up on this committee to understand that this… force we're fighting against was given a Kill On Sight order for all Jedi, and may or may not be wrapped up with the Sith. Information like that is like poison. I don't want it spread further than need be."

Obi-Wan thought he could see where this was going, but wasn't sure it was where he wanted to go. "What are you saying, sir?" he asked.

Valorum fixed him with a cool stare. "I want you to act as the Jedi representative on Palpatine's committee."

"Sir," Obi-Wan put out a hand, "I'm flattered by the suggestion, but I really think that Master Windu would be a better-"

"Master Windu is a busy man," Valorum cut in. "Besides, if I appoint the Master of the Order or a Councilor to take this seat, I will be validating Palpatine's off-the-cuff haste with the highest rank in your Order, and gods know I don't want to do that."

Obi-Wan set his lips into a determined line. "You do know we have a whole council to deal with the Senate. They'd be affronted if you excluded them."

"Then let them be affronted," the chancellor shrugged. "The Council of Reconciliation is too well connected here, too lofty. They would bring their own sympathies and prestige to a committee that, quite frankly, should not have made it past the Senate floor."

Obi-Wan was beginning to see the chancellor's vision. He wished he could glare at it without breaking etiquette. "So, you need me to be a low-ranking, unremarkable knight to wound Palpatine's pride, then," he surmised. "Is that it?"

"Don't sell yourself short, Master Kenobi. You are far from unremarkable. However, you are low-ranking, and Palpatine does not like you, which comes as an added bonus."

"He doesn't?" Obi-Wan was genuinely perplexed. "He's never been anything but courteous to me."

Valorum laughed. "He's a senator. Your Force does not tell you everything - I've seen the way he acts around you."

It was a fair point. "It may be my uncle, Ben. I know he and the senator do not get along."

"All the better, then," said Valorum. Obi-Wan tilted his head and frowned at his leader.

"You don't like Senator Palpatine much, do you, sir?"

Personal feelings were the bread and butter of politics, even though they never came up in any job
description. The Chancellor knew this. "What I like and dislike is irrelevant, Master Kenobi," he said shortly. "But any man willing to allow galactic conglomerates into the Senate and use them to fund unofficial wars is dangerous - any man willing to do that and able to succeed is doubly so. I do not trust him."

"I see."

"Good. Then you see why I am going to appoint you to this committee."

The imperative tense did nothing to soothe Obi-Wan's ruffled feathers. "Yes," he ground out. He did see why. Unfortunately, this was politics, and answering one innocent question also meant agreeing to deal with a can full of worms.

"Good," Valorum said. "It will be you and one other Jedi."

Obi-Wan considered arguing the appointment, but then again, the Chancellor was one of the singular people in the galaxy who could give the Jedi marching orders. He set his jaw. "And who will the second be, sir?" he asked.

"That I will leave up to you. Only I and Master Windu have the authority to appoint your members to service, but in this case I am transferring that authority to you." The gesture took Obi-Wan by surprise, and he looked up to meet eyes with the Chancellor. Valorum was there waiting, ice blue eyes boring into him like a threat. "I trust you understand we must balance our interests carefully in this committee, Master Kenobi." I trust you will not kriff this up for all of us, went the unspoken translation.

Obi-Wan tilted his chin up and settled his shoulders, trying to look more impressive than he knew he was. "Of course, sir."

"Good."

He'd gone straight back to the landing dock, mind awash in conflicting waves of irritation, confusion, and unease.

"Obi-Wan, I had no idea you were still here," came the pleasant voice of Ben Kenobi. Obi-Wan looked up from his thoughts to find his older self and Bail Organa standing with Queen Amidala and her retinue. The creases in his forehead lessened somewhat upon seeing Padme's smile.

"We were just bidding her Highness farewell," Bail said, and looked meaningfully at Padme. Though still dressed as a handmaiden, Obi-Wan realized that it was Padme, not Sabe in her grand regalia, standing closest to the Jedi and the senator.

"Master, Senator," he paused and, after the briefest of hesitations, gave Padme a bow. "Your Highness."

"Knight Kenobi," Padme nodded, doing a poor job of hiding her smile.

"Where have you been?" asked Ben. Obi-Wan raised his eyebrows and heaved an expressive sigh. "It's been an interesting day," he said.

"How was the dinner last night?" Bail asked, deeply curious. Obi-Wan's frown returned.

"Informative. I'm afraid there's not much I can share at present," he glanced at the queen, "Many apologies."
"Understandable," Bail nodded. It'd been worth the try. He turned away from the new arrival and faced Padme once more. "As I said, Your Highness, it has been a honor to meet you. The Coalition will remain in touch with you and your Gungan allies in the coming months. I hope we will be able to work with your administration to propose new representation for the other half of Naboo."

"I cannot thank you enough, Senator," Padme said, shaking Bail's hand and giving him a polite kiss on either cheek.

"Your people are lucky to have you. I'm afraid I must be off. Safe travels to you and your party," he said, waving a hand. Padme waved her hand in reply.

"It has been an honor, Your Highness," Ben bowed to her. He turned to Obi-Wan and put a hand on the younger man's arm. "I saw your ship on the docks. I'll meet you there." Obi-Wan nodded, and watched Ben go. Left alone with the Nabooian delegation, he turned a smile on the very plain, unassuming queen.

"Your uncle knew who I was right away," Padme said in an almost accusatory tone.

"Did he?" Obi-Wan tried not to smile. Unlike his uncle, he had no beard to hide his dimples. "As I said, Your Highness, he's very perceptive."

"Padme," she corrected him.

He glanced around the large, open platform. "No one else is here, your Highness."

"I know," she smiled.

Obi-Wan chuckled. "Very well, Padme. It has been an honor to meet you. I hope your endeavors with the Gungans go smoothly - smoother than this business about the Federation, at least."

The monarch's smile faltered, but if anything, it made her look more unshakable. "So do I," she said. High overhead, ships flew in neat lines as the midday rush hour filled the sky. A cast shadow passed over Padme's face. When the light re-emerged, she shook off her scowl and smiled.

"It has been a pleasure, Obi-Wan," she stepped forward and grasped his arms, giving him a kiss on either cheek in a traditional parting gesture. "Thank you for all your service, you and Master Windu. I cannot thank you enough."

"We come to serve, Your Highness," he smiled.

"So you do."

She turned and allowed Sabe to lead her and her handmaidens up the ramp of their ship. She paused at the top of the ramp to look back at Obi-Wan.

"And Obi-Wan?"

"Yes?"

"May the Force be with you," she smiled.

He smiled back. "And also with you, your Highness."

Obi-Wan watched the glinting Nabooian ship take off from the dock beside the Jedi-issue speeder. Ben shielded his eyes in the sun and watched with him. After the ship was nothing more than a tiny reflection of light in the distant atmosphere, Obi-Wan wondered rather suddenly if he would ever
see Padme again.

"You knew her," he said to Ben without looking.

"Yes," the elder said, climbing into the speeder "quite well. It's good to see her again. Now come on, it's lunchtime and I'm starved."

Obi-Wan finally looked away from the sky, and frowned to see his older self in the passenger seat. "You realize I'm half blind, don't you?"

"And a very capable, licenced pilot, yes," Ben said, pulling the seatbelt over his lap. "Seniority has to have some perks." Obi-Wan rolled his eye to the heavens and climbed into the pilot's seat.

"So what did the Chancellor want?" asked Ben on their commute. Obi-Wan gave a double-take.

"How did you-?"

"I saw you walking out of his office earlier," Ben explained. "I assume it has something to do with the dinner last night."

"Yes," Obi-Wan readjusted his hands on the controls. "Valorum's trying to mitigate the damage from this new committee. He wants me to sit for the Order."

"Really?" Ben turned to his counterpart in surprise. "Not Master Windu?"

"That's what I said," Obi-Wan grumbled. "Apparently he needs a dogsbody. And... did Master Windu tell you about the intel from Naboo?" he asked, realizing that, for the first time, he might know something about the galaxy that Ben did not already know.

"I've heard the redacted version."

"Oh. Well, I've heard the real version, and Valorum wants to keep me where he can see me, or so it seems."

"Aha," Ben gave a wry smile. "Welcome to politics."

Obi-Wan scoffed. "Now he wants me to choose a right-hand man to act as a secondary representative."

"Oh?"

"Yes." A look passed between them, and Ben began to silently backpedal.

"Obi-Wan, if you're going to ask me, please understand that I'm already wrapped up to my neck in the Kamino Accord, and as soon as it's ratified, I intend to-"

"No, I wasn't going to ask you," Obi-Wan said.

"Oh." Ben frowned suddenly, equally relieved and offended.

Obi-Wan tilted his head, looking uncertain, "I had thought of someone, but I wanted to ask for your thoughts on the matter first."

Offense morphed into curiosity. "Who did you have in mind?"
"Well I certainly think it's a good choice." Ben and Obi-Wan stepped out of the turbolift together and strode down the hall, matching step for step. "But he is going to say no."

Obi-Wan's jaw hardened ever so slightly. "He might try. But I've been told I can be a very persuasive person."

Ben glanced at his counterpart in mild surprise. As the years passed, Obi-Wan became less and less of the man Ben knew from his mirror. Getting to know this younger, self-assured version of himself was an everyday adventure. "At least ask him in private," Ben warned the overconfident knight. "You don't want to put him on the spot."

"Oh, don't worry, Ben. You don't give him enough credit." Obi-Wan gave his older self a smile far softer than the determined fire in his eyes. "He's not as skittish as all that."

Ben shrugged and let the topic fade. The pair slowed to a stop at the front door of the Jinn/Kenobi residence. Obi-Wan's hand paused above the door panel. "I'm not going to mention this committee business to anyone until it's all settled," he explained, fixing Ben with a conspiratorial eye. The unspoken *don't tell Qui-Gon* hung in the air.

"You are a knight, you know," Ben told him, "you don't have to ask for permission. Though you ought to tell Master Windu before you go back to the Chancellor. He doesn't deal well with surprises."

Obi-Wan gave a nod. "True," he said, and opened the door. Two heads of grey hair turned to look at them - one long and unkempt, one short and trim. Obi-Wan's face broke into a smile.

"Master Dooku!" he strode in the room, hair swaying. It took the elder Jedi a moment to register who, exactly, he was looking at.

"Force, boy, it's worse than I thought." Yan unfolded himself from the couch and went to stand by his grandpadawan, who had successfully contained his smile, though not his dimples or early crowsfeet. Dooku glanced briefly between Obi-Wan and Qui-gon, and then reached out with one hand and pulled Obi-Wan's long hair back from his face in a similar manner to how Qui-Gon styled his. He let it drop. "You must be bursting with pride," he commented sarcastically to Qui-Gon.

"Why shouldn't I?" replied his former student, crossing one leg over the other in calculated nonchalance. Dooku turned back to Obi-Wan.

"You ought to chop this off," he advised, gesturing to the ginger locks.

"Leave the man be," Qui-Gon called from his seat, "I think it suits him."
Obi-Wan's face was a picture. Luckily, Dooku turned to glare at Qui-Gon the exact moment Obi-Wan began to gape, thus missing the mis-communiciqué between master and apprentice. Qui-Gon stared down their comic expressions without a twitch. He waved them over. "Come on, sit down. I've just made tea. Ben, don't linger by the door."

Upon mention of the other Kenobi, Dooku turned to look. He gave a rare smile. "Ah, Master Kenobi, so good to see you again." He glanced at Obi-Wan. Both of you, I should say.

"Likewise, grandmaster," Ben shook his hand. "Mace told me you have interesting news from Kamino."

"Haven't you been at the Senate all day?" Qui-Gon asked. "How on earth did Mace have time to tell you that?" Ben gave Qui-Gon an amused smile and shrugged

"Another time," Dooku waved a hand, ignoring the interruption. "I shall have to bring you up to speed later, off the record. It's all classified at the moment." He spared a glance for Obi-Wan. "Not that I don't trust either of you," he amended. Obi-Wan held out his hands in surrender.

"No, please," the knight said, eyebrows high, "I've had more than enough of that for one week."

"Yes, Mace refused to tell me about that," Qui-Gon said, "what in Force's name did you get yourself into this time?" Dooku went back to his seat, and the two Kenobis collected a cup of tea before taking their respective spots around the low coffee table.

"It's a bit… complicated. I can't tell you everything, unfortunately," Obi-Wan said, glancing at Ben.

The evening devolved into a casual debriefing. These sorts of conversations were the stock and trade of Jedi friendships. Even with the imposing presence of Yan Dooku, Obi-Wan felt comfortable enough to speak freely. He relayed stories from Naboo, and reflected on his fondness for Padme despite poor first impressions, though he did not reveal her true identity. He even discussed the hasty vote made in the Senate the previous day, and the extremely bad feeling he had about Palpatine's new committee. Ben and Qui-Gon had shared a dark look at that. Luckily, Obi-Wan's blind eye kept him from noticing.

The dark mood lifted when Dooku saw Obi-Wan's lightsaber glinting at his belt and nearly burst with pride - or as close to bursting that a man as collected as Dooku would ever be - and insisted on examining the blade and hearing how his makashi studies were progressing. Swordsmanship was one of the educational disciplines that endured well past the knighting ceremony, and it was, as ever, a popular topic in present company.

"We really must spar sometime," Dooku said as he stood, hours later, "I expect you've gotten far better than last I saw you."

"I should hope so," Obi-Wan said. "Last you saw me I was half blind."

It gave Dooku pause, and he met Obi-Wan's one seeing eye with a twitch of a smile. He looked to Qui-Gon and gave a respectful nod. "Very proud indeed," he said. Qui-Gon made a point to not react, but Obi-Wan felt rather than saw the smile beneath his mustache.

Dooku stood, straightened his robes, and took in a deep breath. "I must be off, I'm afraid. I need to finalize my reports on this whole Kamino affair, and the years add up. Do tell me when you're up for a challenge in the dojo, Obi-Wan," he said.

The knight grinned, "Oh, do you know someone?"
When Dooku turned to glare, it was directed at Qui-Gon. "You taught him that," the elder accused, "I know you did."

"He's shown cheek since the crib," Qui-Gon shrugged.

"Hmph," scoffed Dooku in an aristocratic impression of his old master, "and he'll pay for it, I think." He gave Obi-Wan a sharp smile. "A good evening to all of you."

They bid the master farewell and lounged in their seats. No sooner had the door slid shut than did Obi-Wan whirl back around to squint suspiciously at his former master. "What did you mean, 'it suits him'?" he asked. "You hate my hair."

Ben chuckled, but Qui-Gon remained unfazed. He let out a sigh laden with sixty-one years of wisdom. "Obi-Wan," he began sagely, "I have never once agreed with that man about hair, be it mine or anyone else's. I'm not about to start now." He sipped at his tea, and winced upon finding it had gone cold. "But between the two of us, please know that I think it's horrible."

"He certainly wears it better than I did," Ben said, sipping at his tea.

"You wore your hair long?" Qui-Gon was surprised.

"I resent that tone," grumbled Obi-Wan. Ben sat back in his seat, fingers drifting to the short-cropped hairline at his neck.

"There are no still-holos of that hair, for which I am grateful."

"I'll have to make sure you don't have that luxury," Qui-Gon said to his former apprentice. "I'm sure I can find a holocam somewhere around here. Twenty years from now, you'll look back and regret this," he pointed vaguely at Obi-Wan's head before rising to pick up the tea tray.

"Yes, I'm sure," the knight patronized. He stood and took the tea tray from his master's hands. "I'll put it away. I need to be going anyway."

"Oh?" Belligerence evaporated, Qui-Gon looked disappointed. "Where are you going?"

Obi-Wan gave an intentionally casual shrug as he rinsed the teapot and cups and set them out to dry. "Follow-up business about Naboo. I don't know how long it'll take."

"I'm making nuna gumbo for dinner," Qui-Gon said as Obi-Wan went to the door. Not missing a beat, the knight replied,

"In that case, I'll be going to the commissary."

The door hissed shut. "Brat," Qui-Gon grumbled to the air. "He's left his cloak behind again."

"What was Dooku here to talk about?" Ben interjected. Qui-Gon looked over at him.

"Can a man not have his former master over for a social visit?"

"Qui-Gon," Ben fixed him with a dubious look, "Give me some credit, I know you better than that."

Qui-Gon hesitated, jaw muscles wrestling with his expression beneath his beard. Ben recognized the look from his younger days, and knew that if he were still an apprentice, Qui-Gon would look away and make some ambivalent excuse about masters not answering to padawans. Now, however, they were equals. Qui-Gon let out a tense sigh and stood, retrieving the tea kit that Obi-Wan had
only just put away. With a flick of his hand, the stove relit itself under the kettle.

"Dooku has requested permission to train Anakin Skywalker," he said, back turned.

Ben's entire body came to a standstill. An unforeseen wave of fear surged through him, icy and stiff. "When?" he asked.

"Yesterday."

And he'd been busy wrapped up in the Senate. Stupid. "And?"

Qui-Gon was looking over his shoulder, cupboard open, tea in hand. He watched Ben's expression for a moment more. "They said no, of course."

A huge breath escaped Ben, and his body unfroze. Qui-Gon turned back around and crumbled tealeaves into the pot while the kettle began to whistle. "The official word is that Anakin is too young," he brought the entire kit on its tray to sit on the coffee table. He sat across from Ben. "I suspect the real reason is that Dooku is too old. But that is a fragile excuse." He warmed both porcelain bowls and disposed of the water before slowly pouring the tea. He set the cup in front of Ben and fixed him with stern look. "They won't be able to say no to anyone much longer. The boy needs a master, everyone can see that. Dooku will ask again."

"He told you that?"

"I know him well enough that he didn't have to." Qui-Gon sipped at his tea. It was just slightly bitter.

"No one else has asked after him?" Ben said, voice full of dread and hope.

"No," Qui-Gon's tone was almost accusatory. "But you should."

"Qui-Gon, we've been over this," Ben bent and rubbed at his forehead.

Qui-Gon's exasperated slouch almost made him spill tea, which was in and of itself a harbinger of his foul mood. "Force, Ben, stop dwelling on the past for one damned day, and you'll see that that boy needs you now. Dooku means well, and I have no doubt he could teach Anakin a great deal, but we both know he's not suited for it. The Council knows it too, though I doubt they could express exactly why." Qui-Gon sighed and looked to make sure he hadn't spilled any tea before slowly pouring the tea. He set the cup in front of Ben and fixed him with stern look. "They won't be able to say no to anyone much longer. The boy needs a master, everyone can see that. Dooku will ask again."

"You?" Ben couldn't help it when a twinge of hurt entered his frown. "You said Obi-Wan would be your last."

"I thought he would be, but I know for certain the Force would not put Anakin in Yan Dooku's hands, no matter how much respect I have for the man."

"And what, the Force is telling you to train him instead?"

"What the Force tells me is that you're being a block-headed idiot who won't stop and listen," Qui-Gon snapped, and immediately regretted it. He sighed and took a gulp of tea.

"I do listen," Ben muttered petulantly.

Qui-Gon bit his tongue and clenched a fist. At length, he asked, "Did you ever tell Obi-Wan about
last time?"

Ben blinked. "Last time? What, that I trained Anakin?"

"Yes."

"No."

"Good."

The vindication in Qui-Gon's voice made Ben frown again. "Why?"

"Because if you tell him, it'll put ideas in his head. He's susceptible to notions about destiny, you
know."

"So are you," Ben retorted, remembering the light in Qui-Gon's eyes when he'd spoken of the
Chosen One all those years ago.

Qui-Gon did not deny it, but glared up at Ben from under his eyebrows. "Leave him be, Ben. Use
your senses. This was never meant to be his battle."

"Only mine," the elder Kenobi replied bitterly.

Qui-Gon looked away, sympathetic but remorseless. "I'm sorry."

Ben considered, just for a moment, telling Qui-Gon exactly who Anakin had been, what he could
be. But then he remembered the blind ambition that had led his master to abandon Obi-Wan at the
drop of a hat. He held his tongue. He sighed, sitting back to finally drink his tea. It was already
going cold. "I think he's got other things to worry about right now."

"What's this then? Running around to the Senate and back, I thought you'd be too busy for the likes
of us."

Obi-Wan's smile was easy and lopsided. "Missed you too, Feemor."

"Is that Obi?" asked Aola from within the apartment.

Feemor turned his head over his shoulder. "That'll be Knight Kenobi to you, little one," he teased.

"Oh, stop it," Obi-Wan smacked him in the stomach, and squeezed past him into the apartment.

"No please," Feemor smiled, a bit wheezy from the hit, "come in and make yourself at home." He
closed the door.

"Is Cody with you?" Aola asked from the table, where she was typing up a report. Obi-Wan
ignored Feemor's wit and told the apprentice,

"No, he's at OrbitSec, where he'll stay for the time being." He picked up a date from the plate by
Aola's hand and popped in his mouth. As he chewed, he asked, "How is Garen?"

"Sleeping, I bet. Trying to binge on rest before his vigil tomorrow night."

Obi-Wan waited to swallow before he laughed. "I'm shocked he's observing the traditions - he
always said he never would." Aola smiled, fingers tapping away at her keyboard.
"He's a softie for that sort of stuff, deep down. He's only contrary to annoy you."

Obi-Wan scoffed, and pretended he hadn't thought of it before. "Prick," he muttered, making Aola smile wider.

"So what's all this business at the Senate?" Feemor asked, coming over to steal more of Aola's dates. She gave him a dirty look and moved her snacks to the opposite side of the table. He ignored her. "I saw the story on G-RAN. Something about the Banking Clan, and a committee?"

Obi-Wan's expression fell, easy smile replaced with a carefully composed mask. "Ah, well, that's actually what I came to talk with you about," he said. The shift in Obi-Wan's mood plucked a corresponding chord in the Force, and Feemor and Aola both looked up, the Force hovering around them in intrigued waves.

"Did something happen?" asked Aola, worried.

"No, no, I just…" Obi-Wan flustered. Diplomacy was a second language to him, but it was different when you had to politic your way around family. "I wondered if I might have a word with you, Master Gard." With monumental effort, he did not even flinch in Aola's direction. "Alone."

All of them could feel Aola's flush of hurt as she looked up in surprise. The two men glanced at her, and Obi-Wan ducked his head in silent apology. Feemor studied Obi-Wan's face. "Give us a moment, eh, lass?" He gave his padawan a quick smile. Aola looked between the two and slowly stood.

"Course," she muttered, and turned down the hall toward her room. As an afterthought, she went back and took the plate of dates. After her bedroom door opened and hissed shut, Feemor crossed his arms and turned to Obi-Wan.

"'Master Gard', is it? What's this about?"

"It's nothing she can't hear about, but I didn't want her being here to pressure you." Obi-Wan glanced down the hall where he could see Aola's door. "Is there somewhere we could talk where she won't eavesdrop?"

A deliberative wrinkle had developed between Feemor's eyebrows, but it lessened gently as he chuckled. "You know her too well. My room should be far enough away."

Once sequestered in the privacy of Feemor's quarters, Obi-Wan gave his pitch. Feemor absorbed it, slack-jawed.

"Me?" he asked incredulously. "You want me to sit on a Republic committee?"

"With me, yes," the knight said.

Feemor sat back on his meditation cushion. On the cushion opposite, Obi-Wan sat cross-legged and patient. The master squinted at him. "Did Qui-Gon put you up to this?"

"Qui-Gon doesn't know I'm on the committee yet, let alone that I'm to choose a second representative."

Feemor blinked. "And I'm, what, your… third, fourth choice?"

"No, you're my first choice, actually."
Feemor scoffed. "Why?"

Obi-Wan sighed. "Valorum's only roped me into this because Palpatine dislikes me and because my low rank won't stir the pot. He doesn't want Mace or any of the Councilors involved. He's using me."

"So you think I'm low-ranking enough to become your accessory?"

It hadn't sounded so bad in Obi-Wan's head. He huffed. "No it's not- look, I'm going to need a friend to turn this mess to our favor. This committee doesn't smell right. Someone's got to keep an eye on things, and if Valorum thinks I'm going to roll over and play doormat for him, he's wrong.'

Feemor was taken aback by Obi-Wan's fervor. "Why do you care so much? It's how the Senate works, lad."

"Why do you think Ben's spent the last decade neck-deep in it, then?" Obi-Wan asked, and huffed in frustration. He'd spent too much time mulling over the problem in his own head, and not enough looking at it from Feemor's perspective. "The Senate is a hotbed for… certain powers, these days, and the way things have been going, it's about to get complicated. Ben feels it, and so can I."

"Certain powers?" Feemor repeated. "You mean… you don't mean the Sith, do you?" He whispered the name like a curse. In the temple, it was.

"It has to be. The Force is a maelstrom over there. I don't know exactly why; Ben knows the gory details. I have my suspicions, but frankly, I'm afraid to ask. He probably wouldn't tell me, anyway. The point is," Obi-Wan put out a stiff hand to refocus his thoughts, "we need to have boots on the ground there. Ben's bowing out as soon as the Accord is through, and now, by the Force's will, I'm stepping in. And I'm going to need help." He looked Feemor in the eye, gaze beseeching.

Feemor shrugged and gave a scoff. "But… why are you asking me?"

"You know about me, about Ben. You know why he's here. You can understand why this is important."

"In the abstract, yes, but so does Mace and the entire High Council."

"Valorum won't have any of them on this committee."

"So ask Qui-Gon or Dooku," Feemor gestured, as if to indicate an invisible line of qualified candidates queuing outside the door. "Force knows that Dooku could devastate any politician."

"You're gifted with politics too, Feemor," Obi-Wan reprimanded, "You said so yourself."

"Not like Dooku, I'm not," the Master scoffed, "the man bleeds subterfuge."

"Yes, but he's not..." Obi-Wan hesitated, unsure how to articulate himself. "He's too gray. If this really is the Sith we're dealing with," Feemor flinched at the word, "I don't think it'd be a good idea to have him too close."

"He was a shadow, Obi-Wan. He knows the Dark better than anyone."

"And you don't think he was once tempted by it?"

The idea hadn't crossed Feemor's mind. "He's... he's a Jedi. He may be gray, but..." Feemor shrugged, mind wheeling in circles. "He's still a Jedi. He wouldn't."
Obi-Wan couldn't help but smile. "That's why I need your help, Feemor. You're the only Jedi I know who thinks in those terms."

"What terms?" the master was baffled.

"You're so light, no politician, let alone a Sith, will know what to do with you."

The praise sounded familiar, from years ago. "Ben told you that, didn't he?" he asked dryly.

"What?" Obi-Wan was confused. "No, he asked me why I picked you, and that's what I told him. It's true. And besides..." Obi-Wan ducked his head slightly. "If I'm being honest, I have no idea what I'm doing and would really appreciate someone with a bit more experience."

Feemor stared him down for several long moments, searching for something. At length, he crossed his arms. "And would you want Aola along, too? She's not what I would call a 'people person'."

"I had thought of that. I don't see a problem with it. I was tasked with assigning a Jedi to this position, but on paper, a master and padawan count as one unit, so technically, I can assign two for the price of one. And when Valorum finds he can't overturn my decision, he'll be furious. Serves him right." Obi-Wan's smile was one he'd learned from watching Dooku. Feemor squinted at him.

"Are you sure you don't know what you're doing, Kenobi?"

The younger man shrugged. "Only sort of." He let his smile melt away to expose the desperation and hope in his eyes. "Really, Feemor, I need your help with this."

All of Feemor's growing wrinkles showed as he frowned in consideration. "Let me think about it," he muttered, not meeting Obi-Wan's gaze. "I'll talk about it with Aola and let you know in a few days."

"Alright." Obi-Wan rose and straightened his robes. "Thank you for hearing me out."

"Of course." Feemor was scrubbing his chin, where salt and pepper stubble hissed against his fingers. "How long would this assignment be?" he asked.

Obi-Wan paused. He couldn't help but think of how Ben had spent nearly eleven years embroiled in senate affairs. "I'm... I'm not sure," he said, now frowning for his own sake.

"Alright." Feemor said, looking away. "I'll let you know."

"Thank you."

"Oh, and watch your footing on the way out. Aola's probably lurking somewhere outside."

Obi-Wan paused at the door and looked over his shoulder. "You sure she's not meant for politics?" he whispered. Feemor raised his eyebrows.

"Sneaking around isn't the problem; it's getting caught that she needs to work on." His wrinkles reappeared and cast dark shadows across his face. "I imagine a senator is less forgiving than an eopie in that regard." The idea of his apprentice being caught sneaking around the senate, potentially by a Sith, made him run a hand over his face. He forced a smile. "Best not to trip over her, at any rate."

Obi-Wan forced a smile of his own for Feemor's sake. "Force be with you, Master."

"Aye, you too lad."
Once Obi-Wan was gone, Feemor rubbed his face and sighed.

"Brip bruuuuup."

"Don't say that," Anakin pulled out a screwdriver and wrestled with the stripped head of his target. "You're only four years old. That's only half as old as I am."

"Brip breeEEeeeE."

Anakin scoffed. "Okay one year less than half. I was rounding up. Stay still, would you?" Arbie-one stilled, his longsuffering repulsors thrumming with age. His optical lens pivoted impatiently while Anakin attempted to tighten the joists that held up his mechanical arms. His screwdriver slipped and the metal end banged into Arbie's round hull. It would have scratched the paint, if there had been any paint left to scratch.

"BrrrEEEEEEE," the droid complained.

"It couldn't hurt, you big baby. Your preservation protocols aren't that sensitive. Stay still." Anakin finished tightening the screw and gave the arm an experimental tug. It wobbled slightly, but less so than it had before. "How's that feel?" He let the hovering ball go, and Arbie shimmied in the air. The arm twisted and moved, its two-pronged hand snapping experimentally. After some consideration, the droid gave a satisfied blip.

"As good as new," Anakin smiled.

'New', in the case of the affectionately named Remote-Ball One, was relative. Professionally manufactured droids could last decades, if treated properly. Unfortunately, RB-1 had been constructed by a seven year-old whose only building supplies at the time had consisted of condemned remote units and cast-off shipyard scrap. Judging solely on his origins, Arbie was a shining beacon of success. Measured against any other standard, he was a spark-spitting wad of garbage that only continued hovering by the grace of the Force - the Force, and an extremely determined ten year-old.

"Breeep breeeeeee." Arbie rattled, top half of his sphere rotating around so his lens could face the dormitory door.

"Who is it?"

Arbie considered the question. A circuit sparked. "Breeeup bop."

Anakin's heart sank. "Sithspit." He used the Force to sweep his tools under his bed. He stood up to hid in the 'fresher, but just as he did, the dormitory door opened.

"Oh, here you are," said the boy at the front of the procession. Half a dozen other boys followed him, most of them still sweaty from saber practice. Anakin paused by the 'fresher and abandoned his hiding place.

"Hi, Aren," he said in polite monotony.

"Where were you Ani?" asked a more cordial, blue-haired boy, who was wiping his forehead on his shirt. "We missed you at practice."

"Yeah," laughed a Twi'lek, who'd swung up to a top bunk and now kicked his legs over the edge. "We didn't have enough for six pairs - Hedun had to fight Master Drallig, it was a riot!" The others
laughed, and the blue-haired boy glared.

Anakin smiled. "I just twisted my ankle, is all. Master Che said I should stay off it for a while."

"Twisted your ankle?" Aren snorted. "I thought you'd have Master Dooku plaiting your padawan braid by now."

"The Council said no," Anakin said, taking Arbie into his arms before the droid ran away. He fiddled with a bent antenna. "They said I'm too young."

"Good," Aren spat, and marched over to the younger boy. At not quite thirteen and already making strides through puberty, Aren dwarfed Anakin by nearly a foot. From Anakin's perspective, the boy loomed in shadow. "You should have to wait, just like everyone else. It'll be good for you." The Force coiled around the teen in muddled shades of grey, flickering from dark to light and back again. He shrugged them off, and turned away to his own bed. "Leave enough Masters for the rest of us."

The other boys were silent as Aren stormed to his bed. Hedun, his bunkmate, was very pointedly not watching him as he climbed up. Aren saw it. "What?" he demanded. Hedun shook his head quickly, lips sealed. Aren sighed in annoyance and flung himself into the mattress.

"Breeep bbRUUUUP," complained Arbie in Aren's general direction. Anakin slammed a hand over the droid's speaker. Droidish abuse echoed metallically from the smothered sphere.

"Didn't Master Ulo tell you keep that thing out of the dormitory?" Aren snapped without turning around. Anakin wrapped the irate ball in both arms and went for the door. "Sorry, Aren," he said, and scuttled out of the room.

Some time later, while the other boys slept or showered after their workout, one of the older initiates, a tall, amber-skinned human, followed Anakin into the common room. He found the boy sprawled out on one corner of the room, talking to his droid and fiddling with its attachments. It was behavior typical of Anakin Skywalker; he did not have many friends who were not built of circuits. "Is your ankle alright?" the older boy asked conversationally. Anakin looked up, a bit startled. He relaxed upon seeing who it was.

"Yeah, it's fine, Pel." He fiddled a bit more with Arbie. "How was practice?"

Pel shrugged and sat cross-legged beside Anakin. "You know me. I'm not one for sabers," Pel grinned. "I'm sure you'd dance circles around me even with a twisted ankle," he laughed. When this failed to elicit the desired response, his smile faded. "You mustn't mind Aren, you know. He's just nervous because his lifeday's next month and he hasn't found a master."

"Your thirteenth lifeday is next week," Anakin pointed out. "Aren't you nervous?"

Pel shrugged. "I know I'm not going to find a master. I'm going to the Education Corps, Master Nu's already promised me a spot."

"And you're sticking around for the trials?" Anakin's nose wrinkled. He disliked tests. "When you know you're not going to pass?"

Pel shrugged. "It's the principle of the thing."

Metal squeaked against metal as Anakin wrestled another loose part into submission. Arbie chirped in indignation. "Are you disappointed to go to the Education Corps?" asked Anakin. Again, Pel shrugged.
"No, not really. I've always liked the archives, and I've got a good head for the stuff. I'll be good there. It's the Force's will for my life."

Anakin let Arbie go and slumped against the wall. Arbie darted away, muttering mechanically. "And you just… know that sort of thing?" Anakin asked, eyebrows twisted in confused introspection. Pel watched the younger boy in sympathy.

"You're disappointed that Master Dooku won't train you?"

"Yes. No. I… I don't know…" Anakin sighed, and drew his knees up to his chest. He sat there for a bit. Two initiates, talking amicably, came in through the main door and disappeared into the sleeping hall. "Is it my fault?" Anakin asked when they'd gone. Pel turned to look at him.

"What?"

"Is it my fault that Aren can't find a master?" Anakin peered up at the older boy. "I mean. Master Dooku should've asked him first, right?"

Pel blinked, blindsided by the skewed logic, and shook his head. "No, that's not how it works. Master Dooku can ask to train anyone he wants. Aren needs to come to terms with the Force's will."

It sounded callous, but it was true.

Anakin pursed his lips, the innocence of his baby-fat cheeks at war with the serious furrow in his brow. "It feels like my fault," he said.

"It's not," Pel assured, resting a hand on the boy's shoulder. Anakin shrugged, and huddled into his knees. After a few moments of silence, Pel looked around himself. "I need to shower. Evening meal is in about an hour, make sure you hide Arbie before Master Ulo does her inspection, alright?"

"Okay."

Pel stood and went to the door. "Pel?" Anakin asked. The older boy turned.

"Yeah?"

"How do you know what the Force's will is for your life?"

The question gave Pel pause, but after a moment of thought, he said, "I suppose I just listen to it. It's a quiet sort of thing. The thing I'm meant to do just feels… right. Like it's always been that way."

This did not satisfy Anakin's curiosity, but he didn't have the energy to interrogate. "Oh. Okay."

Pel nodded, slowly leaning back toward the door. "Force be with you, Ani," the teen said to the distraught boy, and went into the other room.

Anakin continued to mope. When Arbie looped around the room, Anakin drew him close with the Force and powered him down with a quiet apology. Listen to the Force, he thought. He wanted to listen to the Force, he did. It was what they were taught to do. But whenever Anakin tried, things happened. Stuff spun in the air, whether he'd asked it to or not. Lights turned off, and could not be turned on again. He fought better than initiates twice his age. People got hurt. Bad things happened when Anakin tried to listen to the Force. His teachers told him he needed to learn control. He told his teachers that he thought he'd had control. He didn't. It showed on their faces that they didn't know what to do.
It feels right, like it's always been that way. Something about that sentiment rang true. Staring off into nothing, Anakin allowed himself to be drawn into the idea, turning it over in his head like a puzzle cube. Something clicked into place.

Across the room, a halo lamp exploded. Anakin started, eyes wide, and put his arms over his head as bits of glass sprayed across the room.

"What did you do, Skywalker?" asked a beleaguered Aren from the other side of the door. Anakin ducked.

"Sithspit," he hissed. He heard footsteps from the other room. It could be Aren, it could be someone else. He weighed the odds, rose to his feet, stashed Arbie behind the couch, and darted out the door.

He could just wait outside the commissary before evening meal, couldn't he? Maybe they'd have leftover sweetcakes from lunch.

Anakin Skywalker. Anakin kriffing Skywalker. Little ten year-old, Jedi initiate Anakin kriffing Skywalker, in need of a master, and who had taken up the mantle? Dooku. Of course he had. Oh, he hadn't earned the right to teach him, but he'd be back, and he'd win next time. Poor little Ani was far too unstable these days, only a fool would argue otherwise. The boy would be in trouble if he didn't get a master soon.

Enter Ben Kenobi, time traveller extraordinaire and unsung hero of innumerable lifeforms. What did the Force's chosen messenger want to do about it? Quite frankly, he wanted to run and hide. Instead, he went to the temple dojo. By a stroke of luck or fate, he found Mace Windu there, running through complex Vaapad katas.

There was a suppressed maelstrom churning in the back of Ben's head, and the buzz gave off a familiar tone. It rang in his ears like a klaxon, and in the old days, there had been only one way to make it stop. He marched toward Master Windu, ignoring the councilor's quiet concentration.

"Mace, would you do me a favor?" he asked, still walking as Mace broke his kata and glared at the newcomer.

"You want me to break your ribs?" he said in deadpan irritation. Ben's expression did not change.

"I want you to try," he said, honestly. Mace stopped moving. Lightsaber still humming by his side, he looked Kenobi up and down. It was a well known fact that Ben Kenobi did not duel often. In fact, as far as anyone else knew, the man maintained his lightsaber prowess almost entirely in katas and, occasionally, by giving demonstrations to classes of padawans. But there was definitely a hunger in his eyes now, a razor-sharp look that said he was itching for a brawl.

"Are you sure that's a good idea, Ben?" Mace asked. He felt the Force around them carefully, expecting to find a cloud of anger roiling around his friend. He did, but it was under control, tightly fisted in Ben's unbreakable composure.

"Please, Mace," Ben said shortly, "I need to fight someone, and you're one of the few who can give me an honest challenge."

Mace's eyebrows rose. The words were pure conceit, but coming from Ben, they sounded like plain truth. "Alright," he said, and tipped up his saber. "You ready?"

Ben drew his own saber, and nodded. Without preamble, Mace launched into an attack.
Ben responded with silent fervor. While Mace fell into his blows with *kiai* and emphatic grunts, Ben was utterly silent. Mace's violet saber whirled around in a swift, cutting attack, but Ben caught it easily on his own and guided the interlocked blades in a circle. The momentum threw Mace's blade into the ground. He recovered with the speed that made him a master swordsman and attacked low from the other side. Ben jumped over it and swung at Mace's unprotected left side. The councilor parried just in time, and the two exchanged a quick volley of blows and blocks, bursts of light crackling like lightning between them.

Face illuminated by their blades, Ben's eyes were far away. His mind wasn't truly in this fight. His body was working on muscle memory, decisions fueled by prompts from the Force itself. He never looked at Mace, or even at their lightsabers. He looked at the floor and the wall, and the air, and eventually he closed his eyes altogether.

Mace darted around him in attempts to flank him, surprise him, or overpower him, but only landed one grazing hit for his efforts. He struck to the right, and found Ben's parry exactly where he expected it. But then he dove and struck at his knees, where he knew the man couldn't move his guard quickly enough, and impossibly, there was a blue blade shining there, waiting for him. The real heart of Vaapad strategy was to overpower your opponent by taking them off-guard. It was damned near impossible to take Ben Kenobi off-guard.

Mace tried to ignore the sweat on his forehead as he watched Ben spin his saber in a wide circle to block the incoming blows, before ducking out of the way of what would have been, to anyone else, an unexpected *sai cha* maneuver. Ben ducked under it as though he'd seen it coming miles away. He hadn't even been *looking*. Frustrated, Mace opened his mouth to make a pithy comment, but just as the words formed on his tongue, Ben turned back to face him, and he caught sight of the man's face.

Ben's eyes were closed again, but his forehead was wrinkled in lines of concentration. They weren't the angry V-shaped lines of a man in a duel, but the confused, wobbled lines of a man trying very hard to sort through a deeper, more tender problem. Curious, Mace reached out his senses and found Ben in a state that he could only compare to deep meditation. The councilor put out a hand and Force-pushed Ben back two yards. The man's eyes snapped open, but the meditative air about him did not waver. Ben charged back toward his opponent, and Mace braced for impact.

*So that's how this is going to go,* thought the councilor, and engaged again. He stopped paying attention to Ben after a while, and forgot about any snide comments. There was the fight, and only the fight. While Ben sank deeper into his own world, Mace pulled on the whirlwind of light and dark that made Vaapad what it was. They were both drenched in sweat and heaving for breath, but the fatigue did not show in Ben's expression. Mace flipped over him in an Ataru move from his apprenticeship days and shouted as he struck at Ben's neck.

Ben blocked it with a vicious upward cut that sent Mace rebounding backwards, shoulders falling first and sending him off-balance. He rolled and rebounded upward, but Ben kicked his shin and kept him near the ground. Mace struck at his ankles, and Ben danced out of the way. Mace leaped off the floor, sending alternating strikes to the thigh, arm, and stomach as he went, but they all bounced harmlessly off of Ben's defense. Once on his feet, Mace struck straight down, the force of the blow catching Ben's inevitable parry in a pause, and wrenched the blue blade to the left. To his surprise, Ben let it happen with absolutely no resistance. The force of his own movement sent Mace off-balance once more, and he stumbled to the left. Ben lifted his hand ever so slightly and Force-pulled Mace's boots out from under him. The floor hit his back, the air left his lungs, and Ben summoned Mace's brilliant purple blade into his own hand. He pointed both at the fallen Councilor, who was groaning as he righted himself. He was too surprised to say anything at first.
Ben's eyes flitted open, taking in the state of his victory. He slumped suddenly, as if feeling the fight for the first time. He saw the blades in his hands and disengaged them.

"Sola," said Mace. Ben nodded, and helped the other Jedi to stand. He handed back Mace's saber without a word.

Both Jedi could feel eyes on them. They turned as one to find Qui-Gon Jinn, accompanied by his junior padawan students, who were staring in awe at the two duelists. Mace Windu was accustomed to such attention, but was not accustomed to witnesses when he lost a duel. "Master Jinn." He nodded politely at the agog young faces and their more composed master.

"Well fought, Master Windu," Qui-Gon nodded back, and glanced at Ben. "Master Kenobi."

"So it was." Since they had an audience, Mace turned to bow to Ben. The other man was flushed from the fight and twitchy under the sudden scrutiny. He gave a curt bow.

"Yes, thank you, Master Windu, that was most helpful," he said. The maelstrom had gone quiet, leaving him alone with quiet thoughts more harrowing than a storm. "I must be going." He brushed past Qui-Gon and his entourage and swept out of the dojo. The padawans turned to watch him go in abject hero-worship.

"Alright, then, go on into the next salle and resume your exercises," shooed Qui-Gon, breaking the younglings' collective reverie. They scuttled into the larger hall, leaving Qui-Gon alone with his old friend.

"What was that about?" he asked, bringing the Korun a towel.

"You know, I'm not entirely sure," said Mace, wiping his face.

Qui-Gon turned to look at the doorway through which Ben had left. "I've never seen him fight like that."

"I've never seen anyone fight like that, except in holovids." Mace shook out a sore wrist.

"How do you mean?"

"It appears as though your old pupil has resurrected the practice of battle meditation. I'm guessing he picked it up during the war." He looked around to make sure there was no one to eavesdrop. "I've noticed he reverts back to old habits when he's stressed. He must be working through something nasty."

"Hmm." Qui-Gon's expression darkened. "Anakin, no doubt."

"Anakin?" Mace raised an eyebrow, and then slumped in realization. "You told him about Dooku?" his disapproval showed in his voice.

"Someone had to. You know Dooku's not right for the boy," Qui-Gon defended.

"And you think Ben is?" Mace gestured with his saber, incredulity all over his face. "Ben, who quite clearly suffers from post-traumatic stress syndrome and works through it by handing my ass to me on a platter? Ben, who has seen the end of the Galaxy as we know it and is balancing all his hope for redemption on that boy? Do you mean that Ben?"

"All his hope?" Qui-Gon interjected. "That's playing it up a bit, isn't it?" His voice faltered upon remembering that Mace was Ben's only complete confidant. The councilor sighed.
"Anakin needs a master."

"My point exactly. And you know better than I do how important it is to put him in capable hands."

Oh, Mace knew alright. He'd lost sleep over it. He'd had nightmares about the memories Ben had shown him. Old ghosts aside, time was running out for everyone involved. Anakin was still just a boy, and Ben was thinking of him as something else. The Master of the Order sighed. There was little to be done about it. He brushed himself off and strode to the door. "Next time, I should just break his ribs first thing," he muttered, rubbing at his sore side.

"What?" Qui-Gon asked, confused. Mace waved a dismissive hand.

"Oh, nothing."
Obi-Wan had always harbored a special resentment for the Temple Commissary, but like all other Jedi, he released his distaste into the Force, for a Jedi had no need for such untoward emotions. Today, he found releasing his disdain particularly difficult, so he thought of Qui-Gon's cooking, and it made the lukewarm groat stew offerings look immensely more palatable.

He'd chosen to eat fairly early in the evening, when he could start off his meal in comfortable quiet. As he chewed halfheartedly on the chunky soup and browsed the news, Jedi young and old began to fill the tables around him. The commissary was one of the loudest places in the temple. Although Jedi did not, as a rule, raise their voices anywhere, in the commissary even normal speaking tones combined by the hundreds to create a dull cacophony. Obi-Wan would hardly consider it soothing, but he'd grown used to it.

Amid the hubbub, a particular presence caught his attention. He looked up to see Anakin Skywalker, alone, with a tray piled high with sweetcakes. The initiate was attempting to see over his doughy ambitions to find a seat.

"I would not attempt to eat all of those, if I were you," Obi-Wan said as the boy passed by. "Take it from someone who knows."

Anakin turned to face Obi-Wan and his view was blocked entirely by sweetcakes. The top one wobbled precariously, and he darted his tray left to keep it from falling. This gave him a better view of his advisor.

"Oh, hi, Obi-Wan," Anakin smiled.

"How many do you have there?" Obi-Wan eyed the tower that dripped of sticky, sugary glaze.

"Um," Anakin said, "well, they were leftover from lunch, and I asked for some and the droid just gave me these."

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow. "I don't see you complaining about it."

Anakin grinned in wicked glee. "Jedi don't complain, Master Kenobi," he said with deliberate aptitude. Obi-Wan laughed out loud.

"How very wise of you. Come sit down, I'll help you not complain about it."

Anakin pushed the tray onto the table and clambered up across from Obi-Wan. The knight put his datapad away and selected a particularly plump cake from the lot. It'd been ages since he'd indulged in these - they were usually more for the padawans and younglings. He bit into it with relish and came away with flecks of icing on his mouth. Anakin did the same. They were quiet for a moment, enjoying their snack together.

"So," Obi-Wan brushed the sides of his mouth with a thumb, "where are your agemates? I should think your dorm master will be looking for you."

Anakin shrugged. He'd never paid too much attention to authority, for better or worse. "They'll be here soon. I just came a bit early."
"Always hungry, is it?" The boy was what, ten? Eleven? Obi-Wan could remember the feeling.

"Not always," Anakin protested as he bit into his third cake, laminated bits of icing falling from his face. Obi-Wan eyed the show with disturbed amusement. He dare not think what he would be like a few years from now.

"You won't be if you keep eating those," Obi-Wan warned. "Save room for real food."

"This is real food."

"It's not, and you know it." Obi-Wan picked up the tray and moved it to the other side of the table. Anakin scrunched his nose, and Obi-Wan ignored him. With knightly dignity, Obi-Wan plucked a second cake from the pile and bit into it. When Anakin gave him an accusing glare, he said through a mouthful, "I've already eaten my dinner." As Obi-Wan chewed his ill-gotten gains, Anakin began to look around for his dormmates.

"So," said Obi-Wan conversationally after he'd finished his dessert, "how are your studies progressing?"

Anakin shrugged with juvenile melancholy. "I twisted my ankle, and now I can't do sabers," he complained, as if this were the be all and end all of his studies. "So I've been working on Arbie-One instead."

As he always did, Obi-Wan cringed at the homonym but said nothing. "It'll heal soon, I'm sure. Are you taking any interesting classes?"

The boy shrugged. "I dunno. I'm in Republic History 4 right now, but it's taught by Master - oh, sithspit," Anakin ducked his head low. Obi-Wan, eyes-wide at the burst of vulgarity, looked down at the boy in surprise.

"I've never heard a master by that name," he said sternly. "Everything alright, Anakin?"

Anakin ignored the reprimand and darted a nervous look over his shoulder. "That's Aren, he's in my dorm," he said, without pointing. "I guess he's the first one here." He slumped lower so his shoulders might hide the rest of his head. Obi-Wan looked up to see a tall, gangly boy with dusty-brown hair and a sour expression.

"I take it you and Aren don't get along very well?" he asked.

Anakin shrugged. "He doesn't like me much. Pel says he's angry because he's almost thirteen."

"Ah." That particular subject dredged up unpleasant memories. He looked back at Aren, more sympathetically this time. The sour expression began to make sense. "Do you know which Corps he'll go into?" he asked, almost sadly.

"I dunno, I just know he wants to be a knight, but can't get a master to notice him." Force, it was so familiar it ached. "And he hates me because I've already been requested."

Wait, what?

"A master has asked to train you?" Obi-Wan said, flummoxed. Wasn't the minimum age eleven? "Who?"

Anakin looked at him as though he should already know. "Master Dooku. He asked a few days ago." Obi-Wan's face was frozen, but his eyebrows skyrocketed. Anakin shrugged. "The Council
said no because I'm too young." Which certainly made sense, Obi-Wan thought. Anakin turned and
looked at Aren shuffle into a line at the serving counter. "I wish Dooku would ask Aren, instead."
He turned back around and looked at his lap. "I feel awful."

"Don't," Obi-Wan advised. "If it's meant to be, it will be. If not, it will not." That maxim had never
placated him when he was younger. He saw that it would do no good for Anakin, either. "Even if
he gets sent to the corps, that doesn't mean he can't possibly ever come back," the knight said.
"Did you know, Master Jinn didn't become my master until months after I was thirteen. I'd already
been expelled from the academy."

"What?" Anakin's mind left Aren in the dust, eyes wide in shock. "You?"

Obi-Wan laughed. "Yes, I was going to be a farmer on Bandomeer."

"What?" Anakin repeated, wide-eyed incredulity keeping Obi-Wan smiling. "But - but you're…
you're you."

Obi-Wan wasn't sure what to do with the flattery, so he ignored it. "I was thirteen, it's what
happens. I went into the AgriCorps to learn how to farm, but then I picked a fight with a hutt, and
Qui-Gon was there, and we ended up on a grand adventure, and the rest is history." He gave
Anakin a smile. "The Force will have its way with or without the Jedi's rules." He realized that he
probably shouldn't be saying this to a ten-year-old initiate. "The Force's will was for me to be a
knight," he shrugged, "so I am a knight."

"Wow," Anakin breathed, wanting to know more but not sure where to start. "Did you know that?
When they sent you away?"

"Know that I would be a knight?"

"Yeah."

"No," Obi-Wan shook his head easily. "Well, sort of. It's difficult to explain. I wanted to be a
knight. No," he paused, expression growing more intense, "I… well, I had to be a knight. I knew i
had to. It'd been like that since I was a kid. But then, I turned thirteen, and that was impossible. So,
I supposed it was not meant to be."

"Even though you felt that you were meant to," Anakin said, something stirring uncomfortably in
his chest, "like it was right, like it had always been that way."

"Yes," Obi-Wan said slowly, frowning, "exactly like that. How did you know?"

Anakin opened his mouth to say something, but was interrupted. "Anakin, there you are. You
should stick with the group." A tall Korun master came up to the table, an assortment of preteen
initiates waiting nearby. Upon seeing Obi-Wan, she extended her hand in introduction. "Master
Ulo," she smiled.

"Obi-Wan," the knight returned the smile as he shook her hand.

"Kenobi, yes, I recognized you," the master chuckled. Obi-Wan resisted the urge to touch his scar.
Most people recognized him these days, whether he knew them or not. "I hope Anakin has not been
taking up your time, Master."

"Oh, no, of course not," Obi-Wan shook his head. "I was regaling him with stories of my own
initiate days, and…" his eyes strayed to the half-decimated tray of sweetcakes still sitting on the
edge of the table, "…advocating better judgement." He winked. Master Ulo fought back her grin
and gave Anakin an admonishing look.

"I appreciate your intervention, Master Kenobi. Come along, Anakin, meals before sweetcakes. We need to be going."

Anakin waved goodbye and left to join his agemates. Obi-Wan waved back, and watched Anakin go, carrying all the puzzles of his character with him.

When Obi-Wan returned to the apartment that night, the kitchen still smelled of burnt nuna gumbo. He wrinkled his nose. "There's some left in the fridge, if you want it," said Qui-Gon, not looking up from his reading.

"I'll pass, thank you," Obi-Wan replied, each syllable dripping with condescension.

"Brat."

"I've already eaten dinner," Obi-Wan defended, taking off his cloak and doing a double take when he realized he'd left another cloak draped over the couch earlier in the day. He swept them both into his arms and went to his room. "And dessert," he said.

"Dessert?" Qui-Gon scoffed, finally looking up from his reading. He gave Obi-Wan a disapproving look as the knight re-emerged from his bedroom. "Knighthood has made you decadent."

"Well, I've finally escaped from under your culinary thumb, I might as well enjoy my freedom."

Qui-Gon scoffed again, and turned back to his datapad. "I hope you get fat."

Obi-Wan collapsed into the couch beside him. "Unlikely."

"Twenty years from now, you shall have short hair and a gut, and you'll regret this conversation."

Obi-Wan rolled his eyes. "I saw Anakin today," he said, diverting the discussion, "he's the only reason I had dessert, you should know. He was trying to eat his way out of a pile of sweetcakes as big as himself."

"Oh?" Qui-Gon chuckled absently, still scrolling through a news article. Obi-Wan turned to watched his old master's expression as he spoke.

"Apparently, Dooku has asked to be his master."

Qui-Gon did not budge, but his eyes lifted from his datapad.

"You already knew," Obi-Wan concluded. Qui-Gon sighed, switched his datapad off, and set it aside.

"I only learned yesterday."

"You didn't tell me." Obi-Wan was mildly offended.


"Yes, said he was too young, I heard. Probably for the best, I was quite surprised." Obi-Wan admitted. "Still, I think Dooku would make a good master for him, when he's old enough."

This time, Qui-Gon's reaction was firm. "He would not, for more reasons than I care to describe."
"You only say that because he was your master," Obi-Wan accused.

"No, I say that because I know that man better than you ever will," he snapped, asserting his latent authority. "Anakin is far too young, Dooku is far too old, and they're poorly matched."

"Alright then," Obi-Wan muttered, raising a sardonic eyebrow. He glanced at the coffee table to see which holobooks Qui-Gon was currently engrossed in. Most of them were saber reference books he used for his classes. He looked away, and spotted a teacup still sitting on the edge of a chair where Ben had left it that morning. "I suppose Ben could train him," he said, "he spends more time with the boy than Dooku does."

Qui-Gon sighed. Obi-Wan looked at him as if he'd just made a statement. "You think Ben should train him."

"Ben doesn't want to."

"But you think he should," Obi-Wan insisted.

Qui-Gon was growing annoyed. "What I think, as I have been so constantly reminded by you and your even more annoying self, is immaterial."

"Why doesn't he want to train Anakin? All this time, I assumed it would be one of them." Had he really read the situation so poorly?

Qui-Gon opened his mouth, and stopped. Obi-Wan did not know who Anakin was, who he had been. He did not know about the arguments held over that boy. He hadn't heard the midichlorian counts that Dooku had reported, all those years ago. He didn't know that Qui-Gon was beginning to wonder if they'd been true after all. He didn't know that Dooku could've been dark. He didn't know that Qui-Gon had offered to train Anakin in Ben's stead. After all, Qui-Gon had told him that he would be his last. "You're going to have to ask him that," said the master at length. His former apprentice gave him an incredulous look.

"Right," Obi-Wan said. The conversation withered. The younger man looked out through the windows where Coruscant's sleepless spires were beginning to twinkle in night, midnight oil sparkling from windows against the skyline. "I should be turning in," he said. "Bant and Reef and I are planning Garen's reception tomorrow."

"Oh?" Qui-Gon regained his smile upon hearing that. "No dreadful pranks planned, I hope?"

"You think far too lowly of me," Obi-Wan said, stretching and unbuckling his belt as he shuffled toward his room.

"My thinking is exactly on par for you and him together in the same room."

Obi-Wan scoffed, and disappeared through the doorway. Before he closed his door, he said, "...Maybe one."

Qui-Gon smirked in the glow of his datapad. "Thought so."

Obi-Wan climbed into bed and fell into a calm sleep. Across the apartment, Qui-Gon followed suit.

It was around two in the morning when Obi-Wan woke up in a cold sweat, memories playing across his inner eye like visions.
They had taken all day to make. They looked like perfect tiny starfighters, painted with humorous hull tags and all glistening with a delicious, sugary, transparent syrup.

Garen regarded the confections with a dull expression, and glared up at the three beaming faces huddled around the platter. The absence of a braid on his shoulder made him feel authoritative, but no force of intimidation would have deterred these particular Jedi. "Really?" he asked, deadpan.

"As a Jedi Knight," Obi-Wan said with pronounced magnanimity as the only other knight among them, "you should be able to tell the muja syrup one from the beebleberry."

"Don't worry," assured Bant, "we've brought a hypo just in case."

Garen exhaled and looked back down at the tiny cakes. There were expertly done, he had no idea how the three of them had managed it. But of course now that they'd made them just for him, he couldn't refuse. That was the beauty of the trick, of course. He glared angrily up at Obi-Wan. "This was your idea, wasn't it?"

"It was a group effort," Reeft said, and pointed. "I baked the cake, Obi did the trimming, and Bant decorated."

"Obi was the one who made the syrup, though," said Bant, and Obi-Wan beamed cheekily. Garen sighed, and looked back down at the platter. "Hurry up, this is getting heavy," Bant added.

Garen regarded his dozens of options. He put a hand to his chin and picked at the clean-shaven skin there. "You realize," he said to his horrible, horrible friends, "that if I die of anaphylactic shock induced by beebleberry kriffing syrup," he glared pointedly at Kenobi, "my death will be on your hands."

"Don't be so dramatic," Bant said, rolling her giant Mon Cal eyes. "I already told you we've got a hypo!"

"Well, that's comforting," he grumbled sarcastically. Emergency hyposhots for allergic reactions were highly effective, to be sure, but they also felt like getting stung on the neck by a hornet. He puzzled over the tray again.

"Use the Force, Garen," Reeft prodded gently like a creche master.

"Oh, shut up, Reeft." Garen followed his gut instinct and plucked one off the tray. He sniffed it experimentally. It was hard to smell anything besides the sugar. To hels with it. He popped it into his mouth.

"Happy now?" he asked after he'd swallowed. The three continued to watch him. He coughed, and felt his neck tighten. "Oh, kriff me," he coughed again, and scratched at his throat. Bant produced the promised hypospray shot and raised it to Garen's neck victoriously, even as he leaned away, coughing out, "Wait, wait, waitwaitwait!"

"Oh, by the way," Obi-Wan said, as Bant deployed her weapon and Garen yowled in pain, "they were all beebleberry."

As Garen's allergy crisis subsided, the first words he wheezed out were, "You kriffing bastard."

"Garen!" said Bant, aghast.

Obi-Wan cackled.
"You have to admit, though," said Reeft, "it was a very tasteful prank."

They all groaned. Obi-Wan handed the tray to Bant, and reached under a tablecloth, where an identical tray was hidden. "Here are the muja ones."

"I hate you," Garen said, taking a ship and stuffing it in his mouth. "I hate you all. Mmm. These are really good. You're all horrible." He ate another one.

Obi-Wan handed the second tray to Reeft. "Congrats, you barve," he said, wrapping Jedi Knight Garen Muln in a hug. Garen reached through Obi-Wan's arm to grab another tiny muja starship. "Bastard," he said again, eating the ship in one bite and patting Obi-Wan affectionately on the back. Through a mouthful, he continued, "you're a bastard, you know that."

"Of course."

"Alright, that's quite enough of you lot." Diminutive though she was, Clee Rhara had very sharp elbows, and she employed them to great effect until she could reach her former apprentice and pull him away from his ginger-haired friend. "The chaps from the Starfighter Corps are here, and they can't stay long. Come say hello."

"Did they tell you they were going to do that?" Garen pointed back at Obi-Wan and the others as his master whisked him away.

"Did they tell me they were going to do what?" Clee said, innocently.

"You knew," Garen gaped at her in utter betrayal.

"Knew what? Come on now, and wipe your mouth. You've got syrup all over your face."

Obi-Wan gave Master Rhara a small salute, and she winked back. Bant and Reeft returned the trays of cakes to the refreshments table. That is to say, Bant took both trays, and Reeft trailed after her, stealing nearly half of them for himself.

"You are just as horrible as I knew you would be," Qui-Gon emerged from the throng and went to stand beside his padawan. "Well done."

"I take my cues from the very best," Obi-Wan bowed, and ignored the surly look he got in return.

"Ach, he'll survive." Feemor came up beside the two, watching as Aola trailed off behind Garen and Master Rhara to give her congratulations. Feemor waited a polite moment before saying, "Obi-Wan, a word, please?"

"Hmm?" Obi-Wan looked up, and caught Feemor's meaningful look. "Oh, yes, of course," He said, face growing serious. The two former apprentices stepped away together. Qui-Gon cast them a curious look, but Obi-Wan only shook his head.

Once they were away from the crowd, Feemor said, "So, this committee thing. I'll do it."

Obi-Wan was ecstatic. "Will you really?"

"Yes, Aola has agreed as well. I can't say I know what you're getting us into, but…" He gave a small smile, "I think I'd like to see where you take this project."

"Thank you, Feemor, really. I think we can get a lot done, here."

"Spoken like a true politician, lad," he laughed. He watched the festivities across the veranda,
casting a special eye on Aola, who'd filled out into a beautiful young woman with a brilliant smile and a mind to match. Mingling with the other Jedi, she no longer looked lacking without a master by her side. "I suppose it's only a matter of time before you'll be playing congratulatory tricks on her," Feemor said, wistfully. Obi-Wan looked over at him.

"You think so?"

Feemor's eyes were steady on his apprentice. "Aye. Sooner than I'd like." He smiled. "Qui-Gon said the same about you before you graduated, you know. He's a softie, at heart." Obi-Wan hadn't known. He was touched, but he wouldn't say so.

"Of course he is."

"Knowing when to let go is difficult. But Aola needs to prepare for her trials. Knighthood is hard, and she finds our missions too easy. But politics? If this assignment is as long as I sense it might be…" he gave a tiny smile. "Well, what greater challenge for a zoologist than a pit full of politicians?"

"I think she'll be right at home," Obi-Wan said. Feemor laughed.

"So she might." He gave the younger man a slap on the back. "Now, where are these beebleberry starfighters I've heard such noise about? They sound delicious."

"You'd better hurry, Reeft was smuggling them out under his robes, I think."

"Force, I'd best be off, then."

Obi-Wan laughed, and watched Feemor make a beeline for the refreshments table.

"I assume," came a deep voice from behind, "Master Gard is agreeing to join you in the assignment detailed in the memo I received from Chancellor Valorum this morning."

Obi-Wan whirled around to find Mace Windu giving him a stern look. "Memo?" Obi-Wan said.

"Yes, apparently the Chancellor assumed that you had, per protocol, informed your superiors of your new assignment as soon as you received his mandate." A pregnant pause. "He wants to know if you're going to, how did he put it… 'get on with it'. Valorum is not a patient man when it comes to committees or their members, Knight Kenobi."

"Ah," said Obi-Wan, shuffling. "I'm very sorry, Master Windu. I… I was trying to figure out how best to handle the responsibility, and I thought that if I went before the Council without a solid plan, I would—"

"Calm down, Obi-Wan. I would've done the same." He came to stand by the knight where he could watch the throng and its distant buzz. "But if that little nip can startle you, you're going to need to brush up on your rebuttals before you go to the Senate. They're like vipers there, and once you fill a committee seat, they're not going to play nice because you carry a lightsaber." He glanced sidelong at the knight. "It's time to put that silver tongue of yours to use."

Obi-Wan clenched his jaw. I know, I know, he thought. But of course, he didn't. It was like trials - you didn't really know what you were doing until you'd done it. And sometimes even then it was a close thing. He blinked his blind eye.

"Feemor was a good choice," Mace said, calmly. "Though I'm not sure how his padawan will play into this, except to annoy Valorum." He glanced at Obi-Wan again, and this time, the knight
withstood the urge to look contrite. "Better," the master complimented his effort, "but be careful who you spite. Politicians have long memories, and you will need some friends in this committee if you want to get anything done."

"Yes, Master," Obi-Wan said humbly. He felt like a padawan again, in over his head and drinking up all the advice he could even though he had no idea what to do with it.

"Feemor can help you in that regard. He's probably the most likable man in the Order - how he ended up in your lineage, I haven't the slightest idea." Obi-Wan frowned at that. "Speaking of which..." Mace trailed off. Obi-Wan followed his gaze, and saw Yan Dooku towering amid the crowd, speaking with Master Rhara. Ben Kenobi was mingling not far off. They were not looking at each other, but were slowly, steadily drifting closer together. At last, Dooku noticed Ben, and began talking to him. They spoke for a matter of seconds before Ben shrugged off the company with an anxious air and marched out of the crowd toward the door.

Mace sighed. "He needs to stop," he grumbled.

"Stop what?" Obi-Wan asked.

Mace went to say something, but paused. "It's nothing," he said, and stepped back to rejoin the crowd, leaving Obi-Wan alone.

"Mm, nothing, he says." Obi-Wan looked down to find Master Yoda enjoying a handful of muja and beebleberry starships. "Teach my padawan deceit, I did not. His own invention it is."

Obi-Wan had to smile at the ancient master's peevishness. "I'm sure, grandmaster."

"Believe me, you do not. Believe you, your friend should not have, when told him there was one muja among the beebleberry, you did." He ate the last of his snacks, and licked the syrupy remains off his claws. "Believe in the Force, you must." He fixed Obi-Wan with a perceptive gaze. "Know why your elder broods, do you?"

Obi-Wan watched the doorway where Ben had disappeared, and a melancholic certainty fell over him. He hesitated. He always hesitated to give voice to his visions. "I might," he said.

"Might," Yoda harumphed again, and began hobbling back toward the party. "A strange word, this is. A knight you are. Your own access code, you have. Begone with you now, and be of some help to him, you might."

Obi-Wan cast a look back at Garen, where the man laughed and chatted with well-wishers and friends. Then, he turned and left down the turbolift.

After he was gone: "Do you think that is wise?" asked Mace Windu, lurking nearby. Yoda did not need to look up at his old pupil; he'd sensed his presence minutes in advance. "Need a master the boy does. Pressuring me to allow Dooku to train him, Master Ulo is. Powerful he is. Without training, dangerous he may become - to himself and others."

Mace glanced between Yoda and the doorway. "And you really think Ben is the answer?" he said.

"Give an answer the Force will," Yoda said cryptically. "Chooses a path for its children it does, even if choose it for themselves they do not." He nodded to himself and some unseen audience while watching the door. Then, he turned back to Mace, as if surprised to see the younger councilor still standing there. "Brood, you still do?" He swung his gimer stick and smacked the Master of the Order on his shins. "Come. More snacks there are. A good baker, Reeft is. Take advantage, we must."
The galaxy was a bustling, restless organism, evolving day after day to the beat of milliseconds and centuries. However, since Obi-Wan was a young man, Basement Level 459 of the Jedi Temple had plowed through the years in its own temporal bubble.

"It's been awhile since I've been down here," Obi-Wan said aloud, voice echoing off the distant stone walls like a shot in the dark. He looked up, head tilted to the right so he could see. "It's comforting to know it hasn't really changed." And that was the real point of this place, wasn't it? The Force was strong and close down here, untouched by the worries and woes of daily life.

Obi-Wan continued to admire the stonework in silence. Illuminated by a small portable lamp, Ben was sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of the great fissure in the middle of the room. It was likely the only thing that had changed down here in centuries; the crack in time and space that had brought Obi-Wan Kenobi back in time to become Ben Kenobi. That had been eleven years ago. Ben was looking at the formation with a far-off expression, ignoring his younger self entirely. Obi-Wan sighed quietly to himself and made his way over.

"You're brooding."

Ben did not roll his eyes, but Obi-Wan knew he wanted to. There was a tension in the air that only ever appeared between the two of them. They were, after all, the same person. But they weren't. When other people fought with themselves, it was rarely so literal.

Obi-Wan sat cross-legged down on the floor next to his older self. "This is about Anakin, isn't it."

"Does everyone know about Dooku, then?"

"Not everyone. I only heard about it from Anakin himself." When Ben's face began to form a puzzled expression, Obi-Wan said, "I ran into him in the commissary the night before last."

"Ah." The master was quiet once more. Obi-Wan watched him sidelong.

"Qui-Gon thinks you should train him." Ben took in a thin, irritated breath. "Master Dooku of course thinks he should train him. Master Windu seems to think you need to get over yourself, and Master Yoda thinks you need my help, for some reason." Obi-Wan gave the older man an apologetic look. "He's the one who sent me down here."

Ben sighed. They sat in the quiet for a moment before Ben started talking. "Mace thinks I'm touched in the head."

"And are you?"

Ben gave him a look. "Wouldn't you be?"

Obi-Wan would've laughed, but found that he couldn't. "Have you considered talking to a mind healer?" he asked. Obi-Wan had accrued significantly more experience with mind healers after his encounters with the Sith and subsequent blindness, and though he abhorred all things medical, he owed significant progress to the mind healers under Vokara Che's command.

"I have. You know that. But I can't tell them everything. And anyway, I have it under control. It's just… sometimes it comes back." He shrugged. "There are just some things that I find impossible to forget."

Obi-Wan could not say anything to that, so he didn't try. "And Anakin brings it all back."
"From a certain point of view, yes."

"Which is why you don't want to train him."

"It's far more complicated than that."

"Qui-Gon thinks that." Obi-Wan began again, but Ben interrupted him.

"Qui-Gon thinks anyone but Dooku should train him," the master snapped. "He even said that he'd train the boy himself, if it meant Dooku stayed out of the picture."

Obi-Wan's eyebrows rose. He hadn't known that. But it did sound like something Qui-Gon would do. "Anyone but Dooku or me, you mean." Ben's head snapped up in surprise, and the two Kenobis locked eyes. "But you think I should train him."

It was rare for anyone to take Ben truly off guard, but Obi-Wan had managed it. "Why would you say that?" His tone was one of curiosity, not defense.

"Because that's how it happened last time," Obi-Wan said. "Isn't it?"

Ben looked at him, mouth slowly falling open. "How did you…?"

"Remember after Kamino? When I'd seen what happened to Qui-Gon last time, with Maul? It was like that. Like a vision, but a memory." He spared a glance at the upturned granite that had hardly aged a day since he and Master Windu had journeyed down here and found Ben's lightsaber. "It was a few nights ago. After I spoke with Anakin, actually."

"What did you see?" Ben asked, dreading the response.

"Not much. Bits and pieces. He was my - your apprentice. I was a very young master, and…"

"And?"

"And you were very close." Obi-Wan glanced at Ben again. "And for some reason, you can't stand to think about it."

There was a long pause. "I did suggest to Qui-Gon that perhaps you would be the best option for Anakin's training," Ben admitted. "It seemed… right to me."

The idea made Obi-Wan uncomfortable. In his vision, he'd seen himself training a young Anakin Skywalker, who had been of a much more difficult disposition than the boy he knew. He'd just lost his master, his hair still not grown over from his knighting, and he'd had an apprentice. He couldn't even imagine taking on an apprentice now. He may have been a knight for four years, but he'd only just learned how to function on his own, to say nothing of a padawan. At length, he said, "Anakin said something curious to me when we spoke. We were talking about a classmate of his who is set for one of the Corps, and is not too happy about."

"Ah." Ben's immediate distaste was somehow comforting. It was nice not having to explain the story.

"We were talking about the Force's will for our lives, and how to know it when we see it. He seemed to get the idea fairly quickly, describing it as 'something that feels right, like it's always been that way.'"

Ben was smiling fondly. "He's a bright boy."
"And he may have a deeper point than he knows," Obi-Wan said. "There may be some things that have been before that are meant to be again."

Ben glanced sharply at him. "You're saying you think you should train him?"

"I was talking about you," Obi-Wan explained. Ben looked away, closed off once more. "You were his master before, and the stars themselves can see how much the boy means to you. Why is it that as soon as he needs a teacher, you run to the hills?"

"There are some things that have been that should never be again," Ben snapped angrily. "Why else would I be here?"

"Why else would you be here?" Obi-Wan quipped. "History does not repeat itself, but it does rhyme, you've said so yourself. So why are you suddenly shutting yourself off to the possibility that the Force might want to use you in this way again?"

"Because it went wrong," Ben burst, loudly enough to ring an echo off the vast hall. "Because my failure with Anakin Skywalker is why it all went wrong. Because it was my damn fault, all of it."

He ran a hand through his hair. "I'm not sure if this life is a second chance or a penance."

"If it's redemption you're looking for," Obi-Wan said, "this is it."

Ben rubbed his face. "You don't understand."

"No," Obi-Wan said plainly, "I don't. I probably never will. But... Force damnit, Ben, stop looking at the past for two damned seconds and maybe you'll find that today lighter than you expected."

"You sound like Qui-Gon."

"He's a wise man," Obi-Wan shot back. "Maybe you should listen to him. You won't listen to me, that's for sure." The knight stood and straightened his tunics. His bootheels clicked a sharp rhythm against the stone floor as he went to the door. The tempo slowed and dust ground beneath his boots as he turned to say, "He's a ten year-old boy who needs guidance, and you know him better than anyone alive, probably better than he knows himself."

"He let that hang in the air. "I'm not sure if this life is a second chance or a penance."

"He needs help. He needs control - or to be contained," Master Ulo had confided in the Council. She was usually not an advocate of such measures, but Anakin was, as he had always been, an exception to all kinds of rules. "The Force is strong with him, and he does not mean any harm. But
he taps so deeply into such power… he's just a child. I worry for him."

That confrontation had lit the fuse. Next, Yan Dooku caught wind of the whispers, as he always did, and went to Yoda himself in an indignant rage, demanding to know why he'd been denied when Anakin so clearly needed a master.

Then there was Ben, still so confused and paralyzed it was all he could do to meditate, or try to, while the drama unfolded. Neither Qui-Gon nor Mace could coax him to see that he was running out of time.

Qui-Gon was millimeters away from requesting Anakin himself, held off only by Mace's warnings - but everyone knew how often Qui-Gon Jinn heeded those. When Dooku found out his former apprentice was attempting to undermine him, all the resentment they'd harbored for each other came out in a massive row.

Mace was attempting to hold the two at arms' length while trying to drag Ben back into the discussion, where he belonged. His own opinion on the matter fell by the wayside while the other Jedi fought.

After weeks of putting off all the appeals, belligerents, and peacekeepers, something in Ben snapped. Some angry spark found his fuse, and that fuse hit a soft spot named Skywalker.

And that is when it became a real argument.

They were all packed into the Jinn/Kenobi apartments in the middle of the afternoon, yelling at each other. Not actually yelling, as even a Jedi in anger knows not to raise their voice, but absolutely boiling in the Force, broadcasting ear-splitting frequencies of tumult to everyone within a half mile radius.

Obi-Wan Kenobi had been putting up with it for days. He'd heard his name spoken more than a few times in their heated discussions, usually by Ben, but he knew better than to take the bait. He hid in his room or left the apartment. They were masters; the could damn well sort out their differences on their own.

But this isn't about differences, a small voice reminded him as he stormed down the hallways, attempting to clear his mind, this is about the future of the galaxy. It had to be, hadn't it? Or else, Ben wouldn't be like this. The man was absolutely catatonic. Nothing hit his nerves like this, not even the Sith. Obi-Wan had been thinking about his conversation with Ben a lot over the past few weeks. Surely he wasn't mean to train Anakin, was he? He brushed against the Force's insightful depths as he had this thought. It was a habit he'd made whenever he thought of Anakin. As always, no clear answer surfaced.

He could offer to train him, he supposed.

Or he could not.

But what should he do?

As long as he could remember, Obi-Wan had relied on the Force for everything, and in return, the Force favored him with visions. They didn't always feel like rewards, but they'd seldom led him astray in times of need. He hadn't had any visions for weeks, let alone any about Anakin. He had dreamt several times about their conversation in the commissary.

"Like it was right, like it had always been that way."
"Yes, exactly like that. How did you know?"

Obi-Wan slowed to a stop in the middle of a hallway. Several padawans had to dodge to avoid hitting him, and cast back curious looks after they passed him.

Could the answer really be that obvious?

There was no vision, or grand revelation, but something on Obi-Wan's internal horizon sparkled, and compelled him to make a detour. He jogged toward the nearest turbolift and, after a brief hesitation, selected his floor.

Anakin tried not to move. He wasn't good at it - at all - but he'd convinced himself that if he didn't move, he wouldn't do anything stupid, and if he didn't do anything stupid, no one and no thing would get hurt. He and the rest of his agemates were in the Room of a Thousand Fountains, and were supposed to be meditating. Anakin had dutifully moved himself some ways away from the others. Occasionally, he could see Master Ulo crane her neck to look at him from afar, expression sympathetic.

He'd had everything under control until he'd started thinking about Aren's plight, and the Force's will for his own life. Then everything had gotten out of hand. Now, whenever he tried meditating too hard or too deeply, things went haywire. The Force wasn't supposed to burn its own, that Anakin knew for certain. So why did he have to tip-toe across its shores like a man across a minefield? Was there something wrong with him? Had he done something wrong? Was it possible for the Force to be angry?

"Anakin?" The voice of his dorm master made him jump. He turned to look up at Master Ulo, who gave him a small smile. "Someone here to see you," she said. He turned further around to see his visitor.

"Obi-Wan?" He was confused to see the young knight in the middle of his lesson.

"Master Kenobi wants to speak with you about your training," Master Ulo said. Something in her tone of voice confused him further, and he frowned.

"Okay," he said uncertainly. He stood and brushed off his trousers.

"Would you like to walk with me, Anakin?" asked Obi-Wan, in a far more formal tone than Anakin was used to hearing from him. He shrugged.

"Sure."

The two walked off together side by side, talking quietly amid the burble of fountains and the cool breeze. Master Ulo watched them go with motherly interest. She couldn't hear what was being said.

"Please," she whispered, to the Galaxy or the Force or both, "please take care of him. Put him where he'll be safe."

Chapter End Notes

2019 note:

Just wanted to say that in the years since I wrote this chapter, I’ve spontaneously
acquired an anaphylaxis-level allergy. When writing the scene with Garen’s party and the prank, I didn’t really understand how scary reactions can be, even if you have an epi on hand but especially if you don’t. I just wanted to apologize to any allergic readers who thought the scene trivialized a serious medical emergency. It was not my intent, and I didn’t fully understand at the time. I do now.

I’m not going to go back and rewrite what’s been written, but for what it’s worth, I’m sorry, Garen! It wasn’t funny!
The door slid open. The figure entered. The door closed. In the dark, Ben shuffled to his couch and collapsed into it, folding over and rubbing his face with his hands. He inhaled, and exhaled so deeply that his whole body seemed to wilt. Jedi were peacekeepers. They were trained to deal with conflict in war and in peace, but not from within their own ranks. Not like this. He grabbed a pillow and pushed it into the crease between the arm and the seat. He leaned into it, joints groaning in protest.

In some childish sector of his brain, he blamed the Force. It was the Force's fault for not telling any of them anything. Surely a decision of this gravity merited something. Some sign, some small indication. A fleeting vision. One of Qui-Gon's gut feelings. Perhaps a simple, diplomatic answer wrapped up in a Council-approved bow and delivered happily to all parties within the week. For the first time since Ben had arrived in this iteration of the universe, the Force was absent. The tea leaves of the cosmos swirled onward, but he could no longer see where they were headed.

Ben stared at the wall, listless. He knew he would hate himself tomorrow if he fell asleep here, but his muscles refused to listen his logic. He did not want to move, so he didn't. Perhaps there had been a sign, he thought, and he'd missed it because he'd been moping. It wouldn't be the first time. He cast his mind back, searching for some loose thread, but all he found was his own desperate, blind hope that he hadn't been too late.

There was a knock at the door.

His muscles would not yield to personal comfort, but social custom was a different matter altogether. He stood from the couch, turned on the lights, went to the door, and opened it.

"Obi-Wan," he said, upon seeing the young man standing outside. "What are you doing here?"

"Doing what you should've done ages ago - you, or Dooku, or Qui-Gon," the knight paused, and added snidely, "or anyone, really." Ben spotted the dark circles under Obi-Wan's eyes and felt guilty. He'd sensed, at least peripherally, that their constant arguing had been testing Obi-Wan's patience for a while, but wrapped up in his own preoccupations, he hadn't cared. "Anyway," the younger man continued in a milder voice, "under the circumstances, I thought we ought to go to you first."

"Under the circumstances?" Ben asked, frowning. His ears registered another anomaly in what he'd just heard. "We?"

Obi-Wan looked down and leaned slightly to one side, so Ben could see the timid figure of Anakin Skywalker hiding behind Obi-Wan voluminous robe.
"Master Ulo doesn't know I've snuck him out," Obi-Wan said. If anyone sees him here, I'm sure to be in for an earful. Can we come in?"

Ben was too surprised to say anything at first. Three seconds passed, and as Ben stared down into Anakin's eyes, he could almost feel the brush of… something. "Yes," he said, stepping back and making room for the visitors. "Please, come in." They did.

"I've been down to speak with Master Ulo about Anakin's training, to discuss his need for a master." Obi-Wan said, standing behind Anakin and resting his hands on either of the boy's shoulders. Ben's heart electrified with a pang of… alarm?

"What?" His eyes flicked at Anakin, and back up at Obi-Wan. "You've asked to train him?" he said.

Anakin looked somewhat surprised, and looked up in an attempt to see Obi-Wan's reaction, but the older Jedi's face was devoid of emotion. "Because no one else did," Obi-Wan said, and for a moment Ben did not breathe, "I asked Anakin what he thinks about all of this." It almost sounded like an accusation.

Ben blinked several times, trying to comprehend, and looked down at Anakin. "Oh," he said.

"Indeed," Obi-Wan shot back, accusation more apparent this time.

"And..." Ben rubbed at his brow, and sat down, where he and Anakin could look eye-to-eye. "And what do you think, Anakin?"

Anakin, unusually silent and shy, looked back up at Obi-Wan for help. The knight gave him an encouraging look, but remained silent.

"Well," said the initiate, fingers fiddling with the hem of his sleeves. When he spoke, it tumbled out in a nervous litany, the kind that only children can manage. "I guess I hadn't thought about who would train me until Master Dooku offered. And then Aren was angry with me, and then I spoke to Pel, and then we were talking about the will of the Force, and then he said that sometimes you know things are right because they feel like they've always been that way." Ben looked up to meet eyes with his younger self, who was watching him quietly. He looked back at Anakin. "And then I started thinking about what the Force's will for my life was, because I'd never thought too hard about that, and I thought if I could find something that had never actually been, but felt like it had always been that way, that might be something important."

"And did you?" asked Ben.

"Well... yeah," Anakin shuffled his weight from side to side. "I meditated about it. But then everything started to go wrong, and bad things happen whenever I try to think about it, and now Master Ulo says I need a master now, and everyone is arguing..." he trailed off in a murmur. He recovered his voice to say, "And I wasn't sure if what I had seen was right after all, like... if there was something... something wrong with me, cause the Force..." he trailed off again. "But Obi-Wan helped me to meditate, and he says he thinks I saw it right the first time."

"Saw what right?"

"Who will train me," he said.

"And who is that?" asked Ben.

Anakin looked uncomfortable. "Well," he said, looking at the carpet, the table, the window, the wall. "I thought... I mean..." he looked back up at Ben, every inch of his face apologizing for
what he was about to say. He wrung his own fingers. "I thought it would be you," he said, shoulders scrunched up in self-consciousness. "It's... it's like it's always been that way." He met Ben's eyes, expression searching. "Right?" he tacked on uncertainly, but the master had already stopped breathing.

Obi-Wan was watching Ben's tortured expression with a sad, incomplete knowledge. Somewhere in Ben's apartment, a chrono chimed the hour. The sound of evening traffic roared dully through the window. "I'll give you two a moment," Obi-Wan broke the silence. He gave Anakin a encouraging squeeze on the shoulders, a smile, and a soft word, and let himself out of the room. Anakin stood alone in front of Ben Kenobi, feeling more awkward than he had in his whole life - awkward, but unafraid.

"Me," said Ben.

Anakin nodded.

Ben blinked rapidly. He played and replayed what Anakin had said over again in his mind. "You said you saw who would train you. If you saw me, why did you doubt?"

"Well, I didn't see you," Anakin said, unused to talking about his visions, which were always vague. "I mean, I did, but... it was different."

"What did you see?"

"A galaxy," Anakin said. "And... and I dunno, it was like..." old memories swirled in his subconscious, misty recollections undefined by language, of a time when he'd looked upon a man and seen a universe of starlight. "You were there. But not. And it was weird because I'd seen it before, lots of times, but didn't realize I could not see it. But when I meditated on training with Master Dooku, it went all wrong. Cause I stopped seeing it. And I can't... I have to see it. It's just... it has to be there." His brow wrinkled in frustrated willpower. "I'm not making any sense."

"No, no," Ben put out a stilling hand. "It's alright." He paused for a long time, trying to hear his thoughts over his heart. Eventually, he waved his hand, gesturing for Anakin to come closer. The boy did, standing by Ben's knee. The master felt every grey follicle clinging to his temples as he looked at the boy. The Anakin he'd known so many years ago had always struggled with meditation, let alone the idea of visions. He'd screwed his eyes shut and shaken his head just to think of them. This Anakin had his eyes wide open.

"What kind of galaxy did you see?" Ben asked him quietly. Anakin grinned.

"A really big one," he said, which made Ben laugh.

"And I was there?"

"Yeah. But you were more..." he hesitated.

"More what?"

Anakin wrestled with his vocabulary, and came up short. "More," he said again, and shrugged.

"And you?"

"I was just me," Anakin bobbed his shoulders again. "But when I looked, I was already there with you. Like..."
"Like you'd always been there," Ben nodded.

"Yeah."

The two fell silent for a while. The chrono made pensive beeping noises as its nighttime illuminator turned on. Somewhere outside, a police speeder turned on its sirens. Eventually, Ben took in a deep breath and said, "Anakin, you should know I'm an old man. Much older than I look."

"Yeah," Anakin said, in a quick tone that, had his heart not been rending apart, Ben would have found deeply insulting.

"I've never trained anyone before," he said, "not properly."

"Okay."

Ben stared at the boy, waiting for - almost wanting - something to throw them off course again. He wasn't sure how his heart would handle regaining what it'd lost. "Are you sure?" he asked, silently begging the Force for both possible answers at once.

"Yeah," said Anakin easily. "I think the Force is too." Only a Jedi so young could understand the mysteries of the universe with such clarity. It put him to shame. He closed his eyes for the briefest of moments and realized with some surprise that he could feel the Force again. Peace, it said. He looked back up at Anakin, his small smile masking a heart fit to burst.

"Well then," he said, "I suppose I had better speak with Master Windu."

Anakin's smile could have lit up space. Old friendship overruled all thoughts of propriety, and he launched himself at Ben to deliver a massive hug. Ben let out a noise that had probably started life as a chuckle, but now lodged a lump in his throat. He returned the embrace gently.

"Obi-Wan said I was right," Anakin smiled, pulling away.

"Did he?"

"Yeah. He also said if you disagreed, he'd stick around to talk to you after." Anakin said, and then paused, face advertising his realization that this information had been entrusted to him in confidence. His eyes flicked back to Ben. "He's probably waiting outside."

"Well then," Ben said coughing to clear the constricting emotion in his throat, "why don't you go and tell him that there is no need."

"Okay." Anakin bounded to the door, opened it, and stepped out. Ben could hear quiet talking in the hall. Obi-Wan appeared in the doorway shortly after.

"That was faster than I'd expected," he said.

Ben looked up at him, exhausted. "Well," he shrugged, "the Force works in mysterious ways." Anakin was still beaming, and Ben graced him with another smile.

Obi-Wan could see the widening cracks in Ben's composure. "It's getting late," the knight said, and looked down at his companion. "I need to get you back to Master Ulo before both of us get in trouble," he said.

"I'm sure she won't mind," Anakin bluffed, too excited to think about evening meditations and sleep.
"Come on," Obi-Wan insisted, putting a hand on the initiate's shoulder and gently pulling him away. "It's my neck at risk, too." Then, to Ben, he said, "I'm sure Master Windu will be happy to hear about this tomorrow." Ben looked unconvinced, but nodded.

"Yes," he said quietly, having to speak roughly around emotions once more, "I'm sure." The cracks where chasms, now, fit to shatter at any moment. Obi-Wan glanced down at Anakin, who could not sense the avalanche of fatigue and memory that creaked behind Ben's neutral expression.

"Go and call the lift, Anakin," Obi-Wan nudged, "I'll be right behind you."

"If Master Ben trains me," Anakin thought aloud, ignoring the subtle social cues thundering around him, "does that mean I'm like your… cousin?" He asked Obi-Wan, tufts of blond hair falling back as he tilted his head up at the man.

"Go on," Obi-Wan chuckled, pushing him more firmly out of the doorway. Anakin sighed and did as he was told.

"Goodnight Master Ben," he said as he left. Ben could not open his throat to answer. As small footsteps padded down the hall, Obi-Wan lingered at the door.

"For the record, I think he's right."

"Do you?" Ben said, not able to maintain eye contact. He blinked and willed the fog in his eyes not to fall down his face.

"Yes. I wasn't entirely sure when he told me, but…” Obi-Wan glanced to his right, where Anakin was bounding down the corridor. "You know, it's been a long time since I've meditated with anyone. Qui-Gon, Yoda, Dooku, you." Obi-Wan paused, and shook his head slowly. "I've never met anyone who can reach as far as he can," he said, and looked back at Ben. "He's very special, though he doesn't know it."

And that shining gem of ignorance was a victory in itself. "He will," Ben said, "when he's ready." The idea that Anakin would get that chance and the realization that he'd be there at Ben's side broke something inside of him, some hope he'd barely entertained even as a young man. He nodded silently, bringing a shaking hand up to his face.

Obi-Wan remained by the door, watching his counterpart in concern and sadness. "Will you be alright?" he asked.

Ben's jaw was shivering. So was his hand, and his chest. He wasn't sure why. He swallowed, and it felt like tar. "Yeah," was all he could get out. Obi-Wan watched him a moment more, but he knew himself well enough to look away in short order. When it came to things like this, privacy was the Kenobi way.

"Force be with you, Ben. Sleep well." The door slid shut.

Ben let out a trembling breath and sank his face into his hands. The Force welled up like water after rain, and he felt, like he had not felt in nearly a decade, that this life was a second chance after all. It terrified him, and he wiped away tears of joy. He tried to meditate, but fell asleep on the couch, too tired to move. When he woke, he would be sore in a dozen places, but through the night, he slept in peace.

"And that's it," said Mace, "just like that?"
Ben looked uncomfortable. Sitting in the crumpled couch where he'd slept the night before, he scratched at his beard. "Yes," he said mildly, not looking at his friend, "I suppose so."

Mace's look of incredulity didn't get much mileage except on the Kenobis. Unfortunately, the intensity of his stare didn't garner any response from Ben, who was pouring himself a second cup of tea. Mace considered his own cup, which had been expertly and thoughtfully brewed by Ben. The man's clothing was disheveled and his posture stiff, but his hands were steady, his eyes sharp and clear. The teapot didn't so much as drip as Ben pulled it back and set it just so on its tray. "You know," Mace said, "when Obi-Wan told me to check in with you, I was convinced it would be because you'd finally cracked." At this, Ben finally raised his head to look offended. "I was right," Mace continued, face deadpan, "you've just cracked in the complete opposite direction from what I was expecting."

"So you were half right," Ben said, attempting to keep the withered sprout of his pride intact. He sipped at his tea carefully.

"What made you change your mind?" Mace asked.

"The Force."

"The Force, or Anakin Skywalker?"

"Both."

The two men waged a brief staring contest. There was no victor. In unison, they drank. "The Force speaks through all of us," Mace said pensively, setting his tea bowl in his palm where he could enjoy its warmth on his hands, "why now? Why just you?"

"Not just me. Just Anakin, it would seem. We should have spoken to him weeks ago." He paused, and added with some humility, "Obi-Wan deserves more credit than I, in that regard. Our arguing drove him to desperate measures."

"To the creche, you mean?"

Ben snorted softly. "Precisely."

The mid-morning sun was bright in Ben's east-windowed apartment, casting brilliant light and shadow against his collection of plants. A fractal, round-leaved specimen caught Mace's eye.

"Is this new?" He brushed the pointed tips of the blue-green leaves.

"A bit. I got it about a month ago."

"I should've thought you've been a bit busy for new charges."

"No, it's very low maintenance. A Jedhan desert flower, a relative of various cactii. I used to have a whole garden of them. As long as they get enough sun, you can more or less leave them alone."

"A small child will be a bit more work," Mace said pointedly. Ben sighed.

"I know what I'm doing, Mace."

"Do you?" The Master of the Order set down his tea with a sharp clink. "Because last time I checked, you could hardly function any time I so much as mentioned Anakin Skywalker. What has changed?"
"Everything," Ben said, and then frowned, "or nothing. I spoke to him, Mace, and he… he was so certain about it all."

"He's ten," Mace reminded.

"He's Anakin." The words 'Chosen One' were not something Ben would ever catch himself saying out loud, but their imprint hung in the air between them like an echo. "You know how powerful he is, you know how close he is to the Force."

"Yes, I've had to sign off on a dozen invoices to repair the damage he's caused over the past month. Aloova Cho's finally got her stitches out, by the way," Mace said, and Ben winced to remember Anakin's poor classmate.

"It wasn't his fault."

"He lacks control."

"That doesn't mean what he sees is not true - if anything, it means it comes straight from the Force itself," Ben was raising his voice.

"Peace, Ben," Mace put out a hand. "I'm not trying to argue with you. I just… a rare look of concern passed over his face. "Are you sure you want to do this? After last time?"

Ben seemed to consider this seriously. When he spoke, it was quieter than before, tone laced with the inflections of a man who'd seen farther and thought deeper than most. "He's changed. I've changed. I'd lost sight of that. I was so shocked to hear Dooku had requested him, I locked myself in my own head, and I forgot what was right in front of me. Or weren't you telling me to remember he's just a boy?"

"I tried to break your ribs," Mace said dryly. "You must be thinking of someone else."

"The point still stands," Ben said. "He needs a master, and seems to think that I'm the one for the job. Said it's like it's always been that way." Ben couldn't hide his small, bittersweet smile. "And in ways he'll never understand, it has been that way before, if not always. I do want to do this, Mace. I'm terrified of it, but I have to, and I want to."

"Are you sure?"

"Completely."

Mace looked into Ben's eyes for several long seconds, seeking out any hint of uncertainty, any sliver of doubt. Eventually, he sighed, drank the remainder of his tea, and set down the cup on the tea tray. "The Council will want to interview both of you separately before we approve it, of course."

"Of course."

"I plan on informing them of your… connection to Anakin beforehand."

Ben gave him a sharp look. "The whole story?"

"No. But half of them think you've lost your mind, so knowing your history with the boy may give some explanation. Trust me, it'll be better for everyone."

Ben pursed his lips. "Fine."
"Good. Expect a summons within the week, then." Mace stood and brushed his breeches straight. "Force be with you, Ben," he said, and made his way to the door.

"I appreciate your concern, Mace," Ben said as the Korun passed by, "and honestly, I would be insulted if you weren't skeptical. But... as lost as I've felt these past days, I do have faith that this is the right decision."

Mace nodded, but said nothing. He looked down for a moment, pensive, before he said, "I won't make any announcements for you, but I will advise you to break the news to Dooku first."

Ben's brow fell, compelling his face into a frown of sudden realization. "Ah," he said. Mace gave an amused chuckle.

"I don't envy you," he opened the door and stepped out. "It won't be an easy meeting." The door hissed shut.

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It wasn't an easy meeting.

It had been, for a little while. It'd been easy to invite Dooku over for lunch and a friendly game of chess. It'd been easy to select a vintage of Sorennoan wine that he knew would suit Dooku's palette. It had been easy to talk with his grandmaster in the casual, precise tones of two master diplomats. Once the bottle was half empty, it had even been easy to open his mouth and utter the words, "Anakin Skywalker has asked me to train him, and I agreed."

The not-easy bit had come afterwards. Alcohol did not affect Jedi as strongly as it did normal people. Ben wished it did, because suffering under the weight of Yan Dooku's stare would have been more bearable if he'd been tipsy.

"When?" Dooku asked at length.

"Yesterday evening."

The silence would've also been improved with stronger alcohol. Ben kicked himself for choosing wine instead of whiskey. On the chair opposite him, Dooku uncrossed his legs and leaned forward to move a rook. Satisfied, he leaned back and re-crossed his legs with ineffable poise. "Has the council approved it?"

"No, not yet." Ben was grateful for the distraction of the chess board. He considered it, and sacrificed a pawn to the line of Dooku's bishop.

"But I suppose they will. No more of this 'too young' nonsense." Dooku took the martyred pawn, but used a surreptitious knight rather than the baited bishop. Ben berated himself for missing it, and picked at his beard.

"Frankly, I don't know," he said. "Mace Windu says I'll have to appear before the Council." Ben castled his king in defense from the bishop.

"An appearance?" Dooku's eyebrows lifted conversationally even as his eyes remained glued to the board. "You have risen far already. I can't recall a master being rejected after receiving a meeting."

"They intend to interview me to make sure I'm not mad, I think," Ben said. Dooku finally looked up at him.

"You don't strike me as the unstable type, Master Kenobi." He glanced back down at his knight.
Ben opened his mouth for a quip, and then sighed. Sometimes, even with Dooku, blunt honesty was best. Quick, like a bandage. "I trained Anakin Skywalker last time around," he said. "It did not end well."

Dooku's body did not move, but his eyes flicked back up to peer at Ben in genuine surprise. "Did you?"

"Yes."

"You were…" the man frowned. "Obi-Wan's awfully young," he commented.

"Yes, I was."

Dooku considered this for several long moments, and eventually abandoned his consideration of the chess board. "And this is your redemption, is that it?"

"Perhaps. I don't know. But I do believe that it is the will of the Force."

Dooku did not seem entirely convinced, but he hid it well. "That phrase gets tossed around quite a lot in this Order," he said, crossing his arms. "And not always rightly."

"So it does. But I still trust the Force, as do you. I've spoken to Anakin about it, and he is sure."

"He's a boy," Dooku reminded him, "he hardly knows what's best for him."

"But he knows the Force,"

"So do we all, and I see no great consensus on him yet,"

"You know how powerful he is," Ben cut in. "You knew it before everyone else. That's why you've stayed here, you told me years ago. If you spoke to him, you'd believe him too. It just might not be to your liking." Ben watched the older man with genuine apology in his expression. "I am deeply sorry, grandmaster."

The aristocratic lines of Dooku's face seemed to sag, but his dark eyes could have cut steel. Without words, he considered the chessboard again and, in frustration, tipped over his king. "When I told you that, years ago, I believe I asked for a duel, and you declined." He looked up at Ben. "You owe me that, at least."

The clip of his voice made Ben's mind scream Count, but his mouth only said, "When?"

"Now, if it's convenient." Dooku stood.

Ben looked up at him and saw his eyes. He recognized the lost, restless look from a mirror on Tatooine. "It would be an honor, Master," he said, and rose.

They fought in one of the more secluded senior dojos. They exchanged no words prior to the duel. They took up opposite corners, ignited their sabers, saluted, and fell in.

Ben sparred with Obi-Wan often, and had become far more proficient against Makashi as a result. But Obi-Wan's hybrid knowledge of the form was nothing compared to Dooku's mastery. Ben was able to keep up an impressive guard while Dooku delivered increasingly sharp attacks, but he was flying by on blind luck and intuition. Dooku could tell.

The Makashi master flicked his blade in a whirl of green and stepped aside to let Ben's overzealous parry carry him past an an angle. Then, he rebounded to whip at Ben's flank. Ben's saber made it
there just in time with a hairsbreadth to spare. He surprised Dooku by launching back up with a
firm Ataru attack aimed at the chest, but the surprise melted away in favor of a slanted block and
rapid-fire beat attack against Ben's blade. Ben responded by ducking under the onslaught, feinting
to Dooku's ankle, and when the inevitable block arrived, diving straight back up to the man's chin.
The blue singed against the trim edge of Dooku's beard, but Ben didn't see it. He would, however,
pay for it.

Dooku feinted left and launched a vicious fleche to Ben's side just as he was turning for the
intended parry. He fell out of the way just in time for the green lightsaber to brush his boot. Dooku
pressed him further back, and Ben fell fully onto his back and kicked Dooku's saber hand as soon
as it was within range. Dooku's hand wheeled back and he hissed in pain, which gave Ben time to
regain his feet and charge for an attack.

Few people could force Ben Kenobi onto the offensive unless he explicitly wanted to be so. Dooku
was different. His Makashi was too relentless, too fast, too tiring for Ben to wall off in his usual
Soresu style. It forced him outside of his comfort zone, and that was where it cornered him. He
thought back to his duel years ago against Grevious. Grevious, who'd been trained by Dooku
himself and had wielded four lightsabers at once. But Grevious had been little more than an
acolyte. The man who'd taught him was a master. Dooku's one saber was worth ten in Grevious's
hands. It stabbed like a bur and moved faster than a thought. Ben remembered, not for the first time
that day, that apart from Vader, Dooku had been the only Sith to have ever defeated him. The scar
on his thigh ached.

"You fight admirably, Master Kenobi," said Dooku, disguising the fact that he was heaving for
breath, "but you've been spending too much time around Qui-Gon." To emphasize his point, Dooku
flicked his weapon skyward and nearly took off Ben's left ear, which he'd preserved with a very
late Ataru guard. Ben came back around with a wide attack, and the two locked blades. Ben
pressed in close to throw Dooku's leverage off-balance.

"You forget, Master Dooku," Ben said quietly, "you have not fought me, but I have fought you."
Dooku actually smiled at that, sweat dripping down his temples. "Did you win?" he asked, and
threw Ben backwards with a carefully aimed shove.

"I learned," Ben rebounded. Their blades hissed against each other, white hot competition running
strong above the mounting fatigue.

"And now you seek to teach," Dooku said, striking high, leaning into Ben's parry, and spinning
against it to throw his opponent off-balance and add momentum to his follow-up strike.

"I seek to obey the Force," Ben retorted, feeling his back creak under the weight of Dooku's
offense. "I will continue to learn even as I teach." He rolled backwards and jumped up and over
Dooku's head, coming down in a falling leaf attack. Dooku caught it on the way down, and Ben
was shocked at the strength of his guard.

"Then let me help you in this," Dooku hissed, and lifted his blade for a devastating riposte that
nearly knocked Ben off his feet again. In desperation, the shorter man fell back into his Soresu
bubble of protection, cheating defeat at every turn. Every parry arrived with nanoseconds to spare,
every block and every guard wobbling under the weight of attack.

What Ben lacked in speed and ferocity, he regained in stamina. Dooku was beginning to grow
tired, though only a master swordsman would have been able to tell. He continued on, delivering
fleche after stinging fleche. He was able to hide his heavy breathing under the clash of lightsabers,
but the beads of sweat on his face and the slight shake in his limbs was evident every time he drew
back for another strike.

Ben waited, muscles screaming, for his moment. He could feel his arms starting to crumple under the attack. When the next hit came, he angled his blade just slightly so Dooku's saber shot off to one side. Seizing the window of opportunity, Ben circled around behind Dooku. The two turned toward each other in the exact same instant, each placing his saber millimeters away from his opponent's neck.

The stilled sabers hummed, and the Jedi heaved for breath. Ben could feel his sweaty hair sticking to his forehead. He kept his chin tipped high to avoid the hot blade at his throat. Dooku did the same. "I did not win, last time," Ben said between breaths, "but we learn from our mistakes," he said, "and the mistakes of others."

They stared at each other, sabers hovering, for a long, tense moment. Then, Dooku sighed. "So we do," he said. "Solah."

"Solah," Ben replied. It was a draw. They deactivated their sabers in unison. Ben had nearly caught his breath, but Dooku looked ten years older than before.

"You know," the tall man said, dignity wilting off his face, "I really am getting too old for this."

"Nonsense, grandmaster," Ben said, giving the elder man a smile and a firm pat on the arm. "If I do end up with Anakin Skywalker as an apprentice, I'm going to need your help." Dooku looked up at him, skeptical. "He's a more aggressive fighter than I am, and needs an instructor to match."

"If you'd been watching yourself, Master Kenobi, you'd find that you're more than qualified."

"It was a tie, Master Dooku," Ben said, stepping out of the fighting arena. "Or didn't you notice? Not even Master Windu has managed that."

This elicited a rare look of surprise. And then, rarer still, a smile. The two masters walked side by side out of the dojo.

Some rooms away, Master Drallig sat at his desk, a half-eaten bowl of noodles congealing in front of him while he watched the security monitors. A tiny holographic Ben strode toward the exit and turned to look at the slightly taller holographic Dooku. Dooku caught up, Ben smiled, and the two left the frame together. Once they were gone, Cin realized with a start he'd been staring incessantly at the screen for several very long minutes. He blinked away the effects of the severe blue light and looked around his surroundings as if for the first time. "I really must talk to him about canonizing that style," he said to no one in particular, shoving a forkful of lunch into his mouth and ignoring that it'd gone cold. Cheeks full, he shook his head at the monitor. "Absolutely unfair."

It was easier to convince Qui-Gon and the rest of his lineage.

"Oh, thank the Force," was Master Jinn's first reaction, "I was worried I'd have to do something foolish." Ben had looked at him in surprise, but before he could say anything, Feemor had added,

"Aye, and I was worried I'd have to knock sense back into both of your heads." He'd looked up at Ben. "Congratulations, little brother."

Ben had floundered under their flippant reactions. "Well," he'd said, "It's not all decided yet. I still have to go through the Council's interrogations. Master Windu promises to especially challenging."

Feemor had snorted. "Does the man know another way to be?" he'd wondered aloud. Beside him,
Aola had hid her smile and sipped at her soup. "Don't worry, Ben, it's just one interview."

It was not, in point of fact, just one interview.

"Yes," Ben told the droid manning the receptionist desk at the hall of briefing rooms at the base of the southwest spire, "I was told to report here at 0900."

"That is correct," said the protocol droid in a tirelessly chipper voice, "please proceed to room 0801, Master Kenobi."

"Thank you." The Jedi nodded to the droid, and followed the directed path down the halls. They were utterly deserted at this time of day. The Council would be holding general session right now, far above in the High Chambers. He supposed they must be holding court without Mace Windu. Who else would be conducting this interview in some back-corner briefing room?

He opened the door and stepped inside. It was a small room, furnished with two chairs, a table, and a shuttered window. The chair farthest from the door swiveled around and its occupant shot him a fond smile.

"Good morning, Master Kenobi."

"Vokara," Ben said, surprised. The Twi'lek healer grinned back.

"It's good to see you."

Ben took a seat. "And you. What's this about?"

"You've asked to take Anakin Skywalker as your apprentice - for the second time, apparently," said the healer, pulling out a flimsipad and pen. She waved her hand, and the door to the room locked with a click. She crossed her legs and propped the pad atop her knee. "I've been asked to assess you."

"For madness?" he joked.

"If you like," she smiled, writing some basic information at the top of her evaluation. "Make yourself comfortable, Ben. Master Windu says I'm not to let you out of my sight until you've well and truly convinced me."

Ben drew in a breath, and let it out in defeat. He leaned back in his chair and folded his hands in front of him. "Just like old times," he said, and let the interrogation begin.
I'm trying to stick to my outline for once, and also en-shaedn is supporting me in what she's dubbed a 'word diet'. Aka, I write too many words, and I need to learn to tell the same story in fewer words. It'll be good for me in the long run, I hope, but the immediate result is this: A chapter below 4,000 words.

Finis pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. He looked around his desk. He'd been working on something before this meeting. What had it been? He mined through the strata of flimsipads and dossiers, searching for clues. After a few minutes, a red tab waved at him and jogged his memory. No sooner had he dislodged the buried folder than did the protocol droid at his door pipe up to say, "Sir, your 4:00 is here."

Four o'clock in the afternoon? Surely it wasn't that late already. And hadn't he just had an appointment? He glanced at his chrono and sighed again. He'd known long before he was elected that the office of Supreme Chancellor would involve a lot of paperwork. No one had ever bothered to tell him he'd never have time to finish any of it. Who was his 4:00, anyway? He pulled up his calendar.

Ah.

He heaved a third and final sigh, letting it puff out his chest and hold it aloft. He stacked up his notes and paperwork and hid them carefully behind his desk. "Show him in, Essar."

"Yes, Sir." The droid opened the door. The senator stepped in and offered a vulpine smile. Finis remained seating, laughter lines repaying tit for tat.

"Senator Palpatine," the Chancellor said, making the Senator stand awkwardly a moment before he waved him toward a seat. "What is it you've come to see me about?"

They both knew he'd come here to ask about his new committee - more specifically, about the rumors currently circulating at the interns' watercooler. "Is it true you've appointed two Jedi to sit on the Committee on Galactic Commerce?"

Galactic Commerce, was that what they were calling it? A bit of a misnomer, Finis thought. "Seeing as the Jedi have a marked interest in the decisions of the Committee, yes, I have."

"But they are not from the Council of Reconciliation," said Palpatine in sweet accusation. Finis took up a small stack of flimsi and paged through its contents, working hard to look disinterested.

"The Senate keeps the Council of Reconciliation busy enough without dragging them into committee meetings - and with the time tables you've been sending me, I can't imagine they'd have time to attend at all." He tapped the flimsi on the table to even out the edges. "There are however, around seven thousand other Jedi on planet at any given time, just waiting to be useful." He set down the flimsi, looked Palpatine in the eye, and smiled. "Lucky you."

Palpatine was chewing angrily on his lip and doing a decent job of not letting it show. "So who
have you appointed, sir?"

Finis wasn't sure if he was supposed to dread or relish this part. He settled for both, leaning back and watching intently as he said, "Obi-Wan Kenobi." He was rewarded when Palpatine gave a visible flinch. The senator opened his mouth to protest, but Finis beat him to it. "Knight Kenobi was on the mission to Naboo, he has seen first hand the danger and destructive capabilities of these droids, he understands the history of this committee as well as the missions preceding. I should think you'd be happy to have him on your side, Senator."

Palpatine was staring hard at the corner of Valorum's desk. "There were two seats for the Jedi," he said evenly. "Who is the second?"

Finis looked down at the stack of paperwork he'd hidden behind his desk. The red-flagged folder lay at the top. He'd received the information that morning, but hadn't had time to look at it. He pulled it up and flicked it open, trying to sound informed and authoritative as he read, "Master Feemor Gard," a pause, "and… his padawan, Aola Tarkona." He flipped the page, galled to see the dispatch of one Jedi that had two names attached. A padawan? Kenobi had dragged a padawan into this circus?

A memory of Obi-Wan surfaced in Valorum's mind's eye; scowling, annoyed, glaring at Valorum from the seat that Palpatine now occupied. Finis' imagination supplied the additional image of Obi-Wan raising his middle finger. The Chancellor snapped the folder shut and resolved to have words with the Jedi at a later date.

Palpatine was flustering not unlike Valorum, but Palpatine didn't hide it well. "A padawan? Really, your excellency?"

"Yes," Finis made himself say it like it'd been his idea. He looked up at Palpatine, daring him to make an issue of it.

"This is an insult," Palpatine scoffed.

It was. "It is an honor," Finis corrected. "The Jedi are not wont to sit on committees even when requested, Senator. The fact that we've confirmed two-"

"-and a half," added Palpatine, sotto voce,

"-is a testament to how seriously the Jedi take this investigation."

Valorum ignored the Senator's rude comment and set the folder neatly on the edge of his desk. He folded his hands at a precise angle and fixed Palpatine with a steely stare. "You are honored by their contribution, Senator." It was a instruction and a threat.

Palpatine was quiet for a while. Eventually, he smiled his empty-eyed smile and brushed off his robes. "Of course I am, your Excellency. I look forward to meeting with them both."

"All," corrected Finis. Palpatine's anger over Aola's presence was like a balm on his own irritation. Palpatine hesitated, and forced a slightly wider smile.

"Yes of course, sir. Good afternoon, sir."

"Good afternoon." After the door hissed shut, Valorum looked back down at the dossier lying on his desk. He flipped it back open and glared at the text. "Damnit, Kenobi," he whispered to his empty office. "You'd better not make this kind of behavior a habit."
"You've fallen out of habit, Kenobi," Vokara said, head tilted, morning sunlight outlining her right lekku against the window. "You should be running that silver tongue of yours, plotting your escape."

Ben drank from the tea she'd offered him. It was cheap commissary fodder, but he didn't mind. The steam rolled like dust motes in the sun. Through it, she could see his crows feet crinkle in good humor. "Time teaches a number of lessons," he said.

"So it does." It had been a long time. "I've missed you," she said.

In his former life, he hadn't really known her. Now, they were closer in age and closer in heart. He realized it was only ever for the sake of his own health, and wished he could know her better apart from these odd sessions. "You as well."

"So," she said, leaning back in her seat. "Anakin Skywalker?"

"Yes."

"You want to take him as your apprentice."

"Yes."

"Again."

Ben sighed. "Yes." Hearing it out loud did make it sound absurd.

"Why?"

It made Ben frown. Why? There wasn't a why, there just was. "Because…" he floundered. "Because it's meant to be that way."

"And you know this?"

"Yes."

She wrote something on her notepad. "I have it on good authority," the unspoken 'on Mace Windu's authority' came through in the word 'good', "That you've suffered a radical change in heart after weeks of," she scrolled through her notes, "wallowing in self-dread and fear." She looked up at him.

"Mace said that."

"He did, yes."

Ben shook his head. "Well?" she asked.

Ben looked out the window, and saw the wisps of steam still rising from his tea. They'd be gone in moments. It was best to drink tea while it was hot. "Anakin fell, last time," he announced, and surprised himself by not feeling shocked to hear himself say it.

Vokara was nonplussed for a moment. "Fell?" she said.

"To the dark side," he said. "Anakin Skywalker was my apprentice, and he became a Sith."

The sound of windchimes floated by the window, whipped up from the temple gardens far below. The sun glittered in blinding patterns as morning traffic hoarded across the city. Vokara's mouth
formed a neat 'O', but she said nothing. She went to take a note, but stopped and laid the stylus aside. "You want a second chance with him," she said.

"The Force wants a second chance with him," Obi-Wan corrected. "I'm only here because of that boy, I know that. I died because of him, and I lived again because of him. For his sake. It's why I was sent to Herdessa, and then Tatooine. It's why Dooku brought him back here, it's why he's been training here..." he shrugged his shoulders. "And now he needs a master, and I'll be there at his side, as I've ever been."

Vokara was watching him with a familiar old stare, one she'd used on him years ago during his censure. She had more wrinkles now to advertise her concentration. She took a note. "You know he's only ten years old."

"He was nine when I first took him." Vokara's eyebrows raised. Ben chuckled. "Of course, he'd also never set foot in the Jedi Temple before. Times have changed."

"Do you think he'll fall again?" She had to ask.

"Do I think he'll fall again?" Ben repeated, eyebrows high. He drew in a deep breath. "I try very hard not to think anything, Vokara. Not about that. I do anyway, of course."

"And?"

"And some days, I fear the Force will make me live the whole thing over again in another man's shoes. But some days..." he thought of Dooku, and Qui-Gon, and Anakin's gaggle of friends still in the creche. He thought of the nature of change. "Some days, I think this was how it was meant to be, all along."

"With you, having to go through two lifetimes to get it right?"

"With Anakin at the mercy of the Force itself, not the ambitions of one person - or twelve."

Vokara smiled softly. "You're very calm," she observed. "Do you feel at peace with your decision to train Anakin?"

"Yes," Ben said. "And frankly, it alarms me." She smiled. "I shouldn't. It should terrify me. It has terrified me for weeks, but then I spoke to him once - once, Vokara - and... I don't know. Call it a vision, or an epiphany,"

"Or the Force."

"Exactly."

Vokara nodded, and took a few more notes. She looked to Ben's cup, neglected on the stand next to him. "Your tea will go cold," she said. He took it up and drank the rest.

Looking at her notes, Vokara spoke, "This... is a question of personal interest to me. Were Anakin's midichlorian counts accurate, when Dooku first brought him in?"

"Is this going on the record?"

"No."

"Yes."

Vokara's brow rose sharply. She'd nursed her own suspicions, of course, but, "Ben, you realize that
"Yes, I know," Ben said, "but he doesn't. And no one else does, no one that matters yet. And if I can free him from that weight of expectation, I will count it a victory in itself."

"Alright," Vokara said, putting out a hand of peace. "I suppose you know how to handle it better than anyone."

Ben snorted softly. "I'll still have to convince the Council," he said.

"I'll convince them for you," Vokara wrote a final note and signed the bottom. She smiled at him.

"What?"

Vokara stood. "I was told to forward your case to the Council only if I found grounds for doubt. I have found none. You're free to go."

Ben glanced at the door behind him. He felt lighter than he had before, which was unexpected.

"That was it?"

Vokara laughed at his surprise, and went to the door with him. "That was it. The Council will want to see you as a formality, of course. And they'll have to examine Anakin's own convictions on the matter."

"Of course."

"It was good to see you, Master Kenobi." She leaned over and kissed his cheek. "May the Force be with you." She opened the door for him. She glanced out into the hall and smiled. "You both," she said, waving to someone beyond Ben. He turned to see Anakin Skywalker walking with Master Yoda. Anakin saw Ben, smiled, and waved. Ben smiled back, but he saw the lines of Yoda's face and knew it was not the time. The two small figures, Grandmaster and Initiate, wandered down the steps of the bright, empty veranda together. Ben took a lift and returned to his quarters.

The following day, as Ben was getting ready to leave his apartment he very nearly ran into Mace Windu. He pulled himself to a stop just inside the door. "Master," he said, surprised.

"Ben," the Korun replied, unshakable composure returning after his own brief surprise, "I've spoken to Master Che."

"Have you?"

"Yes, may I come in?"

Ben shuffled the glowing holobooks in his arms and shrugged. "Of course."

Mace read the spines of the books as he passed. "Bio-electrical Engineering of the Twenty-Fifth Millennium... Neurological Programing and Epigenetic Conditioning - I hope you don't intend to start Anakin off on this curriculum."

The door hissed shut and Ben stared. "You'll approve the match, then."

Mace watched his expression, and nodded. "On probation, to start. He may be powerful, but he's still very young. He won't be ready for active roster for at least another year. You'll be grounded with him here at the temple, until he's old enough."
"Yes," Ben agreed, rivers of euphoric relief surging through his veins. "Yes, of course."

"The ceremony can wait for a few more weeks. Anakin is nearly done with his class rotation, there's no reason to interrupt."

"Right, right," Ben was nodding at everything he said. Mace was not, as a rule, an emotional person, but knowing Ben's life made the sight heartwarming, and he smiled.

"You've got your work cut out for you, Kenobi,"

"Yes, I suppose I have," Ben laughed, slightly hysterical from relief and, perhaps, dread. "I'm far too old for this."

Mace chuckled. "Should've thought of that before. The fourthday after next, Councilors' Gardens," Mace reminded him. It was the traditional place for braiding ceremonies. "In the meantime, I suggest you ask the quartermaster about securing larger apartments." The Master of the Order glanced around the cramped rooms, smiled, and left Ben to his books.

Feeling older and more alive than he had in years, Ben sat down on his couch, listened to the overworked aircon rattle the bulkhead behind him, surveyed his collection of plants, and laughed.

"This is most interesting," Dooku said, stroking his beard as he considered the research Ben had brought to him. "If this is true, then only the clones of Jango Fett could be affected by this… device," he tapped the holographic copy of the bio-chip he'd recovered from Kamino.

"Yes. This program would have to have been engineered to map exactly to the tags on Fett's DNA. With any other genetic makeup, the mind control would not have the same effect."

"Making it impossible to detect or replicate its effect in anyone except the intended victims," Dooku said.

"Exactly."

Dooku gave an admiring nod. "It's very clever," he allowed.

Ben thought about informing Dooku that it had been his accomplishment, last time, but refrained. "Yes, but it remains a danger to the clones."

"I thought you said the chips were being removed upon ingress to the Republic?" said Dooku, turning to look over his shoulder where Ben was pacing by his window.

"Yes, planet-by-planet. So far all the reports look good. Most of them are being processed in through Coruscant, so I've been able to check on the process myself. It's all been done like an assembly line. The Kaminoans even sent a team of Polis-Massan droids in to help."

"How thoughtful of them," Dooku said idly, setting aside the holograph to eye the half-played chessboard sitting beside the holobooks. They'd been waging this match in pieces for two weeks, now. "Come sit down, you're putting my nerves on edge."

"Surely there's a way to decipher the code."

"The cryptographers have assured me they've thrown their best and brightest at it. Nothing."

"Maybe they should look again," Ben insisted. Memories of Tup and Fives whirled around in his head. He thought of Cody, who he knew was on planet, safe at OrbitSec. He wanted to see the scar
where they'd taken it out, to reassure himself. Was this why they'd turned? Because of a damned chip?

"Padawan," Dooku cut into his thoughts, "Come sit down and sacrifice your bishop. It's your only move."

Ben did as he was told. He watched Dooku expertly seize his bishop and a pawn soon after, and felt nothing.

"I heard about Anakin," Dooku said. "Congratulations."

"I am sorry," he felt compelled to say.

"Sorry?" Dooku scoffed. "Don't insult me, Master Kenobi. You should not feel sorry for anything. The Force has shown you your path, and Anakin's as well. If I had tried to usurp that, it would accomplish nothing." Even in such confident tones, Dooku sounded lost. He seemed to hear it too, and brushed the feeling aside along with Ben's last rook. "I have this matter of Sifo Dyas to wrap up, and the clones to look after. Konstanza has asked me to help her select a new recruit from among them."

"Oh?"

"Her son will be assuming the County within the year, and she has it on high authority these Kaminoan clones are apt advisors."

"Oh," Ben tried to imagine it: a clone in court finery, advising a young regent. Amid memories of war and pointless deaths, the image was deeply satisfying. "I didn't know Adan was old enough."

"Yes, he's very nearly of age now, hard to believe. I suppose I could just go advise him myself, I've nothing better to do," Dooku sighed as he sacrificed a knight to Ben's remaining bishop.

"Oh, come now," Ben reasoned, "You'll have Obi-Wan around, and Qui-Gon, too."

"No, Obi-Wan will be off in the Senate, remember. As will Feemor and Aola. Even Qui-Gon is leaving me in his old age. He'll be back on the active roster once his classes end."

"Will he?" Ben frowned, "I thought he enjoyed teaching the younglings."

"Oh, he does. But you know him, longs for misadventure and fresh air." Dooku shook his head. "I should count myself lucky. When his knees start to creak and he remembers how grey his hair has grown, he'll come back and complain to me like he always has." Ben snorted softly to himself. "No," Dooku continued, sitting back in his seat while Ben considered the board, "my whole lineage has left me, and soon I'll have nothing but clones and politics to occupy me." A shadow fell over his face. "I need work," he said, quietly. "I cannot remain idle in these dark times."

Ben moved a chess piece, and the part of him that wallowed in the darkness of the galaxy was offended by his own banality. "The Force will provide a solution," he parroted off, out of habit. Dooku gave a half smile.

"Do you know," he said, "Qui-Gon used to tell me that when he'd left his homework to the last minute."

Ben let out a laugh, and for a moment, the darkness fled.
The week ended. Anakin was having trouble studying for his final exams because of his imminent promotion to Ben Kenobi's apprentice. So excited was he that he was able to ignore the envious glares of his agemates and the looks of concern and relief from his teachers. He tried to visit Ben often, but just as often, Ben shunted him back off to the archives, lecturing him on the importance of academic diligence.

With one week left of freedom before a year stuck on Coruscant, Ben requested and was granted a short personal leave of absence. The morning before he left, he met Anakin in the gardens, where he'd asked the initiate to bring his cleanest set of tunics and Arbie-One.

"What is this for?" Asked Anakin, manhandling Arbie-One so he hovered at the right spot. Ben stepped over and, far more gently than the small mechanic, asked the droid to hover just a bit higher. Arbie beeped at the master and shrieked at its maker. The still-holocam wobbled on the droid's thin arms.

"For a friend," Ben said, smoothing down Anakin's hair, which sprung right back up in an indelible cowlick. "Smile," he said, an instruction Anakin always took to heart.

The resulting image was shimmering and tinted blue. Ben stood by, smile showing softly through his beard, but Anakin's smile stole the show, crooked and huge with teeth he'd had yet to grow into. Ben had a copy made onto a small holoplate, tucked it into a pocket in his robe, and boarded his ship.

Sheev Palpatine was up late in his office at the Senate, browsing on his computer console in the dark. The screen flickered on and off at annoying intervals. The glitch was a downside of splicing into a locked database.

Among the legislature, only the Chancellor had access to the personnel files of all Jedi in the galaxy. The Chancellor and his secretary droid, that is. Essar Nine's eyes flickered in binary patterns, head plate flipped open, wires running from its mindbanks into Palpatine's console. He scrolled viciously through the contents until his eyes locked on the object of his search.

Gard, Feemor.

He selected it, and a file emerged on the screen. A holo portrait rotated in air; a tawny-skinned, kind-eyed man with close-cropped grey hair and a soft smile. Palpatine didn't trust it for a moment. Kenobi had chosen this Jedi. Kenobi. There had to be something. He scrolled through the information.

Species: Human
Sex: Male
Age: 50 standard years
Rank: Knight
Trained by: Thea Coté
Graduated apprentice[s]: N/A
Current apprentice: Aola Tarkona
Qualifications: Class C security clearance. Fluent in Ryl, conversant in Huttese, proficient in Niiman.

The dossier melted off into a collection of mission notes, most of them low-class, all of them utterly unremarkable. Palpatine stared at the information, unmoved and untrusting. He selected the name of the apprentice. A new holo expanded in front of him, this one of a comely young twi'lek girl, also smiling for the camera. The information was similar; expected, bland, useless.
Kenobi had chosen these two, and surely, he'd had a good reason to. But Kenobi was a child, little more than a boy. Even worse, he was a boy who thought he was a man because he'd faced a Sith and escaped alive. Palpatine's fist closed in on itself, and a fuse inside the computer burst. The screen sparked and flickered on and off, sparks hissing inside. He put Essar to rights and wiped the droid's short term memory. He glanced at the flickering screen, which still displayed Aola's smiling face in intermittent shades of blue.

Unremarkable people could become remarkable allies under the proper influence.
Ben had anticipated it might be so, and accepted the news with a smile and a nod. "I would be most grateful. In fact, I've also come hoping to see another friend - Shmi Skywalker, one of the Princess' handmaidens."

"Shmi Skywalker?" The droid made a small metallic noise that could have been its version of a scoff. "Ms. Skywalker is not a handmaiden any longer, Master Jedi. But she does still live in the Palace."

"Is she here?"

"I should think so, she rarely leaves these days."

Ben frowned microscopically at this cryptic information, but only said, "And is she open to visitors?" he asked.

"I'm sure she'll be delighted to see you, sir. I'll notify her presently."

4TM led him through the palace, which bustled with maintenance activity in Bail's absence. The cleaning droids and repairmen would disappear when the prince and princess returned, but while the royals were away, the keepers of Aldera palace worked hard to ensure that the centuries-old castle would stay standing for centuries more to come.

His escort led Ben quite farther into the castle than he'd expected to go, and deposited him in an anteroom with soaring windows overlooking the western mountains. "Ms. Skywalker will be along shortly," reported 4TM.
"Thank you," Ben said, and the droid bowed before taking its leave. Ben listened to an old-fashioned chrono tick on the wall and took a seat on the cushioned sill of the windows. Far below, he could see speeders and cargo ships filed in neat rows like ants. Dotting the horizon in fading shades of blue, the snow-covered mountains of Alderaan shone like jewels. Last he'd seen Shmi, she'd lived on another floor and in another wing of the palace entirely, nearer to the Royal suites to be close to Breha. What on earth was she doing here?

"Ben," said a familiar, smiling voice. Ben looked up to see Shmi emerging from a doorway and returned her smile as brightly. "It's so good to see you," she said, moving toward him, hands outstretched. He stood to meet her. Her hands were freezing as he took them in his, and he meant to comment on it, but then he leaned in to kiss her cheek and bumped into something unexpected. He drew back, face communicating the surprise he couldn't articulate, and inspected the front of Shmi's dress.

She was wearing a simple, thick wool gown to compensate for the cold. It was cut large and hung loose on her frame, but beneath the soft folds, Ben saw a definite curve. Entranced, without thinking, he put a hand out and touched the pregnant swell of her stomach.

"What?" he began to ask, and looked up at her. She was completely unbothered. "When?" he asked. Shmi blinked at him, smile tilting in mild confusion.

"Bail didn't tell you?" she asked. Ben's expression remained the same, and she chuckled uncertainly. "It's theirs," she explained, "Bail and Breha's. I'm their surrogate."

The surge of emotions bypassed Ben's heart entirely and went straight to his eyes. He blinked rapidly, and in his minds' eye, he remembered the way Bail had gazed upon Leia. "What?" he said again. Shmi's smile grew.

"It's not every day I see a Jedi Master taken off guard," she teased, squeezing his hands, "I thought Bail had told you. After… well, after Breha's last heartbreak, I offered to help them."

Ben was still blinking away his emotions, trying to find words. "How far along?" he asked, unable to complete his question in his bewilderment.

"A little over six months," she said.

"Six months," Ben breathed a laugh, and looked down at her bump again, and then at her hands, pale in his. "You're very cold."

"I'm a desert girl, I've never been able to adapt to the winters here, even indoors."

"Here," Ben shrugged out of his cloak and wrapped it around her shoulders. "I'm sure your passenger is doing you no favors," he said, which made her laugh. He guided her to sit on the windowseat with him, and as she eased into the spot with one hand on her stomach, her pregnancy became even more apparent.

"She's started moving quite a bit recently," Shmi confided, rubbing at a spot to the left, "always got a foot lodged somewhere or other. The doctors say it'll only get worse. I blame Breha - Bail is too softhearted to have given his child this hard a kick."

Ben chuckled. "She?" Shmi nodded.

"Breha seems convinced it'll be a boy, but I know it'll be a girl." She winked.

"Do you?"
"Call it intuition. But only time will tell - they've decided to keep it a surprise."

"And what does Bail say?"

Shmi's smile faltered. "Bail tries very hard to say nothing. He's frightened, I think. He will be until he holds her in safe in his arms." Shmi shrugged, and looked out the window. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised he didn't tell you." Her eyes met Ben's. "He doesn't want to get his hopes up."

"I'm sure his worries are unfounded," Ben reassured.

"I know they are," Shmi replied with easy confidence. "I'm strong enough, it's why I offered. I bore a child without help as a teenager in the desert, I think I can manage a princess in a castle hospital." She looked down at her blanketed womb. "They've wanted a child since they were married, you know," she told Ben quietly. "Breha's body isn't built for motherhood, but every bit of her heart is. Me? I never wanted to be a mother. It's not in my nature, not really. Yet I delivered a healthy baby against impossible odds, and it is Breha who is barren." She paused, brow wrinkled in a frown. "It's broken my heart to see her suffer for so long. She's a dear friend to me."

"You are still her handmaid?"

"No, not anymore," Shmi looked up at him, and the elegance of her hairstyle and the lavishness of her gown made more sense. "Bail insisted it would be wrong to ask so much of one of their staff. I spent months convincing Breha that my offer was one of friendship, not obligation, and she spent longer trying to convince Bail of the same. Once he finally agreed, they formally released me from service, though of course they've continued to provide for me very well." Shmi laughed, "Breha's even threatened to make me a lady in her court, after the baby comes. A lady, Ben. Me."

"I can see it as clear as the day," Ben told her. She batted his arm. "Flatterer," she accused, though both of them knew he'd meant it. She shook her head, looking out at the winter landscape below. "A scrawny slave to a Hutt, in a core world royal palace with a princess under her belt," she mused. "My life makes no sense sometimes."

"You were a remarkable woman then, you remain one now," Ben said, and looked at her stomach once more; it was an irresistible draw, a magnet of life and possibility that he'd never seen in either of his lifetimes. He thought again of Leia, and though his heart ached for the pain of absence, his heart rejoiced for his friends. "I take it you are well, and the baby too?"

"Yes," she smiled. "And all going according to plan. I've not even been sick. Things have been much easier the second time around," she said. "Anakin was much fussier."

"Speaking of," Ben reached over to lift up the edge of his cloak that Shmi still wore, "I brought you this." He found the hidden pocket and drew out the glass pane that held the still-holo of himself and Anakin. He depressed the small button on the corner with his thumb, and the picture lit up, bright as Anakin's own smile.

Shmi gasped and put her hands to her mouth, and Ben smiled wordlessly. She took the holo from him and gazed at it, eyes glistening. "This is Anakin?" she breathed.

"It is."

"He's so big," she beamed, hand at her chest, tears now falling. "And his hair," she ran a fingertip over the wild blond as if to smooth it down.
"An unsalvageable mess when it's clean, though most days he manages to get motor oil in it, and that seems to weigh it down."

"Motor oil?" She looked up at him.

"Yes, he's quite the tinkerer, your son." At the word "Son," Shmi's tears intensified. Then Ben put a gentle hand on her back and said, still smiling, "I came to tell you that I've taken him as my apprentice."

Shmi dissolved in tears. She hid her face with her one hand, crying into the sleeve of Ben's cloak while she held the picture of her son tight to her chest with her other hand. Eventually, she looked back up and sniffed, a watery smile wobbling on her face. "I'm sorry," she said through thick emotion, "the babe," she indicated her stomach with a shrug. "I don't mean to be crying. I'm happy."

"Don't apologize," Ben laughed, hand staying at her back.

"Your apprentice?" Shmi asked for verification.

"Yes."

She nearly lost control again, but was able to blink away the biggest tears and say, "It shouldn't be any other way." She looked down at the likeness of her son. "Is he... did you bring him here?" she asked, an uncertain hope in her voice.

"No," Ben said, "he's still very young, and the council doesn't want him out of their sight just yet."

He let a grin break under his beard. "I don't really blame them; he's strong and stubborn." Ben gave Shmi's shoulder a squeeze. "Not unlike his mother."

Shmi nodded, neither disappointed nor surprised. "Well," she said, swallowing and trying to cough out the constriction in her throat, "Then you tell him to behave himself, and you look after him, Ben Kenobi, or I'll hunt you down." She said it jokingly, but when he met her earnest brown eyes, he knew she could and would keep her word if necessary.

"I will look after him as if he were my own," Ben swore to her and to the Force itself.

"Good," she smiled, and wiped away her tears. She held the holo to her chest a while before turning off the light and tucking it into a pocket. She moved to rise up off the seat, and Ben hurried to help her. She took his hand and they stayed close. "I would like to call for food, if it's all the same to you. I'm famished."

"I'm sure," Ben said, and glanced out the window. It was just past noon. Bail and Breha would not be back for several hours, at least. "Might I join you?"

"I'm sure," Ben said, and glanced out the window. It was just past noon. Bail and Breha would not be back for several hours, at least. "Might I join you?"

"I would be cross with you if you didn't."

The Jedi and the expectant surrogate dined together in the easy companionship of old friends. Shmi ate the lion's share of the meal brought to them, but the Jedi Master could hardly complain. Ben lost track of the time as they chatted about Alderaan, and Breha and Bail, of Shmi's friends and misadventures over the years since they'd last spoken, and of course of the soon-arriving prince or princess. Ben refused to reveal his speculations on the gender, even when Shmi prodded him.

"Hedging your bets," she accused, "you are too much a diplomat."

It was well past sunset when 4TM arrived and told them that Bail and Breha had returned to
Alderaan. Ben rose immediately to go to them, but Shmi stifled a yawn. "I should go with you," she said, bracing her back as she stood.

"You should rest. You look exhausted."

"The baby is being rather still," Shmi said, not daring to rub her stomach for fear that it'd wake up again. "I should probably try and seize the opportunity.

"Yes, you should."

"You'll say goodbye before you leave?" she asked.

"I hope to stay the week - of course I will."

"Sleep." He put a tiny Force suggestion into the word, and was surprised when she was able to sense it. She smacked him in the stomach.

"I don't need your help, Ben," she complained, then softened. "Though thank you." She yawned again, wider than before. Ben watched with some amusement, and did not tell her that he'd never met a non-Jedi who could tell when he'd pressed a Force suggestion against their mind. He thought, as he always did in Shmi's company, that Anakin's proclivity was not quite as sourceless as Qui-Gon's prophetic sensibilities would've had him believe.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Ben said, and left Shmi to a quiet evening.

Breha and Bail met him in the hall as he was going to see them. Breha's face split with a smile, and she met the Jedi with a hug. Bail hung back, a more hesitant smile in place. "Master Kenobi," the princess beamed as she pulled away, "it's such a pleasant surprise, I hope we've not kept you waiting,"

"Of course not, Your Highness, I've been in good company, I assure you." He eyed Bail as he said, "Shmi seems very well." Bail stiffened, but Breha took it all in stride.

"Yes, I admire her strength. She's been such a dear friend to this house, I don't know how we will repay her."

"I do not think she wants you to, milady," Ben smiled, and glanced again at Bail, who remained uneasy. "You both have my congratulations."

"Thank you," said Bail, finally joining his wife in greeting Ben. He gestured his arm down the hall. "Come. We'll have something to eat, and drink, and Ben can tell us all the best gossip from Coruscant."

Ben scoffed as he followed the prince down the hall. "You overestimate a Jedi's understanding of political intrigue," he demurred.

"Not this Jedi," Bail smiled at him. "Surely you didn't come all this way for a social call."

"I did, in fact," Ben said.

When he explained that he would be grounded to Coruscant for a year and why, the royals were ecstatic to hear about Anakin. The conversation turned naturally from Anakin to Shmi, to the child that she carried. Breha talked about it in uncontainable excitement. Ben could tell she felt some residual shame in not being able to bear her own children, but seeing her eyes light up at every mention of the babe told him that she was too happy to be a mother to care how it happened. It
warmed his heart.

Bail remained silent while the talk of baby names and nurseries continued on. At length, Breha finished her meal, and excused herself to administrative reports and letters she'd neglected since that morning. Ben remained alone in the room with Bail.

"Bail," he said gently, "you should have told me."

"I know," said the prince, running a hand over his face. "I was afraid."

Ben nodded. He understood, at least in the abstract. "Shmi is a strong woman, you've no cause for anxiety."

"I know, I know," he was trying to convince himself. "But you can't blame my heart after all it's been through."

"No. You'll cherish your daughter, I'm sure."

"Daughter?" Bail raised an eyebrow. "You've been talking to Shmi, I see."

Ben shrugged, thinking of Leia. "Perhaps I am biased. You disagree?"

Bail shook his head. "I'm not sure I could care either way - I will love my son or daughter, whichever the fates give us."

"Of that I have no doubt. You'll be an excellent father." Bail smiled gratefully, and brought out a decanter of wine. The two drank in subdued celebration. "What will happen to Shmi once the child comes?" Ben asked.

"She will live her own life. Breha wants to make her a courtier, though I can't see Shmi agreeing to it. I think she'll settle down somewhere close by, perhaps start a family of her own."

"Oh?" said Ben, surprised. Bail chuckled.

"I am not at liberty to speculate on the lives of others, and I am not a matchmaker, but there's been a young man at court recently whom Breha is convinced has eyes for Shmi."

Ben's eyebrows raised. "Even at six months pregnant?" he said. Bail raised his shoulders.

"I didn't say it wasn't complicated, but I've seen them talking not infrequently when he's off duty."

"What does he do here?"

"He's a young mechanic from Kaamos. Never been off-world, from what I understand, but heavens if he doesn't make the best ships outside of Kuat. I've had him come up to Aldera to redesign the royal fleet."

"Really?" Ben raised his eyebrows, "The entire fleet?" Bail nodded.

"Our ships are outdated, and it's as good a time as any. Our Pilots Corps will be growing nearly thirty percent in the next year alone." He sipped at his wine. "I wrote the Kamino Accord, and have been repaid with an unusually high number of requests for citizenship from the Kaminoan clones."

"They are wonderful pilots," Ben observed.
"They are, and a great many of them will fly under the Alderaanian banner. But there are also scholars, and translators, advisors, warriors, too."

"And your populace is not upset by the influx?" It was not an uncommon response to immigrants, especially in such numbers. Ben knew planets across the core and midrim who'd grown irritated with the terms of the Accord as Kaminoans flooded their immigration offices.

"Oh, there are protests here and there. Some think that the Kaminoans will steal jobs. But I'm growing my fleet instead of replacing pilots. I'm giving work to local businesses, providing good shipbuilding jobs as the clones come in. I'm doing what I can to make sure it happens seamlessly, but… time will tell." he scoffed into his hand. "Some are more upset about their origins than they are about their moving here."

"Kamino?" assumed Ben.

"Cloning facilities," Bail corrected. "Alderaan is a very traditional place, Ben, that's why they still have kings and princes like me. Genetically engineered sentients is an unsettling concept to people here. It's one reason why Breha and I chose to accept Shmi's offer of surrogacy. I may not see anything wrong with the… alternative methods that Kaminoan science may have supplied, but I am in the public eye, and must ease the minds of my people."

"They know about Shmi, then?"

"They know that we are expecting a child by surrogate. We've kept her identity a secret, even among the palace staff. Most people think Shmi chose to leave Breha's employ in order to start a family."

"I see," Ben said, thinking of her apparent beau. He chuckled. "This shipbuilder friend of yours must be a determined fellow."

Bail laughed. "I should tell her she can tell him," he said. "No need to complicate her life any further than we already have."

"I'm sure it's nothing Shmi can't handle," Ben said. "She might've already told him."

"Maybe. Either way, I do see him here rather more often than his work demands."

Ben smiled. "Then I wish them all the best."

"I'll drink to that," Bail said, and raised his glass.

"And to your daughter - or son - as well," Ben toasted. They drank, and were happy, and outside, a fresh layer of snow gleamed on the mountains.

Ben enjoyed the remainder of the week exploring Alderaan's palace and visiting with his friends. He spent time with Bail and Breha when he could, but as the royals were called away to the never ending demands of state, he spent a considerable time with Shmi. He also met the ship-builder, Tam Corteé, who was a humble man, about Shmi's age or maybe younger, with a dirty mechanic's jumper that disguised how much money he must be earning from the contract with the Royal Fleet.

"You know Shmi?" he'd asked warily when Ben mentioned the woman.

"Yes, I gather you do as well?" Ben had replied.
Tam had briefly considered Ben's Jedi robes and all meaning attached to them. Realizing he was in the company of a friend and not competition, Tam had relaxed and adjusted the flat cap on his head, picking it up by one corner already worn black by the repetitive motion. "Yeah, I know her," he'd said, his grin boyish on the face of a grown man. That had been the extent of their conversation about Shmi, but it was all Ben needed to know. He reported his thoughts to Breha later on, and the Princess could've flown on the buoyancy of her own smile.

Ben also met a few clones during his visit, and though seeing Jango Fett's face without any mandalorian armor attached was jarring at first, he was ecstatic to meet some of Alderaan's newest citizens, and said so. The clones were, likewise, excited to meet a Jedi in person, and when they'd learned that he was a Kenobi, they'd happily missed their lunch break in order to stay and grill him for details about his nephew, who was practically an urban legend in their minds.

Ben had never known these particular clones during the wars, so he had no way of knowing what role they'd filled in the Grand Army, but on Alderaan they were pilots and mechanics, all in Tam's employ and bound for the work in the Fleet itself. Ben was relieved beyond measure to see four identical scars on four identical scalps. After they'd talked their fill about Obi-Wan and his miraculous escape from death, Ben felt comfortable asking them about the scars in a polite way, disguising his intense interest. To his surprise, the clones shared a chuckle about it, looking rueful.

"Serves them right for making us in batches," said one clone, rubbing at the small pink line. "Defects in one are defects in all."

"A small tumor, just here," said another clone, tapping his scar through his hair, "they had to go in and take 'em all out, just in case."

"They said they're probably benign. But better safe than sorry," said the third.

"A godsdamn interrogation afterwards, too," said the fourth. "I guess they're trying to make sure they didn't screw us up in other ways too." They all chuckled.

"Well," Ben said mildly, almost wanting to laugh at the clones' dismissive irritation in light of his horrific memories, "so long as you're all doing well."

"Indeed we are, sir," said one clone, and shook Ben's hand. "Tell your nephew thank you for us, will you?"

Ben nodded. "I'll be sure that I do."

Obi-Wan came up in conversation again when Ben was wrapping up his last day in Bail and Breha's company. The three of them, joined by Shmi, were enjoying lunch together before Ben had to return to his ship. As the meal wound down, Bail began to say that he looked forward to seeing Ben again back in the Senate, only to catch himself and realize aloud, "Oh. I suppose you won't be back at the Senate."

"No," Ben had said, almost apologetically. "The Senate is hardly a place for indelicate young padawans - especially mine. My nephew, Obi-Wan, however, should become a familiar face in months to come." Ben explained Obi-Wan's assignment, and the table listened in fascination.

"Jedi from outside the Council?" Bail asked in surprise. "That's highly unusual."

"Palpatine's committee is highly unusual. I think Valorum is making a point."

"I'm sure I would do the same in his place," Bail admitted, "but does Obi-Wan have much
Ben sighed. "No, unfortunately. He's got a silver tongue and a sharp mind, but I'm afraid he has little patience for highbrow politics. As a young padawan, perhaps..." the divergence of Obi-Wan's personality from his own was often a mystery to Ben. "But years of knighthood have yet to teach him humility in his quick-wittedness. I would be much obliged if you kept an eye on him. He's going to need it."

Bail chuckled at this. "Much like you've done for me, all these years?" Ben smiled, remembering the first time he'd set eyes on Bail in Herdessa, young and untested.

"Yes," Ben said, and Bail nodded.

"It would be an honor."

"I'll warn you," Ben said, "he's a bit more headstrong than you ever were."

Breha, who'd been chatting quietly with Shmi while the two men spoke, snorted softly. "I find that hard to believe," she said, and beside her Shmi hid her own smile. Bail said nothing, but looked up in time with the ladies to anticipate Ben's answer. The Jedi took a swig of his drink and said, deadpan,

"To be fair, Bail has never carried a lightsaber."

The table erupted in laughter.

Too soon, 4TM was there to notify Ben that his ship was ready for departure, and he had to give his goodbyes. By dint of their occupation, all Jedi knew how to give a swift and painless goodbye, but Ben also knew that the best of friends were worth the pain of doing it properly. He took his time giving his regards and embraced both Bail and Breha before he left. Last of all, he said goodbye to Shmi, and the royals gave them a private moment.

Their connection was an odd one, Ben mused, made over planetary disaster, ill-conceived bets, Tatooine and the small boy raised between them. "Take care of yourself, Shmi," Ben bade her with a smile, and glanced at her stomach. "And please tell me when the baby comes."

"I'm sure you'll be among the first to know," she promised with a smile. She sobered somewhat, and rubbed her baby bump thoughtfully. "You must come back and visit."

"I'm sure I will, eventually." He smiled. "Perhaps one day, I'll bring Anakin, too."

Shmi smiled at the thought, but looked nervous all the same. "I'm not sure he would want to see me," she said uncertainly.

"I know he would. You are his mother; you raised him."

"For a few years."

"That doesn't matter."

She searched his face for any hint of deception or flattery, and when she found none, she nodded, resolute. "Alright," she said, "Then you take care of him and bring him when you think he's ready."

Unexpectedly, she stood on her toes and kissed Ben on the lips. He froze in surprise, and remained frozen while her face transformed and she pointed a finger in his face. "And if you don't, I will hunt you down, and I will flay you."
Ben smiled to see the origins of Anakin's tenacity. "You have my word," he said, "as if he were my own."

She continued to stare him down. When she was satisfied, Shmi's anger fled, replaced by a bittersweet nod. "Well, he is, now." She hugged Ben around the neck, and he hugged her back.

"May the Force be with you, Shmi," he said.

"And with you, Ben."

Ben boarded his ship and went to the cockpit. Soon, he was flying through hyperspace, enjoying his last moments of solitude before Anakin overtook his life once more. He smiled, and thought again of Shmi. He laughed at the memory of her kiss, grateful that Tam hadn't been around to see it.

A padawan's braiding ceremony was, in contrast to the knighting ceremony, a very simple affair. A few masters were always present, and Master Yoda especially loved to spectate. A few friends, perhaps some classmates. They were usually held somewhere in the gardens, and Anakin's was no different. To the backdrop of a burbling fountain, Ben took an oath to guide, teach, and protect, and Anakin took an oath to obey, observe, and respect. Then, they took an identical oath to walk with each other in the Light. Finally, Ben braided the hair reserved for such a purpose behind Anakin's right ear, and Anakin was officially a Jedi Knight in training. He beamed to receive the honor.

"What's it mean?" Anakin asked later, swinging his legs from his seat on the chair. He was hurting his eyes trying to see his braid, still too short to meet his shoulder. A purple marker was tied around the end of the plait, and he hadn't yet memorized the meanings of all the markers.

"Ironically enough, my young friend, it is a marker of wisdom," Ben told him, busy packing up his kitchen things. "Your insight into the matter of your own apprenticeship is a rare wisdom granted by the Force. And it, like many other events in your life, we will record along with the growth of your braid.

"Oh," said Anakin, admiring the speck of color that he could just barely see, if he pulled the hair over his ear and strained his eyes. "What's 'ironically' mean?" he asked.

Ben laughed, but did not explain. "I'm sure you have a dictionary hidden somewhere in this mess," Ben said, eyeing the box full of Anakin's personal effects. He picked it up and gave it to the boy. "You'll find it as you unpack. Go on." He nudged the boy out of the door, and Anakin carried his box out of Ben's apartment and down the already well-worn path to the larger apartments that would be their home.

Later that evening, all that remained was a plant on Ben's balcony. He came back for it in the dying light of dusk, and it waited patiently for him in its years-old spot. It was a small tree, its species so ancient and so slow-growing that it had hardly altered at all since the day Ben brought it up from the greenhouses. That had been over a decade ago, back in an age of uncertainty and new names. He'd thought to call himself Ben Lars then, and was still bribing Qui-Gon with pots of sapir. And yet... he brushed the swollen roots of the small tree, and realized that beneath the surface the plant was growing too expansive for its boxish terra cotta pot. He resolved to find it a new abode.

Fixing the plant under his arm, Ben scanned the small, empty apartment one last time, withdrew the roots of his own heart, turned out the lights, and shut the door quietly behind him.
"Active roster?" Obi-Wan asked, alarmed. "When?"

"As of right now - I thought I'd told you this," Qui-Gon said. "No, I'm sure I've told you. You weren't listening."

Obi-Wan sighed, annoyed by his own forgetfulness. Qui-Gon was probably right, and he'd been too preoccupied with his own impending mission to remember. "But... when will you be back?" asked the young knight.

"I don't know," admitted the master, "A week? A month?" He paused, not wanting to think it, but added, "A year?" He shrugged. "It is with the Force." He saw Obi-Wan's distraught expression. "You cannot expect differently, Obi-Wan. You're a knight, and I am a Master. You knew we'd part ways eventually."

"Yes, but..." Obi-Wan wasn't sure how to articulate his alarm. That Qui-Gon had opted for Active Roster rather than Special Assignment threw his entire schedule into jeopardy. He would be a free saber roaming the galaxy, and may not even have time to return to Coruscant before receiving another assignment. Order policy had prevented him from going on active roster when he'd had Obi-Wan underfoot, and it shouldn't have surprised Obi-Wan that his master was enjoying the liberties of being on his own once more, but something about it bothered him. Whether it was Qui-Gon going away or the shine of his master's grey hair, he could not decide.

"The Force will bring us back together again, of that I have no doubt. I'll have to clean up your mess sooner or later - or else you'll be called on to clean up mine." Qui-Gon was gratified to see his former apprentice smile.

Obi-Wan nodded, and glanced at Qui-Gon with his one good eye, embarrassed to acknowledge his boyish attachment to the man. "May the Force be with you then, Master," he said, unhappy to say goodbye. Qui-Gon smiled and embraced him, more at ease than the young knight.

"Don't worry," he said, "You'll be too busy to know I'm gone. Feemor tells me Aola is very excited for your first day at the Senate."

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"I don't think I've ever been more excited for anything in my entire life," Aola's voice was dripping with sarcasm as she stooped to look out the windscreen of the aircar they were taking to the Senate. The dome of the Galactic Senate loomed in the morning smog.

"Life isn't all terrifying beasts and violent misadventure, lass," Feemor said from the pilot's seat, flicking buttons to begin their landing sequence. "Sometimes, you'll have to put on a pretty face and pretend to agree with vipers."

Aola scowled and went to the back of the ship to double check her identification cards were in order. As they approached the landing platform, Feemor eyed his younger copilot. "You sure you know what you're getting us into, lad?" he asked.

"Not entirely," confessed Obi-Wan, "but I know it's important."

Feemor knew, at least cerebrally, that this mission was intertwined with the conspiracy of the Sith, which he knew very little about and which he had no desire to understand in any depth. He'd seen Ben mull over its complexities many times before, but the dangerous glint in Obi-Wan's eye was unlike anything he'd seen in the elder Kenobi. "So it is," Feemor agreed. "And have you decided how you're going about it?" he added, tone advising restraint.

Obi-Wan shrugged. "It'll depend on how the room reads once we get there," the knight decided.
"So I suppose we'll see." As he said it, his hands tightened almost imperceptibly on the controls.

Feemor raised his eyebrows and looked away, but said nothing. Yes, he thought privately, I suppose we will.

In a small conference hall around a long, rectangular table, the committee assembled for the first time. The Supreme Chancellor, always present for the first session, was at the head of the table. The Jedi were given three seats on Valorum's left side, and on his right sat Senator Palpatine. The Nabooian delegate gave the brown-robed representatives a kind smile.

"Master Gard, is it? I don't believe we've met." Palpatine extended a hand, and Feemor shook it politely.

"No, Senator. It's an honor, sir."

"Likewise," replied Palpatine. He eyed Aola for several long seconds, but did not acknowledge her. "And Master Kenobi," his gaze flicked to Feemor's right, "How… good of you to represent your esteemed Order today."

Although the Supreme Chancellor sat in the blind spot of his right eye, Obi-Wan was aware that Finis was watching their interaction with carefully guarded interest. His eye did not stray from Palpatine's face. "And how good of you to invite me," said the Jedi, not breaking his stare.

Palpatine's smile widened in the beginnings of a scoff, but he stilled it. "Of course," he said, still grinning. "I do hope we can accomplish much together."


Between the two, Finis drew in a long breath and prayed to the stars for patience. He cleared his throat and raised his gavel. "Order," he said, watching two dozen faces turned toward him and settle into their seats. Jedi, senators, merchants, lobbyists. All handpicked by Palpatine and himself by turn, each stacking their own side of the deck until the odds weighed even. He pounded his gavel again. "Order," he repeated, and the Committee on Galactic Commerce held its first session.
When the doors opened, the Jedi were the first out of the room. The younger came first, face like a storm and walking so fast his cloak blew out behind him. The elder followed at an unrushed pace, pausing to nod and offer farewell smiles to the senators he bumped into on his way to the door. Once in the hallway, he jogged to reach the turbolift, and stuck an arm through the door just before it closed completely. He gave his stewing comrade a reprimanding look, but he held no articulate authority in their relationship, and the look soon melted into one of pity. The doors slid shut.

"It's not fair," Obi-Wan burst as soon they were alone. He huffed, and crossed his arms like a youngling. Despite the immature display, Feemor had a hard time coming up with a response. He opened his mouth to say something, and closed it again. Obi-Wan wasn't done ranting. "I mean, back when this started I couldn't blame them, but…" he tossed his hands and huffed again. "Six months – six months, Feemor. Why do they always, always defer to you?"

"Because I'm older than you are," Feemor replied immediately. They'd had this discussion a dozen times or more. "And around here, grey hair dictates the hierarchy."

"But I'm the principal appointee - Valorum has to have indelicately reminded everyone of that fact every other session, and yet they always, always turn to you for the Jedi's opinions, and you've never even seen a damned battle droid." He glanced at the older man, "No offense."

"None taken, lad."

Obi-Wan watched the floors whir past through the glass windows of the lift. "Why can't they take me seriously?"

Obi-Wan sulked and Feemor stood by in conscientious silence. It was their rehearsed ending to this particular argument, but Feemor decided to break with the script and say: "Do you really want me to answer that?"

Obi-Wan turned to him, surprised. "What?" the knight asked. Feemor sighed.

"Look, Obi-Wan…" He ducked his head and shook it. He'd been avoiding this confession for weeks - months, even. "You don't exactly…" he paused, and looked into Obi-Wan's beseeching, desperate, youthful face.

"What?" asked the man, eyebrows already starting to wrinkle in a classic Kenobi furrow.

It felt like kicking a puppy - a puppy that could bite. Feemor let out a sigh and with it, his reservations. "It's because you look like you're twelve, Obi-Wan," Feemor said, eyes closed.

"What?" Obi-Wan snapped, pride hurt. "I do not."

"You do," Feemor insisted. "You're all clean cheeks and soft hair and… and dimples," Feemor waved a demonstrative hand at Obi-Wan's person, and forestalled the impending outcry by adding quickly, "I don't mean to hurt your feelings, I'm only telling you what they see. One of them still thinks you're my apprentice, not Aola." Obi-Wan stared at him, wide-eyed and horrified. "I'm sorry, lad."

There was a pause as Obi-Wan absorbed this with growing despair. Feemor shrugged. "You need a beard, or a good scowl."
Obi-Wan turned back and gave him his very best shot; if he had been looking in the other direction, the windows of the lift would've shattered. "Point taken. But you can't wear that all the time. Just don't shave for a few days, I think it'll grow you up a bit."

"Ben says I shouldn't," Obi-Wan complained, leaning against the side of the car. "He said we'll look too much alike. Besides," he picked at his chin. "The scar makes it grow with big gaps in."

"Oh, there's no need to go full terrier-face like ol' Ben," joked Feemor, and Obi-Wan found himself smiling. He forced it back into a frown, self-conscious of his apparently boyish dimples. "Besides, he's a bit too grey now to look too much like you. A little scruff won't look bad, scar or no. Might even make yours better, more intimidating."

"Intimidating?" The car was slowing down, the landing dock hoving into view.

"Look, lad," Feemor turned and faced Obi-Wan like a mentor imparting some deep wisdom. "You've seen more chssk in one day that any of those doddering old idiots have seen in their entire lives." He flicked Obi-Wan's fringe out of the way to tap his scarred eyebrow. "Don't let them forget it."

As they travelled back to the Temple, Obi-Wan picked thoughtfully at his chin.

"Oh there you are," Aola said nasally, surrounded by tissues, a neglected bowl of hot soup, and several holobooks. "How was session?"

"Still at a standstill," said Feemor. "What are you doing on the floor?" He glanced at the completely empty, cushy couch behind her.

"It was getting boring," she said, coughing and looking flushed. "I wanted to move around a bit." She looked as though she'd scooted off edge of the couch and stayed exactly where she'd landed. Obi-Wan chuckled.

"Ach, lass, I gave you the day off so you could sleep, not read. Go on," Feemor shooed, "back to bed with you, you had a fever only just this morning."

"It was just a tiny fever," Aola mumbled, leaning away from his mother-henning. "Before I go to bed, Obi, I wanted to show you this," she pulled out some notes drawn on flimsi and waved them. "I was reading your favorite, the honorable Master Ra'alscha."

"Oh?" Obi-Wan went to sit on the couch behind her, peering down over her shoulder to her notes. She held it up for him to see.

"Yes, she wrote a natural history of the mid-rim, did you know? And look at this," she grinned, trying very hard not to cough. "It's a west ridgeland naalta puppy," she smiled as only young women could, first at her very true-to-life drawing, and then back at Obi-Wan. "It looks just like you!"

Where normally Obi-Wan would laugh, he glared at the doe-eyed animal, fluffy ginger coat and all. He stood suddenly to his feet, stepping over Aola in one stride and going to the door. "Excuse me," he said, "I forgot, I agreed to see Dooku this afternoon."

Aola watched him leave in hurt surprise. "What was that?" she asked, sensing she'd tread heavily on someone's toes without knowing it. Feemor did not respond immediately, and went around to see the sketch Aola had teasingly compared to her friend. It was small, and adorable, and did in fact bear a remarkable resemblance to Obi-Wan. The Jedi Master bit his lip. His apprentice turned to
look up at him with concern and confusion written all over her face. "Did I do something wrong?"

In all the knowledge stored away in Aola's encyclopedic brain, Feemor knew she would never find an explanation for Obi-Wan's sensitive male pride. "Isn't Master Ra'alscha a heretic?" he diverted.

Aola shrugged. "So?"

Feemor plucked her notes out of her hand. "We've got quite enough of that in this lineage. Obi-Wan's been a bad influence on you."

"And Master Qui-Gon on him, and you two seem to get on well enough." Feemor sighed. More and more, he felt his masterly authority slipping away as Aola came more unto herself. It was beautiful, and horrible.

"Get to bed, Aola, that's an order," he said, while he still could.

Obi-Wan sulked for the next week, hiding away in his apartment. Qui-Gon hadn't been on Coruscant in months, so there was no one around to tell him he was being ridiculous. He wrote reports, researched for his next committee briefing, meditated, and occasionally ventured out for something to eat. He did as Feemor said, and neglected his razor until he had a healthy week's worth of stubble dusting his cheeks in ginger. Unfortunately, the effect was not quite as he'd hoped.

"Force, Kenobi, you been sleeping in a gutter?" Garen Muln had teased after he'd run into his friend in the commissary. Garen had grown his hair down past his ears, and though clean shaven, was tall and roguish enough to make it work. Obi-Wan resented him for it. "I can't tell if you're trying to look like a homeless criminal, or just a bad imitation of your old master." Garen laughed at his own joke, and Obi-Wan's glower darkened.

He stalked back to his apartment and glared at the mirror. He pulled his hair back to look at his admittedly messy beard. He trimmed back the jagged edges into a neat line, but it hardly helped. He stood back and looked at himself, and almost threw his razor across the 'fresher when the image of Aola's naalta puppy came to mind. He set the razor aside and sighed. Idly, he fingered his scar, a pad of pink skin on the left side of his chin. It cut a path through his beard and mustache, travelling on up across his cheek and of course, his eye. He pulled back his hair to see the rest of it, parting back the strands to reveal where the jagged line disappeared into his scalp. It wasn't as pink as it'd been, years ago.

He let his hair fall back, and the puppy returned to the mirror. His thick fringe fell to its usual spot over his blind eye. Ever since he'd taken off the bandages, Obi-Wan had hated seeing his eye, being reminded of what he'd lost. He'd hated the stares, hated the hushed whispers that followed him wherever he went, hated knowing what people thought about when they looked at him. He'd never told Qui-Gon – or anyone – that he'd only ever grown out his hair in order to cover up his injury.

Once more, Obi-Wan drew up his hair in a nerftail, and this time let it part along the line of his scar. He looked at it, and at his exposed eye, and felt… nothing. He did not see a puppy, or a scar. He saw himself. He tied back his hair and reached past the razor for something hidden deeper in the cabinet drawer.

"It's… wait. No. Don't tell me." Neera Uln, a Kiffar padawan surrounded on all sides by medical textbooks and notes, had her eyes screwed shut. Aola Tarkona, an answer key held studiously in hand, watched her.
"It's-" the Twi'lek began.

"No, don't tell me!"

"Two orders of magnitude," Aola finished too soon.

"Ugh!" Neera tossed up her hands. "I would've gotten that," she said.

On Aola's other side a Zeltron woman lounged, one arm propped up against the edge of the couch and the other fiddling idly with her long padawan braid. She snorted indelicately. "Are you sure about that?" she asked sardonically.

"Shut up, Lori."

Lori smiled and shrugged. "My turn, Lola," she sat up and addressed Aola, who squinted at her and shuffled through her flashcards. She found one and smiled.

"Your patient is a Hutt female," Lori cursed, and Neera laughed. "Who has been exposed to sub-zero temperatures for over three hours, and is suffering hypothermia and frostbite of the foot. What do you do?"

"Oh, son of a..." Lori put her hands to her head in thought, and Neera cackled. "When does that ever happen?"

"You won't become a practicing healer with that attitude," Aola smiled.

Lori sighed. "Three hours, you said?"

"Yes."

"How far below zero?"

Aola glanced at her cards. "It doesn't say. No one knows."

"Chssk." Lori thought. "Okay. Umm..."

Before she could answer, the door to the apartment slid open. Aola looked up, as did Lori and Neera. All three of them did a double take.

"Obi-Wan?" Aola said, surprised. "What are you - what did you do to your hair?"

Obi-Wan shrugged distractedly. "It was getting annoying. Is Feemor here?"

"No, he's at the dojo with Master Fisto. Why?" Aola glanced to make sure Lori wasn't spying on her flashcards, but found the Zeltron gazing, quite intently, at Obi-Wan.

"Oh," the knight tsked in disappointment. "He had a book I was hoping to borrow." The knight was oblivious to the staring.

"Which one?" Aola asked, and realized that Neera was also looking at the knight.

"Intergalactic Military Law," Obi-Wan said.

"Oh, he lent that to me, actually. It's in my room if you want it."

"Oh," Obi-Wan stepped fully into the apartment. "You don't mind?"
Aola snorted. "He gave it to me to have something to write on top of. It's on my bed, I think."

"Thanks," Obi-Wan said, and walked past the women to Aola's bedroom. Lori and Neera turned to watch him. Aola picked up her flashcards again.

"Right, so, what are you going to do about the hutt, Lori? ...Lori?"

"Hmm?" the Zeltron turned back as if hearing her for the first time. "Sorry."

"Is that Obi-Wan?" Neera whispered, leaning toward Aola.

"Yeah," said the Twi'lek, frowning at her, "why?"

"Like, your Obi-Wan, Master Jinn's apprentice?"

"Yeah," Aola's frown deepened and she shook her head, baffled. "Why?"

Obi-Wan re-emerged from the far bedroom and came back down the hall. Aola was waiting on an answer from her friends, but they both remained tight-lipped as the male knight came walking back through the room. "Thanks, Aola," he said, and added, "let me know when Feemor gets back, will you?"

"Sure."

He glanced at the two other women and flashed only as much of a grin as politeness required of him. "Force be with you," he said in a rushed goodbye and closed the door behind him. Lori and Neera were staring as one at the space he'd occupied.

"You had that man in your bedroom, and you let him get away?" Lori said.

"Lori!" Aola burst out, absolutely mortified. Neera laughed.

"What?" Lori spread her hands.

"I'm a Jedi - you're a Jedi!"

"Yeah, and I have a Force-damned pulse," protested Lori, pursing her lips and gazing thoughtfully at the door. "That haircut suits him."

"Mmm," agreed Neera, "as does that jawline. And the scar – Force." Aola listened to the exchange with her mouth hanging open in disgust.

"Mmmmm," Lori nodded appreciatively, ignoring Aola completely as she turned to her notes. "His beard is so red."

"Right?"

Aola had let her flash cards fall face-up on the floor without realizing it. "You are both - I can't believe you. Either of you." She screwed up her mouth and shook her head. "That's disgusting."

There was a moment of silence as the two MediCorps hopefuls studied their notes, or appeared to. Eventually, Neera announced her newest academic insight: "You know, in humans, the color of hair that grows on the face tends to be the same color as the hair that grows on the-"

"Oh for kriff's sake," Aola threw a handful of cards at her, and the Kiffar girl shielded herself.
"Just because you don't see it," she began. Aola had stood to her feet.

"Obi-Wan's like a brother to me, and you're just… just…" Aola shivered all over. "You can study on your own." She stalked off to her room.

Lori picked up Aola's flash cards and jogged them on her knee to straighten them out. Under her breath, she said, "Give me fifteen minutes and I'll study him on my own."

"Uuugh!" Aola rushed into her room, hands over her ears. In the living room, her friends cackled.

The change in Obi-Wan's appearance was met with mixed reactions. Great portions of the female crowd, and indeed some parts of the male crowd absorbed his short hair and scruffy beard with enthusiasm and responded with attempts at flirting that flew right above Obi-Wan's head. Others, such as Master Che and Master Drallig, commended the knight on his unabashed but tasteful display of his scar. Of all them, Yan Dooku took perhaps the most direct approach.

"Oh thank the Force," he'd said upon opening the door to see his grandpadawan on the other side. "It's about time you started looking like a man." He'd ushered Obi-Wan into the apartment and not mentioned his hair again, leaving the younger Jedi to wonder what on earth Dooku thought he'd looked like before he'd cut his hair.

"It suits you," Ben had said unflinchingly upon seeing it for the first time. Obi-Wan privately thought that he could've shaved his head entirely, and it wouldn't have taken Ben by surprise. After all, the man had seen his face more than he had.

"You don't think it'll make me look like you?" Obi-Wan asked, scrubbing his beard, which, while short, still harkened back to the elder Kenobi's look.

"No, the scar sets you apart." Ben admired the worn, pinkish line and the way it parted Obi-Wan's hair to one side, revealing the extent of his injury while curling a cowlick down into a short fringe. "Be careful," the elder man warned, "there are plenty of people who might misinterpret the roguish look."

"What?" Obi-Wan asked, confused. Ben had seen how many of Aola's friends very suddenly wanted to make friends with her standoffish lineagemate. He chuckled softly at Obi-Wan's naivety, and wondered if he'd ever been this bad. Hopefully, Obi-Wan would learn faster than he had.

"Oh, nothing," he said.

The moment of truth came the following week, when the Jedi were called back for session on the Committee on Galactic Commerce. "Obi-Wan?" Feemor said incredulously as the young knight strode into view. "Force, lad, your own master wouldn't recognize you."

"I'm sure Qui-Gon would be thrilled to hear that," Obi-Wan replied, resisting the urge to reach up and rub his neck, which still felt alarmingly bare.

"He'll be glad to see you took his complaining to heart," Aola said, and stepped forward to reach up and ruffle Obi-Wan's hair. Twi'lek did not have hair on their heads, and she had long been fascinated by humans' styling habits. "It's so puffy," she smiled at him. Obi-Wan's new layer of scruff made his glare somewhat more intimidating than in the past, but the puffed up crown, reminiscent of his padawan days, spoiled it.

"I just combed that," he complained, and Aola flattened it back down into place with relative success. "Come on, we'll be late." Obi-Wan strode up into the ship, and the others followed.
At the Senate Offices, the committee room bustled with activity. All twenty-five senators were here today, grey hair glistening, age lines bending and crinkling in political patterns. Outside, Obi-Wan paused to adjust his cloak, and Feemor hung back with him. Aola went on ahead into the room, completely uncaring that she lowered the average age by several decades.

"Are you sure this will help?" Obi-Wan asked, scratching as his whiskered cheek. Feemor glanced at him, his hair, his scar. No one would mistake him for a twelve year old, that was certain. But whether or not they would take him seriously was another matter.

"There's only way to find out," Feemor smiled, and slapped Obi-Wan on the back. "Come on."

At first, no one seemed to see him, much less recognize him. It didn't happen until after Feemor had acknowledged him and asked him a question. When the ginger-haired knight opened his mouth to answer and Obi-Wan's voice came out, there were a few double-takes and under-the-breath comments. Obi-Wan heard a few snickers too, though he couldn't hear who'd made them. As they were taking their seats, Obi-Wan heard a senator at the far end of the table say, "trying to look like a grown man", and a rush of heat rose to his cheeks. He turned to see who'd said it, but Senator Palpatine cut into his thoughts.

"Master Kenobi," the Nabooian began conversationally, "I see that you've-"

Obi-Wan's patience was wearing thin, and he flicked his eyes to Palpatine in form of a glare. "That I've what, senator?" he said, grabbing his knee under the table to keep his fingers from itching the short hairline at his nape.

Palpatine was smiling, or he had been. He had indeed been about to comment on Obi-Wan's overhauled appearance, as Senators occasionally did with each other. Small talk was the gateway to politics, and establishing rapport and power with niceties as small as grooming was a powerful tool. However, there was something in Obi-Wan's eyes… not just the left, which was glaring, but also the unfamiliar right, which was milky blue and shining with the memory of the weapon he'd survived without it. The Jedi did not play by the same rules as the Senate. "You've arrived here earlier than normal, Master Jedi," the Senator rebounded. "How good of you to be on time."

Obi-Wan flashed the barest of smiles. "Of course, Senator." He looked over to the head of the table, where Mas Amedda sat, slightly elevated, as moderator.

"Vice Chair Amedda, if I may add an item to today's agenda?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Of course, Master Jedi," Amedda's bass voice boomed. Obi-Wan slid a piece of folded flimsi across the table. Mas Amedda unfolded it, read it, and nodded stoically. "Very well, Master Kenobi."

The Vice Chair called the session to order, and the agenda filed away. The meeting agendas had grown more and more predictable with time, and Obi-Wan allowed himself to pay only partial attention to the current speaker – the Senator from Velucia, he assumed from the over-dramatized tones – and consult the notes on his datapad once again.

What're you reading? The message appeared in the corner of his screen, and Obi-Wan realized he hadn't been reading at all. You look nervous. They were coming from Aola's address. The knight looked sidelong at the padawan, who was sitting straight in her seat, eyes fixated on the speaker. If Obi-Wan leaned back just slightly, he could see her hands hovering over the keyboard hidden beneath the table on her lap.

I'm fine, he texted back. The slippery knotting sensation in the pit of his stomach did not go away.
He set his datapad aside and made himself listen to the next presenter in line. They were all Senators, and they all wanted the same thing – the resources of the committee, directed to protect themselves and their own. It was their job, of course, to defend the interests of their constituencies, but as with all politics, the ties of loyalty twisted into convoluted webs of corruption and vain self-interest. Obi-Wan had dealt with plenty of politicians in his time, but never so many at once, and he was still learning to understand the motivations behind their communal decisions.

On paper, all senators were equal, but Obi-Wan knew some senators were far more equal than others. The powerful banded together, and worked in turn by extremes to find a midpoint where they could hold each other at arm's length and still nip off a choice corner of the cake, neglecting those they deemed unimportant. The process was like clockwork; the core worlds would suggest that the hunt for Federation droids should start at home with the Republic's capital, and spread outward from there. Then, someone from the mid-rim would suggest that their constituencies were suffering more acutely than the privileged Core, and thus deserved immediate relief. Then, someone from the Outer Rim territories would suggest that in addition to their own suffering, the Federation was more likely to have fled to the outer reaches of the galaxy, and thus it would be most prudent to search for hidden droids there.

At the end of it all, the assembled politicians would reach a compromise and elect to focus their efforts on a mixture of Core, Mid-Rim, and Outer Rim Territories. Almost invariably, they'd chosen to accomplish this by working along the most densely populated hyperspace lanes. It cost less, included all territories in its canvassing area, and, not insignificantly, freed up important trade routes for use by the Banking Clan. Obi-Wan certainly hadn't missed that little detail, or the fact that it was Senator Palpatine who advocated most often for hyperspace-based canvassing schemes. He cast a careful look at the Senator, thinking not for the first time that the man was an utter blankness in the Force. Sometimes, it was almost as if he wasn't there at all.

The committee ferried on through the agenda, appointed officers from the Banking Clan and Republic Intelligence sitting by in silence, as they often did. The three Jedi also held their tongues, at least until the senators had exhausted their Hegelian routines and began circling around their newfound compromise like sharks. They were ready to work out the details of what hyperspace lane would be next on their checklist, but Obi-Wan had made it a point to arrive early enough to reserve a spot to speak.

"Master Kenobi," Mas Amedda said in the same disinterested tone as he'd used all day. "You also wished to speak on the allocation of manpower and resources." All eyes turned toward the head of the room.

"Yes, Vice Chair Amedda, thank you." Obi-Wan stood to his feet, as the senators had done when they'd each spoken their piece. He looked down at his notes, and glanced at Feemor, who was watching him with encouraging attention. "I appreciate all that has been said today. I know that we all agree that the funds given to this Committee for the purpose of eradicating the Federation's illegal droid armies are sparse, and must be handled with due care. I recognize Senator Hildin's point about Manaan, and agree that Inner Rim worlds without hyperlanes have been overlooked in this Committee's decisions, a problem which I encourage the committee to rectify." He gave a smile and a nod to the aforementioned senator, but was repaid with a blank expression. Hildin blinked heavily, and too late recognized the Jedi's kindness and nodded back. She bit on her lip hard, and Obi-Wan could've sworn she was trying to stifle a yawn. He looked around the table and the room. Boredom and impatience stretched out before him in a sea of carefully tailored suits. He pressed forward.

"Manaan, along with other Inner Rim and Mid Rim worlds, has been neglected thus far, even though there have been a rash of reports of droids in that area…" One of the senators was looking
at his lap, and Obi-Wan guessed it was because he did not have Aola's ability to text without looking. "Um… and this ought to compel us to reconsider…" at the back, where they thought Obi-Wan wouldn't see, two senators in the corner were whispering to one another, carrying on a whole conversation, oblivious to the opinions of anyone but themselves. "Reconsider…" Obi-Wan sighed suddenly, and looked down at his notes. He spotted Feemor out of the corner of his eye, looking concerned but offering no help.

"You were saying, Master Kenobi?" Mas Amedda prodded.

Obi-Wan fiddled with the edge of his datapad. He'd come into this committee excited to do his part and eager to employ the diplomatic skills his teachers had lauded in him since he was old enough to talk. He understood subtlety, he understood subterfuge and underhanded politics. He was a natural at it. As an apprentice, he'd talked his way out of almost as many problems as he'd landed himself in, which had been a not insubstantial number. But that had always been at Qui-Gon's side, and Qui-Gon was a sobering personality to have around, tall and wise as he was.

Now, he stood alone. He was outnumbered, out-planned, without vote and without allies. He was in his element – but this time, he was drowning in it. No matter how Obi-Wan smiled, how he persuaded, how he leveraged this and reasoned that, the committee members refused to take him seriously. They'd looked at him and seen a boy, fresh-faced and untried, and they'd dismissed him. What must they see now? A grumpy, scruffy, scarred, half-blind Jedi who'd been to hell and come back. A firebrand as youthful and brash as his ginger hair.

Fine, Obi-Wan thought spitefully to himself, abandoning his matured sense of nuance and subtlety, if that's what you want me to be.

"I think focusing our efforts on hyperspace lanes is ineffectual, irresponsible, and a colossal waste of time," he broke the silence. That woke everyone up. Even Feemor's eyes widened. Obi-Wan watched the Senators move through expressions of surprise and anger, and fixed one of the closest with a look. "It has become clear me that this committee is not actually interested in hunting droids. If anything, it is dedicated to making it appear as though it is hunting droids when in fact it is playing maid for the Intergalactic Banking Clan, whose money I have no doubt has been working miracles on a great many economies along the Hydian Way."

"The restoration of our prosperity is our end goal, Master Kenobi," said senator Demaera Thane of Kuat. "We cannot afford single-mindedness in an issue as complex as that of the dissolution of the Trade Federation."

"I believe we can," Obi-Wan shot back, "and right now, we should. We cannot rebuild what we have lost until we first clean up the mess left behind, would you not agree, Senator?"

She had to nod her head. This small victory helped Obi-Wan warm to his theme.

"This committee was created by will of the Senate to erase all trace of the Federation's treachery from the galaxy, to protect our Republic from such threats as those faced by the peaceful world of Naboo. If I remember the incident correctly, the droids had been programmed to attack all non-Federation peoples on sight," he put careful emphasis on the last syllable, angling his face so the room would see his scar and remember the lightsaber he carried with him. "If this committee seeks to restore anything, we must restore safety first. It is something Naboo remembers better than most. Was it not what our good Senator Palpatine argued for when he moved for the formation of this committee?" Obi-Wan asked, gesturing across the table to the Nabooian senator. All eyes turned to Palpatine.

"Well," the senator said easily, "I certainly agree with you that safety is a paramount concern,
"If you are having trouble remembering, Senator, I have brought a copy of the transcript," Obi-Wan supplied helpfully. Palpatine looked up at him, nonplussed. Obi-Wan gave him a smile.

"That won't be necessary, Master Kenobi," said Palpatine, smile like plaster, voice lower than before.

"Very well. I would still like to remind the committee of a few of your exact words, if you please." He read from his notes: "'a joint committee with the Senate, the office of the Chancellor, and the Jedi Order to continue to hunt down these droids and see to it that they never pose a threat to any other world.' That is how you described this committee, Senator Palpatine, and a majority of your peers voted such a body into existence." He gestured around the room. "However, as you send your forces from the Jedi, the Banking Clan, and others across the galaxy on relief efforts, there has been little to show for it. Several thousands droids, a spare battalion or two, but nothing like the numbers we know they are capable of, nothing like the reports we receive from off-lane worlds like Manaan. The methods this committee has decided to adopt are not working, anyone can see. By persisting in this manner, we are abandoning the mandate we agreed to when took our seats. The threat remains, and this committee must do better."

There was a lull of silence. Many of the Senators, Thane included, were red-faced with anger. Others, usually hiding in the back, twiddled their thumbs and looked contemplative. One senator, from a backwater world Obi-Wan made a mental note to learn about, was nodding along. Before anyone could finish ruminating and challenge him, the Jedi added:

"The Jedi may not have a vote in all decisions made by this committee, but we did take an oath to protect this Republic and keep its peace. If this committee is not determined to make a more substantial effort towards the ends upon which it was founded, I fear we may be forced to review our partnership and redirect our resources where they will have a more substantial effect."

Feemor was frozen in his spot, trying very hard to keep his eyes at a reasonable size, staring hard at the table top, hands folded, knuckles white. Feemor knew Obi-Wan had no power to threaten such a thing; even he, Obi-Wan, and Aola together would've had a hutt's chance on Hoth to renegotiate the scope of their appointments with the High Council or the Chancellor himself. Mas Amedda should have known it. The Senators might have known it. Obi-Wan held his breath as he waited to see if anyone would call his bluff.

"If you do not wish us to work in the hyperspace lanes, Master Kenobi," said the one senator who'd been nodding along, "how do you suggest canvassing an entire galaxy for hidden caches of droids?"

"Quite simply, Senator," Obi-Wan said, ignoring the faces around him who looked fit to spit poison, "by following what we know. Republic intelligence processes reports of droid activity every day, and many of those reports estimate the number of droids. I suggest we follow this data and target the areas with the densest activity."

"Those reports can be highly inaccurate," protested Senator Miamse of Denon, who Obi-Wan knew was currently benefitting greatly from the Committee's work along the Corellian Run, "we could be wasting time, and taxpayer money."

"Shocking how that becomes a concern all of a sudden," Obi-Wan thought privately, and then said aloud: "It is a fair point, senator. The initial reports from Naboo claimed there may be as many as five hundred droids on-planet," he allowed himself a tiny smile, but his scar pulled it crooked in such a way it was impossible to tell if he were grinning or frowning. "This was inaccurate, of
course, as there were nearly three thousand droids in the compound."

Miamse opened his mouth as if to speak, but his gaze caught on the reflection of Obi-Wan's scarred eye, and his retort evaporated.

"The work on the Corellian Run is still ongoing," the senator of Milagro said what Miamse was not brave enough to manage, "are you suggesting we draw out all officers from those worlds and reassign them halfway across the galaxy?"

"No," Obi-Wan said. He'd spent the last week formulating this plan. "Not at first. Draw out a few officers at a time, send them to nearby worlds we know are under threat, no matter what lanes they're on. Allow the Jedi to help Republic Intelligence and the IGBC officers face the threats head-on. Move through worlds quickly, and then move onto the next."

"It will take a long time," protested someone to Obi-Wan's left.

"This will take a long time," the Jedi snapped back, waving a hand around the table. There were other questions, too. Would this impact the cost? Would the branches of intelligence really need to get involved? What about the other hyperspace lanes? Should they operate sector by sector or purely by severity of the report? Obi-Wan answered them as best as he could with the plan he'd drafted.

At length, after the questions died down, the Jedi shifted his weight back, coming down from his firebrand's podium. He cleared his throat politely. In softer tones than before, he said, "I implore the committee to consider not just the well-being of their respective worlds, but the safety of the Republic and the mission they were charged with upon this body's inception."

He sat in the silence that followed. Feemor released a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. Aola looked at Obi-Wan, and when the knight glanced at her hands under the table, she was silently clapping. He made himself look away. The Force rippled in conflicting currents of anger, agreement, impatience, contempt, and deliberation. While the masks of politics may have hidden the physical expression of so many emotions, the senators could not hide their silent cacophony from the eyes of the Force. Except... Obi-Wan's looked at Senator Palpatine, his eyes drawn there not by any particular emotion, but the complete lack of it. Like the blind spot he'd never known he'd had until he was half-blind, Obi-Wan looked at Palpatine and saw nothing but what his intuition supplied for him.

He'd stared too long, and now Palpatine was staring back. "Is the safety of our hyperspace lanes not equally as important as the safety of any other Republic territory, Master Jedi?" asked Palpatine.

"Of course they are, Senator," Obi-Wan said, ignoring how Feemor was tensing up again, "but forgive me when I say that I've never heard of a Federation droid pirate gang. I have, however, seen droids tear up the landscape of free sentients who had no option to flee. Even safety must have priorities."

"It is well-said, Master Kenobi," said Senator Thothili. "I move to approve the Jedi's strategy and compose a plan to relocate forces from the Corellian Run to worlds who have articulated a specific threat."

"Should we not wait?" asked Senator Thane, glancing up the head of the table toward Palpatine.

"No, we shouldn't," said a portly Iktotchi who Obi-Wan recognized as Senator Oloro from Taris. With the Hydian Way officially cleared and open for business, he had nothing to lose here, except perhaps economic competition. "Seconded!" he boomed.
Mas Amedda pounded his gavel. "We will take the matter to a vote. Senators, all in favor?"

"Aye!" A wave of hands rose, and Amedda took a count.

"Those against?" The remainder of hands rose, save for one. "Senator Palpatine, you choose to abstain?"

"That is correct, Vice Chair."

"Very well," Amedda made a note. "Then let the records show that today, the committee approved a new plan to divert resources to worlds in distress based on reports collected by the Senate Bureau of Intelligence, fifteen Ayes, nine Nay, one Abstention." He tapped his gavel. He glanced at the chrono on the wall and sighed. "The committee will adjourn for today."

The members filed out one by one. For once, Obi-Wan hung back, and was gratified when the senators actually looked at him, some nodding, some glaring, but all seeing him for what he was: someone who wouldn't go down without a fight.

"Might I say, you spoke well today, Master Kenobi," Senator Palpatine said sweetly as he came by the young Jedi.

"Thank you senator. I have to admit, I was surprised by your abstention."

Palpatine shrugged apologetically. "I am the committee head. I must keep an impartial eye on things, you understand."

"I don't," Obi-Wan said. Palpatine smiled somewhat wider, and Obi-Wan could practically smell the contempt hidden behind the facade.

"I know you mean well, young Kenobi, but I would feel amiss if I did not tell you – impertinence will earn you no good graces here. Tread with care, speak carefully."

A few years ago – hell, perhaps even a few hours ago – Obi-Wan would've taken the matter to heart, and he knew it was solid advice in the avaricious world of Galactic politics. But if he was going to get anything done, he was going to have to play a controversial role.

"Thank you for your concern, Senator. If I may say so, an unwillingness to defend our Republic will earn you no good graces in the Jedi Order." He smiled, and turned to go.

In the lift on their way down to the docks, Feemor cast a look at his young companion. "I think it worked too well," he said.

"What, the hair?" Obi-Wan frowned.

"I was talking about the beard, actually," Feemor eyed the scruff, and couldn't help but imagine it trimmed into a careful jaw strap and mustache. "You were channelling Qui-Gon back there."

"And you think that's bad?"

"I thought you did grand," said Aola, smiling.

Feemor raised his eyebrows, and wondered if they were greyer than they'd been that morning. "Ach, lad, good or bad, you're going to have to watch yourself."

The lift whirred as they travelled down in silence. Eventually, Feemor said, "But Aola's right," He winked. "You did well."
"Master Kenobi has certainly determined what it is that the Jedi want," Mas Amedda was picking up the last of his materials before leaving the conference hall. As committee head, Sheev Palpatine had stayed behind to confer with the Vice Chair of the Senate afterward.

"What the Jedi want, or what he wants?" Palpatine wondered aloud. Amedda shrugged.

"For the purposes of this committee, Senator, I don't think it makes much difference, but he speaks as though he's got Mace Windu behind his words. Or someone more powerful – if there were such a thing."

"I was under the impression that Master Windu was very carefully staying out of this committee,“ said Palpatine.

"Indeed, but he must've chosen Obi-Wan for a reason." A stack of notes and gavel tucked under arm, Mas Amedda said in an aside, "He's young, idealistic, doesn't know any better, and still he manages to accomplish something." He chuckled as he walked to the door. "That sounds just like Master Windu's sort of joke."

Sheev Palpatine was not laughing.

"A good evening to you, Senator."

"Yes, thank you, Vice Chair Amedda."

Wheels turned in their cosmic machinations, tumbling beyond the grasp of Jedi or Sith or committee. Palpatine rolled with the movement, and went to his office to place a call. "I require your services sooner than anticipated," he spoke into the comm in the privacy of his own office, voice deep and impolitic. "There's been a change of plans."
"This is stupid," Anakin declared. Ben did not look up from his work as he said,

"Is that the best you can come up with?"

Where his master could not see, Anakin rolled his eyes, but dutifully wracked his vocabulary for a better word. "This is **pointless,**" he amended.

"And why do you say that?" Ben asked, re-negotiating space in his new tea cabinet to fit a second teapot.

Anakin pushed his textbook away, threw out his knees, and slouched as only boys can. "Because all Master Rorti ever has us do is talk all day." Jedi initiates were exposed to a broad curriculum of studies before they became padawans or Corps members, and despite his new status, Anakin was no exception. Presently, he was wading his way through elementary-level rhetoric and hating every second of it.

"And you don't like talking?" Ben asked, droll. Once satisfied with his work, he closed the cabinet and turned to regard his despondent padawan.

"No." Anakin whined, and dragged over his assignment sheet to glare at it. "We're supposed to talk 'persuasively' about something, to, um…" he read, "practice protecting others and defending ourselves through words. What does that even mean?"

"What do you suppose it means?"

Anakin sighed and let his head fall back. "I don't know. It's a bunch of hot air."

"Anakin," Ben snapped, eyebrows scolding, "where did you learn that phrase?"

The padawan blinked at him. "You said it last week," he said. Ben opened his mouth and held it there, trying not to go red in the face. He'd forgotten how tetchy the field of childrearing could be.

"I think you will find," the master said, opting to ignore his own gaffe, "that talking can get you out of a great many problems." He came around the kitchen counter to stand near the table at which Anakin had been attempting to study. "Say you're stuck on a planet on a mission, and the politician you were meant to be working with decides that it would be a good idea to bomb all three of the local moons, which are full of innocent people." It was a ludicrous scenario, but Anakin wouldn't know that. "How do you convince him not to?"

Anakin thought about it, and shrugged. "Why can't I just fly away and save the moons?"

"You can't save all three at once," Ben said, taking a seat at the table. Anakin's smooth brow was beginning to wrinkle in deliberation.

"Why not? He'd have to send a signal to actually bomb them, and if I could interrupt the signal, he wouldn't be able to."

"You don't know where the signal is coming from."

"I could find it."

"Not fast enough."
"If I had Arbie and a ship I could," Anakin said, crossing his arms.

"You have neither."

"Then how'd I get on planet?"

"You flew, of course, but you left your ship in the hangar, and by the time the politician threatens to bomb the moons, he's stolen your ship and hidden it away."

"And Arbie?"

"You left him on your ship."

Anakin scoffed. "I would never do that."

"You would, because it is the polite thing to do, and in this scenario I'm imagining that you are old enough to consider your manners before your droids." Ben couldn't help but feel they'd gone horribly off topic. "So, no ship, no droids, you have no time to find the signal, how do you convince him to not bomb the moons?"

Anakin, seeing the answer Ben was searching for and wanting desperately to avoid saying it aloud, decided, "I could knock him out."

"Anakin," Ben admonished, "that'll only make it worse. Who's to say one of his followers won't pick up where he left off?"

"I could knock them all out," Anakin smiled cheekily. Ben's eyebrows came down over his gaze like lead weights.

"No, you can't. You can, however," Ben pushed Anakin's textbook back toward him, "try to talk him out of it."

"Talking never did anything like that," Anakin whined, grimacing at the offensive literature.

"It can and it has - believe me. If you apply yourself to Master Rorti's instructions, you might see what I mean." Ben stood to return to the half-unpacked box of kitchen things. Anakin continued to mope.

"I shouldn't have to," the padawan grumbled, thinking Ben wouldn't hear. He did. The Master paused, let out a soft sigh, and selected a new strategy.

"Alright," Ben said, turning to face his apprentice with an open expression. "Tell me why."

Anakin blinked at him in open surprise. "What?"

"Tell me why you shouldn't have to do your homework, and I may find room to negotiate the matter."

The prospect of avoiding homework was too much for Anakin to comprehend. "You're going to let me skip it?" He had to be sure.

Ben shrugged easily. "Why not? So long as you can convince me." If Anakin were a few years older, a bit more worldly wise, the easy angle of Ben's smile would have been deeply disturbing. "So, why shouldn't you do it?"

"Because it's pointless," Anakin repeated and practically leaped into the trap.
"Yes, so you've said, and I've explained my disagreement with your argument rather vividly. Do you have a rebuttal?" Ben asked plainly.

"A…rebut-a what?" Anakin had never heard – or read – the word before.

"A rebuttal. A response. I've responded to your argument, now you must respond to mine, and convince me to abandon my position with persuasive logic."

Anakin's face was frozen in a portrait of distress. He tried to glance down at his assignment sheet for guidance without actually looking down at it. "But… wh…" he sighed, and looked at the book, and then back up at his master. "Does it have to be talking logic?" He kicked the legs of his chair, whole body itching to move.

"What," Ben chuckled, "are you going to knock me out?"

Anakin stared up at his Master with an irritated expression. Ben stared back, and raised a single eyebrow in challenge. Eventually, the master stepped up to the table and said, "I think you will find there are whole chapters written on how to form a rebuttal." He opened the holobook Anakin had tossed aside and scrolled through its pages. Anakin watched the words fly past like a child watches a serving of boiled vegetables land on their dinner plate.

"If I can convince you about how pointless this is, can I skip it for the rest of term?" Anakin asked suspiciously.

"Of course," Ben shrugged. Anakin took a bracing breath and dove into the holobook like a man on a mission. Immediately, he began compiling notes. Ben strolled back to the kitchen and quietly sipped his tea. He resumed unpacking his belongings.

Strictly speaking, Jedi did not have personal belongings. However, as with all creatures, Jedi were in the habit of accumulating things; plants, teapots, books, gifts. Property was putting too strong a word on it, but even though these disparate trinkets were technically property of the Jedi Order and by extension the Galactic Republic, for all intents and purposes, they belonged to their caretakers. Ben was a caretaker to a great collection of the Republic's property, and in the hectic weeks since he'd moved into his new home, he'd been unpacking slowly, box by box.

The apartment he now shared with Anakin was not unlike the one he'd called home years ago at Qui-Gon's side. Facing it from the front door, the apartment was shaped like a right trapezoid set on end. On the short wall, there was the front door. The left wall was straight, and accommodated the U-shaped kitchen, while the right wall was angled outward and shone with three floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked the very edge of one of the lower temple gardens. The far wall was much wider than its opposite. In the middle was a small alcove that held three doors; Ben's room on the right, Anakin's smaller room on the left, and in between them the shared 'fresher.

Unlike his old apartment, this one had no balcony, so the floor along the windows was lined with Ben's collection of plants. He made a mental note to request some plant stands and a coffee table from the quartermaster. There was a solitary bookshelf set in between two of the windows, and Ben went over to it with the heaviest of his boxes to unpack his personal collection of literature.

He was setting his books into place when Anakin said from the table, "Master, your 'pad's beeping."

"I've got it right here," Ben said, glancing at the datapad set alongside his stacks of books. "It must be yours."
"No," Anakin looked up from his work and craned his neck to see the glowing device on the other side of the table. "I don't recognize the frequency number."

Ben frowned and went to see it. It was indeed his datapad; the two must have been mixed up in the move to their new quarters. Ben glanced back at the other 'pad mixed in with his library and back to the pinging message notification. It was from an Alderaanian number. Ben did not recognize it, but he had a guess. He tucked the 'pad under one arm and went into his room, scooping up the mystery datapad on his way there.

Once in the privacy of his own quarters, he opened the message from Breha Organa. It was a short holovid. As soon as it opened, his face erupted into a smile.

"Say hello to Uncle Ben!" Gums gleaming and brown eyes squinted into chubby crescents, Crown Princess Cora Organa bounced on her mother's lap. Breha held one chubby arm between her fingers and helped the infant wave. "Cora's just turned three months," Breha smiled into the camera, face glowing with pleasure and pride. "I know you can't leave Coruscant at the moment, but we do all miss you terribly. Shmi is recovering well, you'll be glad to know. I told Bail about your last message, and he says if your friend is still looking for some choice clone advisors, we have a few here at our universities that may be of interest. I've attached some information to this message. In the meantime, please give our love to little Anakin and take care of yourself. Shmi sends her love to both of you. Force keep you, Master Kenobi." With a last smile from the ladies of the House of Organa, the message came to a halt.

Ben glanced at the files she'd attached, and watched the video loop again, still smiling at Cora. It'd been an easy birth, from what he understood, with Breha and a retinue of midwives there to see Shmi safely through. Shmi would be helping nurse Cora for several more months, but was relinquishing most motherly duties to Breha. The princess was a complete natural, as Shmi had told him several times before. As Ben put the 'pad away, he couldn't help but glance at the door, thinking of his young apprentice beyond.

Anakin knew that his birth mother was on Alderaan, and he knew that Ben was familiar with her, but he'd not yet learned exactly how remarkable she was. Ben was hesitant to talk about her with him in any detail; at such a young age, he was not sure if Anakin would be desperate to leave the Order for her or not. However, he remembered his mistakes last time, and resolved that if ever Anakin asked about her, he would listen carefully. For now, however,

"Master, what does 'supererogatory' mean?" Anakin's voice carried through the closed door.

Ben glanced at the deactivated datapad he'd found with his books, but shook his head and resolved to look at it later. "It means 'unnecessary', or 'more than needed'," he said as he opened the door. "Where did you read that?" He leaned over Anakin to see the textbook. The apprentice pointed. Ben chuckled.

"Your ambition does you credit, Anakin, but you won't learn faster by starting at chapter eleven."

He flicked open the menu and selected the first chapter. "Sometimes you must walk before you can fly."

Anakin sulked, and Ben let him. The master hung around to ensure the boy was actually doing his homework, busying himself with unpacking, making a pot of tea, cleaning up old bits of packing material and trash left behind by the cleaning droids. He was on his second cup of tea when there was a knock at the door. Anakin looked up from his work, grateful for the distraction. "Come in," Ben said.

Yan Dooku strode into the room and asked without preamble, "How much did you pay the
quartermaster to give you a corner suite?" He cast an appreciative eye to the tall windows and the view beyond. "I've been trying to land one of these for years."

Ben went around to greet the visitor. "When I went to his office he'd already picked out a windowless shoebox for us, but as the Force willed, after some persuasive negotiation, he came around to my point of view." To his credit, Anakin did try not to whip his eyes around and stare, but ended up looking at his master in awe anyway. Ben sensed it, and met his apprentice's look with a smug little smile.

"Your new master is a devious fellow, Padawan Skywalker," said Dooku. Anakin shrugged in forced nonchalance.

"I guess," he said. Ben was still smiling.

"Anakin is working on his rhetoric homework," he explained. Anakin scoffed softly. "Oh, I'm sorry," Ben corrected himself, "Anakin is formulating a piece to persuade me that rhetoric homework is pointless and he shouldn't have to do any."

"Is he really?" Dooku managed an immaculate deadpan, and added an admiring look in Anakin's direction.

"Yes, so long as he can convince me, I've agreed to write off all dues for Master Rorti's class."

"So long as he can convince you."

"Of course," Ben's eyes gleamed. Dooku saw it and the masters shared a private joke.

"That's very generous of you." Dooku said, and turned to his great-grandpadawan. "Best of luck to you, young Skywalker." Anakin smiled uncertainly, and went back to his work.

"So, what brings you here, Master?" Ben asked, crossing his arms into opposite sleeves, "can I do something for you?"

"Oh, no, not as such," Dooku shrugged, and glanced out the windows. "I'd heard you'd moved in, I just came to see how you and Anakin were getting on, see if you needed anything, or..." he trailed off. Warm hospitality was not part of Yan Dooku's repertoire. In the filtered daylight, Ben thought he could see the slightest, involuntary wobbles in man's posture, the thinnest fog in his eyes that reminded him that Yan Dooku was not a young man anymore. "But I see you've got everything in order. I ought to be going."

"No, no," Ben waylaid him, "come, sit. I'll make some tea. It's good to see you." He glanced at Anakin, who was pretending too hard not to eavesdrop. "Anakin, you remember where the quartermaster's offices are? Good. You can practice your convincing me by convincing him that we need two plant stands and a coffee table. Yes, now. Thank you."

With Anakin released onto an unsuspecting quartermaster, Ben and Yan went to sit at the kitchen table on either side of the tea tray. The apartments were much quieter with the padawan away, and for a few minutes the only sounds were the clinks of the teaware and the rush of hot water out of the pot. "I've had a message from Alderaan this morning," Ben said, not looking up from the tea ritual, "Princess Breha tells me they have a fine selection of clone scholars on planet, if Konstanza is still looking for an advisor."

"That's very kind of her, but I think my sister-in-law has finally made a selection. I flatter myself when I tell you he was one my choices," Dooku looked pleased with himself.
Ben chuckled. "Credit where credit is due, master. I suppose you'll be back to Sorenno to train him, then?"

"No, my work is done. She's got it all well handled - Konstanza is not regent for nothing." Dooku looked out the window again, and again, Ben saw the restless age showing in the lines of his eyes. In another life, he never would have thought of Dooku as a restless soul, but he could practically feel the man itching for work, for some cause to apply himself to. It reminded him of Qui-Gon.

"And you've wrapped up your work with Sifo Dyas' case?"

"There is nothing to wrap up," Dooku shrugged. "The investigation has been sent to the forensic droids, and will likely remain there for some time. OrbitSec and Republic Immigration have the chip-removal procedures down to an art, and so, I have nothing to occupy me." He drummed his fingers against a trouser leg. Ben glanced at the amber tea as it poured into a cup, and wished he had chosen a more calming variety.

"Has Qui-Gon not returned from his missions?"

"No, he was re-assigned to address some spat on Eriadu, of all places." The thought of his nature-loving apprentice cooped up on a roiling ball of pollution made Dooku shake his head. "Force help him."

"You've spoken to him?" Ben passed a cup of tea across the table and Dooku took it in one hand.

"Yes, a few days ago. It's all to do with the Senate's wild droid hunt." Dooku paused and chuckled softly. "When I told him he could thank his very own apprentice for moving him from the comforts of Correllia to a backwater trading post, he was chagrined to say the least."

Ben shrugged and leaned back with his tea. "It's a good strategy Obi-Wan's come up with, and I'm glad to see he's finally figured out how to stand up for himself."

Dooku mirrored Ben's relaxed pose, and crossed one leg over the other. "Oh, I wholeheartedly agree with you, and when I told him about last week's upset, Qui-Gon was beside himself with pride. However, his pride in his apprentice is at odds with his dislike of industrial wastelands."

"He was raised on Coruscant," Ben shrugged dismissively, "how bad could it possibly be?"

Dooku laughed. "I'm sure he will be happy to tell you, whenever he gets back."

Ben laughed and drank his tea. "I'm sure, whenever that may be."

"Yes." Dooku watched the liquid oscillate in his cup, and slowly his face slid into a frown. It wasn't the stern expression Ben had come to associate with him, but a sadder, more human look. "You know, a year, two years ago, I would have followed him out into the field," Dooku said quietly. "Just months ago, I thought to take on an apprentice. The sudden shift in the conversation was a palpable wave in the Force, rolling into the room like a stormfront blown in on a clear day.

"And now?" Ben was watching his face carefully, like a man watches cracks appear in a dam.

"And now," Dooku looked at the windows again, and Ben wasn't sure if he was watching the gardens or his own reflection. "I see how incredibly old I am. Qui-Gon was tired when I spoke to him, though he'd never admit it. Tired and grey. He's getting old, and if even he is showing age, how old am I?" Dooku turned back to Ben, but did not look the younger man in the eye. "I must follow my own master's example and give up the field to become a scholar." A shadow fell over his face, and if Ben didn't know any better, he would've said that Dooku looked scared. "But my
speciality, chosen so long ago, drives me only to the darkest corners of our knowledge. I must pursue the darkness in these dark times, I must use what I know to help my Order - to help your own life's mission, Obi-Wan." He let Ben's true name weigh down the thought and hold it in the air while he sighed. "But the dark gets darker all the time, but what else can an old sentinel do? It's lonely place to be." It was a complaint of the old to the young, made without expectation of sympathy, but behind Ben's ginger hair there remained the memory of sun-bleached white.

"I understand," Ben confessed without thinking.

"Do you?"

Obi-Wan nodded solemnly. "I was a few years younger than Qui-Gon is now when I died," the truth tumbled out without pausing to consult him, "I lived alone after the Order fell, for nineteen years." The age came through in his voice, as if even the memory of Tatooine could turn him grey again. "I pursued the Light, but the Dark was always there, just behind me, waiting for me to glance back." He looked up to Dooku, who was listening in surprised silence. "It's not a kind place to be."

"No," Dooku said at length. His shoulders slumped in the company of a peer and he agreed again, "no."

Ben's voice softened when he said, "It will not last forever, Grandmaster."

Dooku chuckled without humor. "Neither will I."

The conversation trailed off and they finished their tea. Afterward, Ben could not manufacture any reason for Dooku to stay, so the elder man gracefully took his leave. Ben tried not to wonder what he would do to occupy his time.

Not too long after Dooku had gone away, Anakin reappeared with his arms around a small plant stand.

"Ah," Ben smiled at his apprentice and the squat black table, "just the one?"

Anakin set it down and shrugged. "He said he couldn't give me any of the things you asked for, but I managed to get this."

"How?"

Anakin's mouth bunched to one side like it always did when he was trying to find a way to be truthful without being honest. "By getting him to talk."

"Getting him to talk?"

"I called his comm," Anakin tapped the small commlink on his belt, "and when he went to answer it he turned his back, and I took this." Anakin patted the table proudly.

"You took it from his storeroom?" Ben blinked.

"No, from his office."

"Anakin," Ben exclaimed, hand going to his face.

"But you said-"

"Take that back and return it this instant."
"But you wanted-" 

"Now, padawan," Ben pointed. Hanging his head and grumbling, Anakin took his brilliantly-acquired spoils and shuffled back out of the door. Once alone, Ben sighed. Resigned that the quartermaster would be doing him no favors any time soon, he moved two of his plants to the bookshelf, one to the kitchen counter, and one on top of the fridge. The last two he tucked under either arm and moved to his own room, where they could sit by the single window until they found a better home.

On his way out, Ben spotted the spare, unidentified datapad sitting on his bed. He opened it and was prompted for a thumbprint. He gave it, and the file opened to the same spot as he'd left it years ago. His eyebrows lifted in recognition and he scrolled through the list. Familiar entries read much the same as he'd last saw them, but a new line of text caught his eye: Returned to Coruscant 06/18/25023. Ben glanced at the bottom of the document and read: Last edited by Mace Windu on 06/18/25023. Yesterday.

Memories washed over him like water, bittersweet and unexpected. He rubbed at his beard, lost in thought. When Anakin came back and opened the door, he jumped.

"Well?" Ben asked. Anakin slunk through the room, shoulders sagging. "Did you apologize?"

"Yes," Anakin said miserably, and fell into a chair at the table. "He says you have good taste in furniture and horrible taste in apprentices."

Ben laughed aloud, and came to stand behind Anakin. He put his hands on either of the boy's shoulders. "Nonsense. Even if my apprentice does occasionally have poor taste in negotiation tactics, and even if he will spend the next several days running extra drills to make up for his lapse in judgement," Ben gave Anakin's shoulders a stern squeeze, then leaned over to take the tea tray away. He put Anakin's textbook back in its place. "I'm sure you have plenty of room for improvement."

While Anakin stewed over his homework, Ben took up the old list of grey Jedi and wondered if history could repeat itself in a lighter shade than before.

On Eriadu, Qui-Gon Jinn covered his mouth and nose with a sleeve as he crossed the landing platform, squinting his eyes into slits against the stinging, yellow air. The crew all had goggles and breathing masks to filter out the pollution, but unless he wanted to soil his rebreather filter to cross the twenty-yard distance to his next post, the Jedi had little choice. He coughed once they were in the shelter of recycled indoor air.

"I apologize for the mess outside, Master, it's been a nasty day." A short, fat human man approached with the bustling demeanor of someone in charge. He had stringy grey hair that could have been neat if it had been combed properly. It was not combed, and formed a strange halo around the welding goggles pushed up into his hairline. Although his overalls and his face were covered in smears of grease and oil, when he extended his hand it was surprisingly and mercifully clean. "Torc Belinger, H4Q51 sector, head of operations." Qui-Gon shook his hands.

"Most ports on this planet are similarly smogged," the Jedi tried to force his wince into a smile. "It's hardly your fault, Mr. Belinger." The mechanic chuckled like a sputtering engine.

"So they may be, but it's not meant to be this bad, even here. We've got one whole scrubber tower down, which we can't afford, part of a whole grid outage, which we can't seem to fix."
"Yes, I gather that's why I've been sent here." Qui-Gon followed Torc as the man set off at a
determined pace. The man's laugh scraped echoes off the walls.

"After a kind, Master Jedi, after a kind. I don't quite understand it myself, but I can follow orders if
it'll get my mech back online. We didn't know what the hell we were lookin' at when the boys
showed us the footage, but the lads at HQ told us to put in the report. Didn't know the Jedi would
take an interest so fast. It's this way, watch your head now, you're a bit tall for these tunnels."

Qui-Gon dutifully ducked and followed Torc down hallways and around rattling pipelines, past
locked doors until they were deep into the belly of the never-ending labyrinth of machinery that
made Eriadu Eriadu. Cold water dripped from the natural stone tunnels even as rusted, scummy
steel pipes hissed with steam. Qui-Gon's back was beginning to ache, and by the time they reached
a room large enough to stand, it was a wonder that he was able to straighten up at all. A few dirt-
smeared men in hard helmets were gathered around a computer console. At the sound of
approaching footsteps, they looked up at the newcomers, particularly at the unfamiliar figure of
Master Jinn.

"Alright, Wink, show 'em what you found." Torc said to the young man nearest to the console.

"Right, sir," he said. His hands hovered over the console, pushing buttons and pressing keys. Torc
waved Qui-Gon closer so the Jedi could see the display. After Wink entered in a passcode, the feed
from a security camera fizzled into view. "When the grid went down last month, we thought
maybe a deep-crust tremor had thrown off our mech," Wink explained, "so we did a scan of the
bedrock and found a big pocket, like for mech or something similar, but it's not ours. It's buried
deep. We could only dig a hole big enough to send some droids through to see what's what."

"Is that what we're looking at now?" Qui-Gon pointed to the camera feed.

"Yes, sir."

"And what have you found so far?"

"Well... just look, sir." Wink took up a small joystick control and waggled the droid's camera
around until he could focus it in the dim lighting. He entered in a quick code, and the droid's
headlamps came on.

Droids. Packed in like sardines, there were thousands upon thousands of droids. The ones in front
looked exactly like the ones Qui-Gon had faced alongside Ben on Alaris Prime, but there were
other ones, larger ones behind them. Round ones ones with turrets, ones with hulking steel armor
and artillery. Behind all of them, there were great, looming shapes, shadowy and threatening. They
were deactivated. Or at least, they appeared so.

A chill had fallen over the group of onlookers. "We didn't know who they belonged to, sir," one of
the other hard-helmeted men broke the silence. He looked nervously at the Jedi, eyes suspecting an
answer he didn't want to say aloud.

"When did you say your grid went down?" Qui-Gon asked.

"About a month ago. Dug down here first thing, put in a report within the week. Do you know
what we're dealing with here, sir?"

"I heard this is what happened on Naboo," said Wink.

"Just 'cause there're droids down there don't mean they're Federation make," said his friend. "This
rock's been a smuggler's hideout since before your ancestors could talk. There's no telling how long
this cache's been here. Look at 'em, covered in dust."

But Qui-Gon could see that the dust was not so thick as that. "I'm afraid your friend is right," he said, gaze not wavering from the display. He could hear the echoes of blaster fire in his memory. If he squinted at the frame hard, he could see that each of the droids in view held the familiar weapon in both metal claws. "Those are Federation droids."

Silence. Wink huffed out his cheeks and produced a greasy handkerchief to wipe his brow. Torc, pudgy face contorted into a frown, tried to save face in front of his lads.

"Well," he said, "at least they ain't movin'."

"Yet," Wink added lowly, and shrugged when Torc sent him a sharp glare.

"I'll send word to Coruscant right away," Qui-Gon said, and began to step away from the console. "Leave it all as it is." Torc hurried over to lead the Jedi back up to the planet surface.

"You'll have to go to the next quadrant, Master. Our main comm tower was on the downed grid, and we've been hopping around on backup ever since. Planetary comm is fine, but anything further out takes hours."

Qui-Gon bent back down to avoid the tunnel ceiling, and his back and hips creaked in painful distress. He sighed, and imagined he could already feel the sting of the shipyard air. "Very well," he said aloud. To himself, he said, I'm getting too old for this. As he had the thought, a low-set pipe hit him squarely across the forehead. He hissed, and moved on.

If it came down fighting dusty battle droids or spending more time in mole-sized tunnels, Qui-Gon thought he'd take his chances with the droids.

"I am not saying that this new strategy is not working," the senator was saying, putting out his hands in a placating gesture, "but if we completely neglect the major hyperspace lanes, we are not only wasting time taking backroads at every turn and overlooking the plights of commercially significant worlds, we run the risk of letting the Federation high-tail it out of whatever holes they're hiding in by leaving the fastest, most accessible routes within their monopoly."

Agreements and dissents rumbled across the room. Valorum scanned them with a sweep of his eyes, remaining politely silent as the committee did its work. His office had been invited to this committee as as a contributing body, but as the Republic executive, he was careful to keep his opinion on a close reign. It was the tactful thing to do.

To Valorum's left, Obi-Wan cleared his throat. With an effort so strong it should've earned him a commendation, the Chancellor did not roll his eyes. The Jedi – or at least, this particular Jedi – did not adhere to the same principles of tact that had seen him through two and a half terms as Supreme Chancellor.

"Master Kenobi," Finis said with as little feeling as he could manage. When he looked at Obi-Wan to grant him the floor, he saw Feemor Gard wincing.

"Thank you Chancellor," The Jedi said politely, and continued. "I agree with Senator Y'thril's point – systems along the lanes are still a vital interest of this committee, and we should not ignore them." Senator Y'thril's shoulders visibly relaxed, and he looked vindicated. Obi-Wan let him bask in it for just the right amount of time before he went on, "However, I think it is equally important to remember that we have already canvassed three of the largest hyperspace lanes in Republic Space. Moreover, since the inception of this committee and our vital work against the remnant's of the
Federation's army, we've exposed not only real droid caches, but also the idea of them. While we may not have found many droids running right along the Hydian or the Perlimian, there isn't a system in the Republic that hasn't heard about the hunt. If the Federation tries to ferry away their army en masse, they will have to run a gauntlet of eyes and ears who know they're there, and know that we're looking for them. With this built-in network of information and response, moving our work to system-by-system missions is a natural extension of our wide canvassing work in the lanes."

There was a round of nodding and muttered agreements. Valorum shut his eyes and internally cursed because Obi-Wan was right. He hated it when Obi-Wan was right. It was infuriating. His eyes scanned the room, and he saw Sheev Palpatine looking expectantly at him. He did not like Palpatine any more than the day this committee had fallen into his lap. However, if the Nabooian senator could manage to bring Kenobi down a peg or two… Hating every second of it, Valorum nodded his assent and let Palpatine take the floor.

"Thank you, Master Kenobi. I think the committee shares your optimism for this endeavor. However, on the matter of the hyperspace lanes, I believe that you may overestimate the attentiveness of lane-based systems, especially when it comes to the observation of vehicles traveling and supra-light speeds. Though it saddens me to say, many may simply not have the…"

Finis propped his chin on his hand and pretended to listen. His eyes strayed – did not glare, he made sure – back to the young Jedi at his side, who was nodding along in an interested way even as the gleam in his scarred right eye promised a rebuttal. Obi-Wan Kenobi, at twenty-six years old, was young, inexperienced, low-ranking, and impulsive. Compounded together, he should have been a textbook rookie, easy to manipulate and call to heel. And yet.

"If you are suggesting that Republic citizens are incapable or unwilling of reporting Federation activity, Senator Palpatine, you have only to look at the recent numbers to know that it isn't true. We've found more droids in the last two months than in the previous six combined, and we owe every success to the vigilance of planetary populations, such as those of Manaan," Obi-Wan spared a kind glance at the Manaanite senator, who smiled proudly back at him. A week ago, she would've been glaring daggers.

That was the problem with Obi-Wan, Valorum mused as he squinted at the young Jedi. He did things. He'd been appointed here to do two things: assure Valorum that the Order was keeping the Naboo intel classified, and to annoy Palpatine. He certainly wasn't supposed to argue, or convince people of anything. For a while, he hadn't. But then he'd gotten it into his head to talk, and then things had fallen off the rails. Obi-Wan spoke with spurs in words, meant to provoke, meant to stir up trouble. But just when he'd set the pot boiling, he smiled at his enemies, and glared at his friends, and spoke with that smooth, core-bred accent until Neimoidia itself had joined in the hunt for their wayward brethren.

If Obi-Wan had been a politician - a terrifying prospect - Valorum would've made sure they were close friends, and would've dug up some old dirt on him to keep in his back pocket. However, Obi-Wan was a Jedi, and was thus only directly answerable to Finis himself. The Jedi had no vote, but in a pinch even Padawan Tarkona outranked every senator in the room. Obi-Wan did not seem to consider this fact, and had hijacked his appointment to press his own opinions. The fact that Valorum could no longer control him was becoming something of a joke at the watercoolers. As of last week, some had started calling Obi-Wan 'Finis' Hound' - a pet Jedi, barking at the opposition and straining at the end of his rope until his master pulled him to heel.

Unfortunately, Finis knew he wouldn't be able to pull Obi-Wan to heel, though he desperately wanted to. And while Kenobi's performance had been largely helpful thus far, one day, he would
slip up, something would go wrong, and everyone in this room and the Senate would blame Valorum, and his career would be on the line. He could not let that happen.

The solution came in the form of a small memo passed silently to him by a Senate Communications intern who was, by virtue of his title, entirely invisible to the rest of the committee. While Palpatine and Obi-Wan continued their never-ending banter, Finis savored every last line of the note, and didn't notice when his lips spread in a small smile.

The committee adjourned, and the members slowly filtered out alone and in groups. Obi-Wan was in friendly discussion with several of his newfound allies. Valorum sighed at sight of them. Beside him, Feemor and his padawan stood to leave.

"Master Gard," the Chancellor said, not looking up.

"Yes, sir?"

"Stay a moment, I wish to speak with you and your apprentice. First, however," He stood and raised his voice. "Master Kenobi,"

"Yes, sir?" Obi-Wan turned at looked, an utterly innocent expression on his face. Finis clenched his jaw.

"A word with you in my office," he snapped, and stepped out the back door of the conference room. "Alone."

Glancing at his fellow Jedi, who seemed equally as perplexed, Obi-Wan followed the Chancellor down the hall and into his office.

Some time later, Feemor and Aola were shown into the ornate space, where they took up spots standing on either side of a very annoyed Obi-Wan. Valorum sat serenely at his desk, utterly unfazed by whatever argument had just taken place. He folded his hands in a neat semi-circle and looked up at the assembly of Jedi.

"As you should all know, our revitalized efforts with the SBI and planetary intelligences have doubled our success rate in hunting down droids. In fact, just today, I've had another report in from your Jedi Council telling me that they've uncovered a massive cache of droids on Eriadu," Finis waved the flimsi memo before filing it away in his desk. "As we speak, the High Council and the SBI are preparing to send a detachment to assist in the extraction."

"That's good to hear," said Feemor.

"So it is, Master Gard. Unfortunately, it also means that this committee will lose an appointee."

Feemor frowned, but Obi-Wan was squinting past the mock remorse. "How do you mean?" He asked.

"You've been slated for the mission, Master Kenobi," Valorum said with a polite smile, which he enjoyed immensely more than usual, "You're to leave first thing tomorrow."

"What?" Obi-Wan burst indignantly, eyebrows drawn, trim mustache angled in a frown. "The Council can't do that. I'm on assignment. They can't pull me out without consulting me first."

Valorum shrugged, effecting an air of well-meaning apology. "You were requested specifically, and considering the high priority of the mission, Master Windu and I decided to preemptively-"
"Requested by whom?" Obi-Wan cut in firmly, ignoring Feemor's wince. Valorum gave the younger man an old fashioned Look, which channelled all power of the leader of the free galaxy. Obi-Wan stood his ground.

"By the Jedi on site at Eriadu," Valorum told him, enunciating every syllable with deliberate warning. "Qui-Gon Jinn." Silence ensued. Valorum ate it up. "Your old master has asked for you specifically, Master Kenobi," Finis said sweetly, "and while I know you relish your appointment here, Master Windu and I assumed you would leap at the opportunity. If we were wrong, of course, I'll happily find someone else to take your place." Obi-Wan wondered if they'd already told Qui-Gon he was coming, if Valorum had consulted Mace about which available Knights would annoy Qui-Gon the most. He'd never hear the end of it.

Obi-Wan wrestled with his mouth, biting back several choice quips before he forced out, "That won't be necessary, Sir."

"Good." Valorum reached into his desk, and produced a thin datapad and held it out. "You're to report directly to the Council."

Obi-Wan very carefully did not snatch the 'pad away from the Chancellor, as that would be a colossal breach in etiquette. However, one moment Finis had it in his hand, and in an instant, Obi-Wan had it in his and was back across the desk. "Is that all, sir?" he asked curtly.

"Yes."

Obi-Wan fled. Aola turned to follow him, but paused when her master lingered. Feemor cleared his throat.

Valorum glanced at him as if seeing the older Jedi for the first time. "Yes, Master Gard."

"Is Obi-Wan to be the only Jedi sent with the detachment?" Feemor asked politely.

"No, there will be another Jedi, as well as a few other officers." He caught the look on Feemor's face and frowned sternly. "No, it won't be you – I can't lose all my Jedi representatives in one day."

"I wasn't going to suggest it, sir."

"No?"

"Not as such, no."

The flight back to the temple was quiet. Feemor glanced at Obi-Wan's stoic expression, which hadn't changed since they'd left the senate. "So," said the master at length, "what did he say to you before we came in?"

Obi-Wan kept his expression pointedly neutral. "He told me I need to stop trying to lead the committee, told me I don't have a vote and shouldn't overstep my bounds. Told me that he'd have to have stern words with Master Windu if I continued to undermine his authority."

Feemor glanced again at the knight, unnerved by the lack of expression in his face. He waited and glanced back a few times before he pressed, "And what did you say to him?"

Obi-Wan set his jaw, and said, "I told him I wouldn't have to do any of those things if he'd been doing his job."
Feemor scoffed, and let his head fall down. "Obi-Wan," he cried, "Lad-"

"What?" Obi-Wan demanded. "You've been there the whole time-"

"You can't just do that-"

"-nearly nine months we've been here, and he's sat back and let Palpatine run the whole show."

"Because he's the Chancellor, and Palpatine is committee chair," Feemor shook his head and looked back to the dusk-lit skylane. "Honestly. I never should have told you to grow that beard, it's gone to your head. Maybe Qui-Gon will be able to knock some sense back into you."

In the navigator's seat, Aola snorted. Feemor turned around and pointed an accusatory finger at her. "Oi, if I hear you've encouraged either of them, you'll be in for it."

Aola made a face back at him. Something in the way Feemor spoke made Obi-Wan frown. "What's that supposed to mean?" he asked, and Aola gave a wicked grin.
"Ah, Ben, good morning." Dooku opened his door. Ben could smell freshly brewed caf wafting from the small kitchenette. "Do come in."

"I hadn't realized you liked caf," Ben commented, eyeing the tasteful silver pot that billowed steam into the sunlight. Dooku looked back at it.

"Not normally, no, but this is an Oyu'baat blend come all the way from Mandalore."

Ben, who'd long loved and loathed Mandalore for personal reasons, raised his eyebrows. "I've never found real Mandalorian fare on Coruscant. None that I could afford, anyway." He did not say he'd been looking for years. "Where did you get it?"

Dooku went around the counter to the steeping pot while Ben took a seat at the nearby table. "It comes compliments of Aren's new advisor, a clone who calls himself Echo." Dooku shook his head. "I've told him he ought to pick out a more… traditional name, but he has stood his ground."

Ben was suddenly decades and decades in the past, at the Citadel, watching Echo lose his life in a fruitless attempt to save the mission. "Echo?" he said. "You mean CT-0408?"

Dooku cast him a curious eye. "Clones guard their numbers carefully, from what I'm told, but yes, I saw it on his paperwork. You knew him?"

"He died on a mission I led," Ben said, eyes distant.

Dooku let the other man have his moment of silence while he set the spiced caf on a tray with mugs and cream. He brought it to the kitchen table. "He is a sound advisor. A stickler for protocol, an inclination which I understand gave him his nickname."

"Yes," Ben chuckled, remembering. He glanced around the here and now and saw that Dooku had poured him a mug. "I'm grateful, grandmaster, but I'm not usually one for caffa."

"You will like this blend, try it."

Ben did, and indeed, it was far, far better than the instant muck they dispensed in the commissary. While Ben considered the rare treat, Dooku stirred his with a drop of cream and tapped the spoon clean before saying, "I'm assuming you've not asked to visit in order to reminisce."

"No," Ben said. The mention of Echo had distracted him from his intention. "No," he repeated, gathering his thoughts from clouds of memory. "I need to speak with you about something you said yesterday."
"Oh?"

"You said that you felt alone in the dark," Ben recounted, neglecting his drink. "You also said you wanted work to occupy you."

Dooku took a sip of his caffa and replaced the cup carefully on its saucer. "So I did. And I suppose you are… worried for me." Very few things could embarrass Yan Dooku, but facing his own vulnerabilities was difficult, particularly after yesterday's confession.

"I came to tell you that you are not alone," Ben's voice broke into his thoughts. "There are others in the dark, even in the Order. Especially in the Order, I would say." Ben drank from his mug as Dooku absorbed this information. At length the older man said with deadpan incredulity,

"And that is supposed to comfort me." Ben ignored the comment entirely.

"You also reminded me that, not too long ago, you were prepared to take on an apprentice." The tone of voice was utterly innocuous. The look that followed it was not. Ben's gaze rested on Dooku with all the patience and warmth of a glacier.

"I was," Dooku enunciated the past tense like a chess piece and waited for the next move. Ben's eyes flicked away, but the weight of his inquisition hovered in the air. He stirred cream into his remaining caf and sipped at it. "There was a Jedi Master killed earlier this week while on assignment. He left behind a young apprentice."

Dooku blinked, momentarily blindsided by the non sequitur, but his brain worked fast. He chose his words carefully before delivering them in a crisp, dispassionate tone, "I'm sorry to hear that."

"The apprentice has been fighting off the dark ever since, but for every mind healer on Coruscant, it's a losing battle. She needs guidance." The glacial stare returned, uninterested in chess. Dooku squared his jaw and took a deep breath.

"All these years," he said, voice low and bitter, "Qui-Gon disallows my training of Obi-Wan, you all but attack me to keep me from training Anakin, and now, after I've finally seen the truth of my future, you bring an orphaned stray to my door. You surprise me, Master Kenobi." The amount of disappointment Dooku could convey in the syllables of 'surprise' was a credit to him. Ben ducked his head as a child rebuked. "Or I am not so ancient as Qui-Gon and the Council and the Force itself have led me to believe?"

The acridity of the words plucked a discordant green in the Force. Ben waited a moment for it to fade before saying softly, "Anakin is a boy, Yan. A very energetic, very tiring boy. This apprentice is nearly grown. She's exhausted, and hurting, and we've almost lost her to the dark. Your age is immaterial. But you've faced the darkness that's nearly claimed her. She needs your help."

"Why me?" Dooku asked immediately. "I am hardly the only sentinel in this Order. Master Windu has made his knowledge of the Dark into an entire combat form - he understands its pull better than even I."

"She was born and raised on Dathomir," Ben told him, and the green chord snapped into a surprised, icy blue. Dooku was conspicuously silent. "You know what happens to Force sensitives in the house of Mother Talzin. Not even Mace has ever stepped foot there."

There was a lengthy silence. Dooku finished off his caffa. "Why are you asking this of me, Obi-Wan?"

The glacier creaked, and Ben's blue gaze melted into something softer. "Last time, you guided her
deeper into the dark." He could not meet Dooku's eyes. "This time, I hoped you might keep her in the light. I'm not sure anyone else can."

Dooku's face was expressionless. Years ago, after he and Ben had first begun speaking of the never-was, Dooku had deduced that in Ben's other life, he'd been a darksider. If the universe was truly as dark as Ben claimed, he may have even been a Sith. Dooku knew himself well enough to not be surprised, but it still stuck a deep sadness in him, a guilt for something he'd never done - or at least, not in this life. "You hope that I might redeem myself," he assumed. Ben looked surprised, and shook his head.

"You have no need to redeem yourself, grandmaster, not this time. I only hope that I will be able say the same thing of her." The opportunity shined with the iridescent sparkle of change.

"What is her name?"

"Asajj Ventress." Ben passed a datapad across the table. Dooku read it, and they finished their drinks in relative silence.

"I'm very old," Dooku said, looking at the year of Asajj's birth.

"She's nearly eighteen," Ben said. "And has a lot to learn."

Dooku had moved on to the report detailing the death of her late master, Ky Narec. The Jedi sent to investigate the distress signal had taken still-holos of the scene. As he scrolled past the litany, Dooku's eyebrows came down in sorrow. "Yes," he said, almost to himself. "I daresay she has."

Ben let the older man read while he cleaned up the caf tray and dishware. He happened to glance into the living area, where the glass chess board sat in its usual spot. Its pieces were set up in what looked like the first half of a match. It was a well-played match so far.

"Who is your opponent?" Ben asked, gesturing with his head. Dooku glanced up, and back at the board.

"Obi-Wan. We've been playing in turns as he has time for." He shrugged. "I suppose it'll have to wait a while, now."

Ben frowned. "How do you mean?"

"Did you not hear?" Dooku looked up, somewhat surprised. "He's been reassigned to the field. Valorum was thrilled to see him go, or so I hear." He gave a chuckle at the thought. "It's the boy's own fault. He's made his bed, he must lie in it."

Ben blinked at this information, stunned by the fact he'd not heard anything about it. He supposed Anakin was taking up more of his time than he realized. "He's left already?"

"Yes, and taken Aola with him."

"And Feemor, too?"

"No. It seems Master Gard is getting ready to cut the cord at last - but I can't speak to the wisdom of handing her over to Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon." Dooku shook his head. "Qui-Gon is not a wholesome influence, and try as I have all these years, Obi-Wan has hardly turned out better."

"Qui-Gon?" Ben's mind was reeling to catch up. Dooku set aside his datapad and looked up at Ben in astonishment.
"Honestly, Ben, I can't be the first one to tell you?" How an aging misanthrope who studied and played chess all day could be more well-connected than an active Jedi Master was an eternal mystery. "Qui-Gon's found something on Eriadu, and in the call for backup he requested Obi-Wan specifically."

"And Aola joined in?"

"Along with two SBI agents, a posse from the IGBC, and a detach of Eriaduan authorities, yes." Upon seeing Ben's surprised expression, Dooku said mildly, "I gather they've found an entire fleet buried underground."

Memories flitted across Ben's mind's eye, scenes of battle and wars in the stars. He got an odd, itching feeling. It was familiar. It'd been dormant for years. Things were happening again. "Oh, Force," he whispered to no one in particular. Dooku was reading his datapad again.

"Tell me more about this girl," Yan said, drawing Ben away from his musings. Ben blinked and came back to the Here and Now. Things were happening again, across the galaxy and at home. Best to deal with them as they came to him.

"Of course." Ben sat back down and spoke in calm tones with his grandmaster. Every so often, his eyes strayed over to the half-finished chess board.

Aola and Obi-Wan stood alone on a landing platform high up in the Temple hangars, air traffic whizzing by all around them. Aola had always enjoyed watching the buzz of the city, letting herself wonder where the passengers had come from and where they were going. It was mesmerising. The trajectory of a taxi cab led Aola's eyes across the sky and down to the brown-clad profile of her companion. Obi-Wan was staring straight ahead at nothing, the Force prickling around him like the spines of an urchin. The detach from the Senate Bureau of Investigation was due to pick them up ten minutes ago. Aola had begun to track the deficit time by the intensity of Obi-Wan's glower.

"Oh, och, lad," she put on her best imitation of Feemor's brogue and elbowed Obi-Wan in the side, "cheer up, would ye?" Where normally her antics would've drawn a smile or a chuckle, Obi-Wan only swivelled his eyes so she could meet the full force of his glare. She sighed.

"Stars, Obi, you should be excited. Seeing Master Qui-Gon again, getting back on the field. You've missed him, I know you have." He looked away. "Don't deny it."

"Yes but why did he have to request me?" Obi-Wan snapped in irritation. Shocked by his outburst, Aola raised her brows and tilted her head toward him in a look that could only be described as a maternal reprimand. Obi-Wan's candor withered somewhat, and he shook his head. "Look, of course I've missed him, and I'd love to be out on the field with him again. It's just... I already had an assignment. He knows that." He paused to chew at his lip, then added bitterly, "I had work to do, and now he's drawn me out of it, they may not let me back. Valorum certainly won't."

Aola rolled her eyes gently. She was not a politician. She'd known that going in, and in that knowledge had kept her mouth firmly shut in committee meetings. And therein lie the crux to Obi-Wan's problems. Aola had gone into the committee knowing she was a bantha in a teashop, and had been walking on eggshells to prove she could handle herself tactfully in the Senate. Obi-Wan, on the other hand, had walked into the assignment knowing he could out-politic most of the senators in the room, and had thrown tact out the window in order to prove it. For as long as Aola and Obi-Wan had known each other, she'd been the brash one, and he'd been the suave one, but somewhere along the way, they'd switched roles.
"Work," she scoffed, "one more week of work, Obi, and Valorum would've put an actual gag in your mouth. Honestly, what's happened to you? You like field assignments."

Obi-Wan was shaking his head, the furrows in his brow wrestling with some unseen enemy. "Of course I do, it's not that, but... there is something going on. I've had a horrible feeling about this whole mess since it started."

Aola glanced at him, browline tenser than before. "Like on Kamino?" it was their code word for 'Sith' when neither wanted to say the word aloud.

"Maybe? No. I don't know." Obi-Wan shook his head as if trying to shake a lost memory free from its moorings. "It's sort of... like..." Like what, exactly? he struggled for words. "Surely you've felt it?" His eyes sought validation.

"No," Aola was sorry to say. Obi-Wan only sighed. Although Aola often suffered from precient visions much like Obi-Wan, the Unifying Force left her alone in the waking light. Obi-Wan seemed to live continually under its afflictions of the future. He shook his head. "It's not right. That committee. The Senate. It's all going dark."

"It's politics, Obi, of course it's dark." It wasn't as if corruption were new in the legislative district. "Not this kind of dark," Obi-Wan insisted stubbornly, scratching at the part of his hair that used to be a braid. "I'm not sure what it is, but I just..." he trailed off and shifted his weight restlessly. He could not communicate the itch under his skin, the press of the Force on his mind to act. "We have to do something about it. I was trying to do something about it."

The sincerely confused look on his face made Aola frown, but a noise drew her eyes away, and she took a breath and shook her head free of preoccupation. "Right, well, mister do something, our ride's here, so your senate campaign will have to wait." They watched as the ship slowed above the platform and hovered down to land. When the door opened, Obi-Wan momentarily forgot about the Senate. His glower evaporated and he beamed at the new arrival.

"Cody?" Obi-Wan had to raise his voice over the whine of the idling engines. Cody, dressed in a crisp blue shirt with the SBI logo embroidered on the sleeve and a blaster holstered under each arm, smiled back.

"Pleased to see you again, Master Kenoobi." He stepped forward to shake Obi-Wan's hand.

"You're with the SBI, now?"

"Yes sir, Special Agent. My colleague and I will be overseeing our end of things on Eriadu and helping you where we can."

"Well," Obi-Wan nodded, "that is certainly the best news I've heard all day." He gestured to his Twi'lek companion. "You've met Aola," he said. Cody nodded at the young woman, who grinned back charmingly.

"Nice to see you again, miss."

"Likewise."

"We should be going," Cody said, gesturing the Jedi on board. "We're already running behind schedule."

The ship was carrying a dozen individuals handpicked by the IGBC for... Obi-Wan was not
entirely sure what. The Banking Clan was of course donating great deals of money to expedite the droid hunt and the clearing of trade routes, but he was not entirely sure what to call these people. Were they mercenaries? Agents? Shareholders? They all seemed to have weapons. At least one of them was glaring at him as he boarded, and he wondered if the IGBC knew that he'd been responsible for the diversion of funds from the Correllian Run to off-lane worlds.

He chose to not think about it. After they entered hyperspace, he followed Cody and Aola to the bridge. There, they met Cody's colleague, a tall Korun woman named Gabri. The four discussed the particulars of their mission and reviewed the files they'd received from Master Jinn. After a while, Gabri stepped to the transmission console to contact Eriadu for landing clearances. Cody was still looking over the dossier of grainy holos and written reports.

"This Master Qui-Gon," he eyed Obi-Wan warily, "he's not the same Qui-Gon who trained you, is he?"

"One and the same," Obi-Wan allowed himself a grin. "Why?"

Cody shrugged. "The Chancellor came by to inspect the team before we left. He said you were nothing but trouble."

Obi-Wan bit back a denial and decided to accept it. "And?"

Cody shrugged. "It got me wondering - if this Jedi is trouble enough to annoy the Chancellor that badly, how much worse must his teacher be?"

Obi-Wan couldn't fight back his smile, and Aola laughed aloud. "Keep that attitude," advised the Twi'lek, "and I'm sure he'll take to you immediately."

They landed in one of Eriadu's cleaner ports, where the air was merely unpleasant and not actually toxic. There was even a slight breeze, which blew up short tufts of Obi-Wan's hair as he descended the ramp.

While the IGBC crew and the SBI agents unloaded their equipment and negotiated the loan of several vehicles, the Jedi went to meet with their colleague.

"Are you sure you've brought the right man, Aola?" Qui-Gon asked as he approached. "He doesn't look anywhere near ridiculous enough."

"I'm fairly sure, Grandmaster, though I think the beard has turned him into a younger, shorter version of you." Obi-Wan scoffed, and Qui-Gon laughed as he drew nearer.

"Is that so bad?" he asked.

Aola shrugged. "The chancellor kicked him out of the Senate."

"Did he?" Qui-Gon finally reached them, looking greyer than Obi-Wan remembered. The wrinkles around his mouth were more defined than last they spoke, and betrayed the smile he was trying to hide behind his mustache. The sparkle in his eye had not changed a bit.

"He did not," Obi-Wan protested sourly. Qui-Gon turned to Aola for clarification.

"There were… words exchanged," Aola told Qui-Gon with a smile, ignoring Obi-Wan completely, "which are now legend among the senate intern community."

Qui-Gon turned his gaze back on Obi-Wan. "I'm so sorry," he said, and meant it.
Obi-Wan shrugged. "It's alright. It's my own fault, I suppose."

"You misunderstand me, Padawan," Qui-Gon cut in, "I'm not sorry they've kicked you out, I'm only sorry I wasn't there to witness it." Aola cackled. Obi-Wan stared, stricken. Qui-Gon's chest rumbled with a baritone laugh that, all wounded pride aside, Obi-Wan had missed dearly. "Aola, collect the SBI agents, will you? They'll want to come with us for this briefing."

"Of course, Master." She left, smiling. Qui-Gon put an arm around his old apprentice and reached up to ruffle his hair.

"It suits you," he decided, and smoothed the auburn back down again. "As does the beard." Obi-Wan had never explained why he'd chosen to grow his hair long, but Qui-Gon had guessed years ago. It was good to see the wound healed over.

"Thanks," Obi-Wan ducked his head, but did not smile. Arm still resting on the younger man's shoulders, Qui-Gon guided Obi-Wan around to walk toward the land vehicles onto which the IGBC mercs were loading their gear. After a few steps, he dropped his arm and folded his hands into opposite sleeves.

"You're mad at me."

Obi-Wan sighed. "Valorum didn't kick me out." He looked up at Qui-Gon with an annoyed expression. "You did." Qui-Gon said nothing, but kept his gaze hovering on Obi-Wan's face. After a few seconds, Obi-Wan cracked. "Fine, he might've kicked me out a bit, but you're the one who gave him an in."

"You could have refused, of course." Of course, if he had refused, Obi-Wan would have doomed Qui-Gon to work either alone or with someone insufferable, would have missed a rare chance to work with Qui-Gon again, would have further incurred Valorum's wrath, and not least of all, would have felt immeasurably guilty. Obi-Wan communicated all of this in one look, and having understood it to its last syllable, Qui-Gon responded with a shrug. "I'm glad you didn't. We can't afford any of that right now. I have a bad feeling about this one."

Obi-Wan stopped walking and turned to face him. "You have a bad feeling?" he said, not sure whether to be amused or alarmed. "Is it as bad as all that?"

"That remains to be seen, but you can see the size of the team they've sent us," Qui-Gon waved a hand at the assembling crew. "I'm grateful you're here - and Aola, for that matter." He eyed the long, black duffels the ICBC was locking into the storage compartments on an all-terrain speeder. "They seem well-equipped."

"Yes," Obi-Wan agreed, following his gaze, "and ill-explained. I don't trust them."

"You are a wise man. Anyone we can trust?"

"Yes, actually," Obi-Wan's face grew a grin. "One of the SBI agents, he's a clone."

"Oh yes?"

"Named Cody."

"Cody?" Qui-Gon glanced in surprise as his former pupil. "Not the one you've told me about?"

"Yes, that one. Come on, I'll introduce you."
Cody seemed to recognize Qui-Gon without explanation. "Master Jinn, sir, it's an honor," Cody's grip was strong as he shook Qui-Gon's hand, and the Jedi smiled at him, meeting strength for strength.

"The honor is all mine, Agent Cody. I understand I have you to thank for saving my life, back on Kamino."

Cody was nonplussed. "I'm sorry, sir, I didn't save anyone's life."

This was not entirely true. "You led Obi-Wan to find me, and Obi-Wan arrived just in time to save my life. Therefore," the Master gestured at Cody, "I have you to thank. Thank you."

Cody chuckled in a self-deprecating way. "Only doing my duty, sir." There was an awkward pause. "Speaking of, we need to be going, if we want to keep to our schedule." Cody stepped away to speak with Agent Gabri, leaving Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon behind.

"Does he call you sir, too?" Qui-Gon asked, watching Cody leave. Obi-Wan watched with him.

"Yes, I think it's a clone habit."

"Ah." Cody looked back and waved the two Jedi over to follow him to their newly-acquired speeders. "We'll have to train him out of that."

Obi-Wan laughed. "I've been trying to no avail, but be my guest." He gave Qui-Gon's arm a smack. "Come on, sir."

They chuckled freely as they boarded, but by the time they reached the affected hub six sectors away, they were no longer laughing. First and foremost, there was no clean air to chuckle with. They coughed and sprinted their way inside. Qui-Gon's eyes stung with tears from the smoggy air. He blinked past the welling moisture in search of the red, fat face of Torc Belinger. The fog cleared, but Torc was nowhere to be found. In his place, a thin, feminine silhouette came into focus. Frizzed white hair seemed out of place atop a human face that couldn't have been over thirty, but if it was unusual, it didn't seem to bother her in the slightest. She extended a hand and stepped toward the new arrivals.

"That smog will kill someone, if we don't get it under control. You must be the Jedi I've heard so much about," She shook Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan's hands in turn. "Sarela Iris, Erudian Homeworld Security."

"A pleasure," Qui-Gon smiled at her.

"You boys going to tell me what we're facing here?" She propped her hands on her hips. Cody, Gabri, and the IGBC mercs were coughing their way into the corridor.

Obi-Wan glanced at Qui-Gon. Qui-Gon opened his mouth to speak, but a familiar, booming voice interrupted him.

"Ah, it's about time you're here," Torc Belinger bustled into the room, and waved the entourage further into the tunnels. "No time to dally, we need that scrubber back. Even the water's started to taste like smoke." He turned and marched down the hall, Qui-Gon leading just behind.

As if on cue, a pipe next to Aola's face vented a burst of steam, and she jumped out of the way, but not in time to avoid a mouthful of the vapor. She winced in disgust. "Well," she said quietly to Cody, "he's not wrong."
Seeing the droids put the problem of smog into perspective. Smog was unpleasant and dangerous, there was no doubt, but with a rebreather and a pair of goggles, it was more a nuisance than anything. Federation droids were another matter entirely.

"How many do you suppose there are?" Aola whispered to the silent room. Packed around a projection console in a conference room, the team surveyed the grainy surveillance footage, rubbing chins and scratching heads. Torc and Qui-Gon stood at the head of the room beside the holo projector. A blue glow reflected off the eyes of their audience, wide-eyed and baffled.

"With the schematics the Order has given us, we estimate there are roundabouts two hundred of these standard class blaster units," Torc poked at the hologram, causing it to fizzle and reform. "Maybe fifty or so of these guys," he pointed to the taller, more heavily armored droids standing behind them. "As for the rest..." He shrugged, doffed his cap, and rubbed his forehead. "We don't know."

"Don't know?" Obi-Wan asked, brow furrowed and finger to his lips, "Or can't see?"

"Both," Torc shrugged.

Qui-Gon spoke up. "The Jedi Order's forensic teams have scoured this footage, but we cannot identify any of these shapes," he pointed, more delicately than Torc had, at the looming shadows in the back of the cavern. "They could be droids, or ships. They could be rock formations. We won't know until we get down there."

"Can we not send a second reconnaissance sweep down there?" asked Cody, in shirt sleeves with his arms crossed.

"The ceiling of this cavern's riddled with wires and pipes," Torc explained. "The electrics are interfering with our imaging equipment, so we can't see exactly what's down there. The corner where we drilled is one of the few points we can access, and there's only enough room for a small probe, not any person. The radiator pipes for our backup scrubber is plumbed through here, we can't risk knocking that out, not even for an hour. If you want to dig, we're going to have to go deeper into the tunnels. It'll take time"

"We need to find the original route in," Qui-Gon said. "These droids did not arrive by magic; we need to find out how they got in, and get to them from that access point."

This plan seemed straightforward enough, but after a few beats of silence, Sarela pointed out, "Any entrance made by the Federation would be heavily guarded."

"And probably rigged," Agent Gabri added, lips turned in a hard frown. "If we try to go in there guns blazing, we'll risk springing a trap and blowing the whole thing - droids, scrubber, everything."

"Yes," Qui-Gon agreed "Which is why we need to evaluate both routes of access. We will have one team searching the planet surface for the Federation's access, while a secondary team plans an alternate route that mines through the sector's existing underground network." Qui-Gon watched the assembly of furrowed brows, pursed lips, and nervous glances. "There is no way to get to these droids without risking significant damage to the planet's infrastructure. Your job is to minimize that risk, or else we die in a tunnel collapse or of toxic air."

"No pressure," one of the mercenaries scoffed. Another shook his head and scratched his neck.

"Say we get to this cache, and say we get into it without springing any death trap," Cody ignored
the IGBC personnel as he sat up straighter. "What, exactly, is our plan for extraction?"

"We've got two freighters on planet and a partial fleet in orbit, ready to secure cargo," said Torc.

"And if these droids power up?" Sarela asked, eyeing Cody first, and then Qui-Gon.

Qui-Gon's hair was silver, but in the briefing room, it did not make him look old. In command on the field once more, his every movement read of the wisdom and authority that had kept him on the Old Guard for most of his life. His eyes, however, glinted with the edge that kept him off the Council. "Every one of you came into this compound armed to the teeth," he observed. "I do not suppose you packed your bags for a weekend holiday?" This actually drew a chuckle from a few of the mercs. Cody took in the comment more seriously, crossed arms fiddling idly with the blasters holstered under either arm.

"Understood, sir."

"You said we would be in teams, Master Jinn," said Aola, business like on the mission field.

"Yes. Obi-Wan," he called, and his former apprentice sat up a bit straighter. "You've seen the Federation and their droids more often than any of us. You'll lead the scouting party on the surface. Aola, Cody, you'll go with him. Mr. Bellinger and I have become acquainted, we will lead the internal team. Agent Gabri, Agent Iris, if you don't mind accompanying us."

"Of course, sir," Gabri nodded. Sarela opened her mouth to speak, but closed it again slowly.

"The rest of you," Qui-gon eyed the IGBC crew in a sweeping glance, "can divvy yourselves up as you see fit, but I expect you to be within sight of a Jedi or an SBI agent at all times, do I make myself clear?"

An unmotivated grumble rose like a clumsy salute, and Qui-Gon eyed his colleagues with a silent warning. "Right." he said, and shut down the holovid. The room's lamps brightened, and the harsh light of reality sunk in. The teams stood to their feet. "May the Force be with us," the Master bid. Everyone stood to their feet and began filing out of the room. On the way out, Qui-Gon caught Obi-Wan's shoulder.

"You should go down to the drill site first," he said. "I've told Torc of your... abilities with electrical circuits and he thinks you may be able to detect a door, if there's one attached to the chamber anywhere. Though, I'll warn you, the place is crawling with wires. It'll be like finding a beetle in a sand dune."

"I'm sure it will," Obi-Wan sighed, and stepped out with his master. "Cody, Aola, go on to the surface. I'm going to get the lay of things underground first, I'll be up soon." The two nodded, and led their four hangers-on up the corridor toward the planet surface, grabbing ventilation gear as they went. Obi-Wan turned and descended further into the underground tunnels.

"Alright, lads, this way," Torc Belinger waved a hand, and five IGBC agents - and Gabri - followed him down the hall. He did a double-take upon seeing the tall SBI operative. "Oh, and Lady, sorry, miss."

"Agent," Gabri corrected, face stoic.

"Er, yes, uh, sorry, Miss, Agent, er," as the Korun woman passed, Qui-Gon saw her smiling. He met her eyes, and she smiled wider. He shook his head. After Belinger's group swept from the hall, only one person remained.
"Agent Iris," Qui-Gon said. "Can I help you?"

"With respect, Master Jedi, I think I should be assigned to the patrol team on the surface of the planet."

Qui-Gon frowned slightly. "With respect, ma'am, I should think both teams would fall under your purview. Overground is hardly less fraught than underground. But you may do what you like."

She nodded. "I'll see to both teams," she decided at length, eyes watching the ground with a calculating glint. After a moment of thought, she looked back up at him, icy blue eyes out of place in a planet full of yellows and reds. "I'll see to the surface first. Something tells me we should be more concerned with the Federation's tricks than Eriadu's plumbing."

Qui-Gon shook his head. "Neither option is favorable. Keep me informed of any developments," he said.

"Of course, Master Jedi."

Normally, Eriadu was a writhing hive of industrial activity. It was hot, and dusty, and hardly smelled of wildflowers, but it was never barren. Every inch of the planet seemed to be home to some form of industry, whether it be the great oil refineries and scrubbing complexes, or the subterranean silicon mines and mechanized assembly lines. However, this sector had been put on lockdown ever since the air toxicity levels had compromised worker safety, and the normal hustle and bustle had been replaced by an eerie quiet. As the team trekked across the red-clay landscape, the only noise was the howl of wind around buildings and the brush of dirt and debris across abused metal hulls.

"I don't know," Aola crooned, turning to regard Cody. Her charming smile was lost under the bug-eyed contraption strapped to her face. Her voice hissed with the sound of ventilators as she said, "It suits you. Very sexy."

Cody strode onwards, sweating through his shirt, face completely hidden by his puke-green, clunky ventilation mask. He sighed in time with his ventilators. "I wasn't aware the Jedi cared about fashion, miss."

Aola scoffed, mock charm gone in an instant. "I wasn't aware Clones didn't have senses of humor, Cody. And for the last time, it's Aola, not miss."

"Of course, Miss."

She sighed, suspecting a lost cause. She turned to make sure their mercenary tagalongs were following them, and counted one, two, three, four ventilated heads bobbing in a line after them. She looked further, and saw a bobbing head, and a masked face beneath it, heading toward them.

"Who is that?" she asked, shading her eyes from the sun with a hand. Cody followed her gaze and produced a pair of macrobinoculars, clinking the eyepiece awkwardly on the lenses of his mask.

"Agent Iris," he said. "What's she doing out here? I thought she was supposed to stay with Master Jinn's team."

"I thought so too," Aola said, voice dipping down in uncertainty. The Jedi and clone remained where they were as the Eriaduan agent drew nearer. Once Iris was in earshot, Aola raised her voice and asked, "Agent Iris, is something the matter?"
After a short delay, Iris' answer floated back on the wind. "I've been reassigned to your team, Master Jedi."

Aola was surprised by this, and turned to consult Cody with a look. The SBI agent shrugged back. Iris was catching up to them at last.

"Eriadu's security is my top priority," the agent explained behind her ventilation mask. "If the Federation was able to drill through our security, I want to know how, and I want to see it with my own eyes."

"Very well," Cody decided first, while Aola frowned. "We can never have too many hands on deck."

Iris was turning this way and that, scanning the horizon. "Where is Master Kenobi?" she asked.

Cody began to speak, but Aola spotted a trail of dust in the distance, travelling toward them with speed. "Right there, I think," she nodded at the dusty orange clouds tossed up in the wake of a landspeeder. Obi-Wan parked the vehicle and stepped out.

"Anything?" Aola asked.

The knight nodded. "There's some pretty thick wiring running south on this plain here," Obi-Wan gestured to the plateau that Aola and Cody had been traversing on foot for the better part of an hour. "It leads out all the way to that ravine," Obi-Wan pointed ahead, and the group turned to regard the dark red fissure looming on the horizon.

"You think it's the Federation?" Asked Cody, sounding skeptical.

"Could be," Obi-Wan shrugged. "The pathways don't appear on any of the schematics for this sector."

"I'm sorry," interrupted Agent Iris, "if they weren't on the schematics, how do you know about them?"

"I was able to see them myself," Obi-Wan said modestly. "From a certain point of view. Come on." He climbed back into the speeder, this time into the passenger seat. "Cody, you can drive."

Cody sighed heavily into his respirator. "You can see intricate planetary electrical maps with your mind, but you can't drive."

"I'm half blind, you know," Obi-Wan said loftily.

Cody cast him an extremely unimpressed look, but climbed into the driver's seat anyway. Aola, Iris, and the four mercenaries piled into the back. Obi-Wan crossed his arms and grinned to himself like he'd just done something incredibly clever.

"Do you ever pilot your own vehicles sir?" asked Cody, deadpan.

"When I absolutely have to, yes, but happily, most people don't like me at the con when they learn I've only one working eye."

"Do you really hate flying that much, sir?"

Obi-Wan tightened his arms and tipped up his chin. "If the Force had intended sentients to shoot through time and space as elasticated beams of matter, it wouldn't have made space travel so
dangerous."

"This is a landspeeder, sir," observed Cody.

"It's the principle," insisted Obi-Wan. "Flying is for droids."

"Well, you are on the right planet, then," Aola said as she scrolled through a projected map and marked their location and their path of travel. "Maybe you can ask one of the Federation's droids to fly you home."

"If it's all the same to you, I'd rather them not fly me anywhere." Normally, Obi-Wan's stuffy attitude around flying would've had him and Aola bickering and volleying pretend arguments for an hour or more, but on the mission field, their joviality died away quickly. When they reached the great ravine, Cody pulled the speeder to a halt and parked a safe distance away. The group stepped out in the silence of the plains, dust and sand hissing around their boots, the wind tossing up odd harmonies against the rocks and juts of the ravine.

It was a narrow, fathomless scar carved into the red rock where the planet's crust had cracked centuries ago. Somewhere deep, deep beneath the surface, where the Eriaduans's industry could not reach, there would be an underground river picking its way deeper into the porous clay in changing spiderweb paths. In response, the ground above was in a constant state of flux between hot and cold, wet and dry. Aola had seen its ilk before. Like glaciers, the chasms moved and widened year to year, little by little, invisible tectonic weights migrating with the power of earth and the unrelenting authority of time.

The padawan surveyed their surroundings, and saw nothing but a vast desert in all directions. Behind them, smog-yellow shadows of buildings outlined the bustling sector from which they'd come. Ahead of them, across the ravine, more distant shapes must've belonged to the sector beyond, but in between the two hives, there was nothing. Eriaduans must know better than to build here. How much easier for the Federation to sneak in undetected? Obi-Wan was looking at the ground, his eyebrows forced down over his face like levers of thought. Aola wondered if he could still see the lines of electrical circuits woven through the ground.

"If anything is in that ravine, it can't be that old," said Agent Iris. She peeked her head down over the ledge and listened. Every once in awhile, ethereal cracks and groans would emanate from its depths, like an ancient creature stirring in its sleep. "These canyons eat underground infrastructure for breakfast."

"It's not that old," Obi-Wan said, still staring at the ground. "But it is starting to fall apart."

"We could just leave them there," Cody supplied with a shrug, crossing his hands beneath either of his arms. "So let it all fall apart. The rock will crush the droids to bits."

"Yes, and all their fuel cells and ammunition, too," Obi-Wan said. "We don't know what all weapons they have, they could have a whole artillery of bombs down there."

This did not bolster Cody's mood. "Sounds fun," he said sourly.

"Is this the spot, then?" Aola attempted to follow Obi-Wan's gaze, and looked at the ground beneath her feet.

"Not exactly," The other Jedi told her, eyes still downcast as he strode toward the edge of the cliff and peered down into the ravine. "It's deep, over a hundred feet down there. But..." He crouched down and put his hand against the clay, senses splaying and showing him the way against the void.
of his blind eye. "There's a door down there. That has to be it."

"Where?" Agent Iris was immediately interested, and went to stand by Obi-Wan as he looked into the canyon. There was nothing to see. There were crags and spiked red rocks, sloped at steep, deadly angles toward a long, thin epicenter. At the deepest parts of the ravine, there was only black nothingness.

"Hidden somewhere on the cliff face down there," he pointed down one segment of the cliff, a sheer vertical drop cut close against the ravine wall and framed by outcrops of rock and crumbling clay. "I can't see it from here, but I can sense it."

"And you can tell it's Federation?" asked Agent Iris, eyeing the Jedi skeptically. Obi-Wan glanced back at her.

"Is it yours?" When Iris did not respond, Obi-Wan nodded. "Worth a look, then."

Iris pursed her lips and glanced again down the cliff. Experimentally, she kicked a rock off the ledge and watched it freefall into the abyss. "And how do you plan to get down there to have a look?" She glanced back at the speeder they'd arrived at. "This is hardly terrain for a landspeeder."

"Grappling hooks, then," Obi-Wan decided. Standing some way away adjusting his belt, Cody turned to interrupt.

"I'd advise against grappling hooks here, sir," the clone said. "These fields are all clay, and dry clay at that. It's too brittle; it won't hold the weight of anyone for long." Obi-Wan leaned over the edge and examined the walls of the cliff. They certainly looked solid enough. "Is that not bedrock?" he asked.

"It may be, down a hundred feet or more, but if you want to fasten an anchor up here, you'll be out of luck," Cody shrugged. "We need a repulsor lift - a strong one, at that, or else a ship."

"Hmm." Obi-Wan rubbed his hand along his chin, or rather, the plastic part of his mask that covered his chin. Aola, Iris, Cody, and the loitering mercenaries watched him. "Right," he said at length. "Of course." He stepped back from the ledge and turned around to survey his team. He addressed the four mercenaries, who looked bored and irritated at the sun.

"I don't suppose any of you have brought heavy artillery with you?" After a moment of inactivity, the four seemed to realize that this question was addressed at them, and stood up straight. One by one, they shrugged. Obi-Wan could see that he would have to clarify his language. "Do you think you could fight off a few hundred droids, if it comes to it?" he translated. The mercs shook their heads or made excuses about how they hadn't wanted to carry too much equipment over land.

"Right," Obi-Wan took it in stride. "Agent Iris, if you would be so kind to take this speeder, go back to the base and see if Mr. Belliger has a repaircraft or other hovering unit to spare. Take these four with you, have them bring back their weapons of choice. In the meantime, Aola, Agent Cody and I will attempt to plot a path down into the ravine.

"Why should I go?" Iris asked immediately, eyeing Aola and Cody. Obi-Wan blinked. "Do you have a weapon I can't see, Agent?" he asked. Iris was frozen. "I didn't think so. You'll want one once we get to those droids." She glanced again at Aola and Cody; Aola with a lightsaber on each hip, Cody with a blaster under each arm.

"Of course," she said, icily. With a wave of her hand, she called the mercenaries to attention and ordered them into the speeder. Leaving a dusty cloud in their wake, they zoomed away toward the
sector they'd left behind. As they faded from view, Aola resumed her examination of the death-drop into the ravine and the slalom course of rocks between her feet and the point Obi-Wan had indicated before.

"So," she said, "what do you think, Obi?"

"What was that?" Obi-Wan turned to her, sounding a great deal less commanding than before.

"The path to the door, you said we'd sort that out." She pointed absently at the fall.

"Oh, no, I know exactly where it is, don't bother."

"Oh." Aola blinked, and cast a look at Cody, who shrugged. "So we're just waiting here, then?" As she asked the question, Obi-Wan unclipped his lightsaber from his belt and ignited it.

"Not exactly," he said, fiddling with the hilt. Unexpectedly, he plunged the saber into the ground, but the sword seemed to catch on the soil, sinking into the clay with difficulty. Aola could see that the weapon was on its lowest power setting.

"What are you doing?" she asked, frowning. Obi-Wan withdrew his blade and adjusted the power setting. This time, the saber went through the soil like butter. Holding the blade completely perpendicular to the ground, he dragged his weapon in a straight line, digging a steaming rut in the ground.

"Just... trying something," he said cryptically, and continued dragging his saber. He held the hilt with one hand and reached up with the other adjust the power setting. As he continued to drag the blade through the ground with spits and hisses and bursts of steam, Aola could see that as the power lowered, Obi-Wan had to pull harder and harder on the blade to cut through the soil, until the saber was stuck fast in the ground and would cut no more.

"Trying what?"

Obi-Wan repeated the ground-cutting movement again. This time, he held the hilt in both hands and gently used the Force to adjust the power, beginning at high power and slowly decreasing the power until the blue blade refused to cut through the soil. It steamed and made frustrated wails in the clay. "Going to check out that door."

"Are we not going to wait for a hovercar?" Aola twisted her eyebrows in an intense squiggle. If Feemor were here, he would've recognized it as an open discouragement. Obi-Wan was not quite so well-versed in her facial vocabulary, and ignored it.

"I'm not. We'll need a repulsor for a large group, but not for now. I only sent the mercs away because I don't trust them. Agent Iris can keep an eye on them."

"And, exactly how do you propose to get down there, sir?" Asked Cody.

"I'll go first. You two can wait here for now, in case something goes wrong."

Aola saw Obi-Wan dodge the question and was immediately suspicious. "How, Obi?"

Obi-Wan gave a cheeky smile and waved his saber hilt in a mock salute. Aola looked at it, and at the ruts carved into the ground, and at Obi-Wan's face.

"No," she said, with the authority of a master and not a padawan. "No, absolutely not. Are you mad?"
Obi-Wan was walking toward the edge, and Aola huffed after him. Cody, not knowing what was happening but determined to keep both Jedi from doing anything stupid without his supervision, followed.

"I saw Qui-Gon do this once," Obi-Wan said.

Aola closed her eyes against the sheer mannishness of the comment. She then asked as serenely as she could manage, "Did it work?"

Obi-Wan was leaning out over the cliff, examining the sheer drop that he'd indicated to Iris earlier. "Not exactly, but I saw what he did wrong."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?" Aola went to stand by Obi-Wan and put her hands on her hips as she peered down with him. From the depths of the chasm, Eriadu let out a noise that could have been a massive belch.

"You know, the longer you've been away from Qui-Gon, the more you start to act like him," Aola pointed out. Obi-Wan was immediately put out by this, and snapped his head around to sneer at her through his mask.

"I do not."

"Yes you do. It's because you miss him," she teased. Obi-Wan sneered harder and busied himself by pulling out a pair of macrobinoculars and surveying his route down the as yet unseen doorway. "All these years, you play the role of a put-upon dogsbody dragged along on Master Jinn's wild misadventures, but now that you lead your own missions, we find out that the misadventuring was you all along."

"Blame Qui-Gon, he's the one who trained me. My bad ideas came from him," Obi-Wan said, lazily holding the binoculars to his good left eye while he fished around in his belt pockets.

"That may be so, but you're the one who's making them worse." Aola glanced down the cliff once more, and had to lean back to avoid vertigo. "Obi, what if you fall?"

"Well, you can catch me."

"From up here," Aola said, deadpan. It was possible, of course, but also very difficult to do.

"Exactly. It's what I did for Qui-Gon last time." Obi-Wan smiled brilliantly, his top teeth just visible through the tinted plastic mask. Aola rolled her eyes. "Hold this for me, will you?" Obi-Wan unbuckled his respirator mask and handed it to Aola. He replaced it with his compact rebreather and sighed, shaking out his sweaty hair. "That's better," he said around the mouthpiece.

"Force forbid you kill yourself with a mask hiding your gorgeous face," Aola deadpanned. Obi-Wan knelt with his back to the ravine and began scooting toward the edge.

"You're not using a grappling hook, are you, sir?" Cody asked from the sidelines. He'd been listening the whole time, but was no less confused than before.

"If only he were," Aola griped. Obi-Wan had rolled over onto his stomach and was lowering his legs over the side of the cliff, right hand gripping his saber. He looked up at his audience of two. "You ready?" he asked Aola.

"Are you?"
Obi-Wan shrugged and pushed himself off the cliff. Cody darted to the edge on pure instinct, but it was too late to do anything. Obi-Wan fell straight down against the vertical slope of the ravine. His left hand trailed a line of dust against the cliff wall as he plummeted downward. With his right hand, he took out his saber and plunged it into the wall. The half-power blade caught resistance immediately, and he had to grab on with both hands as he fell. His saber screeched and threw sparks, leaving a red-hot rut of clay and stone in its wake. Using the Force to adjust the power as he'd done before, he slowed his descent by increments, his muscles and his saber screaming at the resistance of the rock. He was still moving considerably fast, so when his boot hit a large metal door frame and the door itself soared past, his heart jumped. He shut the power output down to zero immediately, and subsequently wrenched both shoulders halfway out of their sockets as his blade jarred to a halt in the stone. He groaned out half-formed obscenities around his rebreather.

"Are you alright?" Aola's distant voice echoed down to him.

Obi-Wan moaned and grumbled to himself some more, and pulled his head up to look around. It was dark down here, the air cooler and cleaner. His trick with the saber had worked; already sunk into the wall, his blade was not hot enough to cut further, and could not move from its current spot. He hung by both hands from the hilt, toes bracing him against the edge of the cliff. It was, as Cody had said, bedrock this far down, but not too far above, he could see strata of red clay. Very, very carefully, he reached down with one hand and removed his rebreather so he could talk. He replaced it to its pocket and reached back up to hang from his saber.

"I'm alright," he shouted up. "I found the door."

Obi-Wan pulled his head up to look at it. It was a wide metal door, something he was used to seeing in hangars and ship depos. Seeing it now, looming massive and blocky in his vision, he wondered how on earth they hadn't been able to see it from above. His hands ached. He'd never noticed how sharp the edges of his saber hilt were.

"Can you open it?" Cody's voice carried down to him. Obi-Wan squinted up into the bright sky above, and could see two silhouettes standing above him.

"I don't know, give me a moment."

The base of the door included a smooth metal ledge, and it was mere feet from his hands. Concentrating very hard, he braced his feet, made sure his saber was stuck fast in the wall, and with a combination of muscle and the Force, leaped from his anchorpoint and grabbed hold of the ledge. The wind left his lungs in an oomph and he had to scrabble with his elbows for a bit against the slippery, sand-dusted metal. Eventually, he was able to haul himself onto the ledge, where he panted for breath and collapsed with his back to the door itself. Idly, he reached out a hand and summoned his saber. He clipped it onto his belt, and looked up backwards at the door control panel, or rather, where the door control panel ought to have been. Not wanting to rise, he pressed his hands to the metal ledge and felt its circuits.

There were no controls on the outside, though there were on the inside. He became absorbed in the shimmering image in his mind, turning the device this way and that like a holographic blueprint. Opening locks with the Force was a fairly straightforward business most of the time, but once in awhile, systems like this could be tricky.

"Obi-Wan?" echoed Aola's voice from above.

"Yeah?" Obi-Wan emerged from his reverie.

"You get in?"
"Give me a moment, pity's sake," he huffed and finally hoisted himself to stand and face the door. "I don't want to spring a trap if I can help it."

Obi-Wan scrubbed at his beard and tilted his head this way and that. He pressed his palm flat against the metal door and closed his eyes. Letting the Force ease him into a new plane of sensation, he watched the electricity meander down its appointed lanes, listened to the inaudible *blip blip blip* of the security circuits running along their business. He let himself fall into the pattern and follow it to its source. Like binary tumblers, the receivers on the interior panel clicked to life. He opened his eyes, and the door opened in silence, showering red dust down onto his boots.

"Does he do this often?" Cody asked Aola, peering again over the side. After seeing Obi-Wan breathe without his mask, Aola had removed her respirator and was trying her luck with the atmosphere. So far out from the contaminated sector, the air wasn't so bad - though 'bad' was entirely relative on Eriadu. She sat with her legs dangling over the edge, wiping sweat off her forehead.

"I don't think he's ever done that in particular," she said, and Cody looked surprised. "But if you mean being an absolute reckless idiot, this is more or less par for the course these days." She looked over the edge. "I would blame Master Jinn, but that's not entirely fair."

The SBI agent lowered himself very carefully to sit cross-legged near Aola. He stayed several feet away from the edge. He tentatively removed his respirator mask, and ran a hand down his face. "Are all Jedi so reckless?" he asked. Aola laughed.

"You don't see me jumping over a cliff," she said.

"I didn't see you stop him, either." She shot him a chagrined look.

"Aola, are you there?" Aola's comm blinked at them. She picked it up.

"Obi, good, we could hardly hear you from up here."

"I've got into the door. This is the place."

"You found the droids?" Aola perked up.

"Yeah. They're here, they're deactivated."

Despite this happy news, something about his tone of voice made Aola frown. "Then why are you whispering?"

There was a pause before Obi-Wan answered. "I don't have enough reception to reach Qui-Gon. Can you comm him for me?"

"Alright?" Aola was still frowning. Cody had been listening to their conversation in silence, but now pulled out his comm, fingers poised over the dial. "Why?"

"He needs to find out if Eriadu houses any starfighters on planet," Obi-Wan whispered. Aola felt her blood chill.

"Why?"

"Because if these droids decide to wake up, that's what we're going to need to get out of here," Obi-
Wan told her. "Those weren't rock formations in the back."

Aola looked at Cody, and the two shared a wide-eyed moment. "We'll comm them now," she said. "Be careful, Obi." By the time she turned off the channel, Cody was already pinging the other team. He stood up and strode away from the ravine, eyes scanning the horizon for the returning party of mercs and Agent Iris.

"Jinn."

"Master Jinn," Cody began, suddenly very aware that he was standing a few hundred feet above a battalion of droids and, apparently, worse. "Master Kenobi has located the droid cache and as gained access. Unfortunately," he glanced back at Aola, who'd stood to her feet and was now pacing restlessly along the cliff's edge. "This may be harder than we thought."
The sun was setting on Coruscant's legislative district. The Committee on Galactic Commerce had just adjourned for the day after a four hour meeting utterly devoid of comment from the Jedi Order.

"Master Gard, isn't it?" Feemor looked around and saw Senator Palpatine of Naboo smiling at him, the kind of old-man smile he'd seen on venerated masters in the temple gardens. He smiled back.

"Yes, that's me."

"Good," Palpatine nodded. "I don't address you as often as I should. Your companion steals the spotlight most days, doesn't he?" They shared a chuckle. "But it's been so quiet today, I'd almost forgotten you were here. Where is Master Kenobi?"

"I'm afraid he's been reassigned, actually. Duty calls."

"Oh, I see." Palpatine arranged his notes and filed to the door slowly, letting Feemor fall into step with him. "Now, I realize your Jedi business is often confidential, but may I ask what he's been called away for?"

"Droid hunting, actually. Since the committee has approved his new canvassing strategies, we've seen an uptick in requests for Jedi intervention. He's somewhere out on the Outer Rim now, I think."

"Ah," Palpatine smiled admiringly, "a man of action as well as a man who keeps his word. I appreciate that." They stepped out onto one of the stacked mezzanines that encircled the main senate lobby and walked together toward the office wing. "And what of your other companion - your apprentice?"

"She went with him," Feemor shrugged.

"But not you?" Palpatine cast him a perplexed glance.

"Our presence here is important to the Chancellor. Someone had to stay behind. I had no qualms taking up the task." Feemor stretched his arms, wincing at how stiff he'd become from sitting all day. "I'm growing too old for the field."

Palpatine laughed. "I doubt that, Master Jedi. I admit I'm surprised the Council was willing to split up a master-apprentice pair. I understand they are usually quite insistent about that sort of thing."

"Aola's really only an apprentice in name, now," Feemor did not know why he felt compelled to share this, but Palpatine's face was old and understanding, his eyebrows tilted at a receptive angle that invited confidence. "She'll be ready for her trials soon. Better to let her learn to work apart from me now."

"Leaving the nest at long last. A bittersweet moment, I'm sure," Palpatine smiled. They'd come to a fork in the path; Palpatine would go right to his offices, while Feemor would continue on straight to the transport hangars.

Something in Palpatine's tone bespoke familiarity. "Do you have children, senator?"

"No, but I've had one or two youngsters beneath my wing. Losing them is never easy."
"I don't think I'm losing her," Feemor demurred immediately, "I look forward to seeing her come into her own."

"Of course," Palpatine assured. "I only mean… it's hard being apart. I do hope she stays safe out on the field. These droids seem a nasty business."

The thought made Feemor pause, just for a second. "Of course. The Force will watch over her," he said as sagely as he could. Palpatine's reciprocating smile was soft and reassuring.

"Of course. A good evening to you, Master Jedi."

Wink pushed himself up through the hole in the floor, grumbling all the way. First came muddy gloves, then muddy elbows, then a muddy chest, head, and helmet. The only visibly human part of him were his eyes, which were peering out through the grime in irritation.

"Red hells' kriffing balls," he said, spitting slime out of his mouth.

"Not encouraging words, son," said Torc Berlinger, mustache twitching. Qui-Gon ducked under the low ceiling and followed him.

Wink rested on the ground, legs dangling down into the blackness of the impromptu access tunnel. He wiped at his headlamp in an attempt to clean it, but only succeeded in rearranging the pattern of mud smeared on the surface. When he tilted his head to look up at his companions, fractured beams of light made them squint.

"It's a bloody mess down there, sir, and that's a fact."

"What kind of mess?" Torc needed to know.

"There's a whole net of wiring down there, miles of it. Without cutting anything, it's going to be next to impossible to get anyone through to the chamber, let alone any equipment."

"How wide a path can you manage?"

Wink shrugged and held up his hands to indicate a width slightly wider than his own shoulders. Unfortunately, Wink was a small man.

"Damnit," Torc snapped.

"It gets worse," Wink continued, mood as foul as his face and clothes. "There's wiring down there that's not on our schematics."

"What?" Torc's irritation turned into alarm. "That's not possible."

"It's there, sir," Wink shrugged. "It doesn't look like ours." There was a wary inflection on the last phrase that pricked Qui-Gon's ears.

"You think the Federation put it there," the Jedi said. Wink looked up at him and shrugged again. Each time he made the gesture, it grew more uncertain.

"I don't know. I just know it ain't ours and it ain't on the plans, and it's right above where we know the droids are."

"What kind of wiring? What does it do?"
"It's impossible to say exactly, but it's like a web. A sort of net, set up grid-like. There's these…” Wink gestured with his hands, not quite able to describe what he'd seen. "Sensors of some kind. They dig into the rock above the cavern, go all way 'round it, from what I can tell."

"Sensors?" Qui-Gon repeated, having a bad feeling. "Do they feed back to anything?

"Master Jinn." Agent Gabri peeked her head around the tunnel bend, holding one side of a communications headphone to her ear. "A message for you." Qui-Gon nodded at her, and looked back to Wink for an answer. The electrician shrugged once more, as if the motion were as necessary as breathing.

"I can take another look, but… if it were me, I'd wire them back to a transmitter."

"A transmitter?"

"If you're off planet, or hundreds of feet above, there's no use wiring everything direct to the source," Wink explained. "Better to just send it out on radio."

Qui-Gon nodded, and left to join Agent Gabri at their makeshift communications center. "It's Agent Cody," she explained. Qui-Gon took the headphones from her.

"Jinn."

"Master Jinn, Master Kenobi has located the droid cache and as gained access. Unfortunately," the clone let out sigh, "this may be harder than we thought."

"How so?" Qui-Gon asked, the bad feeling welling up like tar in the pit of his stomach.

"It's the droids. They're deactivated at present, but Master Kenobi wants to know if Eriadu keeps any starfighters on planet."

Qui-Gon closed his eyes, feeling the tar rise higher and higher. "Why?" he asked, suspecting the answer.

"Because they may be our best extraction plan."

"Put him on the comm."

"I'm sorry sir, but we've had trouble reaching him since he got down there."

"Down where?"

"With the droids, sir."

"He's in the cavern right now?" Qui-Gon asked. Upon overhearing that, several people around him stopped to listen, trading silent, panicked expressions.

"Yes, sir. The depth or the rock or something is interfering with our communications. Padawan Tarkona's gone closer to see if she can reach him, but so far nothing."

"How did he get there? Is your crew with him?"

Cody sighed, a very specific tone of longsuffering that Qui-Gon recognized as something he often felt himself. "Agent Iris and the IGBC's team are en route to you, sir. Master Kenobi sent them away to retrieve repulsorcraft and weaponry. After they'd left, he went down by himself."
"Weaponry?"

"Yes, sir."

Qui-Gon's mind was running faster than his consciousness. His mouth remained frozen while the wheels turned. Sensors. Radio transmitter. Blocked communications. Obi-Wan thought they would need artillery and starfighters, but he could only see the droids, not the invisible wires watching over them from above. Qui-Gon reached across their bond - tentative now that Obi-Wan was older, but still strong. The young knight was oblivious to any immediate danger. "Contact him," Qui-Gon commanded at length. "Get him on this line."

"Sir, the longer he's gone, the more trouble we've had-"

"Wire him in if you have to, he could put us all in danger. I will collect Agent Iris, the men, and whatever weaponry we can drum up and rendezvous with you. Stay put."

"Understood, sir."

Qui-Gon hung up the headphones and turned to Agent Gabri. "We're going to need every starfighter on this planet on call. Contact OrbitSec and let them know to be on the lookout for Federation ships." Gabri, though shocked by this sudden turn of events, nodded curtly and went to work on the comm. "Wink," Qui-Gon turned to where the electrician was still grumbling to Torc about his discoveries. The mud-soaked man turned to look at the Jedi.

"Sir?"

"Is there any way to tap into this mystery network and tell where they've been transmitting to?"

"Uh," the man frowned, thinking. "If they're transmitting anything to anywhere, I'd need to find the hub first, and even then it might take a while."

"Do your best," he bade, and Wink disappeared back into the muddy tunnel. Qui-Gon turned to the remaining engineer. "Mr. Belinger."

"Sir?"

"Contact the freighter fleet and tell them to be on guard." Qui-Gon paused, and added, "If any of their ships are outfitted with artillery of any kind, send them to the planet surface."

Torc raised his eyebrows, cap, and goggles and wiped sweat off his brow, but then wrestled it firmly back into place. "Yessir," he said, and sped off to work. Qui-Gon ducked under the low tunnel ceiling and started toward the surface, cursing Obi-Wan for acting so brashly, and himself for setting a lifelong example.

"For the record, I think this is a bad idea, miss."

"Do you have a better idea?" Aola asked, clipping the end of the radio wire to her belt. She gave it a tug, and the portable satellite dish wobbled. Cody pushed it back into place and drove the stake further into the ground so it wouldn't budge.

"We could wait for a repulsorcraft."

"Master Jinn said to get Obi-Wan on the line. We'll do that." She took out both of her sabers and drove them into the edge of the cliff on low power, much like Obi-Wan had. She swung herself
over the side of the cliff so just her elbows, hands, and sabers were on ground level, dangling her over the chasm. Cody glanced at the drop, at the humming indigo beams dug into the ground, and then back at the Twi'lek herself. After surveying the drop awaiting her, Aola turned back to look at him and smiled.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Cody asked, eyebrows wrung into an anxious expression.

Aola scoffed. "I didn't see you asking Obi-Wan that."

Cody's anxiety became chagrin. "Because I didn't know what Obi-Wan was planning to do," he said.

"Awww," Aola beamed at him suddenly, and his eyebrows drew further down. "You called him by his first name!"

Cody, unsure of how to handle the comment whilst Aola was dangling above a drop to certain death, shook his head and never stopped frowning. "Be careful, miss," he said. Aola sighed in disappointment and started her descent, slowly placing one saber below the other in staggered steps, leaving alternating smoking holes in the clay.

"One day," she promised as she lowered herself behind the cliff, bare arms flexing, "I'll get you to call me by my first name."

"Watch your step," said Cody, ignoring her words and watching her hands and feet instead. "There's some rough ground on the way."

"One step at a time, agent."

She tossed her long silka braid off her shoulder, gave Cody a lingering glare, and disappeared over the edge.

Her descent was more controlled and safer than Obi-Wan's had been, but more strenuous. Her arms burned as she placed her sabers one below the other and lowered herself as if on a ladder. After a hundred feet or so, she swung limp on the end of her sabers, desperate for a respite, knowing she could not rest too long or she risked falling. She could taste the salt of her sweat as she panted into her arm, and spat over her shoulder. Her eyes caught on the wild gash left by Obi-Wan's saber. For a brief moment, she considered turning up the power on her sabers and cruising to her target like he had. Then, she glanced down and saw the chasm below and knew that if she tried to stop at such a speed with arms already worn, she'd fall. She grumbled and continued her slow descent.

When she came within a reasonable distance of the door, she let go of the wall and fell, cushioning her landing with the Force. It still made an audible impact that echoed off the canyon walls.

"Are you alright, miss?" Cody called from overhead, having heard the sound and assumed the worst.

"Aola," she hissed to herself. Louder, she said, "I've reached the door - plugging in now."

She took the cable they'd run from the ground into her commlink and then looked around. The hangar door was massive and gaping open, with blackness beyond. She caught sight of the first row of battle droids and shivered. "Obi-Wan?"

She called into the quiet. The name reverberated off the metal and stone hangar, giving an audible shape to its vastness. "Give me some lead," she said into her commlink, "he must be deeper inside." The wire pinged and whirred as Cody unwound the spool to allow Aola room to move.

"Obi-Wan?" she said again, clipping the wired link back to her belt. Her foot crunched sand into the metal door frame. She took another step towards the opening.
"Stop!" Obi-Wan's shout resonated out of nowhere, and Aola jumped.

"Kriffing Force," Aola hissed, obediently freezing despite her surprise, "I can hear you well enough, Obi."

"Don't move," the knight appeared from behind something, illuminating the way with his lightsaber. He gestured to the threshold just inches away from Aola's boot. "There's a sensor. Step over it, carefully."

Aola looked at the base of the door and could just barely see a node installed flush with the doorframe. She looked to the opposite side to see its corresponding partner. "Ah," she said, and lifted her foot - and paused. "Will this set it off?" she gestured to the wire trailing from her belt. "Master Jinn's been trying to contact you, asked us to wire you in."

Obi-Wan frowned at the mention of Qui-Gon, but then moved toward the door and opened a pocket on his belt. He took out his grappling hook, attached it to the wall above the door, and cut the wire off at shoulder height. This he tied into a loose knot around the satellite wire, creating a makeshift pulley that would suspend the wire above the invisible sensor beam. "That should do for now," he said.

"Good thinking," Aola tested the security of the attachment and then stepped over the sensor, a parabola of wire zipping across the grappling cord. She watched it for a while to make sure it would not jump or slip, but it stayed well away from the sensor's beam. Satisfied, she turned back to her friend and took out her commlink to hand to him. "Call Master Jinn back. He seemed worried when he called."

"Do it as we walk," Obi-Wan replied, taking his saber out again. "You have to see this."

"He did what?" Agent Iris' eyes were wide, voice low with astonishment and a hint of anger. It encapsulated everything Qui-Gon felt but could not say.

"He's reached the droids," Qui-Gon kept his voice calm, even if he wanted to huff and make indiscreet comments about his former apprentice's disregard of his lifelong 'do as I say and not as I do' wisdom. "Unfortunately, the chamber walls seem to have blocked all lines of communication. We've been unable to reach him for details."

"He's down there alone?"

"So it would seem. We need to gather up whatever weaponry we have and meet him down there. I suspect this could go south fairly quickly."

Iris squared her jaw. "We'll leave immediately. I'll have the IGBC hands pick up whatever the brought and whatever they can find, and we'll meet you in the hangar."

"No, I need to stay here," Qui-Gon glanced over to where Torc and Wink were arguing about how best to trace the lines of sensors back to their source. Iris followed his gaze, frowning.

"Sir, we could use your… expertise." She couldn't help but glancing at his lightsaber.

"Expertise is needed on all fronts. Back up Knight Kenobi. Agent Gabri and I will keep in contact with Orbitsec. Watch your backs."

Hesitant, Iris nodded. "Yes, sir." She turned away to the team of mercenaries, and marched them toward the armory.

"I know," Obi-Wan agreed. Before them, rows upon rows of droids loomed through the sandy darkness, slumbering like relics from ancient times. They were arranged in precise rows like soldiers. They were soldiers, Aola supposed. The vast majority of them were flimsy things, cheaply made and roughly life size. Behind those were the real monsters; heavily armed not only with blasters, which nearly all of them held in deactivated claws, but with built-in artillery, armor thick as a ship's hull, heads mounted low against the shoulders, made for durability. Others with slim, strong frames with armored, articulated cores. They were unlike any of the still holos she'd seen.

"Who made all these?" she wondered aloud, gazing into the lightless eyes of a droid, towering above her with a staff strapped to its back.

"I don't know. Look at this," Obi-Wan pointed with his lightsaber, and Aola gasped when she realized what she was looking at. Sleek black angles made it hard to discern at first what it was, but there were slim eye lenses on the front, and jets on the back, and cleverly disguised ion cannons on each of the four wings. It could fly. It was five times as big as she was. It was also asleep.

"We can't wake any of these up," she said to the air.

"No," Obi-Wan agreed, face looking pale in the blue light of his saber. Aola wondered if the fear on his face was a trick of the light. "But we can't ride the mission on the chance that we won't." He took Aola's wired commlink and opened the frequency.

Qui-Gon's comm buzzed. He picked it up immediately.

"Jinn."

"Master, I was told you were trying to reach me."

Because half a dozen other people were listening, Qui-Gon did not say any of the incredibly non-Jedi turns of phrase he wanted to use and instead said, "Are the droids active?"

"No." Dryly, Obi-Wan said, "I think you'd hear it if they were." A pause. "Aola's with me now. Send out the cavalry and I can get everyone in safely, we can start dismantling this arsenal as carefully as possible."

"Obi-Wan you need to be careful. They've uncovered some sort of network up here, a wired net of sensors, right above where you are now. The Federation may be listening or watching what you're doing."

"Sensors? There's a sensor by the door, if that's what you mean. We've gone around that."

"No, sensors above the cavern. In the rock. We don't know who's listening, we're trying to figure it out. Be careful. Agent Iris is on her way back to you know with backup."

"What is that?" Aola's voice came over the comm. "Look at this."

"Look at what?"

"This, look, it's some sort of seal."

"Obi-Wan? Aola?" Qui-Gon said, and waited. "Obi-Wan?" Qui-Gon cursed. "Find out where that line leads," he told Wink and Torc, interrupting their spat. "Now."

While Obi-Wan talked on the comm, Aola was scanning the lines of droids. Her eyes caught on something. "What is that?" She drew closer to see the small metal insignia riveted onto one of the droids. "Look at this," she interrupted Obi-Wan's conversation and waved him over.

"Look at what?"

"This, it looks like some sort of seal." It was a small, cast disc of metal affixed to the droid's hull at the base of its back. It looks as if it might have symbols embossed into it, but in the dim light it was difficult to see. Obi-Wan raised his lightsaber to see, blue light making him squint to see the details.

"Huh." Obi-Wan reached out to the seal, attempting to feel the pattern where he could not see it. "It almost looks like-" When his skin touched the metal, the droid's dead eyes lit up. It jerked to life, its arms moving to seize its staff. It's circular, red eyes turned out of the dark until they faced the Jedi. "Oh, chssk," Obi-Wan dropped the comm and moved his saber to a defensive angle.

Its staff sparkled to light with a burst of electricity, each end crackling with purple energy. The droid brought its weapon down in a powerful arc, and Obi-Wan caught it on its purple end with his lightsaber. To his utter surprise, the staff not only caught his saber, but began pushing it back toward him with incredible strength. "Kriff," he said, and shoved the droid backward with a force push. It fell over and knocked into the droid behind it. That droid came to life with a well-oiled whir, its thick armor plates locking into place with threatening integrity. The barrels of its cannons locked into place with an audible sound.

"Kriff kriff kriff," Obi-Wan said. "Aola!"

Both of Aola's sabers were out and swinging. "Don't let them hit any other droids!" Obi-Wan called, trying desperately to rationalize a droid that could not only fight, but could fight against a lightsaber. He hit and dodged and struck, never quite hitting his target. The light of his own weapon was dizzying against the dark of the cavern, interspersed with the blasts from the tanklike droid Aola faced.

The purple of the droid's electric staff sucked at his vision, making it so he could see little beyond its blurring light. He couldn't help but remember his scar, the staff of the sith that gave it to him. With a shout of half anger and half fear, he cut the staff in two, and when this distracted the droid, he cut its head off.

He turned to see how Aola was faring before he realized the body was still moving. Shocked, he took his saber in a backhanded grip and plunged it into the chest, missing the one functional half of the staff by inches.

"Obi-Wan!" Aola called. Obi-Wan turned just before she pressed her opponent almost fully onto him. "Keep it from the others!"

Obi-Wan slashed it diagonally from behind. It's top half slid off its severed bottom half, but both parts continued moving, It's legs kicking at Obi-Wan's saber hand, its arms using the half-staff of its colleague like a paddle to move toward Aola. It raised one arm and took aim at Aola's head. The two Jedi simultaneously attacked. Obi-Wan cut the legs in three pieces in one smooth movement, while Aola blocked the droid's shot and stabbed through it's skull with one saber and through its
remaining chest with the other. She let the metal melt before yanking the blades away.

The droid's shot ricocheted off the stone walls high above and echoed through the chamber, eventually causing a small rain of pebbles to tinkle harmlessly off the sleeping droids below. Three sabers hummed in stationary harmony, their owners breathing heavy.

"Don't touch the droids," Obi-Wan said, eyes wide.

"Don't touch the droids," Aola repeated, and glanced down at the carnage they'd created, which was just inches away from multiple squadrons of battle droids. Something caught her eye, and she stooped to retrieve a scattered piece of machinery; the metal seal that had originally drawn Obi-Wan to touch the droids in the first place.

"Obi-Wan, are you there?" Qui-Gon's voice was raised, as if he'd been trying to get their attention this entire time.

"Yes, I'm here," Obi-Wan said breathlessly into his comm. Aola pocketed the metal scrap. "Just a bit of trouble with the droids," Obi-Wan said, and eyed the number of droids around them. Aola wondered if he was thinking the same thing she was: that, should all the droids awake, they would be hopelessly, impossibly outnumbered. "You said Agent Iris was en route?"

"Yes. You need to stay tight until she gets there."

Obi-Wan wasn't thinking about that. They couldn't touch the droids. "Master, I don't think extraction is going to be a possibility." They couldn't move the droids. "We need those starfighters. If we're going to get out of here, we're going to have to fight."

Agent Iris was white-knuckling the speeder controls, the engines straining under the weight of men and guns. They'd taken not only Obi-Wan's team of IGBC fighters, but Qui-Gon's as well, all packed into two repulsor craft and barrelling straight for the canyon, tossing up clouds of red dust in their wake.

"Is there not a way to disable them?" Qui-Gon rubbed at the worry lines between his eyebrows, and winced at the slurry of dirt and sweat that had collected there.

"I suppose we could slice them to pieces before they wake up - but if they hit each other it causes a chain reaction. It's going to be a minefield no matter what we do, and some of these things don't die easy." Obi-Wan sighed and added, in a quiet tone of apprehension, "I think some of them are anti-starcraft, Master."

Qui-Gon had seen pictures of the droids they'd been hunting. "Anti-starcraft? Droids?"

"Massive ones." Obi-Wan seemed to sense Qui-Gon's bewilderment. "It's unlike anything I've seen before, and we can't let anyone else down here or we risk setting off the lot of them. Where is-"

The line suddenly went dead, overtaken by static. "Obi-Wan?" Qui-Gon fiddled with the comms unit. "Obi-Wan?" He glanced at Gabri, who'd been monitoring OrbitSec's chatter as they amassed patrols above their sector. "Have your lines cut out?"

"No," she seemed confused.

"Master Jinn, sir," said Torc from across the chamber, waving the Jedi over with a greasy work glove. Qui-Gon sighed, hung up the headphones and joined the engineer and his team. Wink had
emerged from the tunnel once more. "Go on, then," Torc urged the younger man, "Tell him what you told me."

"Blast it," Obi-Wan hit Aola's wired comm unit and tightened the connection, but it did nothing to restore Qui-Gon's voice amid the static.

Aola was now hyperaware of how close she was to the droids; one beside her, two in front; at least three in back. If she tripped, if she put one arm or lekku out of line... "Obi, if those mercs come down here with blasters... they'll light the place up, and who knows what will happen."

"I know, I know," Obi-Wan said, trying to put his thoughts in order. He changed frequencies on the comm.

"Cody, I've lost contact with base. Agent Iris is bringing in the team, you can't let them come down here, I repeat, do not let anyone else down here, understand?" He waited on the line, but there was only the whine of static. "Cody?" he called again, glancing uneasily toward the hangar doors, a window of light a far way off. "Damnit, what did they do up there?"

Overhead, three massive freighters descended into the atmosphere, caked in a red haze from the pervasive Eriaduan smog. All three were mining vessels, the only type of commercial cargo ships outfitted with ion cannons. However, those cannons were meant for rock and clay, not combat. Cody wasn't sure how they would fare against droids, and trying to plot the contingencies made his insides churn.

As the clone watched the extraction party descend, an IGBC merc invaded his personal space. "Watch where you swing that thing," Cody growled, shoving the business end of a long gun away from his face.

"Oh, sorry mate," said the offending selkath, adjusting the strap so the gun sat straighter against his shoulder, almost touching the ground. Unfortunately, the butt of the long rifle had already claimed a victim.

"Hels damn," Cody hissed, stooping to right the small satellite dish. His comm warbled with static and feedback. The dish needle was bent, and he grumbled impolite comments as he attempted to straighten it.

"Alright, you six, come with me," Agent Iris gestured for half of the IGBC agents to join her on the repulsorcraft, which was waiting above the edge of the cliff. "The rest of you will stay here and await orders." To Cody's chagrin, the stragglers included the long gun-wielding klutz. "Agent Cody," Iris' words brought him out of his reverie.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Did Master Jinn fill you in on our plan of attack?"

"Not completely, ma'am. I understand we're to bring in starfighters and artillery in case these things decide to give us trouble."

The OrbitSec agent nodded, businesslike in a crisis. "Exactly. I will take a party down to the chamber itself and provide backup to Master Kenobi and Master Tarkona - you will stay here and take command of this unit," she nodded at the remaining six IGBC mercs, "and those freighters, as soon as they're within range. Let's make this as quick and painless as possible."
"I couldn't agree more," Cody resisted the ingrained urge to salute, and sufficed with a curt nod.

"Keep your comm open." Iris stepped up to the controls on the craft and slowly, the group descended, locking ammunitions and securing helmets.

"Right," Cody turned and looked at the sad, mis-aligned satellite dish. "Does any one of you have a multi-tool?" When the long gun owner sheepishly raised his hand, Cody glared. "Anyone who didn't knock the thing over in the first place?" When this produced no results, Cody begrudgingly let the selkath toss his multitool from some distance away, where his wayward weapon posed no threat. As the clone sat on the ground to repair the miniature comms tower, he grumbled, as had become his habit.

"I'm sorry," Qui-Gon interrupted the stream of engineer speak and tried to digest everything he'd been told. "I thought you said you were seeking out a radio transmitter."

"I was, sir. But I found something else, and I thought you'd like to know," explained Wink in a patient voice, still covered head to toe in mud. "Each of those sensors I mentioned, I had to crack one open to get round it to follow the current, and they're not just sensors. Each one of 'em's packed with charges." Wink delivered the news with alarm, but Qui-Gon was still having a hard time understanding.

"Charges? Like electrical charges?"

"No, no, sir," Wink waved his hands, urgently trying to convey. "Pyrotechnic charges. Explosives. Boom!"

Iris frowned at the paths left by the Jedi's lightsabers, and reached out to trace one with her hand as they slowly descended toward the chamber doors. The clay was mangled and melted, reformed into bulbous black shapes where the hottest part of the saber had been.

"Wouldn't think Jedi need no backup," muttered one mercenary to another. "Imagine that's a person - or a droid? Cor. What's down there that they need our help?" Sounds of agreement went around the craft. Some of the mercs fiddled nervously with their gear. Iris wrapped her hand more firmly around the grip of her blaster. The upper edge of the metal door filed into view.

"Now let's see if that works - hey, finally," Cody tweaked the satellite dish and was rewarded with a static-free channel. Almost instantaneously, his comm lit up.

"Cody, come in, Cody, please," Obi-Wan sounded desperate.

"Master Kenobi?"

"Oh, thank the Force, what happened to the comms?"

"It's a long story," Cody glared at the long gun, still attached to its owners' back as he idled with his companions. "What do you need?"

"These droids are only dormant. They wake up at the slightest touch, there are sensors everywhere. The whole place is a powder keg - you can't let anyone else down here, I repeat, do not let anyone else come down here."

Cody looked up to the edge of the canyon. Iris and her team were likely nearly to the door. "Oh
"Oh no? Oh no what?" Obi-Wan demanded. Cody looked from the canyon to his commlink and back.

"Sir, Agent Iris is... she's already-"

"Stop!" Aola's shout carried over, followed by distant noise and Obi-Wan's much louder,

"No, don't move! Don't-"

"Explosives?" Qui-Gon glanced at Torc. "Why on earth would the Federation put armed explosives above their own cavern?"

"Sabotage? An attack?" Torc suggested.

"They have an army of droids for that," Qui-Gon countered. "Why would they need explosives?"

"Self-destruct," said Wink. The two older men turned to look at him. "They're dangerous, right? The droids? Something you don't want falling into the wrong hands? It's like them dye bombs they put in credit crates in banks," he said, looking between the faces of the other men for confirmation. "If you can't recover 'em yourself, you might as well destroy the lot."

A huge, rumbling noise filled the comm and, Cody realized, the air. He could feel the ground shaking.

"Master Kenobi?" he shouted in alarm. "Master Kenobi, what's going on?"

A whole layer of dust and pebbles were reverberating off the ground from the shaking below, and the satellite dish was shivering right along with it. Obi-Wan's voice cut in and out as he tried to explain,

"-ensor trig- -ast do-rs closing, y- need to -et -os- starfighters - now!"

The rumbling stopped, and the line went dead. After attempting to contact Obi-Wan multiple times, Cody cursed loudly, and opened his comm to a new frequency.

"Freighter fleet, this is Agent Cody of the SBI, do you copy?"

"Yes sir, copy loud and clear."

"Good. Prime your weapons and standby. You're going to have to get down there quickly."

"Yes sir, standing by."

As the ion cannons whined and hummed their way to ready-position, Cody cursed, cursed again, and commed Qui-Gon.

"Self-destruct? Do you really think they'd-" Torc was cut off mid-sentence as the whole room began shake. Wink clutched his hard hat onto his head, and Gabri braced herself against the comms unit and the wall. Torc pulled Qui-Gon away from a precarious-looking stalactite.

"That's not the charges, is it?" Qui-Gon asked above the rumble.
"No, they'd be bursts," Wink said, having to grab hold of the edges of the tunnel to avoid falling over. After a moment, the rumbling stopped.

"Sir," Gabri announced, "we've lost contact with Iris. And Master Kenobi." She frowned, and pressed the earpiece closer to her ear. "Agent Cody says..." she paused to let her colleague speak. Qui-Gon, Torc, Wink, and all other personnel had their eyes trained on her. Gabri's face went slack. "Iris' crew set off an alarm. The blast doors are closed. They're trapped."

"Do you hear that?" said Wink, cocking his head and bending his ear toward the hole in the ground that had led him to the ceiling of the droid's hangar. He swiveled his eyes to look at Qui-Gon. "Sounds like blaster fire."

"Goddess almighty," Torc raised his hat and worried his hair.

It was all so vivid in Qui-Gon's mind; a vast hangar filled with droids of unknown power and number, his padawan and his grandpadawan, and a handful of mercenaries. Blaster fire, loud enough to carry through rock.

"Sir," Gabri said, "Cody has armed freighters standing by, what is our move?"

Qui-Gon's mind raced.

"They'll never break blast doors, but they might break the wall around it. Focus all fire at the rock around the door, and prepare for emergency extraction," Qui-Gon told her.

"Yes, sir."

"Wink," Qui-Gon turned back to the engineer, "would it be possible to set off the charges in those sensors?"

"What, detonate them? While they're all trapped down there?" He was aghast.

"Not all of the charges," Qui-Gon said. "Just the ones in the back of the cavern." The video feed that had brought them here had shown shadows in the back - possibly the anti-starcraft ones Obi-Wan had spoken of. A few tons of earth would, Qui-Gon hoped, cripple the machines long enough to let them escape.

"Well," Wink frowned, wheels turning. "I'll need some clippers and a transmitter, but... I reckon I could."

"Good. Go," Qui-Gon bade. "As fast as you can."

The freighters were mining vehicles; they were made to move earth. "Weeeehooo!" Whooped one of the pilots as he plowed into the bedrock with abandon. On the opposite side of the door, the second freighter was engaged in a similar onslaught. The pilot swung his string of fire side to side, carving a horizontal path beside the massive hangar doors. His hands slipped on the controls, and the cannon veered just slightly too far to the left, and hit the blast doors dead on.

"Oh, kriff," said the pilot as the torpedo ricocheted off the metal doors. In the close quarters of the canyon, it bounced straight back into the cockpit. As the bridge exploded and the freighter fell into the hungry depths of the chasm, Cody watched above from the flatbed of the third freighter, doors open, wind making it almost impossible to hear or talk. His six men were priming their weapons, preparing to join in the fray with their various and sundry rocket launchers, machine rounds, and, of course, long guns.
"Do not hit those doors," he shouted into his comm at the pilots. "If anyone's getting out of there, we have to keep these ships in one piece, and weaken that door." The ship lowered itself deeper into the canyon to replace its fallen comrade, twin ion cannons spitting red mining charges into the side of the cliff with great booms. They'd exposed the anchors of the blast doors, but the metal clung fast to the rock. "Knock that bastard off its fittings," Cody ordered, and the IGBC crew took to their task with enthusiasm. The ship shook, and Cody reached up to grab hold of the cargo netting.

"Gabri," he shouted into his comm, "where are those starfighters?

"Starfighters, inbound," Gabri relayed over the comm, flipping between five different channels or orchestrate a detach from OrbitSec and brief the pilots on the situation. "ETA two minutes." She looked to where Qui-Gon and Torc were peering into the tunnel, waiting for Wink to return. "Sir, fighters are on their way. If you're going to blow things up, I'd suggest you do it now."

"No," Qui-Gon said. "The droids respond to touch, from people and from each other. We don't know what's going on in there, which droids are awake. If we go into early, we could make it worse. We'll do it at the same time as the starfighters hit that door.

"At the same time?" Gabri asked for confirmation. It would be awfully difficult to achieve without radar monitors.

"Yes."

"Alright," Wink appeared like a mole out of the floor. "It's all set, here's the detonator, and-

"Show me," Qui-Gon took the detonator and moved toward the tunnel opening.

"Er, sir?" Wink frowned.

"Show me where it's going to blow. I'm going down there."

"W-but, sir, I'm not sure-" Before Wink could protest again, Qui-Gon had stuck his boots through the tunnel opening, forcing Wink to make room for the much taller, larger man. Undeterred by the tight quarters, the Jedi folded himself into the passage and went forward.

"The same time, Agent Gabri!" he shouted back. "Tell me exactly when they fire!"

Gabri opened her mouth but said nothing, unable to find the protest she was looking for. She looked to Torc, and Wink, and everyone else in the room who looked equally as gobsmacked. Their inactivity made her angry. "Well don't just stand there," she snapped, "show him!"

Wink scurried down into the tunnel after Qui-Gon, and Gabri turned back to her comm. "Orbit leader, this is Sector Five awaiting engagement, please declare your approach." She glanced at the place where Qui-Gon had disappeared, and wondered if all Jedi were as mad.

"It'll be just there, sir," Wink pointed in the light of his headlamp. Qui-Gon took in a calming breath for the fourth time since entering the muddy, dark access tunnel. It was an ancient crawlspace, overrun by cave formations and very determined wiring. In the gloom, he could see crummy lumps sticking out of the ground with red and white wires twisting away in clumps.

"Are these the charges?" he asked Wink.

"The ends of 'em. They're stuck deep in the rock. They'll drop the whole ceiling, if we're not
"Careful."

"We just want to drop the back of the ceiling," Qui-Gon confirmed.

"Yes, sir. I've done my best."

"Good." Qui-Gon found a spot he felt was advantageous and knelt there - though in such tight quarters, kneeling was more a necessity than a choice. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply through his nose.

"What are you doing, sir?" asked Wink, apprehension in every syllable.

"Fighters arrive in one minute!" shouted Gabri from down the way.

Qui-Gon reached out with his senses, seeking Obi-Wan's presence amid the chaos. The knight was in full crisis mode, distracted and confused, fighting hard, tiring fast. Qui-Gon tugged on their disused bond as hard as he could, hoping it was enough. Obi-Wan, listen, he silently begged, hoping the younger man would get the message.

"Arrival in thirty seconds!"

"Sir?" Wink sounded nervous.

Obi-Wan.

"Twenty seconds!"

"Sir?" Wink was ducking behind a stalagmite, pulling his hard hat down over his ears.

"Fighters engaged..." Gabri raised her voice at the end, leaving a pregnant pause waiting for her to finish.

"...Sir?" Wink squeaked.

In one hand, Qui-Gon gripped the detonator. In the other, he gripped his lightsaber. Padawan, Qui-Gon practically shouted in his mind, move.

"Now!"

Pandemonium.

The only light in the hangar was the light of their sabers, blasterfire, and droids' eyes. The last were the most numerous. Every time two went out, there were four more to take their place. Droids fell into droids fell into droids, waking each other from their sleep. One next to Obi-Wan's blind right side jerked to life, sending showers of sand pouring down onto the floor. This warning hiss was the only reason why Obi-Wan's saber reached its head before its blaster reached his.

"Obi, look out!" Aola jumped to his right side and skewered what he supposed was two droids that had been headed for him. One of their heads tumbled away and hit another droid in its foot. It's eyes flickered to life, and Aola cursed.

When Agent Iris had arrived, she'd brought six men with her. Obi-Wan wasn't sure which one had stepped right into the sensor beam at the door, but immediately, massive blast doors had emerged from deep within the rock, creaking and straining against years' worth of dirt and rust. It had shaken the entire cavern. The shaking had caused Iris' men to lose their balance, and at least one of
them, maybe more, had fallen over and knocked into the droids. And so, the powder keg was lit.

The doors had also cut off all external light and snapped the cable on Aola's comm. They were trapped down here in the dark, and Obi-Wan had no idea what to do. He could hear men screaming, firing madly into the fray. There were also huge blasts coming from somewhere near the front of the hangar, but Obi-Wan wasn't sure if it was coming from outside, or if it was echoing from their own fight.

"Aola, duck!" he shouted, and she did, just barely missing the energy-tipped spear of a red-eyed droid as it swung. Obi-Wan caught it with his saber, and from below Aola crossed her blades in an X and sliced first the spear in half, and then the droid. They quartered the creature until every bit of it was shorted out and sparking.

A wild scream made both Jedi look to see an IGBC merc flying past, kicked by one of the thicker, articulated droids. The body slid past three rows of sleeping tank droids and thudded right into the hull of an anti-starcraft. A great, heaving hum filled the hangar, and Obi-Wan watched in horror as the eye plates on the massive flying droid began to glow red.

"Oh no," Aola said. Obi-Wan couldn't find words.

*Obi-Wan, listen.* It shot into his head with the rest of the clamor, and he ignored it. The starfighter droid picked itself up to fill the vast height of the chamber, almost birdlike in its movements. It's wings articulated like legs, digging holes into the floor of the cave.

"We have to take it out now, or we'll all die," Aola shouted at him. "Quickly, the head!"

Obi-Wan was frozen in place, and he didn't know why. *Obi-Wan.*

Aola shrieked as she barely ducked under one of the drone's four limbs. "Obi! A little help!"

*Padawan, move.*

"Aola, move, now," he said, latent training overriding all thought.

"We can't, we have to-"

"Now!" Obi-Wan used the Force to pull her back from the droid ship. He grabbed her arm and ran with her back toward the front of the hangar, hitting droids as they went.

The world erupted. Obi-Wan thought for sure his eardrums had burst from the sudden noise, because all he could hear was ringing. To his left, he could see rocks cascading down the walls, and by his right boot was the crushed hull of a starfighter droid beneath a pile of settling boulders. Aola's arm was still in his firm grip, and it had smears of blood welling up in a dozen different places. She was deflecting blaster fire with her mobile hand, and was moving her mouth and looking back at him. He realized she was shouting for him to let her go, so he did. She shielded them both from fire coming from half a dozen different places. He felt the sound of the battle more than he heard it, ears stunned by the blast.

Light poured in from the hangar doors, which were inexplicably cracked open to reveal the front end of two starfighter jets, guns poised. A muffled cry rang out, but Obi-Wan could not understand what had been said.

Someone grabbed him by the back of his tunic and pulled him to one side of the hangar. A barrage of cannon fire lit up the place where he had been standing, cutting down droids by the dozens. The droids that remained were firing at him. As Obi-Wan raised his saber to deflect, he glimpsed a
flicker of green at his right side. He twisted his head fully around to see Qui-Gon, covered in mud and dust, fighting alongside him. He tried to ask his master how and when he had appeared, but he could not hear anything above the roar, not even his own voice.

When the last droid was dead and the fighting stopped, Obi-Wan did not realize for a full two minutes. He still looked this way and that for lingering droids, ears ringing like a tower full of klaxons. Qui-Gon touched his shoulder and he jumped.

"You alright?" the master's voice was muffled, but Obi-Wan could see it on his lips.

"The blast," the knight replied, gesturing to his ears, unaware that he was shouting. He looked his old master up and down. Qui-Gon appeared a singular shade of brown, dusted with blast residue, dirt, and crowned with the red blood seeping from his right temple. "You look a sight," the knight shouted again. Qui-Gon chuckled, and would have made a pithy comment about Obi-Wan's own appearance if the man hadn't been temporarily deaf.

His smile faded when he looked around the hangar to see the aftermath of victory. Several of the men were dead. Some of them were unaccounted for. Those that remained sat on piles of rubble and rubbed at their heads, their ears. One was lying over the prone figure of another, improvising bandages.

"Stay here," Qui-Gon made Obi-Wan sit down before he went to help the wounded.

Cody arrived within moments and helped haul everyone, including the three Jedi, onto a freighter bound for the nearest hospital. The left behind a second crew and ship to search for survivors.

As they travelled, Obi-Wan's hearing began to return, at least in his right ear. His left ear was still clogged - with blood, Aola told him.

"Well," he said, working hard not to shout. He looked at Qui-Gon's mud-caked beard and bloody hair, the shrapnel damage on Aola's right side, and at his own hands, which were already starting to show bruises. He looked up at Cody, who was sweaty but still in one piece, face a picture of concern and disapproval. "All things considered, it could have been worse."

Cody sighed, and looked at the stretchers laid out behind them, one of which contained the unconscious Agent Iris. "It could have been," he allowed, and looked again at the group of Jedi, remembering his discussion with Obi-Wan about Qui-Gon and his recklessness. He shook his head. "But I'm not sure it went well."

Obi-Wan glanced back at the injured. He hoped they would arrive at the hospital soon. "No," he said. Cody left to join the crew on the bridge.

"What are you going to tell Valorum?" asked Qui-Gon after a while. "I'm sure your committee will want to hear about this."

"Yes, I'm sure they will."

"Master Tarkona, do you require medical attention?" asked a medical droid making its rounds.

"Oh, no, I'm fine, thank you." It rolled on to its next patient. "I'm not a master," Aola balked at the droid's back.

"Don't get used to saying that," said Qui-Gon, smiling at her. "From what I've seen today, I wouldn't be surprised if that's a short-lived truth." Aola blushed with pride, and nodded her thanks at her grandmaster.
Obi-Wan stood up and limped to look out the window. He watched the ground pass below; it was an endless red expanse, dimpled with quarries and pockmarked by industrial complexes. In the distance, the weeping edge of the canyon was just visible. At its halfway point, a puff of black smoke was smudged against the horizon.

Obi-Wan was frowning in the intense way of his that Qui-Gon had come to know well. "Are you alright, Obi-Wan?" The master held onto a cargo net to stand next to the knight.

"Six years, and we've never seen anything like that," Obi-Wan replied, eyes transfixed on the disaster in sector five, so far away now. "What else are they hiding?"

Qui-Gon followed Obi-Wan's gaze out to the retreating landscape. "We'll find out." He glanced at the dried blood clinging to Obi-Wan's ear, jaw, and neck. "But it'll keep. Come sit back down before you fall down."

Obi-Wan wrenched his eyes away from the window, after images dancing across his vision. "Yes, Master," he said, exhaustion reducing him to habit. He fell asleep not long after he sat down, slumped against Qui-Gon's shoulder.
"Better. Try it again."

Anakin knew he shouldn't roll his eyes, but they were already halfway to the ceiling. He obediently reignited his saber and began the kata again. Ben watched him off to one side, only occasionally pipping up to say, "slow down," or, "steady that arm," or, "watch your feet". Lifeless comments like this had provided a running commentary to Anakin's day, as dull as his textbooks and just as never-ending.

He'd been trying, really he had. But as the morning wore toward noon, his stomach had begun to rumble again, and he could hear the exciting sounds of clashing sabers wafting over from the junior padawan's dojo. His thighs ached from going through the slow, slow, slow, slow katas Ben had picked out for him. As he finished the full set for a third time, his patience broke and he turned to face Ben.

"Master, can I please do something else, now?" he moaned.

"Why? Is this exercise not constructive to your education?"

Anakin hated it when Master Ben asked questions like that. They were always rigged. "...No..."

Anakin mumbled, knowing how it sounded and knowing that Ben knew exactly what he meant. Constructive was not quite the same as fun.

"And why is that?" Ben asked.

Hunger and frustration cut short Anakin's nascent sense of deliberation. "Because," he drew out, shoulders slumping as he turned to look longingly to the class of junior padawans, their lightsabers dancing in brilliant, colorful shapes, hums and crackles echoing off the walls. "I want to fight. I'm good at it. You know I am."

"You are good at winning, Anakin," Ben corrected him. "As of yet, you are not quite so good at fighting."

Anakin turned to him with a puzzled expression. What, really, was the difference? Ben seemed to sense the thought.

"You could probably defeat most of the students in that group," Ben gestured to the class, most of whom were bigger, taller, and at least two years older than Anakin. "However, you would win through your power, not your skill. Your fellow students may lack power, but they have been training for far longer than you have. If you were to face someone who could wait out your energy, you would never win." For a ten year old, Anakin had an elevated pride in his fighting abilities, and wilted under the criticism. "However," his master continued, "if you continue training
your technique as well as your power, I have no doubt that you could one day face any opponent in this temple.” It was a hint of flattery to lighten the reprimand. “Diligence does pay off, padawan.”

The idea of diligence and "one day" was hard to understand for a ten year old on a grumbling stomach. "But…” he rolled his head around, searching for ideas. "But can I just fight a little bit?" he begged.

Ben fought to keep his face stern against the smiled that threatened to show. Time and space could shift all it wanted, but some parts of Anakin Skywalker would always be the same. "Alright," he relented, and Anakin straightened up in excitement. "But you'll have to fight me."

Like any other new apprentice put into such a situation, Anakin didn't know how to react. Absently, he remembered that one time that Pol mentioned that Ivaness had told him that Urie's Master had seen Ben slice someone's arm off in a duel. It'd been another Jedi, too. And hadn't Master Ben given up all fighting after that? At the time, the other initiates had said that no one had seen Ben dueling at all, and maybe that was a good thing. Anakin blinked away the memory to see his master, lightsaber ignited and put on its training setting, watching him with interest.

"Well?" Ben asked patiently.

Anakin looked into his master's face and all memories of Pol's stories were washed over by a trust he would never think to question. He shrugged. "Alright."

They fell to it in their quiet corner of the dojo. Anakin wouldn't be able to tell, but Ben was dialing back his abilities so far that it was almost comical. He led Anakin into a series of blocks and attacks that mimicked the katas he'd been working on all day, and yes, there was some improvement there. Then, he switched styles and forced the apprentice onto the defensive. Ah, there were the flaws, gaping and dangerous. If it were another apprentice fighting him, Anakin would still have a strong chance, but Ben was not an apprentice. He was a master, and he needed to make a point.

Without warning, Ben dropped his inhibitions and let two lifetimes of skill take over the duel. Anakin yelped as he tried to block the suddenly rapid-fire attacks, and nearly fell over in his attempt. As he struggled to regain his footing, Ben tripped the boy so he fell on his backside. Anakin's training saber flew from his hand, and Ben caught it. He put both sabers hovering near Anakin's neck.

The apprentice froze where he was, looked at the weapon with wide eyes. He'd never been this close to the blade of a real lightsaber before. Even though it was on its training setting, its thrum was lower, its light brighter, its very presence emanating power and the potential for destruction. He looked up into Ben's face.

"Before you can control a fight, you must control your blade, and to control your blade, you must control yourself." Ben disengaged both sabers, and helped Anakin to his feet. "Now. Do that set one more time, and we'll get lunch."

Thus rebuked, Anakin got to his feet without comment and dusted himself off. Ben handed him back his saber, and Anakin re-ignited it, thinking privately that the hum was quiet, the light dull. He found himself wanting more than ever to have his own lightsaber, a real lightsaber. Determined to prove that he was worthy of it, he began the kata set again, closing his eyes to concentrate.

This time, Ben made no comments at all, not even a disapproving sigh. Anakin whirled through the motions in pure muscle memory, mind meditating on a lightsaber, his lightsaber, one that he would build himself, one day. He could almost see it's color.
Before he could, something else crashed into his mind, and made him stop in the middle of the kata.

"Anakin?" Ben frowned in sudden concern when the apprentice lurched out of his routine. "You were doing very well, what happened?"

Anakin did not move, and looked instead toward the door of the dojo, where a wide hall led to the rest of the temple. "Anakin?" he heard his master say again.

"Obi-Wan's back," Anakin said.

"Back?" Ben craned his neck to see the doorway. "Back where?"


Ben's eyebrows shot up. Anakin did sense people like this from time to time, in the dojo or in the Temple, even, but Coruscant was new. Before Ben could inquire further, Anakin blurted, "He's hurt." His face contorted into concern and fear. "They all are."

"They?" Ben came over to put a hand on his apprentice's shoulder. "Who's they?"

"Ow! Force damn, woman, is that really necessary?"

Luna leaned back from her work and eyed her patient with a dark squint. "Call me woman again, Knight Kenobi, and I'll find half a dozen other things that necessary."

Intelligently, Obi-Wan bit his lip and said nothing while the Nautolan healer bent over his injured ear, washing out blood and assessing the damage. He'd closed his eyes, grinding his teeth. Luna's machines clicked and popped in his ear and his body rebelled, all the muscles buried behind his damaged eardrums twitching and roaring in protest. The combined sound was so deafening that when he opened his eyes to see Qui-Gon and Cody standing there watching him, he started. It was a slight movement, but it wreaked havoc on his ear, which was still pinned under Luna's torture devices. He hissed.

"Steady on, Kenobi, almost done," she said, peering down to carefully plug up his ear with bacta. She glanced down at his face to see involuntary tears streaming down. "Oh, stop crying, you'll be fine," she chided. Obi-Wan glared up at her from his tilted position. She didn't notice, but Qui-Gon bit down on his lip to keep from smiling. "There," she stepped away after she'd wrapped his ear in gauze. "Don't take that out until tomorrow morning, alright?"

Obi-Wan sat up with a grimace, all instincts rebelling at the strange, wet feeling in his ear. The bacta deafened him and his voice, as well as his breathing, was annoyingly loud. "How long will it take to heal?" He asked, working very hard not to itch.

"Three weeks, give or take a few days," Luna told him. "And until then, I'd advise against acrobatics, swimming, loud noises, music, shouting, or anything that would compromise balance or hearing."

"Three weeks?" he protested. "I can't... I have things to do." It was a lame excuse, and appeared the lamer for Luna's stoic resolve.

"You have a perforated eardrum, Obi-Wan, and it'd be six weeks without the bacta, so don't you dare take it out." She glanced at Qui-Gon. "Master Jinn,"
"I will see to it that he follows all instructions to the letter, Master Pillia." The Nautolan graced him with a smile.

"Thank you." She glanced again at Obi-Wan, who was still sitting sullenly on the examination bench. "You can get up, you know." He did, she signed off on his sheet, and whisked off to see other patients.

"She was so sweet as a girl," Obi-Wan complained. "Master Che has ruined her."

"Some people tell me that I've ruined you, you know." Qui-Gon said. Obi-Wan grumbled something rude and indistinct.

"Obi-Wan! Obi-Wan!" The two Jedi and their clone companion turned to the door where a much smaller Jedi barreled through, trailed by an overworked healer's apprentice.

"Padawan Skywalker, you can't just barge in-" he was saying. Anakin ignored him, looking instead to Obi-Wan, whose head was half swaddled in bandages.

"Are you alright? You're hurt, aren't you?"

Obi-Wan had been prepared to ask why Anakin was there at all, but he paused. "Just a little," he said, and his frown deepened. "You already knew?"

Anakin did not pause to answer, and turned instead to Qui-Gon. "You're hurt too, Master Jinn?" It was phrased as a question, but carried the a child's certainty of fact.

"Just a scrape here and there," the tall man assured, bending slightly to smile at Anakin. He glanced up toward the door. "Where is your master, young one?"

"Oh," Anakin, blinders fading in wake of his relief, seemed to realize for the first time that Ben was not present. "He's…"

"I am so, so sorry, Padawan Lopnov," Ben's voice echoed in from the lobby. "I don't know what's gotten into him. I'll see to him. No no, I don't mean to keep you, I'll see him out myself." Bootheels echoed closer.

"Anakin, when I tell you to slow down, that isn't an encouragement to run all the way to-" Ben appeared in the door, and his face cleared. "Obi-Wan, you are back."

"For about an hour, now." The younger Kenobi glanced from Ben to his student. "You seem surprised."

"Anakin sensed you," Ben explained, and both Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon's eyebrows raised. "He said you were hurt."

"Mildly," Qui-Gon said, though his tone was grave. "It could have been much worse."

"For many, it was," Cody cut in. Obi-Wan only nodded a somber agreement.

"I don't think we've been introduced," Ben said, reaching out a hand. "You must be a Kaminoan, if I'm not mistaken."

Cody chuckled. "So I am. Cody Kaminoan, sir, I'm an agent on detach from the SBI."

Ben's hand was frozen in Cody's firm, familiar handshake. "Cody, you say?"
"Yes sir."

Ben looked closer at his face. Force, he was.

It was a moment like many others he'd experienced in this life; meeting Bail, Padme, Anakin. Ben's body was here in the temple, but his mind had been sucked into a microcosm of his own memories, a thousand "sir"s issuing from the mouth of a single man, who, though he shared a face with a million brothers, was uniquely equipped to put Ben's mind at ease. Something in his heart swelled, and he didn't trust himself to speak.

Qui-Gon cleared his throat, and Ben realized he was still gripping Cody's hand. "Sorry," he let go, and coughed to clear the inexplicable lump in his throat. "Ben Kenobi, a pleasure to meet you. I gather you've met my nephew, Obi-Wan."

"Nephew?" Cody glanced at Obi-Wan, and the younger Jedi smiled and gave a nod. "Yes," Cody told Ben, "yes, we met back on Kamino, actually."

"Kamino," the word meant both the planet and a singular incident. Ben's eyebrows raised. "Really?"

"He saved my life," Obi-Wan piped up. "And Qui-Gon's."

"Well," Ben couldn't help but smile. "We owe you a great deal of gratitude for keeping these two among the living."

"Just doing my job, sir," Cody said with some embarrassment.

"And this time on Eriadu." Ben turned to Obi-Wan. "What happened? Master Dooku tells me you were sent out on droid business."

"We were," Qui-Gon crossed his arms, expression grim. "A cache of droids - a big one. We're very lucky we made it out alive. Not everyone did, unfortunately."

"Our contact from Eriaduan Orbit Security is still in critical condition, from what I hear," Obi-Wan supplied, and Ben winced. He looked again at Obi-Wan's ear, Qui-Gon's bandaged arms and forehead, Cody's dirty, battle-weary face. He was grateful to see all of them hale and hearty, if not rough around the edges. However, something - someone - was missing.

"Where's Aola?"

"Appearing before the Council," Obi-Wan said, brushing off his tunic and picking at the shrapnel holes in the sleeve. "She was the only one Che and her minions didn't accost on the tarmac," Obi-Wan accused. Qui-Gon gave his former student a chiding look.

"The only one without a head injury," the master corrected.

"Ah - smart girl," Ben joked. Out of latent habit, he glanced at Cody for a reaction, and found the clone squinting at him with an unreadable expression.

"Is she alright?" Anakin wanted to know. As one, the adults turned to look at him, having quite forgotten that he was there at all. Qui-Gon glanced at Ben before sending the apprentice a smile.

"She's just fine, Ani," he reassured, and put a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Now come on, you're not meant to be here. Come help me convince Padawan Lopnov to discharge me."
Anakin cast a look back at his master, but Ben only smiled at him, so he followed Qui-Gon without protest.

When Anakin's impressionable ears were out of range, it was back to business. "Was it the Federation?" Ben asked.

"We think so," Obi-Wan lowered himself back onto the edge of the bench, gripping the edge for support. As much as he hated to admit it, his ear was hampering his sense of balance, and standing was unusually taxing. "We don't know for certain."

"How many were there?"

Obi-Wan shrugged. "Three hundred? Four?" He sighed. "Not a lot, but they were…” the knight shook his head, remembering the staff-wielding guards who wouldn't die, the hulking anti-starcraft that could've crushed him and everything in their path. He felt small and ineffective. "They're unlike anything we've ever seen, Ben."

Ben didn't have to imagine. He sighed heavily and picked at his beard. "I assume you'll be reporting to the Council soon."

"Yes, I'm supposed to join Aola as soon as I can." He craned his neck to see if anyone was at the front desk. "I suppose they'll make me prove I'm alive before they let me out of here," he griped, and stood.

"I can find Master Pillia for you, if you like," Ben offered.

"No no," Obi-Wan stood, wobbling slightly before he tugged his tabards straight and did his best impression of someone who didn't have a bandage wrapped around half of their head. "If I don't do it myself, they'll never let me go."

Obi-Wan left the room in a gratuitous show of nonchalance, leaving Ben alone with Cody. A quick glance at the man's body told Ben he was not physically hurt, but a closer look at his eyes said that his mind was miles away.

"And what about you?" Ben broke the silence. "Are you alright, agent?"

"Hmm?" The clone seemed shaken out of deep thought. "Oh. Yes, sir, I'm fine. Didn't see too much of the action, but your Council has asked me to stay on the premises for an interview later this evening, after Master Jinn and Master Kenobi have provided their reports."

"That could take a while. Have they shown you to any accommodations?"

"Not as of yet, sir. I came here first, for protocol's sake."

Of course he did. "Well, in that case you ought to come up to my rooms while they're all busy, sit down a while. Do you take caf or tea?"

Cody was too tired to protest, so the two circumvented Obi-Wan, who was bickering about his health with an authoritative apprentice at least ten years younger than he was, and went to Ben's apartments. Anakin was still occupied elsewhere with Master Jinn, so the clone and the Jedi enjoyed their refreshments in silence.

"Cream, sugar?" Ben offered as he gave Cody his promised cup of caf.

"No, sir, thank you."
"You know, you really don't have to call me sir."

Cody sighed. "So all you Jedi have told me. It's clone habit, I'm afraid."

"Yes, I thought so."

They drank in silence for a long time. The afternoon sun poured in through the windows, wrapping the room in a drowsy warmth that could have lulled them both to sleep. For a while, Ben wondered if Cody would slip into a doze - it was clear the man was exhausted. But, as earlier, a closer look told a different story. The clone kept glancing at Ben when he thought he wasn't looking, eyes searching. His brow was furrowed, and he kept biting on his lip as if on the brink of speech. Ben finished off his tea and set the cup down.

"Is there something you want to ask me, agent?" Ben asked cordially. The clone hesitated. Then, with military bluntness, asked,

"How are you really related to Master Obi-Wan, sir?"

Ben was nonplussed. "I'm sorry?"

"You're not his uncle, I know that much."

"I'm sorry sir, I shouldn't have… it's just…" Cody waffled, running a finger around his mug. Ben could almost see the war between curiosity and propriety playing out on his face. At length, the man looked back up to Ben. "With respect, sir, I know a clone when I see one."

OH, Force.

"A clone," Ben repeated. He'd known this man - or at least, this iteration of this man - for all of an hour. He'd heard Cody speak three times, perhaps four if "sir" counted. Yet somehow, he knew. "Cody, Obi-Wan is twenty years my junior."

Cody didn't miss a beat. "I have ten thousand brothers, you know, some who are older than you. You learn to pick up on the similarities."

Ben's mouth had fallen open. An hour. It'd taken Cody an hour to figure it out - no, not even that. He'd been looking at Ben through a squint since the moment he'd introduced himself. Had he seen it all along? Had anyone else seen it all along? Ben's mind whirled.

"It's not what you think," Ben found himself saying. Was he really doing this? Was he going to have to explain the whole mess to a man he'd known for less than a day? He did save Obi-Wan's life, part of him thought. Another part, an older part, chimed in to say, he did try to kill you. The emperor had tried to kill him, but Cody had fired the cannon. Ben tried to see through Cody's thick hair, needing to know if there was scar there.

"Does Obi-Wan know?" Cody pressed. "That he's a clone, I mean?"

"Now, hold on," Ben put out a hand. "He's not… I'm not…” He sighed. "He's not a clone. He really isn't." The earnestness in his voice kept Cody from replying right away. Instead, he fixed the Jedi with a supremely skeptical squint. Seconds ticked by in silence.

"Alright," Cody spoke with thought measured by the syllable, "then what is he to you?"
Ben drew in a breath and tried to speak, but it came out in a lost sort of sigh. He glanced at the chrono, and at the sun, still only just past its midday apex. "When are you scheduled for debriefing?" he asked.

"This evening, sir."

Ben sighed again. He wished Obi-Wan were here. Or Dooku. Or Mace. Or Qui-Gon. Or anyone, really, who might defend him against Cody's unrepentant gaze. He knew, damn him, he'd figured it out halfway, and Ben was about to tell him the whole thing just to correct him.

Should he claim that he was a clone? Should he make up some lie about Obi-Wan's origins to cover the truth of his own life and death and second life? But no, then there would be no reason for secrecy, no reason for Cody to not tell anyone that Ben Kenobi had a clone of himself in the temple. No knowing who would learn that information and what they would make of it.

He needed time to think about this. "After your interview," he said. "Come back here before you leave and I can explain. I don't want to tell you without Obi-Wan here - it's not only my story to tell."

"So he does know," Cody concluded, unbothered by the Jedi's stalling. Ben winced.

"Yes, I suppose, from a certain perspective, he does."

The Council had been going through the team in turns. They'd finished with the Jedi two hours ago and had been drilling Cody ever since. Obi-Wan was somewhere off scribbling down a report for the Chancellor, and Ben was waiting impatiently for him to finish so he could spring the problem of Cody's perception on him before the day was done.

"Figured it out?" Qui-Gon whispered, leaning in to speak with Ben privately while Anakin exercised with the rest of his agemates. "Just like that?"

"He's a clone," Ben shrugged. "He's spent most of his life among clones of himself, young and old, he knows what it all looks like, aging and haircuts and scars be damned."


Ben scoffed. "Yes."

After a while, "What will you tell him?"

"What can I tell him?" Ben despaired. "Everything, I suppose."

Qui-Gon turned to him suddenly. "Everything? Just like that?" It was unthinkable, even to a maverick. "Do you really think we can trust him?" We. Because of course, it wasn't just Ben included in this gamble. Ben took a breath and let it out slowly, forcing himself to consider it as objectively as he could. Nothing changed.

"I would've trusted that man with my life and more," Ben said with resolve. "I did, on most occasions. Some things are very different from the way they were"– he hoped to the Force itself Cody had had his chip removed– "but how could I not trust him? I trusted you, after all."

Qui-Gon was taken aback and insulted. "I was your master." In his mind, Ben knew, it was an entirely different, nigh sacred relationship. Ben's supreme trust in an outsider must have been baffling.
"And he was my commander," he replied without hesitation. It was odd, so incredibly odd to have these two spheres of his past colliding in the present. "I've trusted you all these years based on a man I used to know, a man you've never really been. I think I can do the same with him."

Qui-Gon sighed. He didn't like it, Ben could tell.

Anakin bounded over to interrupt their conversation. "Master, could I stay to play flags?" he was panting from exertion but smiling ear to ear in a mood so incongruous with Ben's own that it took the master a moment to process the request. He realized with some surprise that the class had ended, leaving a gaggle of children lingering to play team sports in their freetime.

"Uh, yes, of course," if it kept the boy occupied. As Anakin darted away, Ben bode, "but control your force-pushing, Anakin, remember last time." The boy waved off the advice, pretending to listen, and Ben shook his head.

"Are you going to at least ask Obi-Wan what he thinks?"

"Of course."

"And if he doesn't like it?"

Ben bit his lip, annoyed at his master's lack of trust. "I think he will. No, I know he will."

Qui-Gon sighed, and pushed himself off the wall. "Be careful, padawan. Things never happen the same way twice."

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The sun had nearly set by the time the Council sent Cody on his way. He was ready to call a shuttle and go straight home, but two Jedi, similar in face but not in age, were waiting to intercept him.

"You know," Cody said with his eyes closed, trying to block out all light and shadow so he could think properly. It didn't help. "I've never once talked about time travel in a serious conversation." He opened his eyes again to see two identical - yes, completely identical, save the age difference and Obi-Wan the younger's scar - anxious faces. He glanced between them. "You expect me to believe this."

"It's the truth," Obi-Wan insisted. Cody grimaced. How, how could he believe that?

"And truth is often stranger than fiction," Ben offered.

"Apparently," Cody burst, shrugging helplessly. "I just... surely, if time travel were possible, I would've heard about it by now. I've studied quite broadly, you know."

"On Kamino? Yes, you would've," Ben agreed. "And if they had taught you about time travel I would question the integrity of your tutors. The Jedi did not think it was possible until several years ago; a fringe science, from what I understand. Then again, not all too long ago, supralight travel was a fringe science, too. The Force works in mysterious ways."

And there was the crux of the problem. The Force. Cody had never put much stock into the stories he heard about the Jedi. Sure, he was friendly with Jedi, he'd saved the lives of two Jedi, and those same Jedi had saved his. He'd studied their Order's religion as a part of his training, been taught to respect and defer leadership to the Jedi. But respecting something and believing it were two fairly different things.
"I suppose the Force is a fringe science too, then?" he asked. Obi-Wan's eyebrows raised in mild insult, but Ben only laughed.

"From a certain point of view, I suppose it is," the elder Kenobi smiled while his counterpart sat in affronted silence. Ben ignored it. "But our own lack of understanding does not render the truth impotent."

"Trikoticus said that," Cody observed.

"You have studied broadly," Ben smiled. "I'm impressed."

"Trikoticus was a philosopher, Master Kenobi. I'm a realist."

"I've told you the reality of the thing as plainly as I can."

"Yes. Thank you." Cody's brows had slowly drawn together, knitting familiar lines of thought that Obi-Wan wouldn't recognize. The younger man was concerned and silent. Ben merely waited.

It was well past dark. Ben had asked Qui-Gon to keep Anakin occupied during their meeting. The boy was probably asleep by now. "Obi-Wan, why don't you head to bed?" Ben suggested. "You need your rest."

Obi-Wan glanced at his older self, and at Cody. Some worry must've shown through, because Cody told him,

"I'm not going to tell anyone." A scoff broke through the promise. "What would I tell them?"

What, indeed? Slightly hurt by Cody's skepticism but unable to express it, Obi-Wan stood. "Goodnight, Master. It was good to see you again, Cody."

They bid him goodbye and then sat across from each other, minds in different worlds. After a while, Ben rose to pour Cody a stiff drink. "You remind me of a man I met several years ago," Ben said as he served him. The agent took it and downed half of it immediately.

"Was that before or after you died?" he managed around the burn of alcohol.

"Before."

"Of course," Cody nearly downed the second half then and there, but was afraid Ben would refill the glass. He stared at the carpet.

"He was probably one of the more skeptical people I've met in my travels. Had no faith in the Jedi, the Force. Called it a 'hokey religion', if I'm remembering correctly."

"He was an exceptionally gifted pilot."

"Why are you telling me this?" Cody rubbed his temples. Between the fiasco on Eriadu and the Council's meeting and this, it had been an incredibly long day.

"Because despite his skepticism, that man safely piloted me through treacherous space, landed me in a warzone, and risked his life to save my own life and that of my friends. And do you know, I don't think he ever believed in the Force or the Jedi, or me, even for a moment."

"You have a point, sir?" Cody's brain was beginning to do laps in his head, and the alcohol wasn't helping.

Ben sighed, recognizing an overwhelmed man when he saw one. He softened his voice. "I don't
need you to believe me, Commander. I just need you trust me."

Cody wanted to ask if there was any difference, but he found his ear caught on something else. He slowly turned his head to look at Ben in shock. Had the whiskey made him hear that?

"How did you know I was meant to be a commander?" He asked. Ben seemed just as surprised to realize he'd said it.

"I knew you, before. There was a war, just like what you were trained for. You and I fought alongside each other."

"Huh." Did he believe it? Cody wasn't sure of anything anymore. He was too tired. "Did I trust you then?"

"Yes."

"Did I believe you?"

Ben smiled. "Most of the time."

"Huh." Cody tipped up his glass and finished his drink. "And I suppose you trusted me."

"I still do." Ben peered at Cody, eyes seeing one man, mind remembering another. "Many things have changed from the world I left and this one," he said. "Some people I knew... well, I don't even know if they exist now, or will. But others..." He tipped his head, indicating the agent himself. "I'm happy you're skeptical, Cody."

"Sir?" It surely wasn't convenient, the clone thought.

"It means your convictions haven't changed since last I knew you."

Ben smiled at him, and Cody was both discomforted and, oddly, complimented. He frowned in confusion, at Ben, and the universe, and himself.

"We can talk about this later, Commander, you need your rest."

"Not a commander," Cody said, standing. "You'll confuse people."

Ben smiled and walked him to the door. "Don't call me sir, then."

Chapter End Notes

For the record, my beta wanted me to end this chapter at "Where's Aola?" to see what would happen, but I didn't think that would've helped anyone, let alone the plot. Although, I gotta say, I was tempted.
Consciousness came to Obi-Wan as an unpleasant gradient of pain. It centered on his left ear, which despite the massive eardrum rupture Luna assured him was the source of his deafness, was doing its best impression of a battledrum. He'd slept on it too, which had only helped the blood to pool there and throb. He opened his eyes with a groan.

This did nothing to help, as his seeing left eye was mashed into his pillow, leaving his useless right eye on lookout. He didn't want to move, so he listened instead. To his confusion, he could hear multiple voices in the apartment. A man and a woman were talking to one another.

"Have you even showered since you got back?"

"Of course I have."

"Well you missed a spot. Look at this. And this. And what on earth - was this from Eriadu?" Was that Aola? She rarely sounded so mother hennish.

"No, that's an old surgical scar." That was Cody, Obi-Wan was fairly sure. What was he doing back at the temple?

"Force, what for?"

"A tumor. It's not important, miss, would you please stop-"

"Your hair is filthy, Cody, I'm trying to help."

"Cody, do you take tea or caf?" Qui-Gon at last - what were the others doing here?

"Caf - black if you please."

"Of course."

"He's going to try to convert you to tea, you know," said Aola. Qui-Gon laughed.

"Perhaps another time."

Realizing there was nothing for it, Obi-Wan hauled himself from his pillow. Late-morning light poured in through the window and assaulted his eye. "Oh, kriffing hells." He winced against the light, and his ear, and his head, and even his stomach, which had decided it didn't care for gravity. The entirety of nature seemed against him. When he stood, the room seemed to tilt and warp around him and he cursed again, grabbing hold of the wall to guide himself out of the door. He emerged into the living room, hair disheveled, sleep clothes rumpled. There, he found Cody, Aola, and Qui-Gon sitting around a tray of tea and caf. They looked up at him with mixed expressions of concern and amusement.

"Obi-Wan, you're just in time," said Aola from her seat beside Cody.

"Nice to see you awake," teased Qui-Gon, though his eyes were scanning his old apprentice in thinly veiled concern. "How are you feeling?"

Obi-Wan squinted into the room with distaste, wanting to wring the bacta out of his ear but knowing he shouldn't. "I'm half blind, half deaf, and I may throw up if I drink any of that," he pointed to the tea. He went to sit on the couch next to Qui-Gon, curling his legs up in front of
himself so he could lean on them. "My head must be somewhere in hyperspace," he complained to his old master. "Coruscant doesn't move this much."

Qui-Gon put a pitying hand on his back. "Did you take the medication Luna gave you?"

"She said not to take it without food, but I'm afraid to eat anything at the moment."

"Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said in a chiding voice. The knight heaved a sigh and stood back up, going to the kitchen to find something suitably bland for his stomach.

"What are you all talking about anyway?" Obi-Wan asked as he rooted around in the cupboards. "I thought Cody had gone - no offense, Cody."

While the Jedi lounged bare-footed and relaxed, Cody's back was straight and his movements as precise as his words. "None taken, sir. I asked to meet with the Eriadu mission team to review a discrepancy I've uncovered in writing my report. You were resting, and given your injuries, we didn't think it wise to wake you."

"Hmm," was all Obi-Wan said. He was willing to bet it'd been Qui-Gon's idea to let him sleep - the man was going soft in his old age. Obi-Wan located a packet of plain biscuits - they were probably long past their prime, but oh well. He turned to the group and sat back on the counter as he munched. "What kind of discrepancy?"

Cody picked up a datapad a glanced through its contents. He shrugged. "A clerical hiccup. I was hoping the Order with its resources might be able to help me clear this up. According to SBI records, there is no agent Serela Iris working for Eriaduan Orbit Security."

Obi-Wan frowned to himself. "What? That's absurd."

"I know," Cody put out a hand. "It's probably nothing more than a clerical error, it happens occasionally in personnel files, but I need to take a look at your archives to verify. On such short notice, I couldn't put in a request." He paused, and glanced somewhat self-consciously around the room. "I was hoping one of you might be willing to help."

"Of course," Aola said. "We can go down together after tea." She sipped at her own cup and sighed appreciatively. Obi-Wan envied her ease, and munched on biscuits to take his medicine. The door opened.

"Master Kenobi," Cody sat up straight. Ben gave him a small smile.

"Morning, Ben," Qui-Gon looked over his shoulder at the man. "What are you doing here?"

"Aola said she had something I might be interested in," He gestured to the young Twi'lek. "Something about a seal?"

"Seal?" Qui-Gon looked back to his grandpadawan.

"Oh, yes," Aola seemed to remember too. "I'd nearly forgotten about that. I'll go get it."

"I wasn't entirely clear on that, to be honest," said Ben, helping himself to some tea. "She said she and Obi-Wan found it on Eriadu - Obi-Wan?"
Still in the kitchen, Obi-Wan shrugged. "It's some sort of badge, an emblem we found on one of the droids on Eriadu. Like a… a brand, maybe." He snorted into his breakfast. "Trying to get a closer look at the damn thing is what made us realize they woke up to a touch."

"Ah," Qui-Gon looked down, eyes darkening with memories of the disastrous day before. Ben was stroking his beard thoughtfully.

"It was on the droids, you say?"

"Yes."

"All of them?"

Obi-Wan frowned, trying to remember. "Perhaps. I admit, I stopped looking closely after the first one." Ben nodded his understanding, and sipped at his tea.

"Got it," Aola reappeared in the room, holding up a tarnished circle of steel with a smile. She handed it to Qui-Gon, who was nearest to her. The man held it at arm's length before moving it experimentally closer, tilting his head this way and that to get a good view. Obi-Wan bit his lip to keep himself from commenting. Qui-Gon would die before admitting he needed reading lenses. Cody and Ben both craned their necks to peer at the curiosity Qui-Gon held.

"Well," the elder master said at length, "I've certainly never seen anything like it before. It doesn't even have writing on it - none that I recognize."

"Let me see?" Cody asked, holding out his hand. He glanced at Ben, almost as if sharing a joke - or as much of a joke as Cody would make among Jedi. "I have studied broadly," the comment made Ben smile. The clone took up the badge and frowned. After a moment's deliberation, he shook his head. "There are symbols, but… no writing."

"Ben?" Obi-Wan asked, and Cody dutifully passed it on to the elder Kenobi.

Ben sighed as he looked at it. It was a crest, of sorts. It was simple. circular, metal, no color or inlays. Engraved into the plate was a solid circle, and offset within that circle, a smaller hexagon split into six identical triangles. The rest of the circle was filled with a subtle hexagon pattern, some of which had been carved fully away in a something that must have been an intelligible pattern. It meant nothing to Ben.

But it was on the droids. Like a crest, a brand, Obi-Wan had said. Ben could not recall having ever seen a maker's mark on any of the droids he'd fought in the Clone Wars, but… had they been there? He could feel doubt, newfound and profound, sucking his mind through a maze of possibilities.

Who had made the droids?

Geonosis, he wanted to say - or at least, they had before. Had they again? He really couldn't say. He looked again at the emblem, feeling lost.

"Well?" Obi-Wan was prompting across the room. Ben shook himself out of the reverie.

"It looks like a maker's mark," he said.

"But whose?"

All four of his companions were watching him with intense interest. Ben realized that, now that Cody was in on the secret, all of them expected him to know things. "I really couldn't say," He
admitted, and watched as four chests deflated of hope. "I'm sorry." He passed the disc back to Cody, who passed it around the room.

They volleyed around theories: maybe it was the logo of a manufacturing corporation. It couldn't possibly be Xanatos, Obi-Wan offered with alarm, and Qui-Gon quickly assured him that no, it wasn't the right shape, the right symbols. Then perhaps a hardware mogul on Kuat or a similar world, Aola suggested. But how, then, would they have evaded the extreme scrutiny of Kuat's Standards Bureau? Battle droids were hardly illegal, but so highly regulated that surely no mere mortal could sneak a few hundred elite battle droids past inspectors' noses. Maybe the Neimoidians had established their own factories in the Outer Rim? Could it even be the work of the Hutts?

As the theories blurred together, Ben watched the crest pass from hand to hand, not really hearing what everyone else was saying. He scrubbed at his beard. If it were him, if he had found this, back in the old days, what would he have done? Consult the archives? But no, it wouldn't show up there, not if Palpatine was smart, which of course he was. The SBI's records? If the makers were known for manufacturing contraband, the SBI would have a record on them. But if the SBI couldn't even keep their personnel records straight, they surely wouldn't have a cache of an illicit droid trade. Cody would've known about it. So then, who would know?

"I'll see if I can find anything in the archives," Aola offered, not sounding hopeful. "Cody and I need to search for his missing Eriaduan agent, anyway." She took the crest from Qui-Gon and began to pocket it.

"No, Aola, leave it here," Ben bade her. She hesitated.

"Why?"

"I want to study it some more. Take a scan if you like." She shrugged, pulled out her datapad and took a holoscan of the disc. "Best of luck then, Master." She and Cody left for the Temple Archives.

Left with his younger self and his old Master, Ben set the crest on the table next to the tea, now cold, and crossed his legs.

"I don't know what it means," he broke the pensive silence. "But I know someone who might. Actually," he corrected himself, a smile sneaking over his face. "I don't know him, not here. But you do."

"You really should have stayed and rested," Qui-Gon admonished as Obi-Wan's wince, which was by now a quasi-permanent fixture on his face, intensified.

"I'm fine," the knight assured. He'd cleaned up well, fresh robes and no bandages, but his inner ear was still shot and throbbing, and the rest of his body ached from fighting droids and explosions and adrenal exhaustion. In all, he did not look so much healthy as he looked like he wanted very much to be healthy.

"Should I tell him you cleaned up so nicely just for him?" Qui-Gon teased.

"Oh, shut up," Obi-Wan smacked the master in the side, looking across the room. Qui-Gon, smile lingering, looked with him.

"Qui-Gon Jinn!" The bass voice boomed across the diner, making at least one customer choke in surprise. "I was wonderin' when you'd show your mug again, ha! And - what do you know? Obi-Wan Kenobi - Obi-Wan is that really you, lad?"
Obi-Wan smiled as wide as he could as their old friend waddled toward them. "Hello, Dex."

The besalisk let out a joyous laugh and wrapped both Jedi in a massive four-armed group hug. Obi-Wan only winced and waited for it to be over, but Qui-Gon at least tried to reciprocate.

"It's good to see you, Dex," he said in a wheezing, breathless voice, patting the Besalisk's back once, twice, and then a rapid tattoo of put me down I can't breathe. Dex received this pat often from many different people; he'd always assumed it was an affection, and so held onto the hug for several more seconds. Eventually, he released the Jedi. While they attempted to mask the desperation of their breathing, Dex was more than happy to fill the void of conversation.

"You're greyer than I remember, Jinn," he chuckled, and brushed a finger over his own wiry mustache, "but so am I. And Obi-Wan! All grown and bearded, you are," he patted Obi-Wan's combed hair, which had been a tall padawan's puff last he'd seen it. "Still got the dimples, I see - though what in heavens happened here?" He indicated the scar than ran across the Jedi's face.

"It's… a bit of a long story," the knight told him, having finally caught his breath.

"Well, it's been a bit of a long time," Dex laughed, propping his top arms on his hips and using another to scratch at his backside. He glanced around the diner to make sure he was not needed. "Why don't you lads take a seat, I'll get you somethin' to eat, and we'll have a proper talk, alright?" He winked. "It's good t'see you boys again!


"I earned that," the master retorted, "you're stuck with yours."

"You're jealous because they make people like me."

Qui-Gon only scoffed.

Sometime after the Jedi found an empty booth, Dex returned with two overlarge plates with steaming heaps of fried food. "Here we are," the besalisk announced, landing the plates with a solid thunk. The smell and the noise made Obi-Wan wince, and Dex noticed. "Aw, what's the matter? Still feeling a drop from last night?" He laughed when Obi-Wan looked offended. "S'alright, lad, we were all young once. Flo!"

"What is it, boss?" asked the moody serving droid.

"Get this one a hair o'the bantha, would ya?" Ignoring Obi-Wan's protests, Dex turned back to his companions and winked.

"I'm not sure that will help," Obi-Wan grumbled.

"Sure it will. Nothing that a little ardees and grease won't cure." Dex squeezed himself into the bench opposite the Jedi and propped one long, hairy forearm on the table while the Jedi picked at their platters.

"I'm glad to see the diner doing well, Dex," Qui-Gon commented while Obi-Wan tentatively tried a fried chip.

"So it is, so it is." Dex looked around at the restaurant, bedecked in chrome, smelling of grease, sounding of clanking dishes and old music. "Hard t'believe it. Why, last I saw you in here, it was still a rotten old shell, and I was teachin' this one here to disarm explosives! Ha!" He gave Obi-Wan
an affectionate slap on the shoulder, which sent him bumping into Qui-Gon from the force.

"Hard to believe," Qui-Gon echoed, smiling at his former apprentice.

"But I don't think you've come here to reminisce," Dex continued, still smiling. He leaned into the table. "What can ol' Dex do for ya lads?"

"We have something we hoped you might be able to help us identify," Qui-Gon said. "A crest of some kind."

"Crest? Hmm. D'you have it with you?"

"Yes, it's just..." Obi-Wan hastily wiped grease off his hands so he could dig around in his pockets for the disc. He gave it to Dex.

"Well, what do you know?" Dex took it between two massive fingers and turned it over like a coin. "Haven't seen one of these in a while. Let's see here."

"Federation droids?" Dex seemed surprised. "What've they got to do with battle droids?"

"Surely you've heard about Naboo?" Obi-Wan said.

"Naboo, sure, but any Neimoidian can slap together a pile of sticks with a blaster. But these," He tapped the disc, "these were a bit tougher, I'd wager."

"They were," Qui-Gon was frowning seriously. "Do you know who made them?"

"Well, if I had to bet, I'd place my money on the Geonosians."

"Geonosians?" Obi-Wan sounded surprised. "But that's in the Outer Rim - they don't have an export trade, do they?"

"Do they?" Dex asked, a glint in his eye. If they did, it certainly wasn't something the Republic commerce bureaus knew about. "Insectoids... they're damn good at manufacturing droids, ships, weapons... and manufacturing them fast, too. A bit like how they manufacture more of themselves, you know," Dex laughed at his own joke.

Qui-Gon took the disc back from the Besalisk and frowned at it. There was truly nothing remarkable about the crest. Geometric and subtle, it could have belonged to any number of planetary traditions - or even an eclectic designer on Coruscant. "Are you sure it's Geonosian?" he asked.

"You see this pattern here?" Dex indicated the hexagonal backdrop in the circle. "Almost like a hive, ain't it? It's how the Geonosians draw maps of their planet. These," he indicated all the filled-in hexagons. "Would be all the major cities and manufacturing points on Geonosis. Although..." He frowned, and decided in a wary timbre, "There are a lot more of them here than I remember."

Qui-Gon ignored Dex's dark tone and pointed at the large hexagon of six triangles. "And what about this?" he asked. "Is this the main city, then?"
"No, that bit is new to me," Dex admitted. "I haven't a clue what it might mean. But this," He tapped the plate with an air of certainty. "This is from your Geonosians, I'd bet money on it. Is this the only one you found?"

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan shared a look. "It's the only one we had time to find," Qui-Gon said diplomatically.

"Ah, I see," Dex nodded with a knowing glint in his eye. "A lot of 'em, were there?"

"Quite a few," Obi-Wan said sullenly, and shoved another handful of chips into his mouth.

"It's been a very long week," Qui-Gon added.

"Another one of those, eh? I thought that was just business as usual for you two," he laughed, his belly shaking the table. Seeing his point, neither Jedi responded right away.

"Blame him," Qui-Gon replied, jabbing a thumb at Obi-Wan. "I'm getting too old to make trouble."

"You're full of chssk, Qui-Gon Jinn," Dex didn't miss a beat. "And he taught you everything he knows," he accused Obi-Wan. Obi-Wan, too tired to argue, shrugged. "Well, then, for the troubled twosome, another round of Jawa juice, on the house." Dex extracted himself from the booth - no small feat - and stood.

When Dex returned, Obi-Wan remained in the booth, but Qui-Gon was nowhere to be found.

"What's happened to your old man, eh?" he asked, shoving himself and three pints of Ardees into the booth.

"If you're referring to Master Qui-Gon, he's just stepped outside to make a call."

"Ach," Dex waved a dismissive hand. "Master this, master that. He's yer old man, and that's a fact."

Obi-Wan only smiled. Dex had turned around and watched Qui-Gon through the window.


"Maybe," Obi-Wan craned his neck to see his old master hunched over a commlink, frowning as he spoke into it. "If Geonosis is really tied up in this," Obi-Wan said, trusting the clamour of the diner to mask their conversation, "it could be bad business."

"Very bad," Dex agreed, wattle puffing up in conviction. "Geonosians don't build factories, lad. They build hives - holed away in every nook, cranny, crevice, and grave they can find. Where'd you find these droids, anyway?"


"You see?" The Besalisk pointed his glass at the Jedi before downing it in one giant gulp. "Hives."

Qui-Gon reappeared moments later and the conversation left Geonosis behind. Last they were all gathered like this, Dex had still been dreaming of owning a diner, and Obi-Wan's braid had been shoulder-length. So much time had passed, and yet as they reviewed the years in laughs and furrowed brows, the conversation flowed as if they'd never lost touch. Dex had crossed the boundary from informant to friend years ago, and Qui-Gon was genuinely glad to see him again.

"A lot's changed," said Dex, who had finished a third glass of Ardees before FLO cut him off (he was supposed to be working, she reminded him). "I suppose I don't need to tell either of you that,"
"Certainly not," agreed Qui-Gon. "Me or my knees." Dex's bellow was so loud, Obi-Wan at first didn't notice that his commlink was ringing at him.

"Sorry," he said to the other two, "I should answer this. Hello?" he spoke into the comm. Dex and Qui-Gon fell courteously quiet.

"Hello Master Kenobi, this is SR-9-"

Obi-Wan closed his eyes. "Oh, chssk."

"Who?" Dex asked.

"-om the office of the Supreme Chancellor of the Galactic Republic."

"Oh, chssk," Dex echoed with some surprise. Qui-Gon watched his apprentice's scowl in diplomatic silence.

"The supreme Chancellor asks to meet with you at your convenience."

"I can be there later this afternoon," Obi-Wan offered.

"Right now is convenient, Master Kenobi," the droid instructed. Obi-Wan tried not to curse again.

"I see. I'll be there shortly." He shut off the comm before Essar could finish and pocketed the device.

"He does this just to irritate me," the knight accused with not a little choler.

"If he does, it's his prerogative," Qui-Gon advised in a sage tone.

"Are you on his side?" Obi-Wan looked at his old master, affronted.

"I remember a time not very long ago when you were on his side, Obi-Wan." Qui-Gon gave a smile. The knight's look darkened further.

"And then he put me on a committee."

"On the bad side of the chancellor, is it?" Dex cut in, highly amused. "A chip off the ol' block, I'd say!" His wattle rippled with barely concealed laughter.

"Purely by accident, I assure you," Obi-Wan said magnanimously. Qui-Gon caught Dex's eye and gave a tiny shake of his head. Obi-Wan pretended not to notice, and stood from his seat. "Thank you for the food and the ardees, Dex, it's been wonderful to see you again."

"O'course, lad, o'course, so good t'see you!" Dex extracted himself from the booth to give the knight a good-bye hug, which Obi-Wan met with wincing reciprocation. "Stop by anytime."

After he recovered from the hug, Obi-Wan smoothed out his tunic and seemed to remember something. "Qui-Gon, take this back to the temple, would you?" Obi-Wan held out the Geonosian seal.

"Why?"

"Because if I have it when I tell Finis about it, he'll find it and take it, and I would really rather not
give him anything else today."

Qui-Gon took it and pocketed it. "Only your pride, padawan."

"He could use a little less of that himself," Obi-Wan muttered, and walked to the door.

"Force be with you, Obi-Wan,"

"And with you."

"Well now," Dex turned back to face Qui-Gon when the knight was gone. "You're Qui-Gon now, are you?" The master shrugged. "You're Qui-Gon and he's caught the bad side of the Chancellor who he calls Finis." Dex took a drink and then tilted his glass toward his old friend. "Your boy's grown up well."

Qui-Gon smiled and tipped his glass in a toast. "Yes he has."

They drank and set their glasses back down with a jovial thunk.

"I have to ask," Dex prefaced with a bashfulness unusual of him, "what happened with the…" he pointed with one finger to indicate his right eye.

"A mission gone wrong, unfortunately."

"I figured as much. What kind of mission?" Dex was squinting at him, and Qui-Gon hesitated. "Now, I only ask because I've only ever seen a scar like that on a few people," Dex spread his hands in defense. "But they were all training accidents from the ziggurat." He leaned in so he could speak quietly. "It was a lightsaber, wasn't it?"

Qui-Gon stared at him. There were two sides of Dex, he knew, but after decades of friendship he often forgot about the older Dex, the Dex that could recognize a weapon from the scar it left, Dex the smuggler, mercenary, weapons dealer, lowlife.

"How did you know that?" he asked evenly.

"As I said, even Jedi have their accidents," Dex said. "I've seen my fair share of academy dropouts and Corps members who forget their training, slip up, and…" he pulled finger across his arm in a cutting motion. "But I can't see either of you being in an accident like that. And there are… rumors, you know."

"Rumors?"

"Sure, you know the ones. Smuggler's tales. Men who've run into rogue Jedi, crews cut down with blades of light."

Qui-Gon felt a chill creep up his spine. "Rogue Jedi?"

"You've not heard, then," Dex realized. Qui-Gon's expression told him he had not. The Besalisk sighed. "I don't know if they're really Jedi," he admitted. "You step in that territory, it's darksider stuff. And people here… everyone knows I'm friendly with you and yours. I start asking questions, everyone clams up real quick. I can only tell you what I hear, eavesdropping like."

Qui-Gon leaned in closer so their conversation could not escape the confines of their booth. "And what is it that you hear?"

Dex glanced around to make sure no one was in the booths next to them, and then fixed Qui-Gon
with an unnerving stare and told him, "You're not the only ones with lightsabers, and you're not the only ones who know how to use them."

"How many others are there?"

Dex paused to think. "I gave up wagering years ago. But if I had to make a guess… I'd say more than a handful." He spread one massive hand.

"This is absurd," Cody muttered to himself, rubbing his forehead. "It has to be here somewhere." He'd been sitting at the console for hours, scouring the Jedi Archives for any mention of Sarela Iris, but so far his search had been entirely fruitless. He'd amended his search at least a dozen times by now, but still the computer couldn't seem to find any record of Sarela Iris. There were plenty of results for "Iris", but many were articles on biology or botany. He tried searching by the first name only, and was confronted with 38,047,927 results. "Oh, for kriff's sake."

"Still going at it, then?" Ben Kenobi asked quietly over his shoulder.

"This computer doesn't know what the kri-" Cody turned to shoot Ben an annoyed look, but stopped short when he saw Ben's young apprentice standing there with him. "Uh, what the… kr-criteria are," he amended himself, shooting Ben an apologetic look. Anakin's blue eyes blinked at him.

"What are the criteria?" Anakin asked. Cody glanced at him.

"What?"

"You said the computer doesn't know what the criteria are. So what are they?"

"Uhhh," Cody didn't know what to say. How old was this kid? Eight? Maybe nine? Did he even know what 'criteria' meant? "A name. I'm trying to find the records of a particular person in the archives."

"Oh," Anakin stood on his tiptoes, trying to see the screen where Cody worked. It was then that Cody realized the boy was holding something in his arms and stroking it like a pet. The thing was metal and round, and beeped like a droid. Cody knew little about droids, but this one looked displeased.

"Not going so well, I gather," Ben sympathized while Anakin studied the glowing blue display. Cody relayed his troubles to the master, having to constantly remind himself that there were young ears present. Ben, in a patient and dutiful tone, attempted to troubleshoot with the clone. Did he spell the name right? He didn't use any filters, did he? Which collections was he searching? Had he asked Master Nu about it?

Barring all other errors, Ben scrubbed his beard and supposed, "It's a longshot, but she may appear in one of the classified record groups. You wouldn't be able to view those - I can help you, if you like."

"Or we could let Arbie-One help," said Anakin, hanging on to the edge of Cody's desk. He let the small droid go, and RB-1 immediately tried to float away, but Anakin took him back under an arm affectionately. RB-1 burbled discontentedly.

"Arbie-what?" Cody frowned at the child.

"Arbie-One," Anakin repeated. "My droid. He can search through stuff a lot faster than your
Cody looked skeptically at the greasy, irritated globe and its prepubescent handler. The boy seemed genuine, but Cody was not the sort of man to place his mission mandate in the hands of a nine year old. Then again…

"Worth a shot." With a tired sigh, he scooted aside so Anakin could access the console. "Have at it, kid."

Anakin took to his task with enthusiasm and a surprising amount of savvy. He conversed quietly with Arbie-One in a language that Cody couldn't understand and the droid plugged into the console. Anakin's eyebrows came down in a scowl- not the scowl of a child, but a true, professional scowl condensed into a child's face. The boy was scanning the text flitting by on the screen, face trained with an expression of comprehension that made Cody deeply uncomfortable.

"This Agent," Ben interrupted his thoughts. "Eriaduan, you said?"

"Yes sir, she was from local Orbit Security. I assume she's native, though without any records, it's impossible to say."

"Hmm." Ben rubbed at his chin, fighting a bad feeling. "Did she have any colleagues with her? A partner?"

Something about the last words made Cody go completely still. "No, sir."

"Odd, don't you think?" Ben cut in, giving the SBI agent with a keen look. "You're an agent. How often are you sent on an assignment alone?"

Cody blinked, suddenly feeling like a trainee called out for making a fatal error during simulation. This wasn't a simulation. He could feel his stomach tugging its moorings towards the floor.

"Never."

"And... did you see her credentials?" Ben's voice was soft and unassuming, but the realization behind his words was like a slap to the face.

Cody's stomach was in the basement. "No, sir," he admitted. "In all the chaos of the day… I didn't ask." He should probably just hand in his resignation then and there, Cody thought to himself. Some agent he was. Ben did not look surprised, and it made Cody feel more insignificant than ever.

"She did have some colleagues meet her at the hospital," Cody blurted. "She was badly hurt. As we were leaving, a team from OrbitSec came to check on her." The sudden memory was a small glimpse of redemption from an inexcusable oversight.

"Quick response, don't you think?" Ben asked, stroking his beard in thought. "For a team to keep such close tabs on someone they sent out alone?"

Cody opened his mouth and closed it again. He stared at Ben, horrified at himself.

"That's weird," Anakin said, and the two men turned to look at the apprentice, who was scrolling through search queries while Arbie stewed by his plug-in.

"What is it?" Ben asked, moving to stoop over his padawan's head.

"There's a hidden protocol," Anakin pointed to a window of text that meant nothing to Cody. "The
first name goes through, and the last name goes through, but if you combine them…” Anakin typed in the query for demonstration. All of a sudden, the millions of results disappeared, leaving only the cursory note: *We're sorry, but no records match your entry. Please adjust your criteria and try again.*

"Perhaps there is no Sarela Iris," Ben said, his beard brushing the top of Anakin's hair. The apprentice shook his head. "No, see, I can get Arbie to override it, and…” Anakin typed in some commands and Arbie's scomp link whirred in busy circles. Suddenly, a short page of results populated on the screen.

"She is real," Anakin said, and for a moment, Cody dared to hope. "And she was an SBI agent, but…” the boy pointed. Ben leaned closer and squinted to read.

"Born 24901, died 24971, natural causes." Ben glanced at his clone friend, whose stomach had fallen past the ground and into the planet core. "I'm afraid you may have a case of mistaken identity on your hands, agent. And not only that," he looked back at the console, its blue light casting inky shadows of worry across his face. "Someone is tampering with our records system." Anakin tilted his head backward to look up at his master.

"You can't tamper with the archives, can you?" he asked. "Unless you're Master Nu."

Ben looked down at his apprentice and smooth the boy's hair, which had been teased up by Ben's beard. "Not usually," he said.

"Then who did?"

"Well…” Ben hesitated, and could not finish. He glanced at Cody, and their conversation the night previous came flooding back to the clone, with all its conspiracy and corruption. But this was not some fanciful story of time travel - this was happening.

Cody said nothing, thinking only of the report he'd have to file, and how heavy the 'pad would feel when he delivered it.

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Despite its giant swooping walls, vaulted ceilings, and massive windows, the beautiful Senate building had never been able to put Obi-Wan at ease. Centuries of surreptitious intrigue had given the Force a acerbic yellow color here that, despite the lofted atmosphere, lingered like smog. It was not unlike the company Obi-Wan often found here: Veneered and rotten.

Today, Obi-Wan found it doubly hard to concentrate. Taking the magtrain had probably been a bad idea. His injured ear was ringing terribly, and the unsteady rocking of public transportation was doing nothing for his wounded balance or his stomach. He found his steps slowing to a crawl as he made his way toward the Supreme Chancellor's office.

He practiced his report silently to himself, trying to anticipate Finis' every quibble. There would be many, he knew, because he was a Kenobi and Valorum was himself. Obi-Wan was reminded of the many times during his apprenticeship Qui-Gon had bemoaned Valorum's intractability, and how he had always teased his master and insisted it was Qui-Gon's own fault. It was unspeakably irritating to realize that his master had had a point all those years.

"Master Kenobi, how good to see you again,” a voice said, and Obi-Wan turned to look. "My goodness, are you quite alright, Master?” It was Sheev Palpatine, and he was looking at Obi-Wan's haggard presentation with heaps of concern. Obi-Wan found himself wondering if the senator had any children.
"Nothing time won't cure, senator, thank you."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that at least." The Nabooian gave a kind smile and stepped closer. "We've missed you in committee meetings, of course. It's been very quiet without you."

Obi-Wan side-eyed him. "Given all that's been said, Senator, I would've thought you'd enjoy not having me underfoot."

Sheev chuckled. "True enough. But I hope you do not let my politics reflect on me as a person, Master Kenobi. Work is work, but I would never wish you ill. Besides, having a decent opponent in the room makes things... interesting, wouldn't you say?"

Obi-Wan shrugged. It was a tired, sickly shrug, and it made Sheev frown again. "But why are you here, Master? Surely you ought to be resting, after all that mess on Eriadu I dare say you deserve a respite."

Obi-Wan looked at him in surprise. "You knew I was on Eriadu?"

"Honestly, Master Jedi," Palpatine scoffed mirthfully, "word travels fast here, and I keep a keen eye on all things droid, as I'm sure do you." The senator eyed the scratches and scabs that littered Obi-Wan's neck and hands. "A closer eye than me, by the look of things." It elicited a soft chuckle from the Jedi.

"Close enough that the Chancellor has asked for an immediate report." He wasn't sure why he felt compelled to tell Sheev any of this. He was easy to talk to, like an older master or teacher.

"Goodness," the senator replied. "Must have been nasty business. I heard there was a cave-in. Was everyone alright?"

"Unfortunately no. I made it out, as did several others, but not everyone was so lucky." Obi-Wan confirmed sadly. "It was incredibly far below ground.

"So I've heard," Palpatine nodded in sympathy. "Quite deep. But I'm glad to hear some made it - we're all very grateful for Eriaduan's mining industry about now, I'm sure."

The non sequitur challenged Obi-Wan's fatigued sense of logic. "I'm sorry?"

The Jedi's blunt incomprehension seemed to fluster the senator, and for a moment it looked as though Sheev would ask him if he was really feeling alright. Instead the senator said, "There were mining ships that dug you out," He hesitated, and eyed Obi-Wan as if to check for further incapacitation. "Or so I hear."

"Oh, yes, I suppose so," said Obi-Wan. He hadn't seen them himself, but Cody had told him about it after the fact. "I owe them my life." Something tugged at his mind, but he couldn't place it. His brain was so foggy, it could have been anything.

"Well," Palpatine smiled, "it's getting late, I have some errands to attend to. I'm glad to see you in one piece, Master Kenobi. I do hope I'll be seeing you back in committee - but only after you've rested."

"I'm sure, senator," smiled Obi-Wan, unsure of most everything except putting one foot in front of the other. "Thank you."

He shuffled onward toward Valorum's suite with a thought nagging around inside his skull like a fly. It refused to land so he could get a better look at it. Word travels fast here, he'd said. Obi-
Wan's ear throbbed, and he nearly tripped on the last step on a stairwell. *There were mining ships that dug you out.* Obi-Wan squinted into the dusky light pouring in from outside and ignored the protocol droids that were asking him if he needed assistance. *Mining ships.*

He reached the door and put away fly-catching so he could act as though he were a functional human being. He cleared his throat, rehearsed speech rearranging itself in his mind, and opened the door.

"Ah, Master Kenobi," Valorum had his reading lenses on and did not look up from his work. Perched uncomfortably on a seat in front of the Chancellor, Aola turned to look at Obi-Wan from over her shoulder.

The sight of his Twi'lek friend jolted Obi-Wan out of all that he'd prepared, and he floundered. Finis glanced up at him. "Do have a seat, Master Kenobi." Obi-Wan realized there was an empty chair next to Aola. Of course it made sense that she was here, he thought as he walked to it and sat. She had been on Eriadu as well. But so had Qui-Gon. But Qui-Gon wasn't on the Senate's committee, was he? But Feemor was on the committee, and he wasn't here. Obi-Wan glanced again at his fellow common denominator.

"I will make this brief," Valorum announced as he put his glasses away and leaned back in his seat. "You will tell me all of what happened on Eriadu, and you will speak of it to no one else on the Committee, understand?"

"Yes, sir," agreed Aola.

Obi-Wan stared, his brain taking longer to catch up than normal. *Word travels fast here.* Aola was looking askance at him. He realized they were waiting on him. "Very well," he said.

"So," the Chancellor picked up a dossier - a report forwarded by the Jedi High Council, if the letterhead was to be believed - and flicked through it. "I gather it was a… how did Master Windu put it… debacle." Obi-Wan was staring at the Jedi crest embossed on the folder. *Mining ships.*

"It could have been considerably worse, sir," Aola was telling the Chancellor. "Considering the limited intelligence we had going in and the reality we found on the ground, the collateral damage was minimal, almost impossibly so."

"Well said, Padawan Tarkona. Master Kenobi," Obi-Wan realized a bit too late that Valorum was looking at him again. "Anything to add?"

"Er, no sir," the Jedi winced. "My apologies, with the injuries sustained on Eriadu, I'm not quite myself today."

Valorum's expression softened microscopically, a grace Obi-Wan rarely saw from the man. "I see. Then perhaps, Padawan Tarkona, you would like to recall the mission for all of us."

Aola nodded, nervous but determined. "Of course, sir."

Obi-Wan tried to shake the nausea, the ringing in his ear, the fatigue so he could hear what they were saying. It was bad enough with one ear, but his thoughts too betrayed him, still buzzing around in his head like drones. Aola was giving a good report of everything that had happened. It sounded like Valorum must've given her enough time to prepare, unlike him, the bastard. But that wasn't important, there was something else nagging him, like a dog gnawing at the stem of his brain. *Word travels fast here.* Force, she'd even had time to analyze the costs incurred by damage and compose contingencies for rebuilding. *Mining ships.* He had to close his eyes as his thoughts...

"It says here that some kind of… crest was found at the scene, on one of the droids," Valorum was saying.

"Yes, sir, we believe it is a maker's mark."

"Federation, then?"

"No, sir, it wasn't a crest we recognized." Aola pulled out a holo disk and showed Valorum the scan. Valorum leaned in to look at it.

"Do we know where it's from, then?"

Aola hesitated, and looked to Obi-Wan.

The older Jedi stared at the seal's likeness, blue and hovering. "No," he said, eventually, and looked up to meet Valorum's eyes. "No leads yet, sir, but we are working on it. Of course I'll keep you informed."

"Very well. Essar," the Chancellor beckoned his droid, "take a copy of this scan, please."

"Of course, sir."

Obi-Wan didn't realize Aola was looking at him until their meeting was adjourned. They walked out together and Obi-Wan was relieved to learn that Aola had flown there, and could offer him a ride to the Temple. As soon as they were in the speeder and the door sealed, Aola turned on him.

"What do you mean 'no leads yet'?" she exclaimed, having bottled in her outrage for the entire walk. "Qui-Gon said you knew. I've been trying to map Geonosis using this blasted thing all day!"

She tossed the holodisk at him.

"He told you?" Obi-Wan wasn't sure why he was surprised.

"Yes. Now why didn't you tell the Chancellor?"

"But… you didn't tell him either," Obi-Wan pointed out, leaning back to regard her. Busy piloting the speeder through rush hour, Aola didn't have time to glare at him like she wanted to.

"Because I trust you, you pillock. Now tell me it's not misplaced."

Obi-Wan sighed and crossed his arms. "It's this committee," he told her. "Word travels fast in the Senate, especially with big things like this. And I…" he hesitated, not sure how to express his concern. "I don't know that the Chancellor's office is exempt. That information is too sensitive to have floating around in the Senate."

"Do you not trust the Chancellor?" Aola glanced at quizzically, and then had to jerk the controls back into line. Obi-Wan was unaffected, lost in thought.

"It's not him I don't trust," Obi-Wan realized aloud.

"Then who?"

Later that evening, Obi-Wan commed Cody. "Can I help you with something, Master Kenobi?" the clone answered.
"Yes, actually, just a question about your report on Eriadu… did you mention anything about those mining ships that shot out the hangar doors?"

"Yes, why?"

"Who's seen your report so far?"

Cody gave a heavy sigh. "Well, no one as of yet. I've been working on the damned thing all day thanks to this Agent Iris nonsense." Another sigh. "Once I turn it in, it'll just be my super and hers unless someone higher up asks for it. Why?"

Obi-Wan knew for a fact it hadn't been mentioned in his report, or Aola's, or Qui-Gon's. None of them had seen or worked with the pilots. A worm of doubt crept into his gut.

"Has Agent Gabri turned in her report?" It was a longshot.

"Not to my knowledge, sir. Like I said, this agent Iris mess has kept us both bogged down on paperwork." There was a silent pause while Obi-Wan's frown transformed into something more alarming, but Cody could only listen to the silence. ".Is something wrong, sir?"

"No, no," Obi-Wan assured, forcing a smile into his voice. "It's nothing. Force be with you, Cody."

Cody did not sound convinced, but he thanked the Jedi and bade him goodnight.

Obi-Wan set his comm aside and spent the rest of the night staring at the wall, meditating in dumbfounded silence.
"Geonosis?" Mace Windu's brow was furrowed so deeply, the wrinkles were beginning to escape to his scalp. "Are you sure?"

"My informant is reliable," Obi-Wan said. "And Aola has researched the possibility extensively."

"All indicators point toward Geonosis," Aola said for the benefit of the Council. "The design corresponds with maps and similar insignias of Geonosian origin."

Mace sighed and leaned forward to touch steepled fingers to his lips. No one spoke. Aircars hummed by in the neverending Coruscanti traffic, and Aola tried to ignore the sun in her eyes. Obi-Wan was concentrating on keeping his balance as the Council Spire swayed beneath him.

"What did the Chancellor have to say?" Mace asked at length. Aola stayed silent, and glanced at her companion. The knight was still feeling too ill to mince words.

"I didn't tell him, Master."

Another silence. Eventually, the Master of the Order asked, "You didn't tell him what, Kenobi?"

"That we knew it was from Geonosis." An irate pause. Around the room, councilors bristled and shifted in their seats. Master Yoda said nothing, but perched his chin on his gimer stick so he could stare up at his great grandpadawan with an ancient squint.

"That information is vital to our intelligence on the Eriadu incident and the Federation's scheme itself," Mace snapped, "which I ought to remind you is directly under the Chancellor's purview. You're flirting with treason, Kenobi."

Obi-Wan tried to pull together an unfazed expression. "Master, I have reason to believe there is a mole leaking confidential information in the Senate."

That drew a reaction. The Force chilled to a prickled grey, and all the Councilors sat up a little straighter. Obi-Wan continued, "I don't who or where they are, but I couldn't jeopardize the future of our investigation by revealing too much. Even to the Chancellor, Force help me."

"What reasons do you have?" asked Adi Gallia. Obi-Wan had to turn fully around to look at her with his good eye.

"There is a senator - perhaps senators, I'm not sure how far it goes - who knows details of this mission that I know for a fact are not yet public. Even the Chancellor hasn't received a full report from the Order or the SBI."

"A senator…" Master Yoda spoke at last, and all eyes turned to him. "Speak of which senator do you?"


"Senator Palpatine?" the Korun repeated. Obi-Wan watched his expression closely.

"Yes."
And there it was, a moment of doubt, an almost imperceptible hesitation that made Obi-Wan's heart contract with fear and anger. Master Yoda looked between the two of them, expression stern.

"Strange, this is, Master Kenobi." Obi-Wan's name seemed to draw him out of himself. "But worthy of deception, is it?"

Immediately, the use of 'deception' irritated Obi-Wan's pride, but he swallowed it and kept silent. He glanced around the Council, eyes lingering on Yoda and especially Mace. "Surely you've felt it, masters," he said, and Aola glanced at him oddly. "There is something not right here. In the Senate. I've sensed it before, but this is the first concrete corroboration I've found. I have to follow the Force's warnings. If I was wrong to do so, I sincerely apologise, but I do not believe I have made a mistake in keeping this information from anyone. Even the Chancellor."

"Knew of this censoring you did, Padawan?" Yoda glanced at Aola.

"Not until later, Master," she replied, hands folded serenely behind her. "But I trust Master Kenobi's judgement." Obi-Wan glanced at her, trying to hide his surprise. She'd never called him 'master', even in formality.

"And what is your judgement, Obi-Wan?" asked Saesee Tiin. Obi-Wan looked back to the council and squared his jaw, confidence bolstered by Aola's faith. He'd spent the better part of last night outlining a plan.

"Investigate Geonosis. Send a team to flush out whatever droids or factories they're hiding."

"Investigate?" exclaimed Master Rancisis from across the room. "If you are so sure in your findings, Master, there should be no reason to investigate further."

"I have said my information is reliable, Master, but of course I cannot be sure until I see them for myself. That which I have not submitted to the Chancellor is inadmissible as fact, and must be investigated before any sanctioned intervention may take place." It was all true, legal, and to protocol. Mace Windu was beginning to squint at him. "That being said, if the situation is as fraught as my informant has led me to believe, I would also advise this investigative team go in with an extraction plan, reinforcements, and defensive contingencies in place."

"You want to send a battalion to investigate this lead of yours?" Mace could see right through the gambit. Privately, he knew it was because it was something he would've come up with when he was Obi-Wan's age.

"No," Obi-Wan clarified breezily. "I want to send a forward team of four people, with a secondary unit of perhaps a dozen Jedi, including a squadron from the Starfighter Corps to provide emergency extraction." He paused. When the Council stared at him in nonplussed silence, he added, "The SBI would likely agree to assist, seeing as they've already collaborated on this mission once."

Mace glanced at Yoda, who seemed amused, and then glared back at the knight and the fidgeting padawan next to him. "Any other recommendations, Master Kenobi?" It was a signal to shut up, and Obi-Wan knew it.

"I would only use armed ships for transport," he said. In the inevitable pause that followed, he added, "The Outer Rim is a dangerous place." He met eyes with Mace Windu and the two Jedi stared each other down for several heady seconds. Eventually, Mace decided:

"The council will deliberate on your… suggestions, Master Kenobi. Thank you." He looked to Aola. "You are dismissed."
They bowed and turned to leave, but as they did, Mace said, "Kenobi, wait outside."

The knight paused mid-step, but did not look back. "Yes, Master."

When they were alone in the antechamber, Aola asked him incredulously, "do you honestly think they'll do all that?" Obi-Wan tried not to be offended.

"I hope so. They should. I have a horrible feeling about this whole mess. We're racing against the Senate, as absurd as that sounds." When Aola said nothing, Obi-Wan gave her a calculating look. "You agree with me."

"Yes. No. I don't know." Aola sighed, brow wrinkling in worry. "I've had… visions, recently."

"Visions?" The knight frowned at her. "Of what?"

"I'm not sure. They're not clear at all. Just impressions, really. But they've given me this horrible feeling that you could be right."

Obi-Wan pursed his lips, both comforted and disturbed to have such confirmation. "Sorry about that," he said. They stood in brooding silence for several minutes. "You should go on," Obi-Wan said eventually. "You don't have to stick around."

Aola shrugged and glanced back at the closed council room doors. "Good luck, Obi. I'm not sure Master Windu sees it your way."

"I think he does," Obi-Wan confided. "I just don't think he wants to."

Aola bade Obi-Wan goodbye and left him to wait in the hall alone. Minutes ticked by with grueling indifference. The lone, masked council guard stood so still that, except for the occasional lift of their chest to breath, Obi-Wan would've thought them a droid. At long last, the Council doors reopened. All the councilors filed past him without a word or even a glance. Yoda paused to give him a piercing look, but just when Obi-Wan expected the wizened old master to make a comment, he turned and hobbled away behind the line of his juniors.

Mace Windu alone lingered. "Inadmissible as fact, is it?" Mace asked. Obi-Wan turned to face him and was surprised to find that the Master actually looked impressed - but also incredibly wary. "So you don't have to make a report to that droid committee of yours?"

Obi-Wan had hoped it wouldn't be so obvious. "Anyone in the Senate, but… yes. I have a very bad feeling about this, Master."

Mace sighed and pursed his lips, wanting to make a pithy comment about how Obi-Wan always had bad feelings, but knowing that this time was different. Obi-Wan seemed to pick up on his thoughts and frowned deeply.

"Will the council send a team?"

"I can't tell you that, Kenobi." When Obi-Wan continued to stare, he added, "We haven't been able to agree."

Obi-Wan scoffed. "Master, surely you see that there's something behind this, we can't just ignore information because of how it's been brought to our attention-"

"I know that, you think I don't?" Mace hissed at him, and Obi-Wan shut up. He'd only seen true anger from Master Windu a handful of times in his life, and was taken aback to face it alone.
"When you took this assignment, I told you to wisen up, put that silver tongue to use. And you have, but this has taken us farther than anyone could have predicted. Watch where you walk, Kenobi. This is not just about you and your bleeding heart anymore."

"I was acting as the Force guided," Obi-Wan hissed back, "do you expect me to do otherwise?"

"That's Qui-Gon Jinn talking, and it'll put you deeper into chssk than he ever was if you don't shut up and listen." Obi-Wan did shut up, lips arched in an angry, but silent snarl. Seeing cooperation, Mace continued, "I'm not talking about your lying to the Chancellor - though Force knows I could have you indicted for less - but suggesting an militarized investigation?"

"That's not what I-"

"It is exactly what you suggested. Twelve Jedi? A starfighter squadron, a fully armed and outfitted convoy?" Mace stared at him, letting the words sink in. Obi-Wan clenched his jaw and looked away. "Listen to yourself, Obi-Wan."

"It needs to be done," the knight insisted.

"If you had spoken to me about it beforehand, I would have helped you." This surprised Obi-Wan, and he looked back at the master, eyebrows raised. "But now you've gone and dropped it in our laps without a moment's notice, and the infighting has begun. I'm fighting for your investigation as hard as I can, but for the love of the Force itself, Obi-Wan, watch your damn step." Mace brushed past him toward the lift, leaving the younger Jedi to stare in befuddled silence. Perhaps he was the source of Mace's anger, his frustration, Obi-Wan realized. But what of the fear?

"There's something you're not telling me," Obi-Wan called after him. They were alone; even the council guard had left their post. Mace turned to look at him, clearly annoyed. Obi-Wan locked eyes with him before asking, "Who is Palpatine?"

And there was that flicker again, uncertain and muddled. The older man clenched his jaw a few times as if trying to make a decision, and then spoke: "As I'm sure you've learned from your uncle, Obi-Wan, keeping information from people can be just as important as giving it to them. It's true for the Senate, and the Chancellor, and sometimes Jedi. I've trusted your judgement on this assignment, and am trusting you about this investigation. Now, you must trust me when I say that it is better that you don't know."

Obi-Wan watched him go in indignant silence. There is no ignorance, there is knowledge. But there was an older version that resonated: Ignorance, yet knowledge. His mind fiddled with the variations, as if they were a holocron suddenly appeared in his hand. He could open it, or put it away. He could either live knowing, or knowing that he could've known.

"I was beginning to think I'd hallucinated ever having a padawan," Feemor announced from the couch, putting his datapad down. "You're trying to get rid of me, lass."

"I am not," Aola protested, setting her cloak aside. "The council is trying to get me rid of you, if anything." He laughed.

"About time."

"Master!"

Feemor chuckled and scooted over to invite his apprentice to sit with him. She did, and he wrapped
an arm around her shoulders to give her a squeeze. "I've missed you. How was Eriadu? You've been asleep every time I'm home."

She sunk into her seat, rolled her eyes, and groaned.

"That marvelous? Any nasty creatures to take your fancy?"

"No. It was only Obi-Wan and Master Qui-Gon to choose from."

"Ach, bad luck."

"It was like dealing with two Qui-Gons instead of just one."

Feemor guffawed. "And what about Cody? He was along as well, wasn't he?"

"He was," Aola tilted her head, lekku swaying thoughtfully, "but I don't think he could be nasty if he tried."

"A credit to him, I'm sure," Feemor chuckled. "They should all be grateful to have had you around. You managed to save their nasty necks a few times, I'm sure."

"I'm sure I did," Aola laughed, but the smile faded as she realized that he was completely right. Feemor, who had heard just how disastrous the mission had been - could have been - patted her back reassuringly. "You did well, padawan."

"Thank you, master," she smiled up at him.

"And without me, to boot!" He pretended to look surprised. "Who knew you had it in you?"

She elbowed him good naturedly, and then, "I missed you."

"No you didn't."

"I did!"

"You might've missed me, but you didn't need me." He looked at her and smiled. "I'm proud of you."

She didn't know what to say. She hadn't needed him, and it scared her, so she scoffed and tried to muster a smile. Feemor only watched her, brown eyes kind and swimming in fondness. He was more aware than usual of the depth of his wrinkles, saw more clearly the layer of grey hair glinting on his arms and hands. Softly, he told her, "You know I've taught you all I can, lass."

Aola's chest seized up. She refused to look at him. She didn't want to hear any of what he was saying, or what he planned to say. Years ago, she could hardly wait, but as her master got older and the universe got wider, she'd begun to cling to the idea she could become a knight without ever having to leave his side. Obi-Wan had done that, hadn't he? But she knew Feemor would be different than Qui-Gon. Already, his desire for a quiet temple life radiated off of him in waves, while she felt she was just warming up to the excitement of the field. She had seen their futures looming in visions, hers forking away from his.

"I don't..." Aola's vision was clouding with tears, and she tried to find an excuse - any excuse - for it to stop. "We have an assignment in the Senate still."

"I do; you were reassigned to Eriadu," Feemor said, softly absorbing his apprentice's desperation across their bond.
"But they'll take me back," the Twi'lek rationalized. "I'll see it finished."

"Maybe," Feemor allowed, "but after Eriadu, I doubt they'll want you holed away in a conference room. This can of worms will lead to another, and another, and they'll want you on board. They should want you on board. That's how Obi-Wan ended up on this committee, you know."

"I want to stay in the senate," she insisted, an absurd sort of dedication in her tone. "I want to see it finished."

"No, you don't," Feemor told her firmly. "And you know it."

She knew it, but she'd be damned if she would admit it. Her chin wobbled and she crossed her arms and looked away.

"Aola," Feemor said. She ignored him. "Lola, look at me."

She closed her eyes against the endearment, whole expression trembling. Lola was what she'd called herself when she was too young to pronounce the dipthong of her own name. Feemor had started using it when he first took her on, and whenever he said it, she wanted to hide in his robes like she had when she was a child.

Gently, Feemor nudged her chin toward him, and she eventually looked back at him, hating every second of it. "I've recommended you to the Council." It should have made her heart sing, but the elation was mixed with a sharp sting almost like betrayal that no one had warned her about. "You know you're ready. If you try to say differently, you'll only be lying to yourself and me."

She couldn't deny it. As a Jedi, she was ready. She was a capable warrior and strategist, negotiator and scholar, and she knew it. But as a woman who still felt like a little girl, she would never be ready. But that, she'd begun to suspect, was part of being a Jedi - or an adult. Or perhaps both. And Feemor… where would the future take him? Somewhere apart from her.

"I don't want to lose you, Master," she confided, unused to the tug of grief on her heart.

"You won't," Feemor promised, "Many things will change, but never that." He pulled her closer and hugged her. "You'll not lose me, you silly, silly lass." She laughed into his tunic and stayed there. Where she could not see, Feemor looked up at the sky and blinked away his own tears, smile gone. He knew he'd never leave her. And yet, for reasons he could not quite articulate, he'd begun to wonder if he would ever lose her.

He reached for her silka bead braid and let the length run through his fingers; she'd been with him since she was only just old enough to train, and the beads had reached a prestigious, terminal length. It was time. He knew it as certain as he knew the Force itself. He bent his head and kissed her at the crest of the lekku closest to him.

"You'll make a fine knight. I've known it since you were young."

"Even after you let me have have another 'saber and I nearly sliced your hand off?" she asked from against him. Feemor laughed, an involuntary spasm that felt almost like crying.

"Aye, even then."

Outside, Coruscant's skies were darkening, multicolored lamps taking over the sun's duty in the never-sleeping night of the capitol. When Qui-Gon entered his apartment, he could see Obi-Wan's hunched back silhouetted against the twinkling skyline.
"You really oughtn't read in the dark, you'll end up with vision worse than mine." He turned on the lights, which made Obi-Wan jump. Suddenly illuminated, the knight blinked his eyes above the mountain of reading material. "What's this, then?" Qui-Gon stepped over to pick at the pile of holobooks and dossiers strewn across the kitchen table. Obi-Wan couldn't see his master, and he didn't turn to try.

"I haven't had the chance to actually read anything for months," the knight said, good eye now adjusted to the light and trained back on his task. "Just catching up on some research I've been meaning to do." Qui-Gon immediately sensed this was a half truth and Obi-Wan immediately sensed that he had, and neither of them said anything about it.

"Minutes from Senate meetings for the last two years, overturned bills from the Chommel sector alliance, police reports from the Triellus trade route… you go for the real page-turners, don't you?"

Obi-Wan said nothing, and continued reading the report in his hand. Qui-Gon watched him. The knight's stoic expression stirred up memories of tumultuous missions long past, of a young padawan coming to terms with the stakes of life and death. Qui-Gon affected nonchalance, poured himself a glass of water, and sat down. "You always favored history and philosophy when you were younger," he observed. "Has the senate changed you into a political connoisseur?"

Obi-Wan huffed a mirthless laugh. "Hardly," he said.

"Then what are you up to?"

"Following a hunch," said the knight, absent-ly chewing on the tip of his finger, something he only did when he was incredibly worried. Qui-Gon tried not to notice it.

"What kind of hunch?"

Obi-Wan stopped chewing, and stared straight ahead. At length, he said, "I don't want to say, in case I'm wrong."

Qui-Gon nodded, accepting the logic without reply. He did not savor the feeling of secrets unsaid between them, nor the unresolved worry written across Obi-Wan's face. But Obi-Wan was his own man, and though they lived under the same roof, Qui-Gon had learned to accept it. Still, "You'll tell me if you need help, won't you?"

Obi-Wan finally turned to look at him, and forced a smile. "Of course, master."

Qui-Gon nodded, satisfied, and finished his drink. "It's getting late," he observed. "You ought to sleep."

Obi-Wan grunted a reply, and began gnawing on his finger again. Qui-Gon watched him, and bit his tongue to keep from commenting. "Good night, padawan."

"'Night, master," Obi-Wan replied, and leaned back over his work like he had years ago, forgoing sleep to study for exams.

Once Qui-Gon was gone to his room, Obi-Wan opened the map he'd been annotating and drew a red line with his stylus, looping another planet into the web of red that enmeshed the Galactic southeast. It wove in and out of the Mid-Rim, the Outer Rim, Hutt Space and leaked northward, inward, coreward. The main players were all out in the backwaters of the galaxy, a fringe of space that Obi-Wan had struggled to memorize when he was young. Now, they were familiar names, every day places, stories he'd heard for half his life - the half of his life after Ben Kenobi had appeared in the galaxy.
Obi-Wan chewed on the crook of his finger, and then on his stylus. He tossed aside the file he'd been using and opened a new one, using his datapad to search for the same keyword he'd been searching for all day: Palpatine.

Obi-Wan woke up at the table with a stiff neck, a numb arm, and an ear so sore that he thought the chirping of his commlink would finish Eriadu's job and render him truly deaf. He sat up, almost yowled at how much his neck hurt, and fished around for his commlink with a half-aware arm. It was light outside, and he'd drooled onto his datapad.

"Yes?" he croaked to whoever was on the other end.

"Master Kenobi, you're wanted before the Council."

"Master Windu-" Obi-Wan scrambled to sound awake. He cleared his throat and it turned into a cough.

"Your investigation has been approved - with caveats. You're to report to the spire at 1400. If you're late, you won't be let in."

"1400, 1400…" Obi-Wan tried to look around for a chrono, but his stiff neck and his blind eye made it difficult.

"You've got three hours. Sober up and get dressed."

Obi-Wan flushed and said nothing.

"And Kenobi?"

"Yes, Master?" Obi-Wan grumbled, still embarrassed.

"Try not to piss anyone off this time."

Obi-Wan knew from the "you won't be let in" comment that he would not be the only one invited to the Council session, and the session itself would be strictly confidential. This intuition did not, however, suitably prepare him for what lay ahead.

"Feemor, Aola." He'd arrived just minutes early, and found them waiting outside, looking unusually solemn. "I didn't expect you," he said.

"Nor I you," Feemor confessed, a befuddled frown twisting into place.

Before the two could sort out their confusion, the door opened and a masked council guard stepped up to meet them, posture stiff, lightstaff held at the ready. "The council will see you now," they said.

Giving each other bemused looks, Obi-Wan and Feemor led the way. Aola, who looked unusually demure, followed their lead.

After brief pleasantries, Mace Windu jumped into the matter at hand. "Based upon the intelligence gathered by Masters Kenobi and Jinn, as well as Padawan Tarkona on Eriadu, the council has decided to investigate Geonosis in connection with the manufacture of battle droids for the Trade Federation." His eyes shifted to Obi-Wan, adamantine gaze challenging the knight to interrupt. "To this end, we will be sending out a reconnaissance team, with backup, to the planet to investigate the
most probable locations of activity. You have all been called together because you are, in one capacity or another, involved in this whole affair. This common bond also binds you to a strict confidentiality, do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, master," the trio echoed each other.

"Good." Mace said curtly. He turned to Obi-Wan. "Master Kenobi."

Obi-Wan straightened up, ready to receive his mission. He wondered about which provinces of Geonosis they'd chosen for him to investigate first. He had his suspicions based on the cryptic maps that Dex had shown them, and was ready to argue should the Council select a wildly different area to canvas.

"You suggested this investigation, and for that the Council thanks you." Mace's voice cut through his thoughts like a machete. "However, I need to make it clear that you will not be a part of the landing team."

For several heartbeats, Obi-Wan was nonplussed. His eyes, seeing and blind, were wide in indignation. "What?" Mace was unperturbed.

"In case you'd forgotten, Obi-Wan, you are still on medical leave. The Halls have barred you from any active status for another two and a half weeks."

"Master, I hardly think-" He scoffed, but Mace cut him off again:

"You will not go to Geonosis. You are here for debriefing purposes only. You will share this information with no one except the Supreme Chancellor, and that only upon orders from this Council." It stung like a whip. "Do I make myself clear, knight Kenobi?"

Obi-Wan was stunned. He gaped a moment, before managing, "Y-yes, master Windu." It didn't make any sense. He'd found this lead. He'd suggested it. He'd spent days pouring over the maps, the seal, materials to concoct a plan to deliver to the Council. And now he was barred? He couldn't be. He had work to do. Webs of red flashed before his eyes, engulfing the outer rim and bleeding coreward. Only he knew. Only he knew. "Master," he said, trying to contain his frustration, "if I am not to go, who will lead the mission?"

Mace spared the knight a glance for only a moment before he turned to the master-padawan pair standing to Obi-Wan's left.

"Padawan Tarkona," he said, much to Obi-Wan's surprise. It was highly unusual for the Council to address an apprentice before the master. To his further shock, Aola straightened, as if she'd been expecting it. Mace continued,

"You have proven yourself as a capable leader on Eriadu and dozens of missions before. Your resolve and your reconnaissance have led us to this investigation, and your diplomacy has guided it through the office of the Chancellor as well as this Council. Furthermore, in light of your related work in the Imperial Senate as well as on your detach to Eriadu, Master Gard has recommended you for your trials of knighthood," Obi-Wan forgot everything about his planning and turned to look at Aola, mouth falling open in surprise. "On these grounds, the council asks you to lead this mission." A pause, while Obi-Wan held his breath and Feemor held his ground. Aola met Mace Windu's gaze, mettle for mettle.

"I accept, master."

Mace almost smiled - almost. "Very well." He glanced around the Council chambers to
acknowledge any dissents - there were none. "In that case," he said, looking back to the young Twi'lek. "You and one partner of your choosing will travel undercover to Geonosis to conduct a reconnaissance mission. You will be accompanied by half a squadron from the Starfighter Corps to provide extraction and backup, if needed. While on Geonosis, you will gather as much information as you can related to the production, storage, funding, or manufacture of battle droids for the Intergalactic Trade Federation. You will then direct your teams according to your findings. Do you understand your mission, Padawan?"

"I do, Master," Aola assured.

"Good," Mace looked to Feemor. "Master Gard, your apprentice has accepted her Trial. What say you?"

Feemor avoided Obi-Wan's stunned gaze and cleared his throat to pronounce the customary answer: "I bid the Force be with her and all whom she meets." Then, with special zeal, he added, "She is ready for it."

The extra benediction elicited a smirk from the Master of the Order. "Very well. Master Gard, Master Kenobi, you may both retire. Padawan Tarkona, stay for your briefing."

Obi-Wan left with Feemor, eyeing Aola over his shoulder just once before the Council guards escorted them out. The door hissed shut behind them, and the two Jinn apprentices stood in silence.

"Trials," Obi-Wan said. He shouldn't have been surprised. Of course it was time for Aola's trials. Of course Feemor would recommend her. She was ready. But somewhere, distracted his own anxieties over the Senate and the Sith and the Federation, Obi-Wan had lost sight of the fact that time was passing as normal. Aola, he realized, was not really so much younger than him, and had been ready for knighthood for quite a while - years, even. In his mind's eye, he saw her as a scrawny, over-exuberant eleven year old, meeting him for the first time and later falling asleep in his lap. The memory burned with nostalgia. Despite his own youth, Obi-Wan couldn't help but feel old.

"Aye," Feemor nodded. There was nothing to clarify. Anyone with eyes could see that it was time.

"I hadn't realized…" Obi-Wan faltered. He should have, months ago. His pride was still smarting from the Council's rejection, but it would've been inappropriate to tell that to Feemor now. "She'll do well," he said.

"Oh, she will," Feemor agreed. "Only… I don't know what it will cost her." There was an unusual, earnest concern there that made Obi-Wan turn and look.

"The Force will be with her, Feemor," he reassured.

"It'd better be."

Feemor would return to the Senate. In a surprise turn of events, so would Obi-Wan.

"I don't relish pulling rank with the Chancellor, Kenobi," Mace had warned when he'd delivered the news. "Don't make me regret it."

"Yes, master," the bemused knight had replied from across Mace's desk. He'd had a few days to ruminate on his own failures of pride, and was touched by the master's confidence. Still, in light of the trouble he'd caused Mace of late, it seemed misplaced, and Obi-Wan felt compelled to say so. "I'm not sure it was necessary, master. Feemor has done an admirable job on the committee in my
"You mistake my confidence, Obi-Wan." Mace dashed Obi-Wan's humble intentions with the tact of a vornskr. "It's not about you or your work. It's about the committee. They think we're conducting business as usual. No one knows about Geonosis, and everyone will expect two representatives in service after Eriadu, not one. One means something's still wrong. Your return to the committee is a matter of course. Even Finis thinks so. Only you, I, and Feemor know better."

"I'm... a cover-up?" Obi-Wan realized, feeling more doormat-ish than he had when Finis had appointed him.

"As I said," Mace enunciated, returning to his work, "don't screw it up."

Barely-recuperated pride cut to the quick, Obi-Wan retreated, too surprised to do anything else.

"Don't take it so hard, lad," Feemor consoled while they sat in morning traffic on their way to the Senate. "You've done well by all of us."

"He's using me," Obi-Wan insisted, bitter and immune to Feemor's calm reassurances. His arms were crossed tightly across his chest and he frowned out at the mid-morning sun as if he could punish it.

"Who, Finis or Mace?" Obi-Wan had complained about both men during their commute, and Feemor was confused.

"Yes," the knight grouched.

"Ah."

"If they want a doormat so badly, they ought to look elsewhere on the committee. Force knows I'm the only one who gets things done around there."

That was a bit overstated, Feemor thought. But he only sighed and masked his frustration in indulgence: "You've done admirable work with the committee and the investigation schema, Obi-Wan, but may I remind you, it was your own initiatives that got you put on medical leave. And that is why you're Mace's doormat." Feemor guided their aircar into a gentle acceleration as the traffic ahead finally let up. Obi-Wan sulked as the engines revved beneath them.

"I didn't ask to be sent to Eriadu," Obi-Wan said petulantly.

"You might have well as done." Feemor was tiring of the knight's foul mood.

"Finis banished me out of spite." It was his puerile mumbling that finally set Feemor's fuse.

"Och, spite, is it?" the master's brogue became suddenly pronounced as he looked between traffic and his sour companion. "Spite put you here and spite put you there - but it's not the Chancellor's spite, lad."

Obi-Wan was unused to dealing with an angry Feemor, but in his current state he was more than happy to rise to the occasion. "I didn't ask to be appointed here, or anywhere," he snapped back, "it was all decided for me and I've been politicked into agreeing, like some sort of slaving sycophant."

Feemor's patience snapped. "You may not have asked for yourself, but you asked me to join you, didn't you? You asked me to help you because you wanted someone with experience." He brought
the car to a jolting halt to wait in traffic and turned bodily to face his companion. "So you listen to me well, lad, as someone who's been doing this for longer than you've been alive," Obi-Wan found himself frozen to the spot. Feemor was a paragon of mild manners, and to hear his voice so low and threatening was uniquely terrifying. "It's time to stop pouting like a infant and keep your damn head down. This isn't about you. This isn't about any of us. Just ask Ben."

Obi-Wan opened his mouth to complain that Feemor sounded like Mace Windu, but bit his tongue and looked away. He felt like a junior apprentice told off for insolence. He probably looked like it, too. Traffic eased, and they inched forward. Feemor was looking ahead, and said nothing. Obi-Wan stewed in silence. Feemor was right - it was bigger than all of them. Obi-Wan knew that. It was Feemor and Mace and everyone else who seemed to have forgotten - or so he'd thought.

Mace was irritating to work with on the best of days, but that was mostly due to the nature of his job. He was on Obi-Wan's side, the knight admitted to himself. He was likely the reason the investigation to Geonosis was happening at all. And of course Feemor was on his side. He'd invited Feemor into this assignment for his advice and help. Keep your head down. If the Master of the Order and his own mission partner were both telling him the same thing, they might've had a point.

*Might have?* whispered the Force, harsh and unbidden. *They do, you dolt.* Obi-Wan sighed.

"I'm sorry, Feemor," he said quietly. "I just… there's something coming. Fast. I've had a horrible feeling about it. I'm... worried." He was scared, too, but didn't want to say it.

Feemor's stiff shoulders deflated. "Aye, I know. I'm worried too." They sat in commiserate silence while the Senate building hoved into view. "But we can't let worry - or spite - make our decisions for us." Pausing with the tiniest of smiles, Feemor assumed his best Qui-Gon impersonation. "Don't focus on your anxieties, Obi-Wan."

Surprised by the impression, Obi-Wan let out a bark of laughter. "That's quite good, actually."

"Actually?" Feemor feigned offense. "You weren't the only one who's had to live with him, you know." And again, Feemor adjusted his accent and lowered his voice. "Focus on the here and now, padawan. Move with the Living Force. Who the hell taught you how to make tea?"

The small cab rang with Obi-Wan's laughter. Eventually, Feemor broke character and chuckled at himself. More seriously, he said, "Irritating as it is, Qui-Gon's got some real wise things to say, if you can get past the fact that he never seems to listen to his own advice." They pulled into the hangar doors and an attendant guided them to a parking spot.

"I'll try to keep it in mind," Obi-Wan said, dark air alleviated.

"I will as well." Feemor brought the car through its landing sequence. "It's not just about this assignment anymore. We have to play off Eriadu as just another mission. We have to keep the intel for Aola's mission safe. Even if it means watching in silence while they talk nonsense."

"Not sure I can do that," Obi-Wan muttered as they unbuckled and opened the canopy.

"Just wear that medical leave excuse like a badge and act like you're too ill to care," Feemor leaped to the ground. "Qui-Gon tells me you're good at pity-mongering."

"Wha-hold on, now, when did he tell you that?" But then they were in mixed company, and family squabbles would have to wait.

As they approached the conference room, the committee members mingled by the doors, and Obi-

Obi-Wan eyed the senators in silent suspicion, his gaze lingering on a clique from the Chommel sector. "You make it sound so easy."

"I've had practice. You should talk to Ben, sometime. With all that he sees and knows… I can't imagine how he keeps it together."

"Master Kenobi!" cried Meena Tills, Mon Cal smile broad and expressive. "What a pleasure to see you again!" Some other senators turned to look, saw Obi-Wan, and scowled. Others made hasty conversation so they wouldn't have to speak with the Jedi. Meena waved the Jedi forward to join the crowd, even as the displeased faces painted themselves into smiles. *Like wolves at a masquerade*, Obi-Wan thought bitterly, *every last one of them.*

But, he supposed, Jedi could play just as well at that game.

It was late when the Jedi returned from the Senate. Feemor went to his rooms to find Aola gone, but Qui-Gon waiting on the couch with a bottle of a particularly fine vintage and two glasses.

"I understand congratulations are in order," the older man said, turning a corkscrew. Feemor grinned.

"I didn't know you liked wine, master."

Qui-Gon wrested the cork from the bottle and shrugged. "For all that Yan Dooku never taught me, it can never be said he didn't give me a healthy understanding of oenology." He poured the wine as Feemor took a seat. "They're sending her to Geonosis, aren't they?"

"Strictly speaking, I'm not supposed to say," Feemor said, taking his glass gratefully. "Strictly speaking, I don't think I'm supposed to know, but we live in interesting times. Trials aren't what they used to be. I seem to remember there being testing chambers for mine. Here I was thinking field trials were an exception to the rule - maybe it's just your lineage."

Qui-Gon's face darkened momentarily as he remembered Obi-Wan's trials. "Let not set Kamino as a standard, shall we?"

"Aola never did like standards, anyway."

Qui-Gon chuckled. "To Aola, then," he raised his glass, "may the force be with her and everyone she meets."

Feemor smiled. "To Aola," he repeated, quietly. They drank and relaxed into the couch together. Chipping away at the bottle glass by glass, they talked of apprentices and knighthood and everything in between.

"What will you do with yourself?" Qui-Gon asked eventually. "Your apartments will be quiet without her."

"I'm not really sure," Feemor admitted. "I figure I'll leave it up to her when she wants to leave, at first. And then…" he shrugged. "I don't need to tell you I have no real interest in going back to the field. I've never really been suited for it - not like you, or Obi-Wan."

"You always managed well enough," Qui-Gon demurred.
"Well enough, perhaps," the master shrugged, swirling his glass. "But you know what I mean. I follow on the field. I've only gone on so many missions with Aola because I know the field is what she's destined for. But me? Now that it'll be just me again... The Force calls me to other avenues. Classroom teaching, perhaps."

The mental image surprised Qui-Gon. "What would you teach?"

Feemor shrugged. "I don't know. Something to the younger ones. I've had enough with adult teaching."

Qui-Gon laughed. "I must agree with you there." He took a drink and eyed his former padawan. "Mind your footing though. Start on that road and you'll land yourself in the creche." He'd meant it as a joke, but Feemor shrugged. "That might not be so bad." He drank. "Less troubling than padawans, I'm sure."

Qui-Gon looked at his old pupil with a conflicted expression. Though he and Feemor had always been incredibly different personalities, the man had been born with a supremely soothing presence, one that Qui-Gon missed more and more as he grew older. And yet, there seemed to be sharp burrs developing under his skin these days, anxieties bundled up into landmines beneath a crust of calm.

"Something is troubling you," Qui-Gon observed.

"My apprentice's trials, maybe?" Feemor raised his brows. "And I'm not allowed to get involved, of course. Just have to sit back and watch it all unfold, for better or worse."

Qui-Gon's mind assaulted him with the memory of the Second Sith slicing Obi-Wan's lightsaber in two while he watched, helpless. He shook himself and pushed it away. "She'll do well." The words sounded empty by themselves, so he asked, "does she at least have a mission partner?"

"She does," Feemor said. "Just picked him out this afternoon."

"Oh?"

"The clone, Cody," Feemor reported, and Qui-Gon was surprised.

"Not a Jedi?"

"No. The Council wasn't so sure about that, at first. But she saw it in a vision as clear as day and put her foot down, even helped them hammer out the details of their cover story." Feemor laughed. "She'll make you proud, you know. Telling off the Council whenever the Force allows. Anyway, Master Yoda pulled few strings, and the SBI approved the roster just before closing today."

Cody had saved Obi-Wan's life, years ago, as well as Qui-Gon's. On Eriadu, he'd done much the same for everyone involved. "Well," Qui-Gon said, "then I think you have nothing to be worried about."

"Hmm." Feemor grunted and drank heavily. Qui-Gon watched him.

"This isn't about Aola," he said. He fought an impulse to take Feemor's wine glass away from him.

The younger master sighed, now too tipsy to sort out his own feelings. He remembered his argument with Obi-Wan that morning, the swirling fog that clung to the Force in the Senate like a virus, the pool of senators whose smiles kept him from the truth. *Something is coming. Fast. Obi-Wan felt it. Even Mace was twitchy. And Aola was leaving.*
"I never knew what Master Dooku meant by that 'darkness' he always went on about when he sat on Council. Or whatever darkness Ben alludes to. I've never understood any of it." Wine, privacy, and familiarity were eroding Feemor's inhibitions with his old master. He sighed and set his glass aside. Seen in the dim light under the touch of strong wine, Feemor looked far older and more harried than his disposition allowed. "But these days… I think I do."

Overcome with sympathy but unsure what to say, Qui-Gon put a hand on the man's shoulder and gave it squeeze. He'd done much the same in decades past, when they were a young master and an old apprentice paired together. "Don't focus on your anxieties, Feemor," he said out of habit, and the younger man let out an exhausted laugh.

"You know, I had a feeling you might say that."
The next day, Cody reported to the temple to meet with the team to review the mission and receive his cover identity. He expected to meet with a tactical team, as per protocol. Instead, he was sent to the tailors.

"These will be yours," the droid told him, handing him a bundle of clothing and scuffed bits of armor, which included a very distinctive helmet.

"Really?" he griped, holding it up for inspection. "Mandalorian? Isn't that a little on the nose?"

A door hissed open and a familiar voice remarked: "You are Mandalorian."

"I am Kaminoan, miss," he turned to glare at Aola, "not Mandalorian-" and stopped short when he saw her.

"Your father was Mandalorian, it counts." Aola dismissed him with a wave of her hand. She was already squeezed into her alias, and it left very little to the imagination. There was enough bare blue skin and freckles to make Cody turn bright red. Aola saw his horrified expression, beamed at him, and twirled.

"Isn't it great?" It was leather, and small, and alarmingly reminiscent of something Cody had seen on a holo once when he'd come home early and walked in on his roommate's 'holovid night'. He wanted to say no, absolutely not, but that would have been rude.

"I got it from Neersha, a friend of mine." Aola glanced back at Cody and added, "She works nights in the red light district."

"Oh," he choked. Aola ignored his discomfort and continued,

"She's a bit bigger than me, we had to nip it in a bit." Aola fiddled with the… did it really qualify as a bra? Cody had only ever seen a bra a handful of times in his life, all of them by accident, and he had certainly never considered that they might need tailoring. While Aola explained the seamstress involved - of which she was particularly proud - he shuffled his gaze awkwardly to and fro, wishing he were elsewhere. "But it did work out in some ways - look at this!" He didn't want to, but she sounded so childishly excited, he braced himself and looked. Aola had crossed her arms and grabbed a cup of her bra in either hand. For a terrifying moment Cody thought she was going to pull the thing completely off, but instead, she produced her lightsabers from beneath either underwire. She held them out and grinned at him like a toddler with a new toy. "Isn't it brilliant?"

She gave the sabers a twirl before returning them to their hiding place.

While she rearranged her fully armed push-up bra, Cody tried very hard to look away, but found that he was staring in fascination. Stars, how did they fit in there? Was it some sort of Jedi Force trick?
"And the best part is, no one will see them."

Cody actually scoffed, meaning to but ultimately unable to look up."Are you sure, miss?"

She chuckled, supremely smug. "You know where they are, Cody, and you're not looking at them."

She had a point. Embarrassed, he turned back to his own costume.

"If you fall for it, everyone else will too," said the triumphant Jedi. Cody paused, wondering if he ought to be complimented or insulted.

"Oh, dear," lamented Feemor as he entered the room to see his apprentice, leather clad and now applying thick makeup. Expression distraught, he glanced at Cody. "I don't suppose he could play the slave, could he?"

"I'll be fine, Master," Aola managed while applying bright purple lipstick. "Besides, I don't think Cody would fit into this costume. Although," she straightened and sent the men a terrifying, mascara-rimmed look, "it could be fun to swap."

"Mandalorian, miss," Cody suddenly hefted his helmet as an excuse, "they'd never buy it on a Twi'lek."

"Oh, now you change your song, spoil-sport." She put away her cosmetics. "We're not meant to be selling the helmet, anyway, we're selling me."

Cody frowned in revulsion. "Excuse me?"

"We're going to the Outer Rim, Cody," Aola told him, as if this explained everything. "You do know that, don't you?"

"Speaking of," Feemor interrupted from the sidelines, "they've asked me to tell you: they're ready for your briefing."

It was just Mace Windu and Plo Koon waiting in the map room to give them their mission details. The Councilors waited in solemn silence until both Clone and Jedi were settled around the holotable - Cody fidgeting in his second-hand armor, Aola serene and poise in the cloak Cody had insisted she wear.

Plo proceeded to their briefing without further ceremony. The Order had enough tangential interest in Geonosis to believably affix any number of backstories to the mission, and so they would travel to the Geonosian capital under auspices unrelated to the droid industry. Once there, they would do whatever they could to locate information pertinent to the manufacture of battle droids.

Their covers, much to Cody's discomfort, would be that of slave and captor. Geonosis was known for its role in the Outer Rim slave trade, and of course, the bread and butter of sentient trafficking was the female population of nearby Ryloth. The ploy had actually been Aola's idea. Going in as a female slave, no one would spare her a second glance, and if they played their cards right it would give her a free ticket into the heart of the Capitol. Meanwhile, Cody could mingle in the capital city gathering intel, playing a slave runner relaxing in between jobs.

"Your primary mission will be that of reconnaissance," Plo told them. The map zoomed in to the capital fortress of the planet, home to the conquering monarch, Poggle the Lesser. "As of our last report we know that the northern spire of the Stalgasin hive houses the royal archives. If
Geonosian nobility has an affiliation with the Federation or their army, the information will be housed there. Your task will be to retrieve it and bring it to us without alerting the Geonosians.”

Cody eyed Aola for her thoughts, but she only nodded at the councilors, frown deep and contemplative.

"And if that proves impossible, sir?" Cody put in for them both.

"An extraction team will be standing by," Mace told them. "And the Council has prepared a report to explain away your investigation. However, I need to make it clear that the closer you get to those records, the harder it will be to explain if you fail. The Geonosians are smart, Poggle especially. He will not show restraint if you're caught in the act; Arkanis is not a Republican sector, and they do not follow our laws. If you have to call it, call it early."

Cody and Aola shared a look, swallowed, and nodded.

"Understood," Cody said.

Once they’d completed their briefing and rehearsed their aliases, they went straight to the landing bay to meet the rest of their team.

Aola's cloak fluttered in the breeze of the busy hangar, revealing her costume in flashes. Someone behind her gave a loud wolf whistle.

"Lookin' good, *padawan.*"

Aola turned to glare daggers, already knowing who it was. "Enjoy calling me that while you still can, *Muln.*"

Garen beamed at her. "You know, I said the same thing to Obi-Wan when I got back from my trials." It was hard to believe she was four years younger than him, and out for her trials, to boot. Heuffed her affectionately on the shoulder. "You'll do great."

Her stomach was fluttering with the fear that she wouldn't, but she didn't let it show. "And you'd better be ready for it. When I get back, I'm going to kick your arse in the master's dojo."

"When we get back, you mean," he said. When she looked confused, he smiled wider and stood to attention, salute and all. "Jedi Ace Gold Squadron leader, at your service, ma'am."

"What?" Aola's face broke in a grin, "You're my backup?"

"Don't sound too surprised," Garen looked her up and down with mock hurt. "I can protect your ass as well as I can kick it to Ilum and back." In her glee, Aola hugged him. He hugged back, a little more hesitantly. "Just don't make it too hard for me, alright?" Over her shoulder, he spotted Aola's mission partner.

"Cody," he grinned, and Aola withdrew so Garen could reach out to shake Cody's hand. "Good to see you again. I hear you're making a name for yourself at the Bureau."

"So I am, sir. Some of them have taken to calling me 'The Pretender'."

Garen had meant it as a turn of phrase, and was not expecting an actual name. "Oh?" he asked, a bit nonplussed, "why is that?"

Cody's face was deadpan. "Because I spend so much time with the Order, I believe they think I'm
pretending to be a Jedi, sir."

Garen and Aola both laughed at that. "Well, pretend on, Agent, we're glad to have you." Garen smacked him on the arm. As he did, Aola looked up to see Feemor approaching slowly.

"Master," she said, smiling, "what are you doing here?"

"What am I doing here, she says?" Feemor chuckled. "So ready to be rid of me. I've just come to wish you well, lass." He glanced at the two men by her side and gave a polite nod. "Cody, Garen."

"Master Gard," Garen bowed. He nudged Cody toward a group of a dozen pilots. "Come on, Cody, I'll introduce you to the others." The clone followed along but glanced at Aola and Feemor over his shoulder. He remembered the day, not so long ago, when he'd arrived on Coruscant for the first time. He remembered what Obi-Wan had said then about Jedi families. Feemor leaned down and wrapped his apprentice in a hug, and the enormity of Cody's task sank heavily onto his shoulders.

Garen interrupted his thoughts to introduce him to the rest of the Gold Squadron, or at least the half that would be accompanying them to Geonosis. All were Jedi, all were ace fighters, and all of them would be armed and waiting in orbit if anything should go wrong. The one called Martus introduced himself with a smile.

"I'll be in your ear the whole way," the Mirialan said, tattoos accentuating his smile, "if things start going pak'pah shaped, let me know and we'll be there in a flash." They shook hands, Cody trying to mirror his smile. He looked at Martus and his fellow pilots.

"May you all sit around with nothing to do," the clone bid, and the squadron laughed.

"Cody," Feemor called. The clone glanced back at the Jedi, who'd come over with his apprentice. "A word?"

Feemor and Cody withdrew just as Aola reached the squadron and said, "Are these the half-wit lackeys you've told me about?" The aces hollered and turned sour looks on their leader, and Garen immediately put out his hands in protest.

"She's got her own mind," Feemor said when they were a ways off, and Cody turned away from the others. "That's for sure. A good head on her shoulders, enough confidence and grit for both of you."

"Sir?"

"Listen to her. She knows what she's doing. She's quick-witted, good at split-second decisions, and braver than a Correllian tiger. But…" Feemor fidgeted, glancing over Cody's shoulder to his apprentice as she elicited another laugh from her team. Cody could see in his face what he was trying to say.

"I'll look after her, sir," he promised, "with my life."

Feemor glanced at the clone's face and then looked suddenly at the ground, jaw clenching around words he couldn't make himself say. "Well," he spoke eventually, putting a hand on Cody's pauldroned shoulder, still unable to meet his eyes, "let's hope it doesn't come to that, lad."

"Cody?" Aola called. Master and clone turned to see the Gold squadron jogging to their fighters, Aola standing alone by the beat-up freighter the two of them would fly to Geonosis. "It's time to go."
The freighter went first, followed by the squadron in formation. Feemor stood alone in the hangar, watching the hulls glint in the sun and disappear into the atmosphere.

Obi-Wan was still moody about the Senate, but today Feemor was having trouble noticing. Some time ago, a trio from the Outer Rim faction had taken over the floor to present updates on the renewed droid-eradication efforts in the Galactic South. Feemor hadn't been listening to them since they'd begun speaking. As if through water, he could hear them laying plaudits on Obi-Wan for his triage schema, on the SBI for its quick response, on Senator Palpatine for his advocacy for cases in the Outer Rim, on the Jedi for their partnership. He heard names and places that he knew he recognized, but they held no meaning. The only thing that mattered was the holo map floating above their heads, the southern Rim rotating in hypnotic, intangible blue.

Geonosis was in the south. Just there, at the crux of the Triellus Trade Route and the Crystal Passage. If he looked closely, Feemor could almost see the hull of freighter, carrying away a piece of his heart and a clone whom he hardly knew.

"Master Gard?" someone said beside him, and Feemor started. He turned to see Senator Palpatine addressing him. The room's lights were brightening again, senators shuffling around the room to speak to one another, stretch their legs, fetch water or caf before the meeting resumed. Obi-Wan seemed to have escaped for a brief respite.

"My apologies, senator," the Jedi sat up and stretched his back. "You caught me in a moment of abstraction."

"None needed, Master. I only wanted to ask after your apprentice. I haven't seen her lately," he chuckled, looking around to the very solemn, aged assembly. "This dour company could benefit from her youthful vigor."

Feemor smiled at that, thinking of Aola's emotive, fidgety air. "She's quite well, Senator, I appreciate your asking. She was recently reassigned."

"Reassigned?" Palpatine seemed confused. "Apart from her master? But surely - oh." Something in Feemor's face must've given it away, because Palpatine's eyebrows rose, and he gave the Jedi a surprised grin. "Reassigned to her trials, do you mean?"

Feemor chuckled. "You know our practices well, Senator."

"I spend half my days living on Coruscant. And after all your order has done for Naboo, well…" he shrugged. "I'm glad for her - and my congratulations to you, Master."

"I'll at last be a master properly, assuming she does well," As he had many times, Feemor caught himself wondering why he felt so at ease around Palapatine. Was it his whispy white hair? His downturned eyes, so ready at all times to smile or weep in sympathy? Maybe it was his soft wrinkles, the comforting presence of a paternal likeness.

"I admit, though the concept is a familiar one, the intricacies of the Jedi Trials baffle me. What is it that the Council has her doing?"

Feemor raised his brows and shrugged. He hadn't been there for the briefing, and what little he did know was in strict confidence. "I'm afraid they don't let the masters know," Feemor said, and added, "I suspect they think it makes it easier for us."

"And does it?"
"Not a bit."

Palpatine laughed, a soft, pitying sound. "I'm sure she'll do marvelously," he assured. "May the Force keep her safe and sound, then," he said, using the Jedi maxim incorrectly, but sincerely.

"Aye," Feemor agreed, eyes unfocusing to stare at the space of air that had displayed the Arkanis sector in holographic lines. Palpatine seemed to sense his need for space and smiled again, patting him consolingly on the shoulder before turning away.

When Feemor looked up again, Obi-Wan had re-entered the room and was looking - no, glaring at him. But no… it wasn't at him. The knight's look intensified as his eyes followed Palpatine, face darkened with something that, had Feemor not known better, he would have mistaken for hatred. The man was unreadable in the Force. As he turned, Obi-Wan's blind eye glinted in the light, and Feemor caught himself wondering what Obi-Wan saw behind its milky film.

He knew that Obi-Wan's visions had intensified after he lost his eye. He'd always suffered premonitions of the future, but soon after his knighting, Qui-Gon had come to Feemor for advice. The night terrors of Obi-Wan's padawan days had returned to haunt his knighthood, vivid, plumbed from some depth of the Force that he'd only learned to access in his blindness. Qui-Gon hadn't known how to help him. Even Ben hadn't been sure. Yoda alone had been able to console the young Kenobi, but it had been years since Feemor had heard anything about the matter.

Surely by now, he could control them. Surely. But Aola had told him before that Obi-Wan often premonissed in the day, his eyes wide open. Seeing the look in the knight's eyes now, Feemor was discomfited. The glare he fixed on the unassuming benevolence of Palpatine, the darkness in his countenance… The master frowned disapprovingly. He resolved to have words with his partner later.

Soon, however, worried thoughts of Aola returned, and Obi-Wan's behavior was the furthest thing from his mind.

"Very well, you have defined your terms and I accept them," Ben peered up at his opponent from his seat, shoulders back, hands folded diplomatically on his lap. "Proceed."

Anakin cleared his throat and consulted the small page of notes he'd scribbled out for himself. "Due to the homework that Master Rorti has been assigning for his class, I've been falling behind on my saber classes, and haven't had time to practice the katas you and Master Drallig assigned to me."

"And what if I don't believe you?" asked Ben, arms crossed and raised high in skepticism. Anakin frowned at him.

"You have to - you were the one who was complaining about it."

Ah yes, he remembered that, now. "Fair enough," the master decided. "Continue."

Anakin glanced at his notes again. "Furthermore," he'd learned the word just last week, and had begun using it every chance he got, "the assignments that Master Rorti has been assigning require reading outside of what we've been requisitioned for the class, even though the archives have fewer copies than there are students. This means that if I try to go and find a copy in the archives, there probably won't be any there. If there is one copy and I take it, there will be five classmates waiting for me to finish with it and give it to them."

Ben's eyebrows raised - he actually hadn't known that, and thought it would be a good thing to
mention to Naatan Rorti. He made a mental note to comm him later in the week.

"Furthermore," Anakin probably thought it made him sound smarter. "If I wanted to truly emulate Jedi virtue, I would pass over the reading materials and give them to my classmates, who may need them more than I do, especially because I also have saber practice that I ought to be doing. So if I skip Master Rorti's homework and practice on my saberwork instead, I am not only accomplishing more than I would have otherwise, but I'm also helping my classmates and demonstrating Jedi virtues at the same time."

Oh, he was getting good, Ben thought. But he was not quite as good as his master. "And had you considered, my young friend, requesting a copy be made of your reading material?"

"But I don't have permissions to do that," Anakin protested.

"There's not anyone else you know who does?" Ben looked at his padawan with an open, guileless expression. "Someone older, perhaps?" Anakin squirmed on the spot. He'd hoped Ben would somehow overlook his oversight. "Taller? About five ten, beard, blue eyes, not to mention incredibly handsome."

"Master," Anakin groaned, slumping in defeat and stomping a foot. Ben fought back his smile before Anakin could see and resumed his most snobbish masterly expression.

"You've not convinced me. Next time, you should provide more compelling evidence and cover all potholes in your argument before you present it. Numbers and documentation help, if you can find them." Anakin stood and listened to the critique with a miffed expression. This was the fourth week in a row he'd attempted to convince Ben he shouldn't do his rhetoric homework, and it was the fourth time he'd lost. But he'd be damned if he stopped trying. "If you had managed to get as far as my rebuttal, I would have argued that you had ample opportunity to request a copy of your reading, just as you would have had plenty of time to practice your katas, had you not wasted both our times on this exercise. But you already know this, so I won't beleaguer the point. Now go wash up. You have," Ben looked at his chrono, "thirteen hours before your assignment is due. And yes, you can take my permissions to Master Nu for a data copy."

After weeks of trial and failure, Anakin had learned better than to openly complain. Still, he let out a heartfelt groan and threw his notes into the rubbish bin before jogging off to his room.

While Anakin rummaged about in his room for his things, there came a knock on the door. "Come in," Ben said loudly as he stood from his seat. The door hissed open to admit a single visitor. "Ah, Obi-Wan, to what do I owe the pleasure?"

The knight looked distracted, his serious expression incongruous with the ever-busy air that came with raising a young boy. "I need to speak with you," he said, glancing around and not seeing Anakin. "About Eriadu. And the Senate."

"Oh," Ben tried to wash his mind from the juvenile concerns Anakin had brought back into his life. Since he'd taken Anakin on as apprentice, for the first time in this second life, he'd found himself forgetting about the darkness of the world and all the shadows of the future. Looking into Obi-Wan's face, he could see that his younger self had not. "What about them?"

"Obi-Wan," Anakin didn't bother saying hello as he emerged from his room, a backpack thrown over one shoulder and exasperation written over his entire body, "is there any way I could convince you to do my rhetoric homework for me?" Obi-Wan glanced down at the boy as if bewildered by his presence.
"Anakin," Ben rebuked. His apprentice was unbothered.

"What? Obi's good at that sort of thing," he mumbled. Obi-Wan should have smiled at that, and the fact that he did not set Ben's nerves on edge. He glanced between the two.

"And I'm sure he's seen enough rhetoric homework for a lifetime." He made a show of looking back at the chrono. "Twelve and a half hours. Get going, padawan."

Anakin sighed and scurried away to the archives. Once he was gone, Ben turned back to his younger self. "Tea?" he ventured eventually. Obi-Wan shook his head.

They sat across from each other at the kitchen table. Obi-Wan produced a holodisk and turned it on. A shimmering blue map appeared; it was the entire galaxy. The southeastern quadrant was shrouded in lines of red. Ben squinted at it for a moment, trying to read the highlighted planet names. Ryloth, Herdessa, Kashyyk, Alaris Prime, Kuat, Mandalore, Geonosis, Naboo. Heart falling like a stone into his gut, Ben looked up to meet Obi-Wan's eyes. The knight looked like the words physically hurt him when he said,

"He's a sith, isn't he."

"What?" Ben asked. Obi-Wan was looking at the table. The blue light from the hologram made the circles under his eyes look darker and deeper than they really were.

"He's the master, isn't he."

"Obi-Wan," Ben began. The younger Jedi looked up at him, hurt and anger in his eyes, as he tested his theory:

"Sheev Palpatine."

Ben couldn't help his own reaction. There was so much hurt and loss tied to that name, he couldn't contain his own anger, and it seeped out into the Force like blood in water. Obi-Wan felt it and closed his eyes, pain etching into his face.

After several long seconds, he whispered in indignation, "Why didn't you tell me?"

Ben squared his jaw, but had to look away from Obi-Wan's face. "You know why I couldn't."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Obi-Wan snapped this time, louder. "I've been working with that… that man for months - nearly a year. A year, Ben." He slammed his hand on the holodisk and it turned off, leaving the two in the dimming light of dusk. "I had a right to know."

"No, you didn't," Ben shot back. There were few people in the galaxy that could bring out his anger as quickly or as sharply as Obi-Wan could. It was little wonder; he'd always reserved his deepest resentment for himself. "You had no more right to know than anyone did. Force only knows why I had to know, it's caused me nothing but grief." Perhaps it had been a mistake to lie to Obi-Wan all this time. Hadn't ignorance been his downfall last time? But Obi-Wan was not ignorant; he was safe. Had been safe. The Force roiled around the younger Kenobi, dark and purple with clouds of ash just waiting to ignite. Ben only sighed.

"You want to know why I didn't tell you?" he asked, trying to keep his voice down. "This. This is why." He gestured to Obi-Wan. "This is why I had to leave the Senate. If you react to his presence, if you loose control for an instant, give off even the slightest impression that you know something, he will sense it. We can't risk him knowing. We have to stay one step ahead."
"And that's good enough reason to keep it from me?" Obi-Wan burst.

"Yes, in fact, it is," Ben shot back.

Obi-Wan was beyond listening. "He nearly had you killed - he nearly had me killed. He took my sight. He's been orchestrating every failure, every bad thing to befall this lineage since... since you got here, certainly." Obi-Wan shoved the holodisk in Ben's direction, and it flickered to life again. "I wouldn't know anything about these places if it weren't for you, I wouldn't be working in the damn senate with a damn Sith if it weren't for you."

"Would you have rather known nothing at all?"

"It's certainly what you would have me do, isn't it?" Obi-Wan snapped, and Ben opened his mouth for a retort, but there was nothing to say. He ran a hand down his face, trying to think clearly.

How had he been meant to decide? How did the Force expect him to direct the fabric of the future with every last secret shared, withheld? He had no one to tell him what to do, to guide him. Doubt sprouted across his convictions so long held. He'd thought Obi-Wan would understand simply because he was him.

Ben looked back on the years of trust in this young man and realized he didn't truly know him.

"Obi-Wan," he said, not knowing what else to say, "I'm sorry."

"And now you've sent Aola into this mess," Obi-Wan accused, voice cracking. "And I'm not even well enough to help her, because of what this man's done, what he's doing. He probably has spies on Geonosis, you know."

"I know," Ben said, eyes closed.

"And you said nothing."

Ben pinched the bridge of his nose. It felt like arguing with Luke, or Anakin. Young, impetuous, too inexperienced to understand the purpose of heartless lies like this one. "Yes."

"And now I have to go back to the Senate and pretend like I don't hate him to his core," Obi-Wan hissed.

"Hate," Ben broke in, "Hate. Obi-Wan, this is why I didn't tell you. You hating him gives him exactly what he wants," He opened his eyes and saw a young man he'd never seen in the mirror. He'd shared his burden with so many for so long, it was seldom he felt truly alone anymore. Staring down his younger self who was practically shaking with anger and hurt, he felt more alone than he'd felt in years. He made himself finish, "He'll know who you are, and he'll know that you know, and he'll use it against all of us. Please, please do not give him that chance."

Obi-Wan stared at his older self, face drawn taught in an expression of intense betrayal that was new between the two of them. He knew, deep down, that it was a hard decision Ben had faced when he chose not to tell him. But he was too hurt in the moment to care. He shook his head.

"You should have told me," he said, weakly, knowing it wasn't true.

"I'm sorry, Obi-Wan."

He continued to shake his head. Abstractly, he understood why Ben had done it. He understood why Ben was afraid. It didn't make him any less angry. He stood and left without another word.
Obi-Wan wandered the temple for hours seeking solitude. It was so easy to forget how many thousands of Jedi lived at the temple until he needed a place to be alone. After wandering past countless rooms, gardens, and halls, unable to find some corner that wasn't already occupied, he found himself on the balcony below the Council Spire, watching the setting sun backlight the city in hues of gold and pink.

For a while, he sat alone in the buzzing silence, frown accentuated by hardening browlines as he squinted into the light. He closed his eyes and let himself become mesmerized by the dim glow of sun through his eyelids. He breathed in and out and no one interrupted him.

In and out. No one lied to him.

In and out. No one asked too much of him.

It was not to last.

"Obi-Wan? What brings you all the way up here?" The knight barely restrained a sigh when he heard Yan Dooku's voice. Obi-Wan harbored no ill will toward his grandmaster, but wished privately that he would sod off. He opened his eyes and tried not to glare.

"Ah," Yan said when he spotted the look on Obi-Wan's face. "Is it Ben or Qui-Gon?"

Obi-Wan frowned up at him, internal soliloquy interrupted. "What?"

"You're angry with one of them, which is it?"

Obi-Wan's stood to his feet and glanced, affronted, at his grandmaster. "I'm not angry with either of them." Or at least, he was working very hard not to be.

Dooku leaned against the railing alongside his grandpadawan. "You brood, padawan. But only in places where you'll be noticed, though I'm not sure you're aware of that. You'll go to the planetarium if you need Qui-Gon's help, or wherever it is that Ben goes off to when you want to speak with him. To the gardens for master Yoda's counsel. I've never seen you here, so you must be avoiding all of them."

"I am not," Obi-Wan protested.

"Your subconscious is as shrewd as you are, and as childish. You came here to feel sorry for yourself."

Obi-Wan sighed. He had come here to be alone. He'd come here for peace and quiet. And yet.

"And what are you doing here, master?"

"Me?" Dooku shrugged. "The council is one floor away and I am an insufferable gossip. My apprentice is at the healers today and I have nothing better to do."

Obi-Wan had forgotten that Dooku had taken on a new padawan, and found his annoyance dimming somewhat at the thought. "How is Asajj?"

"Well enough," Dooku said, shouldering his own frustrations somewhat more serenely than his younger counterpart. "The darkness continues to pursue her, but between Master Yoda, Master Che and myself, she is progressing well. In facing the darkness, she has found strength within herself even I did not foresee. It happens that way, sometimes."
Obi-Wan should've been heartened to hear it, but his heart had bundled itself into melancholy and would not be moved. "Sometimes," he said.

"Yes." Dooku looked down at him, eyes calculating. Where there was normally steel and unreserved judgement, Obi-Wan thought he could sense a soft edge of sympathy. "Oftentimes, it is more complicated than that." Obi-Wan let the silence carry conversation for them. Eventually, Dooku said, "Your anger will do you no good festering, padawan."

"There's a Sith Lord in the senate," the words burst out of Obi-Wan's mouth like a caged animal set free. He bit his lip, realizing he could not take the words back. "Ben's known all this time, and he didn't tell me. Didn't tell anyone."

Dooku raised his head slowly and lowered it again. "Ah," he said. It wasn't natural, Dooku thought to himself. It wasn't natural at all that he could hear such news and barely bat an eye. But he'd tried to warn the Council of such an eventuality years ago, and here they were.

"I've worked with that… that man for nearly a year, and all this time he-"

"I don't know what man you're talking about, padawan," Dooku put a firm hand on Obi-Wan's arm as he drew breath to tell him, "and I would like very much to remain in ignorance. Don't speak his name." That Dooku suspected an identity already was beside the point.

Obi-Wan seemed baffled, but dutifully closed his mouth. "I thought Ben would've told you," he murmured.

"He hasn't. I think he wanted to, once, but I told him not to. I don't want to know."

Obi-Wan looked at him. Dooku had been hunting Sith and darksiders since his earliest knighthood. He'd been trying to pull back the curtain on their festering ranks for decades. That Ben Kenobi could have made him seek ignorance was a mystery. Dooku seemed to sense it. He glanced away and did not meet Obi-Wan's eyes as he said,

"In another world - the world where Ben first knew me - I was a sith, Obi-Wan. Did you know that?" Obi-Wan's face fell slack in surprise. "And do you know, when he told me, I wasn't at all surprised. What with how everything has been, how I have been… given the opportunity, not so long ago, I might've fallen into the same mistakes." Dooku sighed, gazing out at the Coruscanti skyline. Obi-Wan stared agog. The sun's orange edge drew Dooku's normally stern eyebrows at an unfamiliar, vulnerable angle. "Knowledge is power. But our knowledge is not always our own power. Sometimes, what you know can make your enemy stronger."

Obi-Wan frowned, and shook his head. "And if I'm denied knowledge because of another man's fear?"

"Fear is not evil," Dooku retorted. "Fear is a human emotion, fear keeps us safe. Living through fear leads to death, but living with fear keeps us alive." He finally looked back to his grandpadawan. "Ben has lived far longer than either of us, Padawan. He's well acquainted with the difference."

It was an uncomfortable idea. Obi-Wan realized he had no idea how old Ben really was. Yet the Jedi path was far older. There is no fear, there is the Force. "But the Code-"

"Is a document built to keep us on the straight and narrow. But even the Code, which denies fear, is itself an artifact of the Order's greatest fear - that of losing itself." Dooku glanced at Obi-Wan and found the knight frowning in thought.
The philosopher's fire had always burned bright in Obi-Wan's eyes. It was something Dooku had long admired. But today, there were dark circles under his eyes, and it looked like he hadn't trimmed his beard in a few days. "What I mean to say, Padawan, is that Ben's fear, his lie, has kept you safe. You cannot decry that, no matter how angry it makes you."

Obi-Wan sighed and sank lower onto the railing. He could see dozens of lanes of traffic from his vantage point, but he couldn't tell where any of them were headed. "But what if he was wrong? What if he acted through fear, and not with it?"

"It's a thorny problem, I'll grant you," Dooku chuckled. "We cannot control how others deal with emotion, we must only answer for ours. Fear, love, anger, hope, these are all fleeting things we must carry in their season, but we mustn't let them become motivations. We must act with our eyes open, our minds sharp. The Sith are a cerebral enemy, padawan. We must answer kind with kind."

A long silence passed between them. Eventually, Obi-Wan spoke.

"What made you come back?"

Dooku looked at him. "What?"

"What made you come back to the Jedi? You said you could have fallen. Why didn't you?" It should have deeply offended him, but the question took Dooku so off-guard, he could naught but stare.

"I..." he thought. Why had he come back? "I was called back. To fetch up young Anakin from Alderaan."

"Yes, but, why did you stay? Why not leave again?"

Dooku was unused to this level of interrogation from Obi-Wan. He'd always been curious, even argumentative, but as an apprentice, Obi-Wan had never dared to ask such personal questions.

"Anakin... I thought to teach him, before."

Obi-Wan knew this. "Why? What was so special about him?"

Dooku faltered, even though the answer was already on his tongue. "He gave me hope."

"Hope."

"Yes. Hope for a generation that may rise up to see the darkness of this galaxy, and face it, and have the strength to win."

Obi-Wan considered this, brow furrowed in the most quintessentially Kenobi look he owned. "Hope for Anakin. For Asajj. For what Ben is trying to do," he surmised. "That is what made you stay? Hope against the dark side?"

Dooku nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, I suppose."

"Was It a cerebral decision, master?"

Dooku opened his mouth and found nothing to say. Obi-Wan waited and absorbed the silence as his answer.

"And is it not a good thing, master?"
Again, Yan found himself speechless. A weighty silence passed between them. At length, he said, "Well said, Master Kenobi." It was the first time he'd ever used Obi-Wan's earned title, and he could sense the knight's surprise. Dooku gazed back out over the sun, which was very nearly set. The never-ending forest of skyscrapers was beginning to twinkle to life against the dusky sky. "But be careful. Emotions are fickle."

And perhaps they were. Hate. Anger. Love, even, could turn on itself. Admiration often fell sour over time. And yet… despite Obi-Wan's anger toward Ben, his disappointment, his roiling confusion, he found hope nestled in the mire, shrunken, but much the same substance as had always been there.

"I'm not sure hope is an emotion, Master," the knight decided. It was a movement, something to hold onto, a constant of the Force. "It is higher than emotion, or logic. It is only when we lose sight of hope that emotion becomes dangerous. Hope allows us to be with emotion and not of it."

Dooku turned to him, face set in an expression of surprise that Obi-Wan had never seen. Dark eyes gazed into blue a moment before the older man let out a laugh. "You counsel yourself, Obi-Wan. You do need me here after all." Obi-Wan smiled demurely to himself. "But have a care; listen to your own advice. I lost sight of hope once. As once did Ben. Do not think yourself immune."

The precipice between light and dark waited on the edge of a knife; he'd seen what arose from the abyss beyond. He wanted to say he'd never find himself looking down over that edge, but saying so was the danger. He feared it; but fear did not consume him. He gave a somber nod. "Yes, Master."

Yan put a hand on Obi-Wan's shoulder and turned away from the now-darkened sky. "If you cannot forgive Ben, at least understand him. He's been the torchbearer for us all for too long."

Obi-Wan did not say how he felt the weight of the torch passed onto him. "I will, Master."

"Starfang 5, you are clear to land at port 0-5-7. Repeat, 0-5-7."

Cody tapped the comm. "Copy that, port 0-5-7." He glanced back at Aola, who'd been hovering over his shoulder for some time. "We're getting close to the ground. You'd better go back to the berth before someone sees you."

Aola, who'd doffed her cloak some time ago and now stood in her barely-there costume, shivered. "Fine, just hurry up, it's freezing back there."

"Well, it's your lucky day, because Geonosis is boiling this time of year." Once they were lined up with the landing strip, Cody set the sequence to auto. "Alright. We're just about clear." he went back to the berth with Aola, trying to shake out nervous jitters. "Name?" he prompted.

"Seela."

Cody frowned at her. "Name?" he repeated.

"Oh." She affected a Ryl accent, which came quite naturally. "Seela," she said, and then, to get into character, "you cssk-eating son of a vetch."

To his credit, Cody kept a straight face. "That's quite enough from you."

"You have to say it like you mean it, Cody. Call me something awful."
But he didn't want to. "No."

"We need to sell this."

His worry let him snap at her, "No, we need to sell you, now shut the hell up or I'll cut out your tongue."

"That's more like it," Aola commended, still in her Ryl accent. Cody only shook his head. He knew where his DNA had come from. All the clones did. He knew the kind of man his father was. The ease with which his own voice sunk into that role disturbed him, and he longed for the mission to be over.

"Do you have the…” Aola tapped her wrists.

"Yes," he produced the stun cuffs from his belt. She held out her arms and watched while he put them on.

"Tighten them," she instructed.

"But miss-"

"I'm a captive, Ulcan, stop coddling me." She put emphasis on his fake name. He gave the cuffs a sharp yank and even she winced at the pinch of the metal on her skin.

"Better."

They stood, waiting, while the ship thudded to the ground and hissed out the pressurized air.

"You ready?" He looked her in the eye.

"Of course," she replied, hoping he wouldn't hear her voice shaking. A buzzer at the landing door let them know it was safe to exit. Dropping momentarily from her accent, Aola said, "May the Force be with us."

Cody still wasn't sure what he believed about the Force's existence, to say nothing of whether having it with them was a good or a bad thing. Still… he remembered the day, now ages ago, when Obi-Wan had crashed to the floor in front of him and he'd parroted the phrase off right before the Jedi had narrowly escaped death. The clone shrugged.

"Sure as hell can't hurt," he decided. He slammed his helmet on, happy that it would hide the worried lines in his face.

He led her out into the scorching sun by a chain leash, and turned his nervous walk into a saunter. Bounty hunter came too naturally to him, he thought. He glanced at Aola, who still looked a bit too keen for a Twi'lek slave. He wished for her sake that Aola's role could come as naturally, and hoped the Geonosians wouldn't know a Jedi on sight.

*May the Force be with us is right,* he clenched the chain tighter. *We're going to damn well need it.*
Cody did not speak any Geonosian, but found he did not need a translator to understand the slave auction. The buying and selling of sentient beings, he supposed, was a business so old and universal that translation was a tertiary concern. At the Petranaki Arena, language barriers had been accounted for. A series of Geonosian clicks and buzzes echoed over the loudspeakers. Cody waited for the Basic translation.

"Sold at 600 puggat." The lot of 200 field slaves were slowly, sullenly marched off the stage toward the guards waiting to process the datawork. Cody straightened up, straining his neck beneath his helmet to spy on who was coming up for bid. He could see humanoid forms shuffling in the shadows of the arena doors, but could not determine their species of their number. Sweat trickled down his neck and Cody had to fight to keep himself from scratching at it. Curse this planet, he thought, watching the slaves, the buyers, feeling useless. Curse the whole damn system and both suns with it. After the Geonosian auctioneer read the lot details in his native tongue – did Geonosians have tongues? – the speakers parrotted in Basic:

"Lot 1143: 150 factory hands; mixed species, age, gender."

"Oh, kark it all," Cody cursed into his helmet.

"Keep your bucket on, Agent," Garen Muln's voice crackled to life in his ear. "She'll be up after these guys are off." Garen sighed into the mic. Cody wasn't sure he was meant to hear it when Garen added, quietly: "Force, it's a disgrace. Wish we could clean up this whole damn sector."

"Where is she?" Cody asked quietly, so no one around him in the stadium could hear.

"We're not sure; the architecture is interfering with our comms. She should be able to hear us once she's up on that stage."

"I'm here," came Aola's whisper over the comms. "Can't talk or they'll see."

Cody almost asked are you okay, but bit his tongue.

"Good," replied Garen. "I only have to say this once. We're having trouble with our comms. All this rock and clay is interfering with our connection, and Poggle must be more paranoid than we thought, because the Stalgasin Hive has frequency scanners." Clicks and buzzes and intermittent Basic droned form the speakers, but Cody wasn't listening. He pressed his helmet into his ear to hear Garen more clearly. "We can slap together some bogus clearance codes to patch us through but the system resets every five minutes. We'll have to go silent for one minute every five to rework the codes. Once you step foot inside the capitol proper, it'll be touch and go - for you especially, Aola."

"Copy," she said. Cody swallowed.
"And if we lose contact?"

"You'll be on your own. Stick to the plan. Aola, get to the hive and get that data. Cody, stay on the borders and see if you can find a speeder - a fast one. No matter how things go, once Aola is clear you need to get to the rendezvous point fast."

Cody blinked, and suddenly the lot of factory hands were being marched off the platform, a line of shapely Twi'lek and Togruta females taking their place. The crowd hooted. The lots were smaller, now, and sold fast. Cody had to press his helmet even closer to his ear. "And what if we need to call for extraction while the line is dead?"

This gave Garen momentary pause. Through the noise of the crowd, Cody heard him say, "Your distress signal may be able to override the block, it uses an emergency frequency. But it's not a private frequency. They'll hear you." The added don't use it unless you absolutely, unequivocally have to was unspoken but understood.

"Heads up, here we go," Cody sat up straighter when he spotted a geonosian leading Aola up onto the platform. An announcement came over the loudspeakers, and all around him, bidders looked down at their datapads, where lot details automatically flicked to life on their screens. Cody could not read Geonosian, but several bidders seemed impressed. Some huffed at the price and put away their 'pads in favor of conversation, while others leaned in closer, giving cheery wolf-whistles as they scanned through the holo images. A Tygerrian next to Cody actually purred.

The disgust Cody felt was expected. The fear, however, was not. "How do we know they'll win this auction?" he asked.

"Poggle doesn't buy pleasure slaves for himself, but he always keeps some in his staff, for visitors. Based on what we know, he buys for some fairly particular... tastes," Garen explained diplomatically. "Your alias architects have made up some colorful details about Aola's background that make her something of a rare find. Poggle has the deepest pockets here. If he bids, they'll all know to back off." Cody looked again at the excited faces of the bidders. The price was rising. Slowly, bidders began to put away their 'pads. Some left the arena, others munched on snacks. Finally, Poggle placed a bid. Mumbling erupted around the arena, some more annoyed than interested. Cody looked at Aola, chin high, confident in her mission. He looked at the girls standing next to her, young and terrified. Cody grimaced.

"It's disgusting," he said. Garen sighed, quiet and heavy as a planet.

"Yeah."

Entrepid bidders challenged Poggle for a while longer, but it was only a matter of time before Poggle was declared the winner and Aola was escorted off the platform, towed away before Cody could catch her eye. After the auction, a Geonosian appeared to transfer Cody the credits she'd earned him. He took them and disappeared into the crowd. He was half a klick away from the arena when his comm beeped and Aola's voice appeared in his ear:

"They're taking me to the hive. I'm alone for now. So far, so good."

"I'm turning your tracker on now." Garen replied. "Cody, what's your status?"

"Got the chits, off to find us a getaway speeder," Cody told them.

"Eager to leave already?" Aola teased. "We only just got here." Despite the levity in her voice, he didn't need to be a Jedi to tell she was nervous.
"Just stick to the plan, and don't be stupid."

"Alright," Garen interrupted, "Going out, time for the first reboot. I'll tell you each time we go out. Keep a low profile while we're gone. This isn't the time to take chances. May the Force be with you."

The line went dead. Cody continued on toward the market streets under a bounty hunter's mask, alone.

Geonosians moved their slaves quickly and efficiently. Aola didn't have time to gain her bearings as she was shuffled off the bidding platform and into a transport. From the transport, she was moved to an underground holding cell, where other newly-purchased slaves sat on benches along the walls. Aola joined them and waited. Every once in a while, she could hear Garen's voice in her ear, announcing another minute of silence. She wanted to ask him where Cody was, where she was, but there were too many people. She closed her eyes and leaned back against the wall, trying to meditate. She did her best to let Garen's periodic announcements comfort her. "All to plan so far, signing off." Always the same, always quick and quiet. It was a good way to keep track of the time.

Almost two hours later, a door opened. A team of handlers came into the room, shouting to the crowd of slaves in Geonosian. The one in front held a whip coiled in his fist, and translation was not needed as he gestured and pointed to the slaves until they were arranged in a single-file line. The other two Geonosians stood at the front of the line, armed with datapads and a crate full of tools.

One by one, the slaves had their wrist restraints removed, only to have them replaced by thin, sleek metal cuffs about their necks. Some of the slaves in front of her already had scars branching like lightning across their necks, where previous restraining bolts had shocked them for offenses unknown. Some of them were hulking men, or teenagers with rebellion in their eyes. But some, Aola could not help but noticing, were little more than children.

It came her turn, and Aola tried not to flinch as the duo tested her necklace before they put it on. Blue arcs of energy sparked across the interior of the necklace. At least, she thought, it was better that they tested it before they'd put it on her.

After that, they shuffled her through the door where an escort was waiting. They clicked something commanding in their own language and she was prodded down a long hallway.

They walked in silence, save for Garen's occasional noise in her ear. She only hoped her guard could not hear the chatter. The hallway turned left and led to another hallway, which curved right, and led to a tunnel. They seemed to be sloping downward into the ground, but Aola had no way of knowing how deep they really were. It was colder, damper. She reached out with the Force, hoping to sense the ground beneath her and the sky above, as Féemor had taught her so many times. All around her was fathomless stone.

She didn't realize she was growing alarmed until Garen's voice cut out mid-sentence. "All to plan so far. Goin-" her heart leaped into her throat as static took over the line before it went quiet. Too far underground for signals, then. She realized that she had no idea where she was; she had no idea where the palace was. She had no idea where they were taking her.

The guard dropped her off at a door and knocked. The door slid open, and Aola's shoulder sagged in relief upon seeing another Twi'lek woman standing backlit by warm lights.

«You are the new one» said the older woman without smiling. She spoke in gruff tones of Ryl, but
Aola was ecstatic to hear any language she could half-understand. The elder nodded and snapped something at the guard, who left. She grabbed Aola by the arm and pulled her inside.

Aola had never wondered what the dwellings of pleasure slaves looked like. She'd never wanted to find out. Women of all ages - mostly young, mostly humanoid - lounged on couches or ate at low tables. There were even a few boys present. Some of them looked up at her, but many looked too tired to try.

«What is your number?» asked the matronly Twi'lek who'd let her in.

"I'm sorry?" Aola almost forgot to use her accent. The older woman scowled.

«Your number,» she pulled Aola closer and roughly shoved one of Aola's lekku out of the way to see her necklace. She scoffed. «Don't know why they brought you here,» she said, and leaned away to shout down the hall,

«Taliana, I have one for you to take along when you go,»

A nervous looking Zeltron woman, replete with bright pink curls and skimpy metallic clothing, peeked out of a door.

«Taliana's master will be your master. She'll take you to your quarters,» said the Twi'lek. «Stay in line. Don't be stupid.» And with that, her would-be mentor was gone. Aola couldn't help but hear the last words echoing in Feemor's voice as she walked down the hall to where the Zeltron stood by an electric dryer, folding laundry. Don't be stupid.

"You must be the new one," Taliana had a high-pitched voice and a heavy accent. Aola had to look down to meet eyes with her.

"I'm Seela," she said. Taliana smiled at her.

"Taliana." They shook hands.

"You're new to this," Taliana said. It wasn't a question. Aola felt embarrassed for Seela, even if she was just a cover.

"Yes."

There was a flash of sympathy in Taliana's eyes, and she tried to force a smile. It shook. "You'll be alright," she hoisted a basket of laundry on her hip. "Keep your head down, and you'll be alright." A crash and a shout sounded from back toward the door, and the two turned the older Twi'lek, who was berating a young girl in rapid bursts of Ryl.

"Don't let Anahl'ya get to you," Taliana tossed her curls. "She's been in this business too long." Seela did not want to clarify what kind of business it was. "Come on. You'll be sharing with me and Oona. This is just where we do laundry." They walked out of the busy apartment together, and Taliana led her through a narrow hall.

Seela cast a glance into Taliana's laundry and was scandalized by what she saw - even the red light districts on Coruscant had some standards. Taliana caught her looking. "You can borrow some, if you like." She cast a look up and down Aola's scanty leather clothing. "That one's a bit plain."

"I prefer this one," Aola said, doing what she could to not clutch at her bra, which still held her lightsabers.
"The master won't," Taliana.

"Who, King Poggle?"

"King Poggle? No," Taliana laughed at Seela's naivety. "What interest would he have? He's a bug."

To be honest, Aola hadn't given much thought to the Geonosian's biology or whatever it might mean for their sexual interests. She knew Poggle dealt in slaves, and that they could coerce him into buying her for his palace staff. Beyond that, it was just part of the mission, the job. But now, those details, once so certain and predictable, were taking her further and further away from the object of her mission. "He's who bought me," she insisted.

"Was he? Oh, good," Taliana seemed genuinely relieved. "You're a gift, then. Maybe Jabba'll come to his senses. He's been impossible lately."

Aola's chest clenched. "Sorry," she said, "who?"

"Jabba Desilijic," Taliana said, "our master."

Aola stared ahead into the hallway, wishing she had contact with Garen, with Feemor, with anyone. No one had told her that Jabba the Hutt was on-planet. She doubted anyone had known. The Hutts stayed well below the Republic's radar, and for good reason. But if the Hutts were wrapped up in Geonosis, if Jabba was wrapped up in whatever Poggle was hiding… a bad feeling settled in her gut like tar.

"Why would Poggle buy me for Jabba?" she asked. Taliana sighed.

"Why would anyone do something for Jabba? They do business together." She hiked her laundry basket higher on her hip. "Entertainment, mostly. Slaves and arena fights, that sort of thing. Jabba has deep pockets. He goes through slaves pretty fast, but fancy gifts like you keep him in the king's good graces." Taliana stopped suddenly and hastily apologized, "I'm sorry, I don't mean to scare you. He's not so bad. Just… just do as you're told, and you'll be just fine. Maybe..." she pulled at the edge of Aola's bra, "maybe get something more… more interesting… and you'll be fine. Just fine." Aola wondered if Taliana knew how many times she'd used the word 'fine', and if she was speaking to Seela or to herself.

Taliana led them to a locked door and showed Aola the combination. Inside was a small room with a 'fresher, two bunk beds, and a chest of drawers. "You'll be in Ngala's bed," Taliana gestured, stuffing her clean clothes into one of the four drawers.

"What?" Aola frowned up at the beds.

"Sorry," the Zeltron corrected, "Top one on the right. Ngala was the last girl who had it. She was here before I was."

Aola did not ask what happened to Ngala. She looked at the bed: a hard, plastoid mattress, no pillow, no blanket. Aola had had one or two short stints in prison during her eventful apprenticeship; she had never done so at a Hutt's request. This wasn't supposed to happen, she growled internally at the Force and no one in particular. This isn't where I'm supposed to be."

"Oona must still be in Jabba's quarters," Taliana broke Aola from her thoughts. The Zeltron crept over to a door which, upon closer inspection, was little more than a mesh screen separating the small bedroom from a much larger chamber. Aola could hear heavy breathing and something like music. Aola leaned in beside Taliana to press her face to the mesh.
From what little Aola knew of the Hutts, Jabba was fairly young. But he was still massive, and slimy, and he smelled. Aola couldn't help but wrinkle her nose. She could only see the Hutt from a glancing angle, but it was enough. A ruddy-skinned Twi'lek girl lounged against him, wearing a barely-there skirt and no headdress or top whatsoever. Aola felt herself blushing for her. "Is that Oona?" she asked.

"Yeah," Taliana whispered back. As they watched, something happened that made Jabba laugh, and he reached down to stroke one of Oona's lekku, and use it to pull her back against him. It must've hurt the girl, but she forced a laugh and smiled up at him. Aola felt sick. She backed away from the door.

"I never thought I'd end up here," she said to the air.

"None of us do," Taliana said, keeping her voice low. "But here we are." She stood and faced Aola. "And Oona's been in there all day. All yesterday, too. He's going to get bored eventually, and I'm sure he knows you're here by now. You should get ready to go out there."

Aola was a Jedi, but this was not something she'd been prepared to do. "Out there?" She hissed. "With that… thing?" This was not her mission.

"You need to change clothes. If you go out in that, they'll just take it off you. He's a bit of a showman."

"Showman," she hissed. "What does he get out of it?"

Taliana only shrugged. "Power. Distracts his clients, to be sure. And his captives. Now put on something better than… whatever that thing is," she gestured to Aola's home-tailored suit, which, to be sure, had seen better days.

She remembered her sabers, pressing against her chest. She looked at Taliana, who was small. There was no way a borrowed top would hide her weapons. She couldn't hide them in the room - even in the beds, there was no place no hide them. "I have to get out of here," she said aloud.

"Seela, you're here now," Taliana told her, "you can't."

"No." She turned to the Zeltron, and hissed, "I have to get out of here."

"And I'm telling you, don't try it. They'll be coming for you any minute."

Aola was headed for the door. Taliana darted around to block it. "Seela, if they come for you and you're not here, they'll kill me."

"They won't."

"They will," she pressed her palms in the doorframe, real terror in her eyes.

"Taliana, listen to me, I-"

The mesh door hissed open. "You there," Aola turned and saw a pale-skinned male Twi'lek standing in the doorway, looking her up and down. "Master Jabba will see you now," he said in Ryl.

"My lord," Taliana curtsied. "I present to you, Seela"

"Seela," said the man, "you will come with me."
Aola did not have time to think. She thought of her sabers, of the earpiece barely hidden by her headdress, of having her whole mission, her whole Trials blown because of a giant, power-hungry, meddling slug. She was accustomed to anger. She wasn't accustomed to dealing with it alone. She drew her shoulders back and tried to let her face relax, like Feemor had taught her, in quieter times when he could get her to listen. In carefully enunciated Ryl, she told him,

«I am not here. There was a delay. You will apologize to Jabba for my absence.»

Taliana might've gasped. Aola was concentrating too hard to notice. The pale Twi'lek's eyes flickered with outrage for a terrifying instant, but then his eyelids softened and he stared at Aola as if she were his own epiphany. «The slave Seela is not here. There was a delay.» He looked distraught. «I… I must to apologize to Jabba immediately.» He scurried away, and the mesh door hissed shut.

After a brief silence, Taliana squeaked, "How did you do that?"

Aola turned to her, knowing the trick wouldn't hold for long if she were spotted again. She pulled the Zeltron into the dark corner of the room. "Taliana, I need your help. I have to get out of here."

This time, Taliana said nothing. Mouth agape, she listened.

Garen switched channels. "Martus, any luck?"

A sigh on the other end of the line. "None so far. She's underground, that's all we know. We don't have a read on her. She disappeared, heading to the southeast wing of the palace."

Garen cursed to the private air of his cockpit before opening up the line again. "Anyone else have any luck?" He was met by a chorus of "No"s and "Negative"s. He looked at the holomap sprawled out on his viewport, backdropped by the dark side of Geonosis' largest moon. The blue blinking dot that represented Aola's location had disappeared almost an hour ago. She should have gone to the mid-northern sector, where Poggle kept his personal slaves' quarters.

Garen sighed and rubbed his face, running through the brief in his head again and again. They'd played the scenarios seventeen different ways when they were creating Aola's background. They had thought of every detail, using intel on Poggle's spending habits, the slaves he'd bought in the past year, how much money he still had to burn. They knew where his slaves lived and what parts of the palace they had access to, what times of year he bought certain kinds of slaves, everything. What had they missed?

He slipped into meditation without thinking, there in his seat. He allowed the Force to grow into a protective shell where it found him, floating in space. He reached out with his senses, hoping, praying to get some semblance of where Aola was, if she were in danger. Nothing. He rubbed his eyes. There were reasons to send masters and apprentices on missions together. The mental bond formed between student and teacher were not only useful for instruction; they were useful for times like these, when things went wrong. He remembered his own trials. He opened his comms.

"Gold two, six, seven, keep your guns primed."

"Roger that, Gold Leader."

"Gold three, keep an eye out. We don't know what it'll be when she reappears."

"On it," replied Martus.
Garen looked down at the timer he'd set for himself and watched the chrono count down to one. He switched his comm back to Cody, and wondered if Aola was on the line, too. "Going out in three, two, one."

"Going out in three, two, one."

The constance of the announcements was simultaneously comforting and maddening. Cody shifted his helmet, trying to situate the earpiece more comfortably, to no avail.

"Tonight! Come see returning champion Oxellanna face off against the Gamorrean Hoarde. And don't miss the pre-event masstiff races! Place your bets now at the Petranaki Arena!" Cody turned away from the blaring loud speaker and forged ahead into the marketplace. Where Geonosian had been the primary language during the slave auction, out in the Stalgasin marketplace, where traders gathered and locals pandered overpriced wares to passers-through, Galactic Basic blended with dozens of other languages in a never-ending buzz of haggling, heckling, and cursing.

Cody strode into the masses with a soldier's confidence and the crowds parted for him. His eyes drifted over half a dozen food stalls and drink stands which stank of beer and whatever liquors Geonosians fell partial to. He passed a tavern, and a hotel, and finally, his eyes lighted on something useful.

Used speeder for sale; quad engines, aux acceleration; 200,000 kliks; inquire at Cortinxl's mechanics

"Garen," Cody spoke to his comm, "are the chits from the sale on my card yet?"

Nothing. Cody cursed, and waited. It was only a handful of seconds before Garen's voice appeared in his ear.

"Back."

"Are the chits from the sale on my card yet?" Cody repeated.

"Copy that, agent..." Garen paused. "They are. Why?"

"There's a speeder here, has a decent engine on it, may be a good bet for a getaway. Buying it would raise fewer eyebrows than stealing."

"Send me the specs."

Cody did. There was a slight delay, before Garen came back to say, "It looks good. Just keep it on the down low, see if this Cortinxl person can't hold onto it until we need it. Aola hasn't reported in yet."

Cody stopped in the middle of his stride. "What, at all?"

"She's in process. Wherever they've taken her, it's too deep underground for our comms. She knows the mission. We just need you in holding pattern until she can tell us what's going on."

Cody was suddenly less inclined to buy a speeder and more inclined to look for a larger blaster. He fiddled with the one holstered at his hip. "You'll tell me when she checks in." It was not a request.

"Just get that speeder, we may need it. Then, lie low."

"Lie low?" he looked around the marketplace, every corner of it writhing with all the mundane
temptations he'd never seen on Kamino, all the things he wanted no part in: gambling, revelry, pit fights, drugs. "And do what?" he asked.

Garen almost sounded amused. "Have a drink. Who knows, Cody, it could do you some good."

Grumbling, Cody stepped into the mechanic's shop and let Garen's voice fade away. He hoped Aola would hurry up with whatever she was doing. Maybe he'd buy the speeder just in time to make their exit. Maybe she already had the files. Maybe she was also lying low, waiting for her chance. If he did have to go drinking, he hoped he wouldn't have to linger.

It took him an hour to haggle a price. Another to fill out paperwork and transfer funds. The twin suns had begun to set by the time he stepped back out into the street, the keys to his new speeder safely in his belt. He opened his comm.

"Any sign of her?" he asked.

"None so far." Garen, who'd sounded optimistic all day, had a flicker of worry in his voice.

"Alright," Cody said. Where the clone trooper half of his brain wouldn't notice, the human half prayed to a Force he wasn't sure that he believed in that she would hurry up and stay alive.

Aola waited, as still and as quiet as she could, by the door. In the other room, Jabba was throwing a fit. Aola did not understand Huttese, but Taliana could, and she looked terrified. "He's not happy about the delay. About you. Or the king." she told her companion. "Bib will come back soon to check if you're here. Will you be able to do that… that thing again?"

"I don't know, sometimes it's a kind of one-off thing," Aola said. She was peering close at the door, trying to find any crack or peephole where she could watch for guards patrolling outside. When she found nothing, she looked around the rest of the barebones bedroom, but there were no windows or chronos in sight. "Are you sure the lights are the only way?"

"It's the only way to know for certain," Taliana replied. "The security lights go on right after the guards change shift. Every night. I hear them talking outside when they switch. Otherwise, they're too quiet to hear, and I'm not allowed to leave if I don't have a reason." It wasn't a comfort.

"It was daylight when I got down here. It's only been a few hours. When do these lights go on?"

"After sundown. The daytime generators are solar, they shut down at night to conserve energy." They both flinched as Jabba cursed louder and threw something across the room where it clanged against the wall just outside their room. "And what time is it now?"

Taliana was looking at the wall, as though she expected cracks to form in the duracrete. "They haven't brought him dinner yet. Maybe… late afternoon?"

"That's not good enough," Aola growled. "I need to get out of here."

The mesh door unlocked. Taliana squeaked, and Aola dove and rolled under the bunk bed just before Bib entered the room. «Where is she? The new one?» he hissed. Taliana's voice choked with tears as she glanced to where Aola had been, hoping to her gods that she would stay hidden.

«I-I don't know, lord," she stammered, genuinely frightened. «She isn't here.»

Bib snarled, his pointed teeth flashing in anger. For a terrible moment, Aola thought he would grab
Taliana and drag her out, but he only shut the door and stormed away. Taliana was shaking out of fear, shoulders stiffening as Jabba's anger roared in the other room. Aola could hear Oona screaming, and hoped the girl was alright. By the yelling and the clattering of glass and furniture, it wasn't a sure thing.

The Jedi stayed pressed low in the shadow of the bed, her ear flat against the floor. It wasn't carpet or tile or even duracrete here. It was stone. The same stone as the hallway outside. Someone passed by not twenty feet away; she could feel it in the rock, in the Force that surrounded it. They were quiet, to be sure, but she was a Jedi.

"Seela?" Taliana whispered. "Seela, I think you should stay under there, for now."

"I know," she replied, keeping her eyes screwed shut. "I think I've figured out a faster way. Just keep Bib away for a little while longer."

"Seela, this is scaring me," Taliana confided, close to tears again. "I've never seen him this mad, he's going to kill someone." She choked. "He could kill Oona. I'd be next."

And if they dragged Aola out and discovered her sabers, they'd all be next.

Aola pulled on a courage she didn't have and projected it to her newfound companion. "You are brave, Taliana, I know you are." The Zeltron wasn't sensitive to the Force at all, Aola could tell. But she stood up a little straighter. "I just need a little more time." She pressed her face more firmly to the ground and listened, counting quietly to herself.

Aola wasn't the only one waiting. Far away from the depths of Geonosis, Ben Kenobi stood in the same spot in the Jedi Temple's rooftop gardens that he'd been occupying for the last half hour.

Sunsets on Coruscant were always spectacular, unless otherwise mandated by the WeatherNet. Today was no exception. High above the sky was inky blue and hazy from smog, but arching down to the horizon, magnificent fuschia blended with drowsy yellows to create a dazzling show of oranges, pinks, pastels and shining ruby that reflected off the chrome surfaces of buildings and passing skycraft.

Ben stared until his eyes ached.

"Master Kenobi," someone said, coming up behind him. "May I join you?"

Ben turned to see Mace Windu already settled into a spot next to him. "I suppose."

They stood in silence, watching as the Coruscanti skyline lit up with twinkling lights as the sun dipped below the horizon.

"I can only assume you've come to lecture me about something," Ben said. "You're not normally this quiet."

Mace shrugged. "Yoda saw you brooding. Said he was tired of dealing with you." The Master of the Order peered out over the railing. "So naturally, he made me come down here instead."

Ben huffed out a laugh through his nose. He shook his head. "Of course he did."

"So are you going to make me ask you, or are you going to tell me?"

Mace was the only person in the galaxy who knew the extent of Ben's pain or his fear, but making
himself share was almost as hard as getting Anakin to do his chores. And therein lay the problem.

"Aola has been sent on her trials," Ben said. "To Geonosis."

"Yes. I suppose Obi-Wan told you, despite the fact that he was expressly told not to."

Ben didn't even care if Obi-Wan was breaking promises. "Geonosis," he said again. Mace turned his head to see Ben staring off into the middle distance, forehead creased in deep lines of worry. The sunlight made his grey hairs glow gold.

"Yes," Mace replied.

"I didn't even know it was happening until she was already gone." He shook his head, forelorn and resigned. I'm a fool."

"Are you saying I'm a fool for letting her go?" Mace snapped back. He stood and leaned his back against the railing, crossing his arms in front to glare at Ben. Ben broke his staring contest with the cosmos to face his confidant with sudden hurt.

"I never said that."

"Good." He looked away, miffed. "Fool isn't the word I'd use for you, anyway. Try 'pain in the ass'." Ben flinched, and Mace wasn't ashamed to feel gratified. "You're not Obi-Wan's keeper, Ben, but the least you could do is talk some sense into the man. He's been flying off the handle ever since Geonosis came into the picture. I only barely kept him from assigning himself to the team. Thank the Force for whoever cuffed his ears. Saved me the trouble."

Ben bit his lip and looked away.

"A pint of Tatooine blonde," Cody said, still speaking through his helmet. He was glad for the bustling crowd at the bar; the bartender didn't give him a second glance. He took his glass, paid, and left. He picked a corner booth where he could see the front door and the bar. He removed his helmet only when he was sure no one cared to look in his direction. He drank and did not enjoy it.

A crowd started filtering in as dusk lit the streets outside in double shades of gold. Holoscreens flickered to life and Cody understood the crowds; the arena fights he'd heard advertised so loudly in the market were being broadcast on every available surface. The bartender had turned bookie, and every man, woman, and even some children seemed to be vying for one gladiator or another, chits in hand and ready to take more. Cody shook his head and sighed. He took another sip of his beer, trying to take it slow.

Cody had spotted a slew of hidden weapons as clients trickled in. He wondered if any of their owners would make a fuss when he had to hightail it off this planet, or if they'd just make themselves scarce and leave the fight for Poggle and his underlings. The fact that they'd be fighting their way out was no longer a doubt in Cody's mind; the longer Aola was out of contact, the faster he knew they'd have to leave. He'd turned off the safety to his blaster before he'd stepped foot in the tavern.

A short, misshapen Balosar approached his table. "You want to place a bet? Guaranteed cash today."

"Do you want a blaster bolt to the face?" Cody replied, deadpan. The Balosar snarled and moved on. Cody sighed and drank his beer.
"Every twenty minutes? Are you sure?" asked Taliana, wringing her hands.

"Yes," Aola replied, shocking herself with her own calm. "As soon as the next one passes, I'll leave."

"And what about me?" Taliana begged. "Jabba'll call me in any minute, once Oona's had enough."

Aola didn't want to leave the Zeltron to such a fate. As frantic as she was, the girl had shown real bravery in helping her. "Come with me," Aola said, knowing it would be a risk. Taliana seemed to know it, too.

"What? No. No, I can't. They'll find me, and they'll kill me then. Really kill me."

Aola sighed. "Then..." She looked around the room. She couldn't hide. She couldn't run. "Then put on a show," she told the girl. "Like I've done. Put on a mask, a smile. Put on your best outfit and pretend you're not scared."

"I don't think I can pretend that," Taliana said. Aola looked her in the eye.

"You can. I know you can. You told me all those things earlier, and you weren't scared then."

"Jabba wasn't angry then," she insisted.

"Then pretend he's pretending," Aola grasped. She didn't have time to pep talk this girl, but she felt she must. A memory struck her of another Zeltron she knew, a Jedi healer's apprentice who'd told her far too much about Hutt biology during exams. "Taliana," she pulled the girl closer, "Hutts are easy to kill."

"What?" the slave squeaked.

"They're all fat and blubber on the outside, but inside they're normal sized. Normal sized heart, lungs, throat. Put enough pressure on their throats with a rope, a chain," she glanced at the dresser, "a headdress." She gave Taliana a meaningful look. The slave shook her head.

"I can't."

"You can. Not now. When the moment is right. When no one will see you. You can do it." Was it bad, evil of her to tell a slave to murder her master?

Taliana squeaked again, shaking. Aola glanced up at the bed she'd been assigned. Jabba roared Huttese profanities. She'd begun to guess what had happened to the last slave who'd slept in the bunk.

"Do it for Ngala," she said. Taliana's tears became angry. Chin quivering, she made herself nod. Aola finished counting down the twenty minutes. She heard the guard come by, and walk slowly away. The footsteps faded. Seven, six, five, four, three...

"May the Force be with you, Taliana," Aola said. Taken aback by the strange bidding, Taliana hesitated until Aola was nearly out the door.

"Good luck," she said, and the door hissed shut once more.

Aola ran down the hallways almost without looking. She clung to the Force for guidance and protection. She'd almost turned down the hallway she'd used earlier, when the Force flashed hot with danger.
"I swear to you, I turned her over to that idiot Taliana," Anahl'ya's voice echoed down the hall. The tall shadows of a Twi'lek and a Geonosian marched down the side of the hallway. Aola pivoted on her heel and flew down the opposite hallway. She rounded blind curves and chose doors on pure instinct. *Up,* her senses told her. *I just need to go up.* She bounded for stairs and ramps and anything that smelled warm and fresh. She stuck to the darkest and smallest hallways, anywhere servants seemed to congregate. The guards weren't alert here. They wouldn't notice another face in the crowd - she hoped. She ran up a stairwell and found herself on the wrong side of a locked doorway. She fiddled with the control panel.

"-opy? Aola, do you copy?"

"Garen," she almost shouted. "Oh, thank the Force."

"What's your status?"

"Running on borrowed time. The Hutts are here. Tell me how to get to the archives." She pried at the panel, probed it with the Force, but it was a complex lock.

*The Hutts?* Garen exclaimed, *Which ones?*

"It's Jabba, I don't know what he's doing here, but I think he's been dealing with Poggle, I-"

«Who goes there? Hello?» Grunted someone in Ryl. Aola cast a look over her shoulder. A shadow fell over the bottom of the stairway far below. Panicking, she took out one of her sabers and ignited it straight through the door's lock. She ran as soon as it'd opened.

"I don't have time to explain, get me to the archives."

"Aola, if you need to call this mission, call it now." She guessed by his tone that Garen would call it, were he in charge. She set her jaw.

"Get me there, Garen."

A pause. "Alright," she recognized the voice of Martus take over the line. "You're gonna want to make a right turn... now."

For all his anxiety, no one in the bar seemed remotely interested in Cody. In fact, no one in the entire tavern seemed interested in anything except the arena broadcast, at the moment. Everyone was cheering or groaning in their turn, eyes glued to the screens, yelling encouragement to their chosen champions. No one seemed exempt.

No one, it seemed, except the occupants of the booth next to Cody.

"-hands on a lightsaber."

The clone paused mid-sip, and carefully swallowed before putting the glass back down. The walls of the booths were high, and he couldn't see who was speaking, but he could hear their conversation.

"Oh, come off it," said one man, slurring his words in a way that said he'd had a few drinks.

"No, no, I swear, I swear, I gots my hands on a whole payload of 'em." The second man's slurring said he'd had more than a few drinks. "Real 'uns, too. Not sticks or glowing props. The real deal. Laser swords."
Cody wondered if they knew he was there. The cheers at the bar swelled, and he leaned closer to their booth to eavesdrop.

"You ain't never seen a laser sword in your life," said the tipsy one. "I have. And I don'ts believe you."

"I have! I'll show you I have! Lookit, lookit at this, then," Cody could hear the leather upholstery creaking under some weight. He could imagine one man leaning over to look at the datapad of the other. "Lookit that. That real enough for you?"

"You're too shitfaced to lie, you idiot," said the skeptical one. "That's not a lightsaber. That's a prop. I seen a hundred laser swords in my life, those Jedis carry 'em all about on Coruscant, I ought to know, I was born there."

"-born there, yeah, yeah," the drunker man made a farting noise with his mouth. "These are real, I tell you. Lookit this, and this. Those ain't scars from no vibroblade, I tell you that."

"The hell, man, you seen a doc for this?"

"Had bacta on those for two weeks. They still that pink cus they're the real thing."

There was a long, quiet pause. Cody had forgotten his beer entirely. His ears rang in an attempt to listen over the din of the bar.

"Where the livin' 'ells you find those?" The tipsy man now spoke with sober fear.

"I have a contact," the drunkard bragged. "A supplier."

"A supplier? The hells does that mean? Lightsabers come from the Jedi, and the Jedi are on Coruscant."

"Not all of em ain't," said the drunkard, undeterred. "Some of 'em are out here, ain't they? And they gaves me these to sell, didn't they?"

"But that's... that's not right."

"Innit?"

"No. Jedis don't sell laser swords. There's laws against that, I think. Those ain't even the right color for Jedi swords anyways."

"What?"

"They're knock-offs, I tell you. I know the genuine article. Jedi swords ain't red."

"Oh, come on, you're taking the piss."

"I'm not,"

"You're jealous!"

"I'm not!"

"You a-are,"

"Ah, shut up. I could go for a piss," the tipsy one belched. He grunted as he stood. "Don't drown
while I'm gone, you wanker."

Cody listened as the one man staggered off for the 'fresher. The other man grumbled into his drink. Cody put on his helmet and went around to the booth. The braggart was an Anzati, drunk out of his mind.

"Those lightsabers," Cody demanded without preamble. "Where did you get them?"

"And why," said the Anzati, shakily raising his glass to his mouth and almost missing, "should I tell you, bruv? Unless you got chits for 'em."

"Where?" Cody insisted, reaching out to grab a fistful of the man's coat.

The Anzati laughed and spilled his drink down the front of Cody's armor. This made him laugh harder.

"Son of a-" Cody shook sticky alcohol off his glove.

"Cody, Aola's back on," Garen appeared in his ear. "It's gonna be a tight race. Get the speeder and head to the rendezvous point."

As Cody gripped the man's lapel, the Anzati's small datapad fell out of his pocket and onto the table, still illuminating the picture he'd shown his friend: three lightsabers, displayed in stands, ignited and glowing an angry, crimson red.

"Cody, report, we need to move."

"Ay, give that back, you bastard!" The drunk grabbed at his pad, but Cody gripped the 'pad and stared at it, memorizing every detail, committing every blip to memory. The sabers were set against a plain white backdrop to improve the display, but hiding behind the sheet, he could just barely make out something, unfocused and distorted.

"Cody!"

"Give it back!"

"Oh, kriff it," Cody shoved the drunk back in his seat, and the Anzari ripped his datapad back. Cody didn't have time to fight him for it.

"Copy that," he told Garen, and ran.

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"Alright," Aola whispered, crouched low in front of a door. "This one?"

"Yeah, that's the service entrance to the archives' main stacks," Martus said. "You're going to have to be more careful with this one. If you break the circuits, the security system will go off and this place will be swarming with bugs."

Aola nodded. "Alright." She put her saber away and placed her palm flat against the door, thumb and forefinger angling around the control panel. She closed her eyes. "What sort of security do they have on it?"

"Normal stuff - radio-magnetic locks, integrated door sensors, that sort of thing. You won't find the serious stuff until you get to the royal archives inside."

"And that's where I'm headed, is it?" Aola asked, trying to sense the shape of the lock hiding under
"What, did you want to stop while you were ahead?"

Aola smiled to herself. "Course not."

"Going quiet in five," Garen broke in. "Don't work too fast. Three, two, one."

The line went dead, and Aola breathed out a long breath, trying to keep herself steady. The lock in the door was cold and dead in the Force, but there seemed to be sparks on the edges of her senses where the electricity brought it to life. Since he lost half his sight, Obi-Wan had become a master of this sort of thing, seeing the Force even in electric circuits. It was an irony considering how much the man disliked machines and mechanized life, but so incredibly useful. Aola had begged him to show her how, but had struggled to replicate his techniques.

"Treat it like it's alive," he'd told her. "Look at it like you'd look at the movements of a living thing, like insects on a web, or snakes on a branch." She knew he'd been trying to help her, equating it with creatures and nature, but it was hard to do, because no amount of imagination would make these things alive. It was durasteel and wires, nothing more.

A distant noise made her jump, and she had to resist the urge to break concentration and look over her shoulder. She drew her brows together and reached out her senses. Far away, she could sense a Geonosian patrolling the hallways, unaware of her presence. It was... oddly cold, in the Force. Cold, like durasteel, but alive. Cold-blooded, insectoid. Biological and alive, but cold. Something clicked into place and she found it easier to imagine.

She pressed more firmly into the door, and the sparks moved from the edges of her inner eye to the center, migrating along dictated paths like insects along a wire. They converged in a maze of patterns, crossing over each other and exchanging small cargos of light in even intervals. She stared at the central exchange, the lock, where the electrical signals - the bugs - mobbed thickest. There was a signal in there, waiting for her to pluck it up and give it to the right receiver. But where?

"Back," said Garen.

"Shut up," Aola hissed. "I'm busy."

Thankfully, he did shut up. She leaned all the way forward and pressed her forehead to the door, struggling to keep her vision rooted in the immaterial blips riding along just beneath her fingertips. Stop tensing, she could almost hear Feemor reprimanding her whenever she tried to use her brain too hard. Relax. Let go. It'll come to you. It hadn't always. But it needed to, now. With some effort, she let her shoulders fall and the skin of her face relax. She watched and waited.

Then, like a cloud passing away from the sun, an opening appeared. On pure instinct, she nudged a passing blip of electricity into the gap, where it disappeared. The maze froze for one second, and then resumed.

The sound of the door unlocking made her jump. Hesitantly, she stood and it slid open. Beyond was a darkened room and rows and rows of tall stacks of databanks. It was utterly quiet and still. "I'm in," she said. "Where to?"

"The royal archives are the personal files of King Poggle. Our intel tells us he keeps them in a guarded datastack within the main archives, but we don't have a perfect layout of the archives. Do you see a separate room or chamber?"

The archive itself was seemed to be a panopticon - a circular room with shelves radiating out from
the center like spokes on a wheel. While the stacks continued up for dozens of floors, at the center there was a tall open space and a central spire that reached halfway up the height of the building. At the base of the spire was something that looked like a room.

"I think so. Give me a moment." Aola crept down one aisle of shelves toward the center of the archive, looking left and right to make sure there was no one around. As Aola inched closer, her stomach sank. What she'd thought would be a room was in fact a large, cylindrical generator.

She stopped before she left the cover of the shelves, and traced her eyes up and along the length of the spire. "Oh, no," she grumbled. At the far end of the duracrete pillar, hovering amid floors upon floors of stacks was another cylindrical hub. Even from the ground, Aola could see that this one was a room of perforated duracrete. Behind the decorative cutout patterns, she could see the twinkling blue lights of holobanks.

"I found it," she said quietly.

"You don't sound happy."

"It's going to be tough to get to, and there are way too many sightlines." She glanced at the generator and the wires than ran from it to the royal archives high above. "It looks like this thing gets it own power supply. Security too, I'm guessing."

"That would match what little we know. Be careful getting in. Geonosian tech usually runs on cards and codes and such. Biometrics don't mesh well with exoskeletons. Your best bet is probably finding some sort of ID chips."

"Right. And where am I supposed to find one of those?"

"It's the night shift. I'm only picking up one or two lifeforms in your area, and they're both at one of the upper levels, in the center of the room."

Aola looked up and saw a platform, even higher than the royal offices. It was a circular desk, and at it, almost invisible from their height, were two Geonosians quietly working away.

"How are your pickpocketing skills?" Asked Martus conversationally.

In her mind, Aola could only hear Feemor and all the times he'd called her a bumbling mess. He said it out of affection, of course, but now was the time to prove him wrong. She cast a look back along the shelves. There was sure to be a lift or a stairwell of some kind leading to the upper floors, but they may have been guarded, and even if they weren't, the archive was a panopticon. It was constructed very specifically to make sure that all parts of the circle were visible from the center at all times. She looked back up to the Geonosian archivists high above, each stationed directly above the walkways that led to the royal archives to survey any incoming researchers.

Aola traced a path with her eyes down the long, long spire all the way down to the ground. The only blindspot in a panopticon was the center. She took a bracing breath, used the Force to leap on top of the generator room. From there, she grabbed fistfuls of wires in her hands and began to climb.

It was so, incredibly quiet. Aola was scared to breathe too loudly, and had to stop often to catch her breath so she wouldn't be heaving by the time she reached the desk. Garen and Martus both seemed to sense the need for quiet, and stopped talking altogether. Partway through her ascent, Garen said quietly,

"Going out in three, two, one."
The line went dead, and Aola paused to catch her breath. She looked up the pillar toward the walkway, now looming life-sized just meters ahead. She refused to look down. She knelt her head into the roped wires to which she clung, and breathed. *Force be with me.* She kept climbing.

When she reached the walkway, she wished desperately that she had her toolbelt, and her grappling wire. The wires fed up around the inside curve of the path into what Aola assumed were the walls of the archives. But there was no gap large enough for even her smallest finger. She looked over her shoulder to see the edge of the walkway above and behind her by about a meter and a half. Then she made the mistake of looking down. She clung to the wires and breathed, questioning for a moment whether this plan was at all less stupid than taking the stairs. *Just breathe,* said her inner Feemor. *Let the Force support you.* The Force and the tools it gives us, she'd always wanted to say. But she had no tools, only a damned leather bikini.

She looked again at the small gap where the wires wove up around the walkway. It was small, but there *was* space there, though it was thin. Holding onto the wall with her right hand, she reached up with her left and undid the leather thong wrapped around one of her lekku. It was considered highly immodest for a Twi'lek of her age to be without them, but modesty was hardly in the forefront of her mind. Now wearing only half her headdress, she shook out the long length of leather and tied one end as securely as she could to the wires, and threaded the other end through the gap. She closed her eyes and used the Force to pull the leather across the walkway and down. She looked back over her shoulder to see it dangling, less than half a meter of material to grab onto.


Aola took in a shaky breath. "Doing something stupid," she whispered, and leaped. She grabbed onto the leather with both hands and swung just long enough to reach up her right hand before it snapped. She caught the ledge of the walkway with her right hand, and then her left. She heaved herself up and over the ledge and rolled as close to the archive walls as she could, coming to a crouch and reeling in the leather rope into a ball. She could hear the archivists above stirring, talking to each other. No doubt they were asking each other about the loud snapping noise, where it had come from. Maybe they were even leaning out over their desk to see the walkway below. Aola plastered herself to the sides of the archive and waited.

Eventually the archivists seemed to lose interest and quieted once more. She could hear keypads tapping and machines humming, nothing that gave rise to alarm. She let out a silent sigh and edged along the room until she came to the door.

"Aola?" It was Garen, not Martus, and he sounded judgemental and worried at once. Aola did not have time to berate him for it.

"I'm at the door," she said, so quietly she barely even heard herself. "There's a slot for a card of some kind."

Martus spoke up once more. "*Good. There are still the two lifeforms nearby, I assume they'll both have an ID card you could use. You'll have to create a diversion to draw one of them away.*"

Aola looked down at the leather thong she'd left on the floor. Working quickly, she knotted it into a tight ball. She looked at the desk, about one floor above her. Then, aiming for a shelf a few floors down from the desk, she took aim, reached out to the Force, and threw.

The noise was like gunfire in the silent chasm of the archive. Half a dozen holobooks came crashing to the ground, unsettling a whole shelf and coming to rest in a pile. The archivists took immediate notice. She could hear them talking for a while, until one of them stood and left their post, heaving for a door that Aola assumed was a lift.
Working quickly, she went to the opposite side of the royal archive and began climbing, using the decorative cutouts in the walls as handholds. She scrambled on top and surveyed the ledge of the desk from below. She stopped.

"Martus," she hissed, "which one just left?"

"The one at your twelve o'clock."

"Right." Using the Force to power her, Aola jumped up and over the desk, coming to land softly behind the lone Geonosian at their post. She could not tell if they were male or female. Whichever it was, they were an ancient specimen of their species, bent over and frail. They sported a large electronic attachment to what Aola supposed must be their ears; she only hoped the cybernetics would not let them hear her. They wore a long robe-like outfit with a rope belt fitted at the waist. From it dangled decorative tassels and, hidden among them, a flat square chip, held on by a clip.

The archivist moved suddenly to grab a file, and Aola jumped. She realized all at once that this was an incredibly stupid plan. Before the rest of her brain could realize this in its entirety, she crept forward, silent as she could be. Just as the Geonosian was turning their head in her direction, she used the Force to knock over a stack of holobooks on the opposite side. The archivist turned to look, and while they were distracted, Aola darted forward, unclipped the card, and jumped back over the edge of the desk. She hung on the ledge before dropping, very carefully onto the top of the royal archives, and onto the walkway, and quicker than she'd ever expected she could, scanned the card and went inside. She stood, panting quietly, and stared.

"I'm inside," she said to her comm. To herself, she added, "That went better than I'd thought."

"Good. I'll keep an eye on the Geonosians' positions, let you know if anything changes."

Aola went to the main computer console within the archives. At a touch, the screen lit up and the servers whirred to life. The keys and files were all in Geonosian, but she didn't need to read to find the external drive port. She took out a small datadrive from its hiding place in her headband and plugged it in.

"Are we sure about this algorithm?" she asked.

"It comes from our best cryptologists. If there's a file in there that has intel on battledroids, it'll find it. But it could take a while. Stay out of sight."

Aola crouched, senses spayed, eyes scanning the room and the vast archives beyond, and waited.

Ben looked down at his boots and ignored the derision in Mace's voice. "Do you think she's ready?"

Mace raised his eyebrows. "Padawan Tarkona? As a matter of fact, I do. I wouldn't have sent her if I thought otherwise." This amount of sarcasm from Mace in so short a time was a testament to his frustration. Ben bit his tongue. "I would have, however, liked more time to consider Geonosis before your nephew chomped through his bit entirely." He shook his head, letting the frustration fall away into the Force. There was more to take its place. Each in its time. "Cody's gone along as well, you know."

"Commander Cody?"

"Agent, actually, but yes."
Ben absorbed this. To his own surprise, he laughed. "It's ironic. He wasn't there, last time."

"On Geonosis?"

"Yes. Not the first time, anyway."

Mace gave Ben a wary look. "Things don't happen the same way twice, or so you're always telling me. This could be the only time."

"True… but if these droids did come from Geonosis, it's not going to be nothing." Their eyes met.

"I don't expect it to be. But this is a reconnaissance mission. Dooku is on our side. The Clone Army is disbanded. The droid army is in hiding. No one in the Senate knows the Jedi have any interest in Geonosis, and by the time they do, we'll be long gone." Mace held Ben's gaze, and for a moment the time traveler looked placated, but after a few heartbeats, his faith snapped away.

"That doesn't mean it can't go wrong, that I couldn't have done something - anything - to help." Ben burst.

Mace tilted his head back and sighed. Eventually, he looked back to Ben. You're not wrong, his gaze said. Out loud, he said, "we must trust in the Force, and what it has given us."

The Force gave you me, Ben thought. And I've kriffed it to hell and back.

"I've become so preoccupied with Anakin," Ben confessed suddenly. It'd been weighing on his mind since he spoke with Obi-Wan, and now came tumbling out. "I've been so obsessed with fixing the one thing I knew I could grasp, the only thing I thought I could change. Anakin was the biggest failure of my life, and I finally got the chance to start over, to see him again, to train…" He trailed off with a lump in his throat. He looked back out at the sunset, which was all but faded. "I've let it blind me. I've let it blind me to everything. I didn't see how far removed I've become until Obi-Wan all but pommeled me with it."

"Good to hear he's been good for something," Mace commented mildly.

Ben seemed not to hear. "And now Aola is gone and I did nothing to prepare her, and there's nothing I can say to make it right." He heaved a sigh, a last weight off his chest. "It's not a galaxy I recognize, Mace," Ben said, jutting out his chin toward the legislative district. "I don't know what's going to happen any more. I don't know who is doing what or what to tell whom, I have to remind myself of my own name, some days, because I've forgotten. I've been here so long, it's all so different, that I forget."

"I don't," Mace broke in, tired of Ben's overdramatic drivel. "And I wasn't even there. That day you showed me all that happened? The Sith? The Purge? The Empire? I remember your memories every damn day, Kenobi. Don't tell me you don't."

Ben said nothing.

"Anakin is important, I'll never say he isn't. But there is more to this all than Anakin, there always has been. So you don't know what's going to happen, neither do I. But you know far more than I ever can. No matter what you tell me, no matter what memories you share, I will never understand the details of what happened, of what led to the fall. I wasn't there. I didn't feel it. I didn't watch it happen." The Master of the Order's steely-eyed gaze made Ben look over to meet his eyes. "You've had thirty years to think about it. And I need you to keep thinking about it for a few more if we're going to take this son of a vetch down."
Ben was unused to such strong words from any Jedi, least of all Mace, who, though infamously blunt, was still a diplomat at heart. "I remember like it were yesterday," he confided. "But it gets harder each year to understand. So much has changed."

Mace nodded, but countered: "Some things are certain. We know the identity of the Sith. We know what he hopes to achieve. We know his moves. We've got him cornered."

It was meant to be a comfort, but Ben frowned upon hearing it. He rolled his shoulder under his cloak, as if there were an invisible itch there, impossible to scratch. "Do we?"

A quiet beep made Aola look back at the console. The datachip blinked green. Carefully, she snuck over, plucked it out of the port, and tucked the drive back into her headdress. "Alright," she whispered, "got it."

"Great. Now get out of there, find an exit, and get to the rendezvous point," Martus said.

"I'll have to get this necklace off at some point," Aola said, looking around to see that no one was walking nearby. The archivists, it seemed, had gone back to their posts, fingers tapping away at keys meters above her head.

"You still have your sabers, don't you?" Garen said. "Just use one of them."

"Didn't Master Nu ever tell you no saberwork in the archives?" She shot back. "I'll give you my ETA when I'm out. Don't be late."

"Don't be late yourself."

She left the way she came. Creeping out of the royal archive, she lowered herself over the edge of the walkway, and with a few swings and a well-aimed drop, caught herself on the bundle of wires that led all the way down to the generator room. Slowly, quietly, she lowered herself back down the ground floor. Going down, she thought, was far easier than going up.

Mace and Ben walked back into the Temple together and cut through the gardens toward the residential wing. It looked like a different planet at night, alive with bioluminescent plants, devoid of the daytime foottrafic. Eerie green light like from a nearby sea ivy reflected off Mace's face as Ben looked over at him.

"Have you heard any word from Geonosis since they left?"

"Not yet. They were supposed to have arrived yesterday afternoon, by our time. If all's going to plan, we should hear back tomorrow morning at the latest."

"I see," Ben nodded amicably and let his gaze wander appreciatively over the nocturnal flora. Insects chirped. Fountains burbled. "And what if it isn't going to plan?" he asked.

After Aola had the data securely in her possession, Garen finally allowed his shoulders to relax. He watched her reassuring blue blip cruise down the center of the archives with a feeling of utter relief. In a separate holomap of the city, Cody's orange dot was inching its way to the rendezvous point at a comfortable clip. Garen's timer beeped.

"Going out," he warned.
"Copy," Aola whispered. He cut the line and watched in silence. Aola was taking her time, which showed her maturity. Apprentices, in Garen's experience, had a tendency to rush through dangerous exits once a job was completed. But in sensitive surroundings, keeping a cool head even after you'd achieved your goal was key. He made a note to mention it in his report.

"Hold up, we got a bogie," Martus' voice appeared. Garen's heart froze, looking out his viewport toward the moon, looking for a ship.

"What? Where?"

"Aola. Below her, at her two o'clock."

Garen looked down at the map. A red dot had appeared at the ground floor of the archives, moving slowly through the shelves by the door - the door Aola would need to access to exit. "Chssk," he cursed. "Aola, there is a hostile at your two, repeat, hostile at two o'clock."

Radio static. "Chssk," he cursed louder. "Gold five, how much longer do you have on those codes?"

"Forty three seconds," reported the cryptographer.

"Can you make it run any faster?"

"Not without risking the entire set."

"Dammit, Aola," Garen almost ripped off his headset. His eyes bore into the blue dot as if he could communicate with her. "Stop moving, stop moving, stop moving."

Aola landed softly on the roof of the generator and paused a moment to catch her breath, quiet as she could. She adjusted her sabers, which had shifted during the climb, and checked to make sure that the datachip was still in its place. She glanced around to make sure no one was around, and then, using the Force to cushion her landing, leaped deftly to the floor, heading toward the exit with quick, silent steps.

"If it doesn't go according to plan, Padawan Tarkona is under strict instructions to call the mission early. Garen Muln and half of his squadron are standing by for extraction," Mace told Ben, folding his hands into opposite sleeves. "She's grown a lot in the past year alone. She would know if she were in over her head."

"Hmm." Ben tried to think back to his experience on Geonosis. Anakin and Padme had run headlong into danger without weighing the consequences. But he hadn't. And yet… "I don't doubt it," he said.

"Nineteen seconds," Gold Five choked. Aola was moving closer and closer to the door - but so was the red blip on Garen's map.

"Dammit Aola, move!"

Aola turned the corner to the door to find the Geonosian archivist grumbling to the air, digging through the tassels of their belt for their missing ID chip. She was about to dive behind a shelf when the archivist looked up and spotted her. She froze.
They clicked something sharp and commanding at her. She stared. They spoke louder, more angrily as they stepped closer.

"M-my master," she said, affecting her Ryl accent and trying to look demure, "sent me here to fetch a record. He wishes to hear from the masterpiece composers of Geonosis." It was an absolute shot in the dark, and Aola winced to hear herself say it, but it seemed to work. The archivist tilted their head and seemed less angry. They looked from the door, to Aola in confusion. Then, they shrugged and began moving toward a shelf.

"Aola! Get out of there, there's another one coming up froooOOOOOOOOohhEEEeeEEeeeee!"

Aola and the archivist both yelled and clawed at their ears from the screeching feedback made by the radio interfering with the archivist's cybernetic ear fittings. Seeing Aola's reaction and hearing the words ringing in their own ears, the archivist stared at her. They pointed and said something harsh and accusative. Aola gulped.

"My master," She repeated, but they yelled at her, louder this time. She turned to find the second archivist, this one far younger and more able-bodied, marching toward her.

"Sorry, Master Nu," she said, and pulled out her sabers. The archivists yelled. One of them began pulling a comm out of their belt, but she sliced it in two. The other had slammed their hand on the exit door panel and red a klaxon blared. A security gate was closing over the door. Aola dove and cut past it. She fell into the hallway with the archivists screaming after her. She ran.

Even Cody heard the feedback, and nearly ripped his helmet off while driving. "The kark was that?" he growled irritably into the comm.

"Aola's been made," Garen said. "She's on the run."

Cody's speeder continued on its course, but his mind was rerouting faster than he could process.

"What's the plan?"

"Drive fast."

"Well," Mace sighed as they came to the residential lift, where Mace would go one way, and Ben another. "I'll let you know if I hear anything from them. I don't expect anything before the morning."

"I'd appreciate that," Ben said. As Mace was turning to leave, Ben called after him,

"Out of curiosity, how many fighters does Garen have with him?"

They caught her before she'd reached the main stairwell. While she deflected crossfire and cut blasters in half in pairs, it only took one Geonosian with an enforcer remote to activate her necklace and she went tumbling down with a scream, tazed into submission. Her sabers fell dead to the floor and a soldier rushed forward to retrieve them. She watched, paralyzed from the shock, as they plucked the comm from her ear and inspected it. They began shouting at one another.

The Gold Squadron had been listening to it all happen.

"They know she's a Jedi," said Gold Five, one of the few on the team who understood
Geonosian. "They're going to try tracking the signal."

"Deactivate the line, Martus, kill it, kill it now!"

"On it."

"Gold Leader? Do we attack?"

"Not yet, it's too dangerous." Nevertheless, Garen was priming his guns and warming up his hyperdrive. "Cody!" he shouted, looking between his weapons and the holomap on his screen, swarming with unwelcome red. "You're about to have company!"

"You're about to have company!"

"Dammit," Cody swerved, and caught a fleeting glimpse of royal fleetcars in pursuit. He changed gears, hit the auxiliary power, and floored it.

Aola could not move. They held her earpiece under some piece of equipment, and perhaps she was imagining it, but she thought she could hear Garen and Cody yelling over the line before the chatter cut off altogether.

"How long til extraction?" Cody shouted above the sound of klaxons and blasters chasing after him.

"Aola has the intel, we can't leave without her. But we can't go in guns blazing until we know exactly where she is."

Cody pulled hard on the controls and made a braked turn into an alleyway. "I'll find her," he grit out, trying not to look in his rearview mirror as his speeder's repulsors took a beating on the rocky downhill slope.

"If you go inside the palace grounds, we will lose contact altogether."

"Well I can't exactly stay here, can I - chssk!"

An airship had come down out of nowhere, blocking off the whole alley and sending a spray of sand and dust into Cody's eyes. He winced and pulled on the brakes.

As he coughed and squinted, the dust settled. No less than two dozen blasters were pointed at him. One air ship, two ion cannons, ten fleetcars, and four response units had packed into the alley, barricading him in on all sides. The Geonosians poured out of their ships, yelling at him and waving their blasters. Warily, he put his hands up.

"I'm made," he said. "May the Force be with you, Garen."

Garen stared at the map before him. "May the Force be with you -"

"Kriff it, no!" Garen yelled as Cody's line went dead and the small orange dot disappeared off his
map. He couldn't waste time.

"If they found Cody, they can find us, too. Gold Eight, gold Ten, get back in Republic space and get a communique to the Council, now. Gold Five, Gold Three, you're with me. Everyone else, stand by and stay out of sight. We're are getting out of here with both of them with us so long as I have a Force-damned ship in my hands."

"Copy that, Gold Leader,"

"We're on it, Garen," bid Eight and Ten as they pulled out of formation. "May the Force be with you."

They dragged Aola away. When she tried to reach up to take one of their blasters, they shocked her again, and she fell unconscious. Across the palace, they dragged Cody, in handcuffs, to their dungeons, and sent word to the king. A Jedi on Geonosis, with help from a Senate officer. On the outskirts of the city, the Geonosian royal navy was mobilizing to launch.

"Ten pilots, if memory serves, not including himself" Mace said. "All Jedi, all trained for special combat. Why?"

"Oh," replied Ben. They'd had two hundred Jedi, the first time. And still, it'd been a massacre. "I just forgot, that's all."
The Arena

Chapter Notes

I got to 32 pages and my beta, enshaedn, made me cut off this chapter and save the rest for chapter 23, so sorry in advance for the cliffhanger. As always, these things end up being much longer than I plan.

Anyway, enjoy!

Obi-Wan had visions. As a rule, Ben did not. He had grown out of them as a teenager, and unlike Obi-Wan, had never encountered anything that brought them back. But the day after Aola and her team landed on Geonosis, it was Ben who woke up in the small hours of the morning in a cold sweat with a shout dying in his throat. His room was dark, but seemed much darker for the ethereal afterimages burned into his eyes.

He stared at the wall and heaved for breath, trying to remember how he'd dealt with visions, eons ago. He gripped at his eyes, his temples. The images were fading from his sight, and it was a relief - but he knew he had to remember their meaning. The haze of sleep hadn't quite gone, but his mind was churning to life and begging him to keep up. He needed to speak with someone - with Garen, or Mace, or Yoda. Or all of them.

"Master?" A tiny voice piped up. Ben looked up to see the silhouette of Anakin leaning through his doorway, not willing to trespass his master's sanctuary without permission. "Are you alright?"

"I'm-" Ben found his voice had gone hoarse. He cleared his throat. "I'm fine, Anakin. Just… a dream." Or the twisted cousin of one.

"Oh." Anakin melted back into the shadows. Ben heard him stir in the other room, and came back shortly with a glass of water, which he brought over to his master. Ben smiled, and the shadows seemed to fade. It was something Ben always did for Anakin when he had nightmares.

"You're very kind, Anakin," he said. The boy lingered. If it had been Anakin with the nightmare, Ben would have stayed to talk with him about it. With the roles reversed, Anakin was unsure how to initiate a conversation. Ben forestalled him by drinking the water and reaching out to give the boy's shoulder a pat. "I'll be alright, padawan. Go back to bed."

Anakin was clearly skeptical. In the daytime, he would have stayed and argued, but now he only blinked groggy eyes under a worried brow and shuffled back to bed. He forgot to close the door.

After Anakin was back in his room and fallen asleep, Ben stared out into the dark apartment, unblinking.

After a while, he realized he would not be able to sleep. He stood and, not bothering with shoes, belt, or outer garment, put on a robe and stepped quietly out of his apartment.

He padded down the empty residence halls without having to think about where he was going. Fading images drifted across his mind's eye like shadows over glass, and he struggled to keep them fresh - but not too fresh - in his mind.
He gave two loud knocks at the door, and waited. After a long, sleepy moment, the door swept open to reveal a bleary-eyed and uncharacteristically disheveled Yan Dooku.

"Ben?" the master croaked, bass voice made even deeper by sleep. He took in Ben's bare feet, the robe he'd wrapped hastily over sleep clothes. He frowned. "What's happened?"

"Our lineage needs help," Ben told him perfunctorily. "And you're the only other person I know who's ever stopped an army."

The Senate committee would convene to review the SBI's report on the Trade Federation Investigation in one half standard hour. Obi-Wan checked the chrono again, and resisted the urge to tap his foot in impatience. Aola had been gone on her trials for three days, and in those three days, Obi-Wan't hadn't seen head or hide of her master, and he was beginning to wonder if he ever would.

It was uncommon that he had to wait on Feemor in the transit bay - if anything, the master usually ended up waiting on him. Most days, they met in the halls and walked to the bay together, talking and exchanging thoughts on the day's agenda. Today, however, Obi-Wan had been waiting on Feemor for thirty-four - no, thirty-five minutes. If they didn't leave in the next thirty seconds, they would be late.

It was two more minutes before Feemor arrived. Obi-Wan was so antsy to be at the Senate on time, he jumped in the cab before Feemor had even reached the landing pad. When the master clambered into the car, the engines already hot and roaring beneath him, Obi-Wan finally got a look at his face, and the pithy comment he'd prepared died on his tongue.

"Morning," he found himself saying, tone faltering between nonchalance and concern. Feemor's eyes seemed sunken into their sockets, but the flesh beneath them was puffy and dark. His hair was unkempt and his eyebrows were low. There was even a layer of fine blond hair dusting the man's chin and cheeks that Obi-Wan had never seen before. Feemor did not look sleepy. He looked weary, like he'd waged a war overnight and lost.

Feemor did not look at him. He took a breath as if it were a chore. Obi-Wan's frown tugged in concern. "Feemor, are you-

"We're going to be late," the master cut in. Obi-Wan closed his mouth.

Obi-Wan piloted them out of the temple and wove through the sky lanes until they were stuck slugging along with the rest of the glacial traffic. He took the time to glance back at Feemor, who hadn't moved an eyelash. He wasn't sure how to say anything without speaking out of turn.

"You don't look well, master," he said eventually.

"I didn't sleep well," Feemor replied, voice hoarse and quiet. "Sorry I was late."

"Oh." Obi-Wan didn't know what else to say. They flew to the Senate building in silence.

They were late, but only by a few minutes thanks to Obi-Wan's lead-foot driving. Still, the meeting had already begun. They ducked into the darkened room and found their seats in silence as the presenters from the SBI reviewed satellite footage and surveillance stills. They were reviewing the latest intel on all of the Federation's known bases and those that had already been shut down. Obi-Wan leaned forward to examine the images, comparing each base with those he'd seen for himself; Naboo, Eriadu. The Federation's stockpiles of droids were popping up across the galaxy, but the Republic was becoming increasingly better at destroying them. The Trade Federation itself was all
but gone; it was only a matter of time before their droids were, too - or so the SBI liked to think.

Sheev Palpatine was sitting only two seats away, but the room was dark, and it was alarmingly easy for Obi-Wan to forget the man was there at all. It must've been how he'd hidden here on Coruscant for so long, he realized. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end, but he refused to turn and look. The senator remained a stationary buzz in the back of Obi-Wan's mind. He chose to ignore it in favor of the task at hand. "As you can see, the movement of the droids on Vendaxa is almost identical to that witnessed on Harrin. We believe this is evidence of a standardized evacuation protocol developed in response to Republic efforts..."

Feemor wasn't even looking at the slides anymore. His eyes were focused far away, at a point no one else seemed able to see.

"I hadn't realized there were quite so many droids as this. I hadn't known of half of these sites," Palpatine confessed with a nervous chuckle, looking to his neighbor for a response.

Feemor, sunken into his chair, didn't respond immediately. "Yes," he said, projected images of droids distorted by the bend of his cheekbones, "there are quite a few."

"...accounted for 79% of our best estimates. Yes, Master Kenobi?" The presenter gestured to the Jedi.

"What about the other droids, aside from these infantry types?" Obi-Wan's spoke politely with a deep frown in his brow. "On Eriadu there were massive ones, flying ones. Anti-starcraft types. Have any others been found?"

The presenter nodded, as if she'd prepared for this question. "Following the incident on Eriadu, our teams have been thoroughly surveying all known sites for underground or otherwise expanded activity, and have found nothing. The Eriaduan site seems to be unique in its size and scope, and some of our researchers on site believe the Federation may have set up an underground research and manufacturing plant in the deep canyons of Eriaud, which, I should reiterate, are under Republic control and investigation as we speak. If Eriadu was in fact the manufacturing point for the droids, it will have been the worst case by far. In that sense, we suspect the worst is likely over." Obi-Wan frowned deeply at this, but held his tongue and allowed the presenter to continue. "Now, if you look at this timelapse, you can see how the Federation has pulled out of the mid-rim on multiple planets in the last two months..."

"It's hard to believe all this is just now coming to light," Palpatine continued, quietly so no one but Feemor might hear. "That they've been hiding under our noses for so long. It's absolutely chilling."

"Yes," Feemor replied, too tired for anything more. Still, his eyebrows found a frown, and then his eyes, and his mouth.

"It makes one wonder, I suppose," the Nabooian senator continued, and looked at Feemor once before he saw the man's deep melancholy and looked again. "And thankful," he tacked on with a sympathetic smile, "that the Jedi have been so meticulous in tracking down our problems for us." It did nothing for Feemor's mood. "You and yours especially, Master Gard."

They took a recess two hours in to let the committee stretch their legs, exchange notes and pleasantries. As soon as the lights went up, Obi-Wan crossed the room to speak with the Eriaduan senator, Ohalau, about the reconstruction progress made since they'd last spoke.

"...alright, Master Gard?"
"I'm sorry, what?" In the middle of a thought, Feemor realized that someone talking to him. It was Senator Palpatine.

The Nabooian's aged face crinkled in good-natured concern. "I asked if you were alright, Master Jedi. You don't look well. Do you need a drink? Water, tea, perhaps?"

Feemor would've mustered a smile if it weren't so much work. Deep down, he was glad to have Palpatine's kindness. The senator didn't prickle and fuss like Obi-Wan did - instead, he was just... there, a comfort. "No, I'm fine," Feemor said, though it might have been a lie. Palpatine let him have it.

The senator looked over to where Chancellor Valorum had been drawn into conversation with Obi-Wan and the senator Ohalau. "I understand Eriadu is back on the right path. Can't have been easy for them." A thought seemed to strike and he looked back to Feemor. "Your apprentice, Aola, she was on Eriadu as well as Master Kenobi, wasn't she?"

"She was," Feemor confirmed, and had to look away. He'd been avoiding talking about Aola for days, although she was all he could think about. Every time he closed his eyes, he imagined he could see... he tried not to blink.

"Nasty business. It's a shame she isn't here, we've all missed her wit, and I'm sure her input would've been a great help in these dry meetings. But of course," Palpatine drew in a dutiful breath, "Trials are an important part of a Jedi's life, or so I'm told." Sheev's smile melted into something softer and more sympathetic. "How are you faring?"

How was he faring. The words could've set off a floodgate, but Feemor didn't know which one. The last seventy-two hours had exposed chambers in his mind he hadn't previously known existed. He'd sent his apprentice halfway across the galaxy and suddenly dozens of doors had emerged from the shadowed walls of his brain, straining at invisible restraints, cracks revealing something deep inside threatening to burst out. Was it grief? Worry? Affection? He knew those well enough. This was something alien. It didn't have a home in his mind, but it was looking for one. Feemor considered telling Palpatine this; the old man seemed a well of wisdom and calm and would surely understand. Still, he couldn't find the words.

"I'm... here," he said instead.

Palpatine seemed to understand there was more, but only smiled sympathetically. "Quite so," he said gently. As the committee members mingled, a serving droid brought in a tray of refreshments. Sheev stood to fetch some water and brought back Feemor a glass as well.

"Thank you," said the Jedi, glad he hadn't had to ask for it.

"Do they really not tell you where they send your apprentices?" the senator sat back down, concern dripping from each word.

Feemor bit his tongue. This time they had. He knew. He'd seen the droids. He'd heard the prognosis. And he'd let her go anyway, damn him. Damn him, his brain shot back the echo louder. "No," he lied. He felt hot. Hot, but cold and sweaty. He felt he was thirty again, coming back to the Temple and hearing word of Qui-Gon, of Qui-Gon's apprentice. Gone. He felt as if he were falling. "No, they don't let us know. Say it's... best that way." He couldn't look at Palpatine, at anyone. There was something in his mind, wanting, demanding to be seen.

"I see," Sheev said, frowning pensively at his cup, ignoring the sweat beading on Feemor's brow, the tremor in his breathing. "Best for whom?" he asked, almost rhetorically. "Best for the student,
or best for the master?"

Feemor didn't know, couldn't think. "For us, I suppose. Just… in case."

"In case of what?" Palpatine sounded confused. He stirred a citrus fruit into his water and sipped.

"In case things go wrong. In case they, uh…" Feemor cleared his throat, but found he couldn't finish his thought. He rubbed at his temples, which ached.

"Surely not, Master Gard," Sheev smiled, making light of what should have been a joke. "Surely they'd never send their children to die."

_Die_. The word seemed to echo. Aola could die. Die in her trials, the trials he'd set for her, the ones he'd decided she was ready for. He'd sent her, his Lola, to die.

"Oh dear," Sheev realized with a sudden frown, "you're serious." His frown hardened into adamantine lines, and he set down his glass with a frustrated thud. "It's not right of them, you know," he said, voice colder and harder than Feemor had ever heard it. The bitterness of it resounded with his own heart. He could feel Palpatine's eyes boring into his skull, but he couldn't look up. "To send her away into danger. Surely the High Council knows better - she's only a child, after all."

"She's capable. She'll come back safely," Feemor insisted, to himself and his own mind, where doors like cellblocks were threatening to spring open and release their prisoners.

"Can you sense that? Through the Force, I mean," Palpatine asked. Feemor's lungs were seizing. He couldn't breathe. He stared at the wall, eyes burning, and tried to remember how. "Can you sense it for certain?" He let himself blink, and the cellblock doors flew open.

Images like fire burned across his vision and he saw blood and torn blue skin, and gore. He could smell smoke, taste heat, feel sand gritting between his molars. Something like a scream or a blaster or both rung in his ears, and he was overcome with the feeling, no, the need to get away, to go, go, go. He stood from the table, nearly tipping his chair over in his rush to get away. Sheev Palpatine moved just in time to avoid being knocked over. "Master Gard, are you-" but Feemor was already gone.

Feemor elbowed his way to the door, brushing past Obi-Wan as he went. The younger Jedi turned to see him, and then turned to see where he'd come from. Sheev Palpatine looked up at the knight, and the two met eyes. Palpatine shrugged, affecting astonishment. Obi-Wan's heart froze, and he looked to see where his colleague had gone.

"Feemor," he called, as the master flew down the hall. "Excuse me, Chancellor, I'm so sorry," he said to Valorum, who looked as baffled as Obi-Wan brushed past him and lunged for the door. "Feemor!" He gave chase.

Feemor could not hear him. He was marching toward the lifts with heavy breathing, his ears ringing with something that wasn't there. It was a galaxy away, in a world of sand and pain, and screams. Animal? Twi'lek? What were they screaming about? What had happened? He had to fix it, he had to go, he had to be there. He wouldn't lose her. Not like Qui-Gon had lost Xanatos, the Council wouldn't take her from him. He rounded the corner and summoned the lift without realizing what he was doing. He watched as Obi-Wan ran headlong toward him, watched as the lift doors closed before the other Jedi could reach him. He continued on toward the landing bay, and to their speeder.
"-eemor!" he heard, on the edge of his awareness. "Feemor, stop!" But he couldn't. He wouldn't. Was it even his decision? His head swam and his chest clenched, and the sound of Obi-Wan's boots on the duracrete sounded like a threat.

"Feemor, what is going on? What did he say to you?"

"I have to go," the master said suddenly, voice hoarse from exhaustion and something else. "I have to find her."

"Find who? Aola?" Obi-Wan dodged an astromech and a passing service cart. "You're not making any sense."

"She's in danger," Feemor said. "They all are." Was he crying? He didn't feel like he was, but he couldn't see straight through tears. "They should know better, those bastards. I'm not going to lose her." His voice was shaking, too.

"Who? What are you talking about?" Obi-Wan ran to catch up before Feemor reached their ship, but the master was nearly to the door.

"The council should know not to send her into danger. It's not just a child." Feemor's face and hands were twitching like they had fire beneath them, itching, aching to move, to grab, to hurt, if only it mean he could stop the images in his head which burned, burned, burned.

"Feemor, what did he say to you? Did he tell you all that? You can't listen to Palpatine, he-" Obi-Wan reached out and grabbed Feemor's arm. The master rounded on him like an iron pendulum, pinning his hand around the knight's neck and pushing him back until his skull bounced against the hull of the speeder. Obi-Wan choked.

It all happened so fast. Obi-Wan rarely had occasion to remember how massive a man Feemor was, because Feemor was the calmest person that Obi-Wan knew. He was a quiet man and an incredibly average fighter. Obi-Wan hadn't ever lost to Feemor in anything, because Feemor didn't fight.

But he could, Obi-Wan realized in horror. Feemor was made for fighting; nearly as tall as Qui-Gon, built like a boulder and trained by legends. Obi-Wan gasped for air and clung at Feemor's wrist in utter surprise. "Feemor," He choked out, staring wide-eyed and terrified, "what the hell-" Feemor pressed harder into him, and Obi-Wan's toes rose up off the ground.

"I'm going, now," Feemor said, voice low and cold and unfamiliar.

Obi-Wan clung to Feemor's hand with both of his, choking and gurgling. The heel of the master's palm dug into his larynx and his eyes danced with spots. He tried to speak, but nothing came out. He reached out his senses to shove Feemor off of him, but found he was unable to use the Force against the man. He could feel his hands growing sluggish. He pulled desperately at Feemor's grip.

Feemor watched it all happen as if from a corner. For a long moment, he didn't know whose hand it was around Obi-Wan's throat. He saw the boy choking, and staring, and maybe dying, but it wasn't until Feemor really looked at the hand and the arm attached that he realized it was his. He looked between the hand - his hand - and Obi-Wan's pale face, growing slack, lips now tinged with blue. His furious expression transformed into a look of horror, a horror that only intensified when it took him several attempts to make his hand let go.

Obi-Wan fell to the ground coughing and gasping, one hand going to his neck and the other to the ground. He shook, and Feemor backed away as if burned. He looked at his hands and fell against the side of a parked ship. He leaned there, staring at his shaking hands as if they'd move of their
"Obi," he said eventually, voice changed into that of a scared child, "lad, I'm sorry, I-" he stepped forward to help the younger man up.

"No, no no!" Obi-Wan stood quickly to his feet and thrust out his hand in defense. "Don't - don't touch me," he heaved another hungry, chest rattling cough. He could barely look the other Jedi in the eye. Maybe it was the adrenaline, or anger, or fear, or maybe it was all three. "The hell was that? You could've..." Obi-Wan looked around the landing bay, as if expecting a crowd to have gathered at the spectacle. There was no one. He rubbed his neck, which was already showing Feemor, he hissed, "what is wrong with you?"

Feemor stared at him, trying to find answers. His mind was a mess, as if a cyclone had ripped through the darkest chambers of his mind and plastered their muddy contents to the inside of his skull. The storm had gone as quickly as it'd come, but the aftermath kept his hands shaking. "I don't know," he confessed. Like coals smoldering under the rubble, he remembered: "Aola's in trouble. Something's happened. I... thought I could... but then... oh, Force." Feemor bent over, clutching at his chest.

Obi-Wan watched him, eyebrows twisted in concern and recondite fear. "Aola's in trouble? Palpatine told you that?"

"No, no, he... he said..." Feemor had to think hard. The whole morning was a daze. "He said - well, he said what I had been thinking. Or... what I had wanted to think. I don't know. He was critical of the Council, said that they should know better... that..." his face twisted up in disgust as his memories emerged from the mire. "Force, did I actually say all that?" Feemor looked fit to start crying again, overcome by his own lack of control. "Obi-Wan, what's happening to me?" He looked up at the knight for help.

Obi-Wan was paralyzed. Feemor was a master, twenty-five years his senior, and the most level-headed person Obi-Wan knew, and now he was shaking and on the brink of tears. What could he possibly do?

"We're going to the Temple, now," Obi-Wan said, forgetting the Chancellor and the entire committee. "We need to speak with the Council." He paused, and amended: "I need to speak with the Council. You need to see Master Che."

When they arrived at the Halls of Healing, Master Che herself was there, as if she'd been waiting for them. "Master Gard," she beckoned, and Feemor didn't need to say a word. She watched as an assistant led him back into the examination rooms before turning her gaze back to Obi-Wan. "I could sense him as soon as he stepped foot in the district. What," she asked, enunciating every syllable with decades of authority, "happened?"

Obi-Wan opened his mouth, and found himself at a loss for words. He didn't know how to not mention Palpatine, not reveal what he was. "His apprentice has been out for her trials for a few days. He was going on about her being in danger, saying he had to go and help her, he... he wasn't himself," Obi-Wan's face twisted in fear but also hurt; seeing such a kind man taken to such a place of darkness was not a memory he'd relish. "I tried to stop him, but he..." he was suddenly hyper aware of the number of people milling about, and was afraid of what they'd think if he spoke the words out loud. He reached up and pulled the neckline of his tunic down to reveal the hand marks on his throat, which were beginning to bruise.

"Oh my stars," Vokara breathed, and reached up to pull the fabric further away. Obi-Wan flinched
and straightened his clothes, glancing around warily as he pulled his tunic closer about his neck. "It was as if something else had control of him," he confided. Vokara's horror grew on her face.

His commlink chirped at him. "Kenobi," he said.

"Master Kenobi, you asked to speak with the Council." It was Master Windu. "Report to the Council Spire at your convenience."

"Yes, Master." He clipped the comm back on his belt and looked again at Master Che.

"Go," she said, "I'll take care of him."

"Thank you, Master Che."

"I'm going to need to look at that," she pointed at Obi-Wan's neck. "As soon as they're done with you I expect you back here." Obi-Wan didn't try to protest.

The Council Spire seemed oddly empty as Obi-Wan made his way up to the Council chambers. There were no temple guards, no other knights or masters milling about; even some of the lights had turned off for lack of movement. Nevertheless, he made his way to the Councilroom door. Where there was normally a guard or a droid waiting to tell him when to enter, Obi-Wan found an empty antechamber. He looked around, and, not knowing what else to do, knocked on the door.

"Enter," came a voice from inside. Obi-Wan opened the door.

Eleven of the twelve chairs in the council chambers were empty. Alone in the room, Mace Windu sat hunched over in his seat, elbows splayed wide across his knees, fingers steepled together. He looked up at Obi-Wan and swept an arm to one side. "Have a seat."

Obi-Wan was nonplussed. After a moment of hesitation, he sat on the edge of Plo Koon's seat, feeling as though any minute the Councilor would appear and drag him away by his ear. If Master Windu noticed his discomfort, he didn't say anything. Obi-Wan looked around the empty room.

"Master, are we waiting on others, or…"

"The darkness I sensed walking through our front doors isn't clinging to you, so it must've been Master Gard," Mace interrupted, and met Obi-Wan with the steely gaze that had kept him as Master of the Order for so many years. "What happened?"

Obi-Wan almost launched into the same explanation as he had with Master Che, but then realized who he was talking to. "Palpatine," he replied.

Mace sat up straighter. There was a lot of information packed into that single word. First, Obi-Wan seemed to have figured out who Palpatine was. Second, Palpatine had done something to Feemor to wrap him in a darkness strong enough to be felt across the Temple. Third, Palpatine had a reason to manipulate Feemor Gard, of all people. Mace closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"Did Ben tell you who Palpatine was?" he asked.

Obi-Wan bristled. "I figured it out myself, actually," he snapped back. Mace was unfazed by the younger man's venom.

"And do you understand why we didn't tell you?"

Obi-Wan was glaring, he knew he was, but he couldn't help it. He was long past understanding.
"Do you understand why I think we should've been warned months ago? Feemor could've kept his sanity. I could've avoided this." He tugged down the neck of his tunic.

To his credit, Mace did wince upon seeing the bruises, but it was a microscopic wince. "Or," the Master of the Order said levelly, "you could have alerted Palpatine that we know who he is. Do you honestly think that Ben would've kept silent all these years if he or I saw a way forward? If we believed we had the strength, the chance to take him down?"

"Palpatine is one man," Obi-Wan's voice was rising in anger, "Sith or no, he's one man, and we're an Order. Even if it's only those of us who know about him, we could take him down in a day."

"And make him a martyr to whatever followers he leaves behind," Mace's voice rose to match him. Obi-Wan bit his tongue. "This isn't about just Palpatine," he said. "He was the missing piece to the puzzle of Ben's era. But here, in our present, he is one of the only certainties we have. And if we treat him as our sole enemy, his contingencies will give us grief for years. Leaving him untouched lets us track him and his constituents until we know exactly how to take down his underground empire."

Obi-Wan stewed, because it was a good strategy, he could see that much. But Feemor was in the healers, and he'd seen the most sensible master he'd ever known almost, just almost, go dark. "And what about Geonosis?" he asked. "Feemor said Aola was in trouble. What if he's right?"

"Palpatine told him that."

"Palpatine made him act on it. He's been acting weird for longer than that. I've have a bad feeling about it for weeks - Geonosis, the mission, all of it. I really think they could be in danger," Obi-Wan said. Mace sighed and sat back in his chair.

"You're the second Kenobi to tell me that today."

"And are you going to listen to either of us?" Obi-Wan demanded. Mace was very good at looking annoyed, but found he never had to do so quite as often as he did with men named Kenobi.

"What would you do in my place, Obi-Wan?" he asked. He'd meant it to give the man pause, but Obi-Wan didn't miss a beat.

"Send back up. A scout, a battalion, anything. Find out what is going on, help them." However intelligent Obi-Wan was, he could also be incredibly reckless - internally, Mace blamed Qui-Gon.

"Palpatine wanted Feemor to go help Aola," he reminded the knight. "He wanted a Jedi to go to Geonosis without a plan, armed only with fear. Of course he wants it, it would throw the entire mission off. Should I really send help because I'm afraid Aola could be in trouble? Or is Palpatine's manipulation of Feemor a sign that she's getting close to the truth?"

Obi-Wan faltered. "All the more reason to send help," he said, after a pause. "If she's gotten that close to uncovering him or his 'underground empire'," Obi-Wan borrowed the moniker, "he's going to give her hell."

Mace nodded. "Yes, he will. But if I send so much as a scouting droid past Republic borders, I have to alert the Chancellor. And if I alert Valorum that one of our missions requires military backup, Palpatine will learn about it within a day, and will doubtless alert whatever allies he has on Geonosis." He could see Obi-Wan's face falling into a realization, one that finally set them on the same page. "If I send anyone to help Aola, I will put her, her team, and her mission in more danger than whatever they've found on their own." Mace let it sink in, and watched the trapped alarm rise
in Obi-Wan's eyes. "So you see my problem."

"Then send them somewhere else," Obi-Wan said. "Send them down the Corellian Run, to the edge of Republic space. If they happen to catch a distress signal from the Geonosian sector, they would be duty-bound to answer it." The two Jedi met eyes, minds trying to pick a lock from opposite sides of a door.

"And if I knew about it, if I had even the slightest oversight on the mission, I would be duty-bound to report it to the Chancellor."

"And if the mission had nothing to do with you?"

Mace thought about it and shrugged. "Even I can't be expected to know everything. I could delay the report by perhaps a day, two, if I'd like to look truly irresponsible."

"How important is it that you look responsible?"

"To a Sith? Not at all."

"Good."

"Good." Mace sat up. "Now I suggest you go and find and Ben. I think he's planning a coup."

Obi-Wan had intended to ask Qui-Gon where Ben might be, but upon arriving at their apartment, he found that Ben was already there. And not just Qui-Gon and Ben, but Dooku and Master Yoda as well, all four gathered around the dining table drinking tea. Obi-Wan paused at the door, realizing he'd never seen all four generations of his lineage gathered at once.

"Oh good, you're here," Dooku noticed him first.

"Master Windu says you're staging a coup," Obi-Wan said.

"Not as such," Qui-Gon waved him in. "Close the door."

Obi-Wan stepped inside and let the door hiss shut. He was quickly briefed on their plan; Master Yoda, perhaps the only Jedi who might conceivably outrank Mace Windu, would oversee a mission to Milarian, which was just inside Republic space and only a quick jump away from Geonosis. Ostensibly, the mission was to follow the trail of a powerful spice cartel that Yoda had personally tracked for more than thirty years. He even had the documentation to prove it, contrived though it might be. In reality, of course, they were bound for Geonosis.

"Ben, Master Windu said you'd warned him about Geonosis," Obi-Wan said. "How do you know something's gone wrong?"

"I've been having horrible dreams lately - visions," Ben confessed. "All of them about Geonosis. After last time around... well, we can't afford to take chances."

"And Aola?"

"Know little, we do," Master Yoda said. "Slow to reach us from the Outer Rim their reports are."

"Which is why we're hoping Master Gard will join us for this venture," said Dooku. "He knows his padawan better than any of us. If we're going to help her, his insight would be most useful."

"Feemor can't go," Obi-Wan told them, as if it were obvious. "He's in no state to do anything."
When none of them seemed to understand him, he frowned. "You haven't heard." He explained the events of that morning, of Feemor's slip toward the dark, of the way he'd attacked Obi-Wan. All of the masters were silent, though Yoda's face was drawn in such a way that Obi-Wan thought he must've sensed the darkness enter the temple, even if he couldn't tell what it had been.

"I wouldn't let him within ten parsecs of Geonosis," Obi-Wan concluded.

Qui-Gon seemed absorbed in his own thoughts. Obi-Wan didn't need the Force to guess at their substance: *how could a man like Feemor fall so fast?*

"The Sith was behind this, you say," Dooku was stroking his beard, a pensive look in his eye.

"Yes."

Dooku's hand paused on his face. "Who is it?" he pressed.

"Grandmaster," Ben warned. Dooku had asked very specifically that Ben not tell him the identity of the Sith. Yoda had asked him the same thing, years and years ago. But now, gathered around Qui-Gon's small kitchen table planning an unsanctioned mission beyond Republic space, Yoda put out a clawed hand to forestall Ben's words of warning. Dooku and Yoda looked to Obi-Wan.

"Senator Palpatine of Naboo," the younger Kenobi said immediately. He glanced at Ben, who seemed almost in pain to have everyone know. "We can't pretend we don't know," he told his older self. "Not to each other, not when things like this are happening."

"I suspected it would be in the Senate," Dooku confessed. "I have for years. I can't say I'm happy to know, but not surprised."

"On your Committee, Senator Palpatine is," Yoda said.

"That's how he got so close to Feemor," Obi-Wan replied.

"And does Feemor know who Palpatine is?" asked Qui-Gon.

"No. I plan on telling him as soon as he's in his right mind, though. He could have avoided all this if he'd known."

"Or he could have let on that we know about Palpatine, and our entire advantage would be ruined," said Ben, irritated.

"Or he could keep a damn secret from his enemies without keeping it from his friends," Obi-Wan burst, glaring daggers and accusations at Ben.


"This is not the time, padawan," Yan Dooku was unfazed by Obi-Wan's anger. "Force knows we have little of it to spare. If Master Gard cannot accompany us, you must go in his stead."

"No," Ben said, and Obi-Wan almost said something he'd regret. Ben stood his ground. "If Feemor can't go on this mission, he certainly can't go back to the Senate, not after what the - what Palpatine did. You have to hold down your place in the Committee meetings, Obi-Wan."

"It's pointless," the younger man insisted. "Those meetings are meaningless, we already know what we need to know,"

"But we need him to not know that we know," Ben dug in his heels, and Obi-Wan could've
screamed.

That's the kind of thinking that got us into this mess, he wanted to say.

Ben saw the anger and didn't flinch. In a voice clipped with annoyance, he explained: "Master Windu cannot be involved because if he is, Palpatine will know within hours of our leaving. If you go on this mission and fail to return to the Senate, do you honestly think Palpatine won't think twice about it?" Ben's eyes bored into his, and Obi-Wan was reminded that, despite Ben's relative youth and despite the fact that Obi-Wan understood him better than anyone in the room, Ben was decades older than him and had lived through more battles than he'd ever tried to imagine. "Your job is to convince Palpatine that his plan has worked," General Kenobi told the knight with a tone he'd once used on Anakin. "Your job is to protect our mission by keeping a damn secret."

Obi-Wan hated to his core that Ben was right.

In the quiet that followed his outburst, Ben's commlink chirped. He saw who it was and stood. "Excuse me," he said, letting himself into Qui-Gon's room for privacy. The others continued their planning without him.

"Master Windu," Ben greeted, going to look out the window at the far side of the room, "I thought you wanted to stay out of this?"

"I wish I could. We both know that one squadron isn't going to be enough if things go poorly," he said.

It'd been a fear lurking in the back of Ben's mind. "Possibly."

"Probably, if our intelligence is correct. We haven't heard from Aola or her team since they arrived on Geonosis."

Ben hadn't known this, but he wasn't surprised. The longer they remained out of contact, the more trouble they could expect when help arrived. "Are you sure you can't get involved?" Ben asked.

"Unfortunately, that's why I called you. You remember Herdessa, don't you?"

Sabotage, refugees, falling ships, unplanned hyperspace jumps, Anakin. Though ten years ago, it was hard to forget. "I do. Why?"

"It's close to Geonosis. How much pull do you have with the Herdessan Navy?"

Ben could see where Mace was headed. "Not much, I'm afraid, they weren't overly fond of me. However," he paused, memory racing back in time, "I think I may know someone who does."

When Ben returned to the room, the rest of his lineage was discussing how many Jedi they'd have with them on their mission.

"Asajj is nearly twenty, and more than capable in a fight," Dooku was saying. "Moreover, I've convinced the second half of Garen Muln's squadron to accompany us." This announcement caused an excited stir around the table.

"Are they allowed to do that?" Obi-Wan asked, hoping against hope.

Dooku shrugged with superior nonchalance. "I'm not sure. I don't think they care. They seem to be rather put out that they weren't allowed in the first place. I take it Master Muln does not instill a
great deal of respect for authority in his squadron."

Obi-Wan smiled at that.

"So that's thirteen, fourteen, fifteen," Qui-Gon counted pointing last at Ben.

"Just fourteen, I'm afraid," Ben admitted, and the whole table looked to him. "I won't be going with you."

"What?" Even Obi-Wan seemed baffled by this. "Why not?"

"I have a very young apprentice," Ben reminded them, "who is certainly not ready for battle. Officially I'm not supposed to leave Coruscant." Even Yoda scoffed at that - as if Ben Kenobi cared for the rules. "If I'm going to help you, it will be from afar."

"How do you mean?" Dooku peered at him, and Ben peered back. The mission was already riding on unfavorable odds, and Ben did not want to promise any help he couldn't guarantee. "I may be able to send more help to Geonosis. But I need time to do it; I have to stay behind."

Dooku looked skeptical, but let it go. "Very well," he said.

"What should we be prepared for?" Qui-Gon asked Ben. The table turned to look to him. The time traveller raised his eyebrows, not sure where to begin. It was all so different this time. The Federation was all but gone, the droid army dispersed, the clone army disbanded. Palpatine was scrambling for control, with Aola and the SBI digging deep right beneath Poggle's nose... and yet.

"You remember Eriadu," Ben said.

"Yes."

"If things go wrong, it could be something like that."

Aola nodded blearily, trying to remember where, exactly, things had gone so wrong.

The first time she'd woken up, it'd been in an interrogation chamber, her hands tied behind her back, hovering in a suspension field. Poggle himself had been there, along with several others. The only one that Aola had understood was a tall male Twi'lek. He'd held both of her lightsabers in his hands, turning them over and showing them to the King. «...Jedi. They're the right color for it; she must have been sent by Coruscant.» Whatever Poggle had said in response, he hadn't sounded happy. Tired but determined, Aola had opened her hand and summoned one of the sabers from the Twi'lek's grasp. It flew through the air toward her, but hit an invisible energy grid on its way. The thin beams of energy lit up blue and sliced the saber into three pieces.

"No!" She'd watched the hissing, sparking pieces fall to the ground, but had no time to mourn them. The Twi'lek had gone to a console and pressed a button; immediately, Aola's whole body had seized from electric shock and she felt herself losing awareness once more. As she faded, she'd heard him say, «...rarely come alone. Better to take care of this now before it becomes a bigger problem. We can say we didn't know; she came here as a slave.»

The second time she'd woken up, it'd been in a holding cell. There were people nearby, talking to one another. It sounded like they were arguing. She couldn't understand anything they were saying, but a few minutes later, one of them appeared beyond the rayshield of her cell and glared at her. He - or she, Aola couldn't tell with Geonosians - snapped an order and waved a pair of shackles. Aola nodded, scanning the dark room beyond to make sure there was only the one guard.
As soon as they'd opened the cell, Aola dodged under the chains and bolted. She ran headlong down the dark labyrinth, not knowing where to go, not knowing where she should be going. Voices and other unidentifiable sounds echoed down the hall, confusing her hearing. Any corner could've sent her barrelling into an enemy or a new cell door, but she didn't dare slow down.

It didn't take her too long to realize that she wasn't in the palace. The clay was too wet and grey. The doors weren't the right shape. The air was too cold, the walls too thick. It felt less like a hive and more like a catacomb. She heard voices drawing closer and made herself keep running, more lost than ever. Then, she stumbled into a massive room, and froze.

Barely illuminated by the halo lamps far above, there were droids. Hundreds and hundreds of droids. It Eriadu all over again. She didn't dare to breath, to flinch. If she touched them, she was sure they'd wake up, just like Eriadu. But this time Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon weren't there to call for backup. She had no comm to send a message up to Cody. Cody. Her blood ran cold. Where was Cody? Had they found him, too? Had he been looking for her? Did he, did anyone, know about these droids?

"Of course there are droids," a part of her brain whispered. You're here to prove that they've been manufacturing droids. But, she realized, a part of her hadn't actually believed it was true. But they must've been; not just manufacturing, but storing, too. And were they still manufacturing? Were there more of these rooms, hiding in the darkness? Rooms? Warehouses? Factories?

"Oh, Force," she whispered. She had to get out. She had to get out and find Cody, find a way to warn Garen what she'd found before it was too late.

She turned around to see a Geonosian right behind her. They lifted their blaster and pulled the trigger.

"Gold Eight, Gold Ten, do you copy?" asked Garen Muln aloud for perhaps the fifth time. His radio crackled with static. "Damnit," he said, and saw three blips on his radar. "Damnit, damnit, damnit!"

"Gold Leader, we've got six new bogeys, inbound."

"Take care of them, I've got my own. Gold Two, I'm on your tail, you've got a bug on your starboard side."

"He's locked onto me! My wing's damaged!" shouted Gold Two. The Geonosian fighter let out another missile, and the whole starboard engine fell away in a shower of sparks. The ship veered off course and spiraled through space.

"Yardi's down!" Gold Two screamed.

"Garen, we need to pull back," said Gold Six, her voice frantic and she dove under two fighters and missed them by a hair.

"Not yet! We have to get to the surface if we're going to help Aola. We have to get them out of there!"

"It's a suicide run!"

Maybe it was, Garen realized. He pulled open his long-distance comms once more. "Gold Eight, Gold Ten, where are you?" Garen shouted, "Where is Coruscant?"
That evening, just as the Coruscanti sun dipped below the horizon, a silver protocol droid stepped up quietly to the Master of the Order.

"Master Windu," it interrupted politely.

Mace, deep in conversation with Vokara Che, turned to see the droid holding out a small sheet of flimsi for him. "Yes?" he asked it.

"A communication from the Starfighter Corps' Gold Squadron, master. It appears they're in trouble."

Mace's heart fell. He took the flimsi and read it. He looked back to Vokara.

"I won't let Feemor know," she said, but they both knew it wouldn't matter. The darkness that had taken hold of Feemor earlier that day had faded. But the fear, the anger, the dread of what was happening on Geonosis had clung to his mind, tethered by whatever he could sense across his bond with his apprentice. Even a Sith Lord couldn't fake that.

"Thank you," Mace said, and turned away. He commed Qui-Gon Jinn.

"Where are you?" he asked.

"We're in hyperspace. We should arrive in a few minutes."

"I'd advise you to power up your shields. You're flying into a firefight."

"You're flying into a firefight."

Qui-Gon looked over at Dooku and Yoda, who'd also heard the message. The masters shared a look of collective calculation, an unspoken communication built on decades spent between them. "Copy that," Qui-Gon said eventually. "Thank you, Mace."

"May the Force be with you."

Asajj was the first to move. She marched into the bridge and took the captain's chair, flipping switches to turn down the ship lights, transferring all available energy to the forward and aft shields. The floor vibrated with a tangible hum as the cannons awoke and primed for fire.

Qui-Gon followed the apprentice and took the co-pilot's seat, opening the fleet comms. "Gold squadron, shields up, guns hot," he announced to the ten pilots flying in formation around their vessel. "Looks like we're going to have a bit of trouble."

Aola was awake once more, not in a suspension field, but in the back of a chariot, her hands bound in front of her in cuffs and a heap of chains. Her eyesight went in and out of focus, head made fuzzy from the repeated shocks. He nose was bleeding, head pounding, ears roaring. Weren't they?

It took a little while longer for Aola to realize that it wasn't her ears ringing; there was a great roaring noise echoing from up ahead, growing nearer. The chariot was taking her down a long, dark tunnel. A door opened up a ways up ahead, bright light pouring into the dungeons from the outside world. The roaring grew louder, but Aola could not see where it came from, blinded by the daylight.

"Miss Tarkona, thank the stars," she turned to see another chariot pulled up to a halt beside hers.

"Cody, you're alright," she said, voice flooded with relief.
"For now," the clone tensed as their chariots began moving again, slowly inching toward the end of the tunnel. A world was taking shape through the light; a stadium, roaring crowds, burning sun, sand.

"This has all gone a bit wrong," Aola said, staring at it all. "Cody, I'm so sorry."

They listened to the mob and the humm of the repulsorcraft ushering then into danger. "What is it that you Jedi always say," Cody asked, keeping his gaze trained stoically at the arena ahead. "The Force will provide a solution?"

She turned to look at him. "Do you even believe in the Force?"

After another pause, he looked back. "I believe in you," he told her. "I wouldn't be here if I didn't."

She heaved a defeated laugh. "Here, about to be executed?"

"I meant at your side, miss," Cody corrected. "Don't worry. We'll figure something out."

Aola stared at the looming arena with wide eyes, wondering what Feemor would say if he could see her now. *Do you go looking for trouble, lass? Or does it just happen to find you everywhere you go?* It would've made her laugh, if it weren't so true."Force, I hope so," she breathed.

They both jumped when a Geonosian voice came over the loudspeakers, booming across the stadium. The noise of the crowd swelled in excitement as their chariots passed through the tunnel and into the bright of the day. The Geonosian announcement was followed by one in Huttese, but there was none in basic; it seemed to be a largely local crowd. Half of the roar was made of not voices, but wings and exoskeletons rattling in excitement.

The sight of the Geonosians made Aola remember: "They have droids."

"What?" Cody whipped his head to look at her.

"I saw them, somewhere down with the cells, I can't remember exactly where. There are a lot of them. Hundreds, maybe, or more. If they are actually manufacturing droids here, we have to find a way to tell Garen." she looked to Cody. He clenched his jaw and made himself look ahead.

"I don't think it's droids we need to worry about just yet," he said, and Aola looked out into the arena with him.

A line of four massive duracrete pillars awaited them in the middle of the circular arena. The chariots escorted Cody and Aola to the pillars in the center. Two Geonosian guards came forward and took the ends of each of their chains and flew up to fasten them to rings at the top of either pillar. Aola's arms ached as the chains pulled at her wrists.

"I heard about this yesterday," Cody said, mustering a conversational tone despite the circumstances.

"You heard about our execution?" She wriggled her wrists against the restraints, testing their strength.

"No, about this arena. They have gladiator fights here. Gamorean hoards and fighters and whatnot."

"What, you think they're going to make us fight one another?"
"I hope not," Cody told her. "There's no way I'd win."

It made her smile, which made him smile, but they were both the shaky sort of smile you give to whatever friends are around right before you die. They looked away from each other and focused on their own breathing, the beating of their own hearts as the crowds drowned out the sounds of their panic.

Over the loudspeakers, more announcements. The crowd roared. Geonosian picadors on orrays twirled their energized pikes, as if bracing for something. Their nervousness was infectious, and Cody felt his breathing quicken. A large duracrete door rumbled open across from where the Jedi and the clone hung against their posts. Cody fidgeted nervously, shifting his weight from foot to foot.

"These chains aren't good quality," Aola said suddenly.

"Well," Cody breathed, eyes fixated on whoever or whatever was going to come out of the massive door, "when we get out of this, we can use Poggle's chits to buy you something nicer."

"No, I mean," she looked over at Cody and waited for him to look. Eventually, he did. She lifted her left hand free from where it'd twisted and snapped a link of chain.

"What," Cody was interrupted by a deathly screech and the pounding of four feet on hard-packed sand. A massive creature erupted from the gate, screeching and yowling at the crowd, the picadors, and the prisoners. The crowd went wild for it.

"Oh Force," Aola gripped her chain.


"Watch out for the claws," Aola screamed back at him over the din of excitement. "That's a Correllian sand panther, they have some of the strongest poisons of all galactic mammals." The Jedi had turned around and was attempting to use her chain as a grappling wire to scale the pillar. "That one's still young, they're more potent than the adults - it'll be enough to kill you in minutes!" Her voice floated down to Cody as she scaled the pillar, speed fuelled by survival instinct.

Cody saw her scrambling, turned, saw the panther, saw its claws, saw it looking at him. "Oh, kriffing hells," he cursed, turned, and began to climb. Heavier than Aola and more encumbered by his bound hands, he didn't make it far. The panther made it to him in two massive leaps and charged up the pillar, scoring massive scratches into the duracrete as it jumped up and slid down. Cody climbed as fast as he could. It scaled up after him, stretched out its neck to bite at his ankle. By sheer luck, he saw it, pulled up his leg, and kicked it in the eye just as it bit down on air. Unfortunately, this only seemed to make it angrier. "Chssk chssk chssk," Cody swung to the other side of the pillar, not knowing where else to go.

Aola reached the top of her pillar and saw her clone companion struggling beside her. "Cody!"

Drawing on the Force, Aola yanked on the creature and pulled it off the pillar. It fell to the earth with a thud. For good measure, she threw sand in its eyes. The crowd roared and booed. Aola staggered atop the pillar, vision growing dim, dancing with spots. She was far more tired that she thought she was. If she tried to use that amount of power again, she'd likely fall unconscious.

She shook her head and reached out to the Force, not for power, but for her center. If she was going to make it out alive, she'd need it.
The panther had seen her, now, and was yowling, circling her pillar. It looked up at her, and on its exposed neck, Aola could see a collar not unlike the necklace she'd worn, only this one was much, much bigger. "Oh, you poor thing," she said to it as it growled. There were scars on its neck, jagged lines cut into the fur by claws or blades. As it paced, emaciated ribs showed beneath the layer of fur. "They've starved you for this, haven't they? Monsters."

The panther did not seem interested in whatever she had to say. When Cody slipped and fell halfway down his chain, the panther's tail began to twitch, its ears turning toward the clone once more. It hissed, and lowered its head to hunt.

"No no no! Stay over here, look at me, aren't I interesting?" Aola lowered herself over the edge of the pillar and clung to her chain. She glanced at the link holding her chain to the pillar. It looked like it was made of the same brittle steel as her chains. "Please work," she bid it quietly. She gripped the chain near her wrists and let go. She fell down the length of the pillar like a lead weight. When the chain reached its limits, she came to a jerking stop and screamed, but a second later, the chain snapped away. She fell to the earth in a heap, a length of chain still trailing from her right hand. The crowd was cheering, and when the dust cleared, she could see why: the panther was charging straight for her.

Ignoring the pain in her arm, she dove under its claws and brought the chain around and flung it like a whip. The end wrapped around one of the cat's hind legs and she yanked it off its footing. It yowled and scrabbled in the dust, wrestling with her hold on its leg. When it finally turned to face her, she pulled the chain free and put out her hands.

"You don't want to hurt me," she said, pouring as much Force into the words as she dared. She'd charmed dozens of beasts in her time - most Jedi learned to do so in some capacity, and she'd always had a knack for it. Surely it would work. She didn't know what they'd do if it didn't. "You won't hurt me or my friend," she said. To the shock of the crowd, the panther stopped just short of her and stood perfectly still, breathing heavy, its chest rattling with a chasm-deep pur, jaws that could split her into pieces within seconds stilled by the power of her gaze. "I don't want to hurt you," she said, coming closer.

The chain rattled as she drew closer to the creature, and the sound made it draw up its lip and growl, but still it didn't move. Aola glanced at the chain, and moved more carefully toward the panther's head. "Shh," she reached out, aware of the creature's teeth, some of which were as thick as her arm, as she placed her hand on the panther's nose.

Hunger, she could feel its thoughts, primal, powerful, and desperate. Hunger, pain, food, fear. It was scared of the chains. It was scared of the shocking sticks that the Geonosians carried. But most of all, it was starving, and she, the Twi'lek, smelled delicious.


The crowd was muttering in confusion, but Aola did not listen to them. The whole of her awareness was focused toward the panther, its thoughts, her own need to keep it calm. Its ears flicked backward and it hissed. Hunger, pain, hunger, food, its needs roared above whatever power Aola had over its mind.

Calm, friend, calm, she pushed back. She felt her nose begin to bleed from the effort.

Hunger, fear, angry, hunt, hunger, it seemed to shout back.
Aola refused to move, though the panther was shifting and snorting and growling beneath her hand. She couldn't move. If she moved, it could hurt her, or worse, hurt Cody, who was in no place to defend himself. There was a distant pounding noise, cheering. She could feel Cody's sudden spike of fear.

"-Tarkona!" he yelled.

The noise grew closer, and Aola could not help but look up. An absolutely massive creature burst through the arena doors, its shoulders cracking the doorway as it passed, its huge tail sending a picador ricocheting to his death across the arena. It threw up its head, cracked open its massive, reptilian jaws, and roared.

Fear overwhelmed Aola; her own fear, Cody's fear, the panther's fear. "Krayt," she whispered.

MY PREY, the panther seemed to shout, desperate in the shadow of the massive dragon, HUNGER. It's purr became a growl and it tossed off Aola's hand and snapped its jaws at her. It was only her reflexes that saved her hand. Aola dove away from the panther, but it followed her, now free of her influence. It snapped again and she dove, but this time, it dove after her and grabbed at her, claws extended. The claws raked across her back and down her exposed thigh, and she screamed. She turned, almost bewildered, to see the deep gashes there, the edges dripping with blood and a clear, viscous fluid she knew was poison.

"Oh, no."

The krayt dragon's roar drowned out the scream of the panther, but Aola saw the cat running toward her again. Pain in every movement, she drew out her chain and swung it as before. This time, it wrapped around the beast's neck, choking it. Aola dove to one side and yanked on its neck, throwing it off balance. The panther bit at the chain and pulled on it, dragging Aola over and into the sand.

Cody was having his own problems. He'd finally wrestled his way on top of the pillar, but it only put him at convenient eye-height to the krayt. It saw him, and Cody wilted. "Oh, come on," he said to no one in particular. "Really?" It roared and charged for him. Cody didn't have time to make any semblance of a plan. The dragon reached his pillar in a burst of speed, and hinged open its jaws. In a split second decision, Cody cut his losses and leaped off the the pillar, clinging to the chain for dear life. The krayt's jaws wrapped around the top of the pillar and crunched. The chain broke away, and the top half of the pillar shattered like clay.

Cody hit the earth hard enough to break ribs, and he screamed in pain as he rolled onto one side. From the ground, he could see the krayt, tipping back its head and hoarking down the duracrete and clay like it were food. It must've been starving - moreover, it must've thought Cody was part of that meal. Behind the dragon, the sand panther was dragging Aola across the arena, trying to get rid of the chain she'd wrapped around its neck. The krayt finished its snack, and the enraged panther - and the Twi'lek that trailed behind - seemed to pique its interest.

Cody looked around and saw the picador that the dragon had killed lying against the arena wall. Their electric pike lay abandoned by the corpse. Knowing he had to seize the opportunity, Cody crawled to all fours, then to his feet, and scrambled over to take the pike for his own. As soon as his hand touched the handle, the blake sparked back to life with a snap.

The sound must've been familiar to the dragon, because its head snapped around and it abandoned the Jedi and her foe.

"Hey!" Cody shouted at it, clutching his injured side with his free hand. "That's right, you didn't
get me, you overgrown lizard, over here!" It snarled and charged for him. It was a lot faster than it looked. "Kriff," Cody said, and ran.

The krayt dragon sent waves of sand spraying into the air as it charged, and a cloud of dust blinded Aola and the panther as it passed. With the panther distracted, Aola stood and yanked on the chain, pulling the cat backwards into the dust.

Her vision seemed dim. It could have been the dust or the tears, but Aola knew it was from the panther's poisoned claws. She struggled to find the Force amidst the haze. She was exhausted. She was in pain. The poison should have killed her minutes ago, and she had to keep fighting. She'd never been very good at accessing the Force on a deeper level. She had visions, she meditated, but it wasn't her forte. Deep power, meditative power, that was for Jedi like Ben or Yoda, or even her own Master Feemor. But not Aola.

She looked at the panther, which was still struggling to rise. It was angry; she could sense the fury rolling off its muscled shoulders in waves. Angry, and tired, and in pain from starvation, and terrified of the krayt. She felt sorry for it, for herself. Aola was angrier than it was, and more tired, and in more pain, and more terrified for all the things that were happening in the arena and beyond.

If she had to die on the field, she wasn't going to die like this. Digging deep, frowning past her pain and her fear, she dug into the well of the Force that'd kept her alive through the poison's bite and stood.

They'd fallen near one of the giant pillars. Aola ran around it until she faced the panther from the other side. It saw her and charged, but ran out of chain before it could reach her. It didn't seem to understand why, and charged harder. Aola groaned against the strain, holding onto the chain with both hands, using the pillar as a giant pulley.

It was horrible quality chain, and she could see the links straining against the duracrete, stretching and threatening to break. The panther hissed and screamed and continued to yank on the line, stopping and starting again in violent bursts. As it did, the pillar beneath the chain began to crumble. On the fourth and fifth pull, cracks burst across the base of the pillar and the whole thing seemed to shake; Aola was struck with a plan. Pulling on the well of power she hadn't known she had, Aola closed her eyes and waited. The panther hissed and scratched valleys through the sand and into the stone beneath it, claws gouging at the rock. The chains groaned. The pillar rumbled. And at the last moment, when the pillar was at its weakest and the first link of the chain snapped, just as the panther made its final leap toward her, claws outstretched, Aola reached out and pulled.

The pillar fell sideways like a felled tree, right on top of the panther. It roared and lay still.

The dust settled and Aola could hear the crowd roaring. She backed away from the dead panther, heaving for breath. The krayt dragon let out a massive, echoing roar, and descended on the place where the cat had fallen. Aola ran from it, watching in horror as the starved animal ripped apart the pillar and the body beneath it, eating everything from duracrete to sand to the panther itself.

The krayt was just a juvenile too, she realized. So that's what they did for executions - captured half-grown animals, starved them, and set them loose on sentients. A pit of abuse and pain, for creatures of thought and creatures of instinct alike. Aola felt bile rise in his throat. All around, the crowd booed at the two captives, condemning them for subverting their sport.

"It'll be us next," Cody said, jogging up beside her, panting for breath. He looked at her back, her thigh. "It got you."

"Just a bit," she said, trying to disguise whatever delirium he could've heard in her voice.
"Can you last long enough to take this thing down?"

"That's a krayt dragon," Aola told him incredulously. She'd read stories about the krayt as a child and adored it; she adored it because it was vicious and deadly and nigh impossible to kill. "How do you expect to just take it down?"

"We have two pillars left standing," Cody pointed. "That cat didn't stand a chance from one - do you think two would be enough to crush a big lizard?"

"I-I can't," Aola started. She hadn't ever killed the creatures she admired. She hadn't ever had to. These gladiator monsters, starved and enraged, didn't offer her any alternative, but she had no experience to draw on except the stories she'd read in the archives, years ago. "I don't know," she amended. "I don't know if I can."

"You have to," he sounded desperate. Maybe he was.

She knew Cody was right. Cody didn't have the Force. The chain she'd had was gone. The strength of the panther pulling the pillar over was gone. Cody only had an energy pike, which in comparison to the dragon seemed like a toothpick. Those pillars would not come down unless she told them to, and she'd only get one go. She swallowed.

"I'll try," she said.

"Good, because it looks like our friend is almost done with his snack," Cody said. They watched as the dragon snapped its bloody jaws and sniffed the ground for more. "He seems to like this thing pretty well," Cody raised the energy pike. "I'll distract him, lure him over there. You bring those things down when we get close."

"The head and neck are weakest," she told Cody as he moved away. "Get him right underneath them, we have one shot."

"Copy that, sir."

She watched him go and heaved for air. The poison was sapping her from the inside, and she found herself limping as she moved along the edge of the arena, looking for a better view of the pillars. She happened to look up and see King Poggle himself looking down at the games, devoid of feeling and emotion. Jabba the Hutt lounged at his side, surrounded by beautiful women serving him food. From where she stood, Aola thought she could see Taliana. Her blood boiled to see them all. She wrestled with her own anger; she knew it wouldn't do her any good.

You're brave, I know you are, Aola had told the slave girl. She wished she could say it to herself.

Breathe, she could almost hear Feemor telling her, like he did when she started fidgeting during meditation, just breathe, and let it come to you.

Cody was taunting the krayt again, thrusting the pike at him like a threat. The dragon roared and snapped at the weapon, but Cody managed to keep his distance. Aola watched the game of cat and mouse unfold, breathing heavily, working hard to keep her eyes focused on the pillars. The dragon snapped at Cody again, and almost caught him between its jaws. Aola's heart leaped and she closed her eyes.

She could feel the pillars waiting there, tons upon tons of kinetic energy just waiting to be unleashed. She could feel the krayt, starved and angry and hating the sight of the pike, the purple energy that had tormented it since its days as a hatchling. It hated all who held the pike; would eat them, too. She felt it coming closer, closer, closer to its prize even as Cody inched closer, closer,
closer to the pillars. As if in slow motion, Aola could see in her mind's eye as the dragon reached out its neck long to bite the pike out of Cody's hands.

Aola thrust out both her hands and screamed. Lines of dust erupted at the base of either pillar where they'd cracked suddenly off their foundations. Making fists of either hand, still screaming, Aola pulled her arms back to herself, and the pillars fell, the tops angling toward each other like an arrow. They fell directly onto the krayt dragon's skull.
"Your hyoid has some hairline fractures - they should heal on their own - but your larynx is just fine. You'll probably need to wear a high-neck tunic if you don't want anyone to see this," Vokara advised quietly as she rubbed balm over Obi-Wan's bruised neck. He winced despite how careful she was. Without moving his neck, he glanced out the door. He could just barely see the edge of the mind healer's wing, if he strained his eye.

"How is he doing?"

Vokara did not look up from her work. "I've been helping him meditate since I finished the exam. Luna's looking after him now. He'll be alright – eventually."

"You don't think he'll…" Obi-Wan paused, not sure what he was asking. "Will he be in any sort of trouble?"

Vokara sighed. "There's no protocol for any of this," she said. "We're trained to deal with the darkness that Jedi find within themselves - not the darkness that breaks in from outside." Vokara looked shaken at the thought. The fact that anyone, let alone a master of the Dark Side could manage such a thing without help was harrowing. "I'll put him on leave for a few weeks. He's understandably shaken up, but not corrupted, not really." Obi-Wan was relieved to hear it, but Vokara shook her head. "They've done a number on him, that's for sure."

Something in her voice made Obi-Wan look down at her. "You want me to tell you who it is," he guessed.

Vokara's brow was drawn tight, and she refused to look up. Through a clenched jaw, she said, "You shouldn't, because then I'll decide to kill them."

Obi-Wan stayed silent as she finished tending to his neck. She pulled up his tunic for him to hide the worst.

"You'll keep him here, then?" he asked.

"It's for the best," she said. "For now. You'll have to tell that committee of yours he's been called away. I'll let you make up the reason."

Obi-Wan nodded, and cast a look back at the door. "Right." He slid off the examination bench and adjusted his tunic. "Thank you, Master Che."

Garen did not know how much longer they could keep this up.

They'd already lost four of their eleven ships – three obliterated, their pilots rejoined with the Force, and one dead in space, breathing recycled air and hoping none of the flying droids spotted her. With every passing moment, there were more and more droids to worry about.

"Everyone to me," Garen said, trying to muster the bravery he didn't feel and knew his squadron didn't have, "we're going to give it another go. Gold three, flank them from starboard - Gold Six, portside. Everyone else, wing formation."

There were too many hostiles for such a maneuver to work. Garen knew they didn't have the fuel or the power to make this kind of run and make it work, but there was a chance, just a small,
glimmering chance that they could break through the onslaught and make it to the surface. Maybe then, just maybe, they could get the intel they’d come for and bring Aola and Cody home alive before their ships ran out of fuel.

"We'll follow you, Garen," said Gold Six, sounding uncertain but loyal. It broke Garen's heart.

"Alright," he really hated being in charge, sometimes. "On my command. Three," he gripped his controls, "two-"

"Sorry to interrupt, Gar, but we thought you might like some help,"

Garen turned in his seat to see the absentee half of the Gold Squadron coming out of hyperspace, stopping just short of their battered collection of starfighters. The squadron erupted into cheers and hoots and hollers. "Celi!" He saw his second-in-command and watched her wave through the viewport. "Am I ever glad to see you!" he said, beaming.

"Wish I could say the same thing, you ugly mutt. We've brought company, so behave."

"Master Muln," Garen's eyes nearly teared up when he heard Qui-Gon Jinn's voice on the other end of the line. "I hear you are in need of some assistance."

"We certainly are, Master, you couldn't have come at a better time."

"Well in that case," said Gold Fifteen, and Garen could almost see him cracking his knuckles, "Let's show these sons of vetches how it's done."

"Hear, hear!" said Gold Eight. Garen's heart swelled and he felt fit to punch Poggle himself in the nose. He primed his cannons and turned on his aux engines.

"Alright then, Gold Two, Three, Five, on portside flank. Six, Eight, Ten, starboard. Everyone else, on me. Let's give 'em hell and bring everyone home!"

The Gold Squadron's comms erupted into cheers and jeers, and as one, blasted forward.

"Are you sure I've never been here before?" Anakin squinted at the atmosphere as their ship's engine whirred to a stop and a landing team came out to meet them.

Ben was unbuckling his landing restraints. "Not that you'd remember, certainly." He stood and moved toward the landing ramp, which opened with a hiss.

"So I have been here before," Anakin said, smug as he hopped out of his seat. "But… when?"

The doors opened and Ben stepped out onto the tarmac. He looked up and breathed in the fresh air; crisp and cool, eliciting memories of crashing starships and sabaac chips. "A long time ago," he said, and couldn't help it when he looked down at his apprentice in sheer nostalgia. Anakin was nearly eleven years old. Had it really all passed so quickly?

"Come on," Ben interrupted his own thoughts. "This way."

"Where are we going?" Anakin followed his Master down the ramp, tucking Arbie-One under his arm in an attempt to control the droid. Arbie fought and grumbled, but Anakin only shushed him.

"To see an old friend. She's been stationed out here for a few years as a sentinel. I'm hoping she'll be able to help us."
Obi-Wan told the committee that Feemor had been called away on business, and would be back shortly. They'd eaten it up, too. Valorum, Mas Amedda, all the senators. Even Palpatine had the nerve to play along.

"Duty calls, I'm sure," the Nabooian had said with a smile that Obi-Wan had grown to hate. "I do hope he's back soon. Master Gard is such a calming presence to this committee." The way he'd said "calm" made Obi-Wan's blood boil so quickly he had to look away. Was this how Feemor had felt?

Obi-Wan meditated on his way back from the Senate building, trying to clear his mind, trying to make sense of his own role in their fight against the Sith. It wasn't a fight, not really. He was merely a pawn. Again. A pawn for Valorum, and then for Mace, and if he didn't watch his step, Obi-Wan felt he might just become a pawn for Palpatine.

He couldn't afford to let his emotions interfere with his work, Obi-Wan knew that. But never in his life had he ever found it so hard to find his center, so hard to feel the light when the darkness was smiling over his shoulder, waiting for him to turn and look.

It was quiet in Sheev Palpatine's office, save for the monotonous bass of Mas Amedda, who was convening with his colleague in the dark hours of the evening.

"...are you quite alright, Senator?"

"Hmm?" Palpatine looked over to see Mas Amedda looking up at him from beneath his blue brow, the datapad held close to his face. "Oh," he forced a chuckle despite the clouds intruding on his thoughts. "My apologies, Mas. It's been a long day. You were saying?"

The speaker gave a curt smile and looked back to his notes. "You'd asked for any relevant intelligence reports into the Arkanis sector," Mas explained.

"Oh, yes, of course," Sheev smiled, though the Force seemed tug on his body like tenterhooks. "Any news?"

"Not in Arkanis." He shuffled through his notes. "However, there was a Jedi ship spotted not too far away, en route to Milarian yesterday morning. No report has come in to the Chancellor's Office from the Order yet."

"Spice cartels, most likely," Palpatine chewed his lip. "Anything else?"

"No. Although..." the Chagrian fidgeted uncertainty. "None of my sources on Milarian have actually seen the Jedi since they should've landed."

Sheev scoffed. "They wouldn't have. The Jedi are particularly fond of espionage. They'll be undercover. If your informants value their... businesses, I'd tell them to lie low until you're sure the Jedi have gone." The senator met eyes with the speaker, a silent force of will. "I'd hate to see their benefactors uncovered. How is the spice trade faring these days, Mas?"

The speaker had to look away. "Well enough," he answered curtly.

"Anything other news?"

"No," Mas made a careful bow of his head, "my Lord."

Sheev smiled at that. "Good. You may go."
Mas scurried out of Sheev's office and left the Sith to sit in the dark.

Sith did not meditate in the same way Jedi did, but Sheev found himself sinking into the dark slurry of his thoughts and the Force, unseen feelings brushing up against him like creatures hidden in the mire. He shook them off, unsure of their meaning.

He thought instead of Feemor Gard, of his anger. He did not know where they'd sent Gard's apprentice, or if Feemor had actually gone after her, but Sheev clung to his success, to the waves of rage he'd felt rolling off the knight. Feemor had been a difficult mind to reach, but, having seen the cracks emerge, Sheev knew he could prove a valuable asset in the future. He hoped the Jedi would be back in the committee room soon.

Ben knocked three times before someone answered the door. A teenaged Kiffar girl answered. Her eyes widened.

"Master Kenobi?" she said, stunned.

"Traesa, isn't it?" he asked her. Eyes gleaming with something like hero worship, the junior apprentice nodded. He gave her a quick grin. "Is your master here?"

"She is," said a voice on its way to the door. "What can she do for you?" A tall togruta appeared behind the padawan and stopped short when she saw the newcomer.

"Ben Kenobi!" said the woman, a brilliant smile breaking onto her face. "What are you…?" her expression dimmed when she saw the serious set of his eyes, felt the heavy presence of the Force roiling around him. "What's wrong?"

"It's very good to see you again, Master Dahn." He turned his smile to her, but it was a somber look. "I'm afraid I've come to ask a favor – a big one." Ben glanced at Alara Dahn's apprentice. "I'll warn you, it could be dangerous."

Alara's smile dissolved into a resolute line. "Is it worse than last time?"

Ben opened his mouth and closed it again. "We're going to need a lot of help," he said. "Help with very large blasters."

The Kiffar apprentice looked up at her master in confusion, but Alara was staring into Ben's eyes, mind running calculations like gambling odds. At length, she said, "What did you have in mind?"

Aola nearly collapsed. The dragon was dead; she'd felt it. The crowd was no longer cheering, or booing. They were murmuring, a wave of uncertainty. Poggle had stood and come to look over into the arena. Taliana had her hands over her mouth. Aola didn't see any of it.

"Cody?" she called. As the dust settled, she couldn't see him. "Cody?"

She heard someone moaning in misery; a human voice. "Cody!" She ran.

She found him by the krayt's front legs. He'd been caught up by one of the claws when the pillars fell, and hadn't been able to escape the rain of duracrete.

"Oh Force," Aola dove over the rocks and dead dragon limbs. There was sand everywhere, over the pillar, the dragon, over Cody. The sand below Cody's waist was bright, bloody red. "Oh Force, oh Force, oh Force-" She fell into the sand at his side and tried to survey the damage. A huge boulder
rested on his right leg. Blood seeped out from beneath it. She touched his left hip, and he screamed. "I-I'll move it, I'll lift if off, just hold still," she said.

"No!" Cody shouted, shock and pain taking over. "No, you'll make it worse, please, please don't, miss-"

"I can't leave it there!" She didn't need the Force to tell that he was bleeding out as they spoke. "You can't die, not after all this, I'm not letting you die."

Cody looked past Aola's shoulder. She turned to look with him.

In the distance, there were starfighters. Shrouded by sand and the mirage of a desert horizon, the outline of republic starships was unmistakable. She wondered if anyone else had seen them. She wondered if they'd be too late.

She felt something on her face, and turned. Cody was brushing his fingertips lightly over her temple, touch sticky with blood and sand. His hand drew back, and she looked to his face for an explanation. His skin, usually such a healthy brown, looked ashen with dust and a shade of blue that didn't belong. "Aola," he said, and absurdly she found herself thinking that his accent made the vowels of her name sound odd and warm, "we have to get back to Coruscant." He grit his teeth in an attempt to stay conscious. "That datachip..."

"I'm not leaving you here," she threatened, and he was too tired to argue.

"Back to Coruscant," he said again.

Cody's head fell back and his spirit seemed to fall away - for a moment or for good, Aola couldn't tell. Her chin trembled. She turned, no longer needing to focus on her own breathing, the poison in her blood. She was furious: righteously, luminously enraged.

"You!" she screamed, pointing to the royal suite where King Poggle was standing at the edge of the platform, agog. She climbed up on top of the duracrete wreck to see him better. "You fear-mongering, lying, Sith-siding warlord!" Maybe it was the Force helping her voice along, or maybe Aola was mad enough to make her words echo across on the arena on their own power. "Did you think you were taking care of a problem?" She'd heard what they'd said when she was in chains. "You expected to kill us and forget about it. You expected to knowingly execute a Jedi knight and a Republic Agent and sweep us under the rug!" This accusation rustled the crowd. Geonosians did not speak Basic, as a rule, but they understood it, and most people in the arena seemed to realize the level of trouble this spelled for their king - and for them. "You expected to bury us underground, didn't you? Like you did with your droids. Who bought them from you? Who paid you to make them? The Federation?" But the Federation was defunct; if Geonosis was still manufacturing droids, the money was coming from elsewhere. "The Hutts?" Aola pointed at Jabba. "The Sith?"

Poggle said something, and as he spoke, a Twi'lek interpreter stepped up to translate: "It is you who must pay for your crimes, Jedi. You and your Republic presume to trespass on our world, to infiltrate our palace, and to walk away unscathed. You have insulted the king, deceived his entire palace, swindled his honored guests, and attempted to steal from his very home. And now, to atone for your crimes, you will die."

Poggle waved a hand, and half a dozen new doors opened into the arena. Droids poured out and formed neat lines. They were like the ones Aola had seen on Eriadu, except these were illuminated in broad daylight, the open arena floor clearly showing their numbers. There were infantry droids
and cannon droids and nimble, armored droids like the ones Aola and Obi-Wan had barely been able to defeat together. More and more and more amassed, and still, there seemed to be no end. Aola realized that she had no saber, no weapon. She was poisoned, and Cody was bleeding out, unconscious. They were both dying. She prayed the ships would move faster.

"Kill me now, and the Republic will still know of what you've done," she dared the king. "The Jedi will know. The Chancellor will know. I will die, but your crimes will follow you."

Seemingly out of nowhere, a single ion blast screeched through the air and exploded into a cluster of droids, sending up a ploom of dust and fire. The force of it threw Aola off her perch and into the sand. She crawled behind a piece of downed pillar for cover. More blasts followed, and she heard more than she saw the starfighters passing overhead. She peeked out over the edge of the pillar. One, two, five ships passed, turned, and began their second run.

In the arena, pandemonium. As droids continued to pour out into the arena, the spectators were racing to flee. Even Poggle seemed disoriented, ordering his guards to and fro, arming battle stations, running to man anti-starcraft cannons. Beside Poggle, hidden by the sheer panic of those around them, Jabba the hutt choked on the golden headdress inexplicably wrapped around his throat.

After the starfighters, a gunner dropped down into the arena, throwing up clouds of sand that blinded her. The doors on the ship slid open to reveal multiple Jedi - and not just Jedi, but Master Qui-Gon, and Master Dooku with his young apprentice.

As soon as the Jedi stepped away from the ship, droids began firing. The newcomers had four lightsabers between them, and Aola watched in horror and relief as all four danced in frenzied arcs to deflect the onslaught. Dooku seemed to take the shots as a personal offense, and launched into a hoard of droids with hardly a second glance, slicing off heads and arms with mere flicks of his wrist. Asajj was similarly making quick work of a battalion, her jar'kai blades moving like cyclones through a sea of blasterfire and droid.

Qui-Gon saw Aola and fought his way towards her, slicing droids to pieces.

"Master, behind you!" Aola shouted. Qui-Gon turned just in time to see a commando-class droid raise its blaster. He sliced of its blaster arm, but it returned with its other arm to punch him in the face. Qui-Gon stumbled backwards and struggled to regroup.

A mechanic whirring sound made Aola turn and look just in time to see a droideka rolling into place behind her. Its shield went up, and its guns clicked open. She dodged just in time to see two blue blasts shoot by, and screamed when she landed on her injured thigh. Spots were dancing in her vision; her ankles felt weak. She could almost feel the poison in her body, coursing through her heart, her brain, her hands. The droideka turned to face her once more, and she stepped back. There was something soft under her heel, and Aola looked down to see the prone figure of Cody - she'd stepped on his forearm. Through the Force, she could tell that he was alive - but only just. She looked back up at the droideka, who was aiming a gun at them.

Exhausted, Aola clenched a fist around the air where her saber should be, and then instead thrust her hand out toward the droid. Screaming from the sheer effort, she clenched her fist, and the entire droideka crumpled like paper. She let go and stumbled backward, vision dimming.

"Aola!" she heard. It was Asajj, Dooku's apprentice. "Catch!" A blaster rifle hurtled through the air and she caught it on reflex alone. "Get him to the ship!" Asajj stayed close by, covering the blasterfire that edged closer and closer to the fallen clone. "Now!"
Aola glanced at Cody, at the blood. She used the Force to press the boulder away from Cody's leg. She only glanced at it - or what was left of it - before she grabbed him by the arm and heaved him up, lifting and carrying him by the strength of the Force alone.

A droid shot her in the back as she ran toward the shuttle, and she screamed. Asajj descended out of nowhere and sliced the droid and its blaster into pieces.

"We'll meet up with you at the ship," the girl shouted. "Get him secured and prepare for takeoff!" Aola nodded dumbly, to exhausted for anything else. She got to the shuttle and collapsed on the floor. It was a small ship, and most of the cabin was exposed by the infantry doors, but Aola dragged Cody as far into cover as she could. She went to the cockpit and primed the engines. No sooner had the floor begun to rumble under her feet than did a great boom echo through the hull. The jolt sent Aola jolting into the control panel.

"No," she said, and grabbed her blaster. "No, no, no!" When she got outside to inspect the damage, she found two halberdiers digging their energy pikes deep into the ship's engines. Black smoke poured out of the jets, exposed wiring spitting sparks out onto the sand.

"Master! We have to call for reinforcements!"

Dooku could not look away from his opponents, vision tunnelled in on the melting metal and humm of his own saber.

"We cannot overcome them by numbers, padawan, get to the ship!"

"That's just it," Asajj insisted, fatigue and frustration giving her words a biting edge. "The ship!"

Dooku dispatched the last of the droids on his flank and finally looked up. The ship, their escape, was spewing smoke. The main engines were hanging off the hull in pieces, and jet fuel leaked on the ground like blood. Aola was facing two commando droids on her own, and Qui-Gon was across the arena, pressed in from all sides.

"Master," Dooku spoke into his commlink. "They've trapped us down here." After a moment, the reply came in:

"On the way, help is. Hold your positions," Yoda said.

Suddenly, Dooku had to somersault to avoid being barrelled over by a droideka. Swiftly, before he could falter, he deflected two shots, made a fleche into its shields, and sliced it in two. He griped into the commlink:

"It's not an option I have the luxury to take. Tell them to aim carefully and hit as many as they can on their way down."

"Reinforcements," Yoda ordered over the comms, "Ground reinforcements, we need!"

"They're pinned down on the south side," reported Celi. "And the east."

"And west and north - they'll be overrun in minutes!" chimed in Gold Ten, voice strained with the mounting panic that Garen felt.

"I see them, I see them," Garen said, banking around the arena and shooting off what droids he could reach without hitting his ground-bound colleagues.
The bombing runs, which had seemed so successful at first, had been like pouring hot oil on an anthill. Burned for but a moment, droids continued to pour out. For every doorway that the ships shut, the droids pushed out through the remaining gaps in even greater numbers. Qui-Gon, Dooku, and Asajj were holding their own, but they would be no match by themselves.

The infantry droids weren't the worst of their problems. They had anti-starcraft droids as well, like the ones Obi-Wan had talked about after Eriadu. They were massive, black, and swift, outfitted with guns on each of their four wings. There were only half a dozen of them, but they were zipping around the Jedi starfighters with the firepower and accuracy of three dozen. They'd already taken down six ships, and irreparably injured the shields of two more.

Amidst the chaos, Garen had realized another thing: the Geonosian fleet was mobilizing. He didn't know how many ships they had in their navy, but he was willing to bet that King Poggle would send every last one of his pilots out to kill the Jedi. Garen looked toward the palace now, its hangars buzzing like an angry hive. The Force was humming along with it, angry red with malice and fear. He struggled to hold onto hope.

"Orders, Gar?" shouted Gold Six.

They were impossibly outnumbered. Garen stared at the arena, at the stirring fleet. They needed Jedi on the ground, but they needed the same Jedi in the air. They needed time, they needed a miracle. He swallowed hard.

"Celi, Martus, take down those starcraft droids. Paol, chase down anything that tries to get away. Everyone else, get down to that arena and kill as many droids as you can."

A chorus of "yes sir"s and "on it,"s echoed across the comms. Celi asked instead,

"And what about you, Gar?"

Garen was already turning his ship toward the palace. "I'm going after the fleet. We can't let them leave the tarmac."

"You can't go alone-"

"We don't have enough fighters! You can join me when the droids are down. Go!"

"Listen to what Traesa says," Ben told his apprentice as Alara climbed into the pilot's seat of the speeder. "She's going to look after you until I get back."

"But why can't I come with you?" Anakin asked, face creased with an angry frown. Ben hesitated, and Anakin saw right through it. "It's because it's dangerous, isn't it?" The frustration in his expression was evident. The fear was harder to see, hidden in his eyes, along the edges of his boyish cheeks. Ben sighed, and knelt down to meet his apprentice at eye level.

"Yes, Anakin."

Anakin said nothing at first, and watched Ben carefully for signs of deception. "You're going to come back," he said, not willing to phrase it as a question.

Ben pulled him into an embrace, and felt guilty. Their year-long probation on Coruscant had ended the week previous, when Anakin celebrated his eleventh life-day. Ben wasn't allowed to leave Coruscant - especially with Anakin - without explicit permission of the Council. However, since Mace Windu had recused himself of all knowledge of this mission, Ben had slipped beneath their
radar. No one on the Council had record of his travelling here with Anakin at all. If things went wrong… Ben couldn't let himself think it.

"Of course I will," Ben assured. How many battles had he walked away from? How many wars had he been through? He knew it was reckless to think it, but really, how would this would be different?

*But it's Geonosis,* a part of him whispered. *Surely you remember Geonosis.* Images flashed across his memory: of dead bodies, of holding his friends as they died, of monsters and droids and death.

He refused to indulge the memory further. He gave Anakin one last squeeze.

"Admiral Titian is standing by," Master Dahn leaned through the open speeder door. "We need to go."

"Look after that droid of yours," Ben stood, not mentioning it when Anakin wiped at his eyes. "And I want to see your rhetoric homework finished when I get back, alright?"

Anakin sniffed and nodded, unable to look up at him. Ben ruffled his hair.

"May the Force be with you, Masters," Traesa said from behind Anakin, masking her trepidation more successfully than the younger padawan.

"You as well, Trae," Alara bid her apprentice. Traesa shot her a smile. "Keep some dinner for me, will you?"

The girl's stoic expression faltered, eyes shining. "Yes, Master," she said dutifully.

The Jedi Masters rendezvoused with Titian and her fleet just outside of the Herdessan orbit. They passed under the flagship as they lined up for their hyperspace jump, and got a view of the other half dozen ships preparing for launch - one of them, Ben was pleased and chagrined to see, was a refurbished Rylothian ship whose hull looked strikingly familiar.

*"Master Kenobi, it's good to see you again,"* Titian said when the Jedi sat down to converse with her via hologram. Holograms often distorted voice and expression, but Ben was able to see her smile when she added, *"Thank you for not sabotaging any of our ships this time."*

He smiled back, somewhat sheepish. "Admiral, it is I who should be thanking you for this favor. It's not your fight, and I appreciate your help."

*"On the contrary, Master Jedi. The stuff coming in from the Geonosian black market has been our fight for a long time. If I had known there were Federation droids hiding in their nests all this time, we would've made a run of it years ago."* Her face took on the hardened, battle-hungry look he recognized from the Clone Wars. *"Lead the way."*

The halberdiers turned as one to see her. Aola opened fire.

As on Eriadu, the halberdiers were hard to kill, and used their double-sided energy spears to deflect her blasterfire. She wished desperately for her sabers.

"Do not resist," said one, now too close for her rifle. Aola dropped the gun and put up her hands as it swung its halberd to strike. She caught it by the handle and twisted it out of the droid's hands. She pushed it back with the Force and it went flying.
"Come on, you useless pile of bolts!" She challenged the remaining droid, and it charged. It twirled its pike and came to a ready stance. Aola raised her own pike and swung.

It was like a saber spar, but with needles in her veins. She didn't like fighting with a saber staff, though Feemor had made her train with one before he'd let her attempt jar'kai. The katas he'd drilled into her head came in handy now. She was too tired to think for herself, but her muscles remembered what to do. Parry, block, parry, parry, strike - and make it count. She stabbed the droid in its neck and kicked it backward. It fell, not dead but down, her pike in its chest. She ripped its own pike from its hands and used it to stab it in the head.

She had no time to celebrate her victory. She heard metal feet on a metal ship bed, and turned to see a droid climbing into the ship to inspect Cody's body. She found her rifle and shot it in the back of its head. It collapsed and rolled out of the ship, and she climbed up to cover the space where it had been. She stood over Cody, legs braced wide like a barricade.

"Come on," she said to herself, to the Force. She could feel her heart racing, blood too thin and too weak to keep up her pace. She imagined that the Force itself could replace it, and reloaded her gun. "Come on."

Qui-Gon had missed the worst of the fighting on Eriadu. He wondered now if it had been anything like this.

For every droid he cut down, there were five more to take its place. And for every droid that died with a single stroke, there were two that took three or more. His hair was soaked with sweat and blood, plastered to his neck, his face, in his mouth. He could feel his breath wheezing and rattling in his lungs. Qui-Gon knew he was getting old - he'd known for quite some time, though pride had kept him from admitting it. He began to wonder now if he would die here, doomed by his own pride. Dooku crossed his line of vision, tumbling through an uncharacteristically acrobatic riposte that took down three droids in one blow. Dooku was over ten years older than him, and Qui-Gon let the man's grace offend him enough to keep him going.

"Master Jinn! On your left!" shouted Asajj, and Qui-Gon turned just in time to see one of the halberdier swinging at him. He caught the purple tip of the energy staff with his saber and braced. The droid pushed him back a full foot before he wrestled the weapon to the ground, kicked the knee of the droid, and sliced off its head. He looked up to see Asajj fighting another halberdier while two more flanked her.

"Behind!" he shouted, and lunged. He cut one in half, and she turned just before the second could stab her in the spine. She looked up at him, and her eyes grew wide.

"Look out!"

He moved too late, and the blaster bolt hit him in the hip. He cried out and knelt; Asajj rolled toward him and blocked the subsequent fire. Instantly cauterized, the wound smoldered and ached, but adrenaline allowed Qui-Gon to stand. He favored his right leg.

"This can't end well," he said, and Asajj cast him a concerned look as she used one of her sabers to block blasterfire and the other to cut droids in two.

The scream of falling metal took both of their attention off the droids and onto the sky; there was a fighter jet plunging toward them at a shallow angle. It hit the arena behind them and dug up a plume of sand and droid. The ship came to a staggered halt just beside the crippled gunner ship. Its canopy sprung open and from it leapt a Jedi, blue lightsaber twirling in an arc. He cut off the heads
of two droids before landing on the ground.

Another starfighter joined him, and another, each plowing ground and crushing droids as they dove into the sand. They landed in three sides surrounding the gunner ship. Qui-Gon limped toward them, taking cover behind the newcomers so he could see his grandpadawan, standing her ground over Cody's prone figure.

"Is he dead?" he asked her.

"He will be if we don't get out of here." She looked him in the eye, and he noticed that the sweat on her face wasn't from exhaustion alone. There was a green tinge to the tips of her lekku, her lips chapped and grey. "So will I," she said.

"They're only coming from two doorways now," one of the grounded pilots screamed as Dooku and Asajj joined them behind the ships, whose shields flashed orange as blaster bolts pinged off the hulls in all directions. "If we bring down the arena walls, we could bottleneck them long enough to get everyone out of here before they destroy the ships!"

"Where are these doors?" Dooku asked.

"There," the pilot pointed, and then pointed again directly opposite, "and there. We can't give them any gaps - bring down the whole thing and crush the lot!"

"Cody's unconscious, we need to get him on a ship first," Qui-Gon spoke up. "Aola, help me." While the other Jedi guarded them, Aola and Qui-Gon loaded Cody into the cramped rear cabin of the largest fighter. Qui-Gon saw the man's leg.

"Put a tourniquet on that," he told Aola. "And keep it high. And don't fall asleep until we get you to a hospital."

"Master, I can fight," Aola insisted.

"Then fight for your life, and his," Qui-Gon snapped back. There was no time for lessons here. "This entire mission is carried in your heads. Keep them safe so this will be worth it." He all but forced her into the ship after Cody and shut the doors closed. She cradled Cody on her lap because there was too little room to lay him out.

"Qui-Gon, with me to the West," she could hear Dooku order through the closed door. "Asajj, Gold Squadron, to the East. Now!" Aola watched through the window as the Jedi leaped from behind their cover and dove into the fray.

"Master Muln, this is Captain Ulran of the Herdessan Navy. We've got a dozen fighters inbound to your location. Stand by and we'll make the run with you."

Sweat was pouring down Garen's face. He'd gotten close enough to see the navy yard, and he didn't like what he was seeing. It wasn't a dozen ships, or two, or three. It was hives and hives of ships, small and agile. They were hardly ships; they were cannons with wings, and they would be deadly in such numbers. They were all packed onto four massive arms, fuel lines and dock arms connecting to the fighters like umbilical cords. Once they were loose, Garen knew there would be no hope of reining them in. But before they launched...

"How far out are they?" he asked, wiping sweat off his brow.

"Two minutes," the captain reported.
So they'd just entered the atmosphere. It wasn't enough. He scanned the four hangars and found the one closest to launch; mere seconds at best.

"That's not fast enough."

"Hold off your attack, we will be there as soon as we can."

"They're launching now!"

Qui-Gon felt catapulted back in time, fighting alongside his master. Dooku pressed forward with the assurance of a true Jedi master, but there was a wobble in his wrist, a hitch in his step that Qui-Gon did not recognize. He felt the hitch in his own step, and the pain, the grinding, piercing pain. He leaned into the Force for support, but there wasn't enough, not enough to keep going against the hordes of droids.

He heard Asajj scream, and even Dooku turned to see where she tried to catch one of the Squadron pilots as he fell, taken out by a ion blast. She stumbled over his body and kept fighting.

An earthquake-like boom brought Qui-Gon's attention back around, and he stopped short as a massive, spiderish anti-starcraft droid peered down at him, its cannons glowing green. It pointed a wing at the Jedi and a high-pitched whining filled the air. Qui-Gon tried to dodge out of the way, but there were too many droids pressing in to find a place to be. He fell into one and sliced another, but was not far enough away. He felt the heat of the cannon priming against his skin.

The boom from the explosion deafened him for a moment, and when he looked up, he saw the green glow of the cannon dim, before the droid itself fell to the ground. The starship that flew past the wreck was not Republic, or Jedi - it had round edges, striped purple and white. He didn't recognize it.

Another ship under the same colors came careening into the area, slamming its engines down so it hovered over the ground. Bay doors slid open, and a whole platoon of fighters poured out. Among them was none other than Ben Kenobi.

Qui-Gon watched as Ben chopped down the droids like it was second nature, hardly looking as he took off heads and cut blasters in two. He forged his way forward toward Qui-Gon and Dooku, who were doing just enough to stay alive.

"I thought you might like some help," he shouted at them.

"We were doing just fine, I think," Qui-Gon kidded, hunched and limping. Ben actually smiled, an expression absurd in the moment, and twirled his saber. He surveyed the hoard of droids.

"I'm sure you were." He turned and directed Alara to take half of the platoon to follow Asajj, and the other half to follow him. He looked to Qui-Gon, eyes eager for a fight. "Ready?"

Overcome with newfound strength, Qui-Gon hoisted his blade into a salute. "Ready."

"Now!"

Dooku and Qui-Gon let Ben take the lead as they plowed forward from the center of the area toward the edge. Ben was a phalanx all to himself. Droids fell in front of him by threes and fours, clustered together in jagged lines of saber scars. Dooku and Qui-Gon cleaned up the stragglers, leaving a wide berth of metallic bodies in their wake.
"Clear a path from the left flank!" Ben shouted above the chaos, and the infantrymen obeyed instantly, mobilizing as a single mass to thin out the crowd of droids so the Jedi had room to move.

"Careful!" Ben shouted at one point, and pulled a gunner down by his belt just in time for a blaster bolt to pierce the air where his head would've been. While the soldier froze in momentary shock, Ben immediately turned and kept moving.

General, Qui-Gon remembered, and wondered why he'd forgotten.

Behind them, the Herdessan infantry drove toward Asajj and the Gold Squadron by sheer numbers alone, shooting any droid that dared come into their path. Crossing her blades, Asajj screamed as she pressed herself to the limit, daring the droids to make it past her and live.

"Take cover!" Ben shouted as a shadow fell across the arena. Another huge anti-starcraft droid fell to the planet surface, smoking. The Jedi leaped out of the way, watching as the wreck crushed a dozen droids upon impact.

"The door, the door!" Ben shouted, and he moved as one with his master and grandmaster toward the gate, where platoon upon platoon of droids marched out in a relentless stream. "We have to bring it down!"

Seeing his target, Qui-Gon pulled on the strength that seemed to emanate from Ben, and charged.

"That's another down!" Celi shouted to the sound of celebratory whoops and hollers across the comms. "Just one more. Hang in there, Garen!" To her squad, she ordered, "There! There! Take it down, now!"

"Just one more. Hang in there, Garen!"

He should've asked her to come with him, Garen realized. But it would've been selfish. Celi was the best shot in their squad, better even than him. If he'd hogged her to himself, the squad might not have taken down any droids, let alone five.

One more, it was so promising, but they didn't have time even for that. The Geonosian ships were beginning to pull away from their docks. Even with the Herdessan Navy en route, Garen knew they wouldn't have enough firepower to make it out without incurring massive casualties. But what could he do? He only had one ship. Realistically, he only had one shot.

Garen felt himself breathing heavily, but everything seemed suddenly quiet.

"You have to hit them while they're docked," he instructed, comms open to the Herdessans as well as his squad. "If they get out, they'll be too many to stop. Hit them while they're all still connected, it's the only way to keep them from the arena."

"Garen?"

"Master Muln, if you wait for our reinforcements, we can-"  

"There's no time! Hit them while they're down. Keep Aola and her intell safe." Garen pressed forward, punching his auxiliary engines. The Herdessan captain yelled back at him over the comm, but he couldn't hear it over the blaster fire. The Geonosians had spotted him, and were taking aim at his ship. The hangar loomed closer.
The computer was hindering his vision, so he threw his whole helmet, guidance, comm, and all, to the ground. Leaning into the Force, he hit the trigger and flew full-speed to intercept. He stared at his target, chest heaving. The hull of his fighter screamed against the atmosphere.

"May the Force be with you all," he said, neglected comm hissing back static.

"What's he doing?" asked one of the Herdessan cadets. Ulran stood from his seat and watched the radar in horror.

"Master Muln, slow down. Master Muln!"

Celi sensed it before she saw it. "Garen!" She screamed just as the last anti-starcraft droid fell to earth. She tipped her wings and flew straight for the hanger, but before she could make headway, the entire structure had exploded in a fountain of flame and smoke and desecrated ship. "Gar!"

"Get to the door - wait for my signal!" Alara plowed through the droids as if through a tidal wave. Every two steps she took forward necessitated one step back. The gateway that ushered in the neverending onslaught bobbed just beyond their reach, above a sea of droid. Beside her, Asajj and the only remaining Jedi pilot pressed onward through the fray, flanked by half a dozen Herdessan navymen.

If the Jedi could just get the space to concentrate, if they could just get the room to think, they could bring down the door from a distance. Alara wasn't sure she had that kind of power, and she could see that the others were struggling. Asajj had been fighting nonstop for half an hour, and the pilot was still wearing his heavy piloting gear in the melee. She dared a look over her shoulder, and saw that while Ben and the others were making better headway toward their door, they still faced a sea of droids.

"We could use a little firepower right now," Alara shouted into her comm.

"Copy that, Master. We're sending two fighters your way."

"We need more than that!" she found herself saying, too exhausted to be polite.

"We don't have more to spare. The Geonosian Navy is giving us a run for it. They'll overwhelm you in minutes if we don't hold them down. Just get out of there as quickly as you can."

"We're trying!"

"Now!" Ben pointed his arm forward, and the Herdessans fired as a single unit, a wall of blasterfire that downed a whole line of droids in one shot. "Ready!" he shouted. Blasters clicked and whirred. Droids charged. "Aim!" Soldiers braced their feet in the sand. "Fire!" And again, the blasterfire rang out and the droids fell in waves.

To either side of the line of infantry, Qui-Gon and Dooku plowed through the army like threshers in through wheat. In the odd moment where Dooku had time to look up from his task to see Ben, he would remember all at once how little he knew about the man's actual past. The only other person who's stopped an army, Ben had said. Dooku realized now he'd been including himself.

"Fire!" Ben shouted, voice still strong after continual shouting.
No man learned to command like that in the Jedi Order - not the Order that Dooku knew.

Qui-Gon ducked too late beneath the blast of a droideka, but Ben sensed it even behind his back. "Anakin, look out!" he shouted, and leaped to deflect. If Ben or Qui-Gon noticed that he'd used the wrong name, they didn't show it. Dooku stabbed what must've been the thousandth droid that day and pondered.

"Ben," he approached the other Jedi, and was surprised when Ben whirled immediately around and raised his saber as if to strike.

"Dooku-" he breathed, eyes wide. If Yan didn't know better, he'd say Ben was scared.

Dooku stepped back, and Ben froze instantaneously, dropping his guard and turning to strike a droid instead. Yan could guess at the reasons behind Ben's reaction. He chose to ignore them.

"If we don't bring that wall down soon, we won't have the strength to do it at all," the master said.

Ben nodded. "We'll have to have the troops cover us then, and work quickly."

"We'll do it together," Dooku said, turning. "Qui-Gon!" his bass voice boomed through the noise. Qui-Gon turned as much as he was able. "Do you remember Triscellia?"

"The temple or the basilica?"

"The catacombs!"

"Ah," the younger man said, and retreated to join his colleagues. Ben shouted above the fray to explain the plan to the platoon leader, who ordered her men to create a circle around the Jedi.

"Hold your ground!" she shouted.

"Keep the rubble clear," Dooku told his fellows, and the three men raised their hands, the Force pulling taut across the arena. "Now!

Asajj turned when she heard the walls cracking behind her. She saw her master, Qui-Gon and Ben standing in their protected circle and sensed more than understood what Dooku's plan was.

"Master Dahn!" she shouted. "We have to bring it down now!"

"There are two starfighters incoming," the pilot reported, pressing a finger to his earpiece. "If we can block off the droids here, they'll cover us for our retreat."

"Alright," Alara twirled her saber in determined circles, and called on the troops to rally their efforts and trace a loose perimeter around the Jedi. "Quickly! And... now!"

Aola's wrist ached. She'd made a tourniquet for Cody's leg out of a broken blaster barrel and the remaining straps of her headdress, which was now reduced to a single leather band around her forehead. Holding it in place on his leg was difficult. Cody's body was heavy on her lap, and it should've kept her warm, but he was growing cool and clammy to the touch. She shivered. She was hot and cold all at once, itching and aching but unable to do anything about it. She pushed the feeling down, hoping it could stay down for just a little while longer.

Outside, blaster bolts raged like a lightning storm. Aola propped Cody's head upright against her chest, making sure he could breath, making sure his heart and his brain were as parallel as they
could in the cramped space. She wedged the tourniquet rod against the seat of the ship so it wouldn't come unraveled when she finally passed out. Master Jinn had told her not to fall asleep, but her strength was leaving her faster than she could trace. She leaned back, and gave in.

Just as she faded from consciousness, she heard a great crack, and shouts, and the rumble of duracrete and rock falling to the ground.

The entire arena was in rubble, and the Jedi with the Herdessan Navy had to climb over it to get to their ships.

The two Herdessan starfighters arrived mere seconds after the walls went down, and were plowing down the droids that remained trapped in the pit of the arena. With too much noise to give orders, the Jedi split their groups into four: the Navy and Ben to the Herdessan gunner, Dooku and Asajj to the first fighter, Alara and the last Gold Squadron pilot the second. Qui-Gon didn't have to think before he took the pilot's seat of the ship where Cody and Aola lay crumbled in the back. He glanced at them and knew they were running on borrowed time.

The ships launched out of the arena not in victory, but in desperation.

"Oh, Force," Asajj said quietly as they climbed through the atmosphere. Smoke and fire billowed not too far away. For the first time, the Jedi saw the size of the Genosian fleet, half of it burning, half of it buzzing in frenzied patterns around the Herdessan ships that hunted them.

"Admiral Titian," Ben's voice came over the comms. "We've got everyone out of the arena. It's time to pull out and go home."

"Copy that, Kenobi," came the reply.

"I have two down, badly hurt," Qui-Gon spoke to the Navy. "They need emergency medical attention."

"Copy that, Master Jedi," replied Titian. "I'll alert medical."
Casualties - Part 2

Ben watched the curve of Geonosis fall away from view. In the distance, he could see the Herdessan navy shooting up through the atmosphere, racing away from the light Geonosian fighters. Too small to endure orbital flight, they let the Herdessans flee the planet.

The Jedi and Herdessan fighters converged on the open hangar of the flagship. The hyperdrive was already revving when their landing gear when down, and as soon as the hangar doors slammed closed, the fleet jumped into hyperspace.

"Make a hole! Make a hole!" A medical team raced across the landing platform just as Ben disembarked. He watched them push two hovering stretchers toward another fighter.

The cockpit opened and Qui-Gon was there, dried blood all over his face. He helped lower an unconscious Aola to the waiting medical team, and then, with more difficulty, Cody.

"Oh, Force," Ben breathed when he saw the man. The majority of Cody's right leg was gone. Ben had seen it happen to several clones over the course of the war, but Cody wasn't a warrior, not anymore. Ben stood back as the medical team rushed the two away. He went over to Qui-Gon.

"You should have that looked at," he said, pointing to Qui-Gon's face, which sported a long gash on his right cheekbone as well as a cracked nose.

"In time," the master said, still breathing heavily after the battle. Ben looked back to the medical team, whose shouts echoed back to them as they raced down the hangar.

"How bad are they?"

"You saw Cody," Qui-Gon said somberly. "As for Aola, I think she's been poisoned."

Ben glanced at him. "Poisoned? By what?"

Qui-Gon shrugged. "There were a few dead gladiator animals in that arena. I assume it was one of them."

"Oh," Ben breathed, remembering. He wondered if they'd been the same creatures he'd faced, or something worse. "Of course."

"She's strong," Qui-Gon said. "She'll find a way to pull through."

It may have been true. And yet… Ben looked around them, astonished by the empty spaces left in the hangar. "Is this all that's left?" he said aloud.

Qui-Gon looked with him and sighed, a heavy air falling between them. "I'm afraid so."

Ben wished the feeling were not so horribly familiar. "Force be with them all," he said, without knowing half their names. An immense fatigue fell over him, as if his chest were weighed down by a mountain. He found a barrel nearby and sat on it, sinking his arms onto his knees.

Feemor blinked his eyes open, surprised to find that he was sitting on a meditation cushion not in his own chambers, but in a dimly lit, windowless room. His nostrils filled with the smell of incense and, behind it, something more chemical. He was not alone in the room.
"Luna?" The knight frowned. "What are you doing here?"

The nautolan studied his face carefully. "Master Che asked me to look after you."

"Master Che?" Feemor looked around himself again, and found that he was dressed not in his normal nut-brown tunics, but in the white linens of the healer's ward. "What?" he asked the air. He pulled at the neckline and looked down at himself, but there were no injuries that he could see. He looked up at Luna. "What happened?"

"You don't remember?" Luna seemed confused.

"I…" Feemor frowned, stopped. His frown became regret. "Obi-Wan," he said.

"Yes," she said.

"Oh, Force." Feemor closed his eyes and rubbed his face. "I thought… I hoped I'd dreamt it." He looked back up and around himself. There were no windows and no chrono, and he had no idea what time it was. "How long have I been here?"

"Most of today. Master Kenobi brought you in mid-morning, it's coming around to nineteen hundred hours."

"Oh." Feemor couldn't remember the last time he'd meditated for so long. Everything felt like a dream. All his memories, all his questions, fears, anger… it felt like a veil, lifted away. He couldn't recall what was real and what was imagined. Luna watched him as he blinked away confusion. Eventually, a fog seemed to clear and he looked up to meet her eyes.

"Where's my apprentice?"

Ben had the job of explaining to Admiral Titian the sensitive nature of their mission without revealing details. With great reluctance, the Admiral agreed to escort the Jedi envoy and their incapacitated colleagues to Coruscant, while Ben and Alara returned with the rest of the fleet to Herdessa to collect their apprentices.

"I hope it was worth it," the admiral said to Yan Dooku when the Jedi joined her on the bridge. "I lost a lot of good men today. They should die knowing they made a difference."

Dooku watched the kaleidoscope of hyperspace with a stern expression. Beyond the immediacy of the Here and Now, he could feel the Force itself moving, revolving like a great and intricate clock. The *tick tick tock* set the pace of the galaxy, and it was speeding up.

"The Jedi have been hunting the Federation and their compatriots for five years. Geonosis was an important base. Now, we can prove it, and more." He glanced at the hard lines of the admiral's face. She was not quite as old as he was, and reminded him of his sister-in-law, who bore the weight of her homeworld on her shoulders. Yan was not a man of sentiment or particularly strong loyalties, but he understood their purpose, and admired those to wore them genuously. "Your men can rest in peace," he offered. "They did not die for Herdessa or the Jedi, but the Republic."

"Thank you, master Jedi," she said. "I hope you're right."

Aola awoke to the beeps and blips of a vitals monitor, and the deep, rumbling thrum of hyperspace whirring past at lightspeed. The brush of a medical gown was comforting but rough against her skin, which felt rubbed raw all over.
"I'm surprised you're up," said a voice. Aola turned to find a human man in medical scrubs examining a datapad at the foot of her bed. "Welcome back to the land of the living. How do you feel?"

It seemed like a stupid question to her. "Like I've been run over by a star destroyer," she said. He gave her a sympathetic smile.

"I've never seen anyone survive that kind of poison for that long. I still don't know exactly how much was in your system, but I know it was enough to kill three people." He shook his head in awe. "You're very lucky."

Lucky. Aola wasn't sure about that. "Thank you," she said. She looked around. A latent panic welled up from her toes. She remembered the chaos of battle, the sound of explosions, the weight of Cody's body on her lap. She remembered her fingers slipping through blood as she tried to fasten the tourniquet.

"Where's Cody?" she asked.

"He's just next door," the medic told her. "He'll be alright."

She didn't know if she could believe him. "I want to see him," she was already trying to climb out of bed. The doctor abandoned his charts and put out his hands to forestall her.

"You shouldn't be walking."

"Is he okay?"

"Yes, as I said, he-"

"I want to see him." If she put a tiny bit of Force suggestion behind the words, she wouldn't let herself feel bad about it.

"Alright," he relented, obviously irritated about it. "But Jedi or not, you need to take it easy. He's been on strong drugs since the surgery. They've kept him fading in and out of sleep, so I can't guarantee you'll talk with him. If you do, don't say anything that might panic him. He needs to stay calm until we can get him to a bacta tank."

Aola blinked rapidly, trying to absorb this information. She nodded wordlessly, and let the doctor show her to the room next door.

They'd cleaned up Cody much as they'd cleaned her - skin scrubbed free of sand and blood, torn clothes replaced by a sterile medical gown. Cody was asleep under the blankets, but there was a distinct dip in the fabric where his right leg should have been. Aola fought back a lump in her throat. The doctor was watching her carefully, but then his comm beeped loudly at him.

"I'll leave you with him. If you feel even a little dizzy, call me immediately."
Aola nodded, not watching as he turned to leave.

There was a small stool next to Cody's bedside, and Aola fell onto it, watching his face in the hopes that he'd stir. He was still. He was not as pale as before, but they'd cleared the dust off his face to reveal the myriad of scratches and bruises there. Aola felt her chin wobbling. She couldn't help but look at his leg again.

"Oh, Cody, I'm so sorry," she told him, even if he couldn't hear her. Her voice wavered. "This is all my fault. You shouldn't have agreed to come." He'd risked his life and lost his leg, for what? For a doomed mission, a disastrous battle, a small scrap of information. Aola reached up to her headband to find the datachip.

It was gone.

Her headband, exactly where it'd been since they left Coruscant, was smooth against her skin. "No," she said, to herself more than anyone. "No, no, no, no, no no," she chanted. She ripped of her headband, patting her head, the leather, the back of her lekku. It had to be here, it had to, it had to. She rushed back to her hospital bed and tore the sheets off the mattress, searching. She retraced her steps back into Cody's room, looked on the floor, beneath the stool. There was nothing.

She imagined it, a tiny, fragile chip, lost in the vast desert sands of Geonosis. She thought of all the Jedi and all the pilots who'd died to retrieve it. And she'd lost it. She had lost it.

She fell back onto the stool, put her head into her hands, and sobbed.

She didn't know how long she cried, but somewhere in between one exhausted sob and the next, the bedclothes stirred beside her.

"I'm not dead yet," an irritated voice told her.

"Cody?" Aola croaked. She looked up to find Cody blinking his eyes open and peering at her through a squint.

"You crying over me, miss?" beaten, bruised, and bedridden, Cody managed to look amused.

"No," she moaned. "No, Cody, I'm so sorry," she reached out to take his hand.

"For what?"

Her face crumpled and she almost started crying again. She couldn't look at him, couldn't look anyone in the eyes after this. Dozens of lives had been lost in the last twenty-four hours, and she'd failed them all. She squeezed her eyes shut and heaved a shuddering sob, trying not to give in to crying altogether.

"I lost it," she told him. "Cody, I… I lost it."

"Lost what?" He seemed confused, or drowsy, or both.

"The datachip. From the archives. I put it in my headband, but it's not there, and I don't know where it is, I lost it, I…" she couldn't communicate the magnitude of her mistake. She put her face in her hands and did her best to curl in on herself completely.

Cody watched her, mind lagging behind his ears to process what she was telling him. He glanced at her head, which was now bare. He'd heard that leaving the lekku bare was highly immodest in Twi'lek culture, akin to being naked. Aola must've been horribly upset, because she didn't even
seem to notice. Her shoulders were shaking. She didn't see him shaking his head.

"It was slipping out of place," Cody told her, and dug under the neck of his gown to find the thin chain that hung around his neck. He pulled it out to show her. There was a small metal badge engraved with the SBI seal and his personal information. Alongside it, clipped to the chain with a makeshift fastener, was a datachip.

"I couldn't talk, and you weren't really listening. I took it."

Aola stared at him, and stared at the chip, and stared back at him.

"Sorry," he added, mistaking her shock for horror.

Aola started weeping again, this time in such pure relief as she'd never felt.

"Cody, you stupid, brilliant, brilliant man," Aola's crying was migrating toward laughter, and she wiped at her eyes so she could stare at the chip and prove to herself that it was real.

"It needs to be cleaned - probably got sand all in it, chssk gets everywhere." The clone complained, handing the small stick to Aola so she could hold it up to the light. A pink smudge glinted off the surface and Cody winced. "A bit of blood, too, looks like. Sorry about that."

Aola didn't seem to hear him. She hugged it to her chest, a few sobs still finding their way out. "Cody, I can't... Thank you, thank you, thank you," caught up in the moment, Aola grabbed Cody's face with both hands, leaned down, and kissed him firmly on the lips. She pulled away seconds later, realizing she'd overstepped. "Sorry," she said, retreating in embarrassment.

Cody did not complain, though he did make several unusual sounds with his mouth as he tried to find something else to say. "S'alright," he managed eventually, "welcome. Just job doing - er, doing just job - ugh," He blinked and stared at his vitals monitors, which were beeping along at a faster tempo than before. He squeezed his eyes shut and sighed. "I am on a lot of drugs right now."

It triggered a laugh from Aola, a laugh of pure relief, hysteria, and exhaustion. Truly, Cody," she laid her hand on his arm, and he turned to look. "Thank you. You don't understand how important this is."

He did, but he wasn't going to say so. She was cleaned up considerably since he last saw her, but still had sand and blood under her fingernails, scratches all along her arms and face. He looked in her face, and behind the tears and bruises saw a Jedi Knight, beaten but not defeated. "You're welcome, Mi-" he began, and hesitated "-Aola."

She gave him a tiny, shaky smile.

The Jedi and their Herdessan escort arrived just before seven in the morning. What remained of the Gold Squadron returned to the Temple at a quarter past eight.

The rumors of a crippled squadron limping in from the Outer Rim had dominated the refectory at breakfast, and Obi-Wan Kenobi had all but run to the landing docks.

He arrived right as the pilots were shuffling away from their ships. He craned his neck to see the state of their ships - it was worse than the rumors had made it sound.

"Martus," he called, but the pilot was too exhausted to hear him. There were several other pilots who he didn't recognize. Then, he spotted someone.
"Celi!" he shouted, a nervous grin splitting his face. She turned to see him, but her face remained gaunt and sober. They did not know each other all that well - they'd only ever spent time together because of their mutual friend. "You made it back. I hear you had a time of it."

Even as she grew nearer, she only stared at him. As others filed past, Celi came to a halt in front of him. She didn't know what to say. "Kenobi…"

Something in her tone killed Obi-Wan's smile immediately. He was suddenly aware of something he'd missed before; an absence, not just in the hangar, but in the Force. He looked past Celi and the pilots to prove his own senses wrong, but found nothing. He looked back to her, terrified of the certainty he felt in the Force.

"Where's Garen?"

She didn't answer, but the crumpled expression on her face set him adrift. She brushed past him, unable to contain the sounds of her grief.

Obi-Wan stood motionless in the middle of the hangar, utterly lost, unable to comprehend the world in which he found himself. Men and droids moved about him as he stood. The cosmos tumbled mercilessly on.
"Master!" Anakin was racing down the path before Traesa could stop him. Under normal circumstances, Ben would've reprimanded him for his impatience, but he had just lived through Geonosis – again – and there was a certain level of fear left in Anakin's eyes that told him it wasn't the time. He caught his apprentice's hug and held him.

"I'm alright," he told the boy, patting his hair. Anakin gripped him tight. "I'm alright."

They walked back to Alara's home together to find that Traesa had, in fact, saved food for them. They ate in exhausted silence, and fell asleep shortly thereafter, with Ben and Anakin cramped up against each other on the couch.

In the morning before the sun rose, Ben extracted himself from Anakin's sprawling limbs and joined Alara for a cup of tea in the kitchen.

"The Council will want to talk with you," he said quietly, as to not disturb the pre-dawn stillness.

"Yes, I know." She sipped at her drink, and looked out the doorway to Traesa's bedroom door across their apartment. "I'll send them my report. If they want to drag me back to Coruscant, they'll have to do it properly. We've gone far enough off-book already, I think." She glanced at him, eyes coy. "Unlike some people, I remain in their good graces. Have you earned any more censure since I left?"

He side-eyed her, but smiled despite himself. "No, just an apprentice."

"Hmm." Alara smiled, and glanced into the living room where Anakin was lying starfished across the couch, shirt hiked up to his armpits, hair a puff of dark blond. "He seems like a good boy."

"When it's convenient for him."

Alara laughed at that.

"I only hope he doesn't get wrapped up in this."

"Well," Alara's expression faded into a more somber tone as she watched the boy sleep, "that may be up to the Senate. You never told me what intelligence you were after, but after what I saw..." she looked up at Ben, a post-battle haze in her eyes that he knew too well. "It's not light stuff, Ben."

"No. Which is why I have to get back quickly." He set down his tea. "With luck, Anakin will sleep all the way back home. Thank you again, Alara. I really can't tell you how much it means to me - to me and everyone who walked away from that."

With difficulty, Alara smiled. The number of lives lost weighed on them all. "It was the least we could do. Look after them all, Master Kenobi, and as always, may the Force be with you." They shook hands, and Ben bowed. With another brief goodbye, Ben herded his half-sleeping apprentice onto a ship and set a course for Coruscant.

Halfway through their trek, Anakin woke up and joined Ben in the cockpit. He sat in the co-pilot's seat and put his feet up on the dash, arms crossed across his chest to keep him warm in the cold of hyperspace. He was uncharacteristically silent for a while, before he said,

"What happened to your neck?"
"Hmm?" Ben had been absorbed in his own thoughts.

"Your neck," Anakin drew a short line on his own neck to demonstrate. Ben reached up and felt the old sai cha scar that had creeped out above his tunic, and the newer, shorter gash that intersected it.

"I must've gotten it yesterday," Ben said. He felt that it was not bleeding, so he folded his hands once more as if nothing had happened. Anakin continued to stare at him.

"It was bad, wasn't it?"

Ben looked at the boy, overcome by the softness of his cheeks, the innocence in his face. He tried to remind himself of the weighty realities he'd faced when he was a young apprentice. Qui-Gon had trusted him with that.

"Yes, it was," he said at length.

"Lots of people died, didn't they?"

Ben took in a breath, and let it out again slowly, determined to not let Anakin see how much it hurt him. "Yes, I'm afraid they did."

Anakin nodded like he'd expected it. "I felt it," he said, tucking his chin. This surprised Ben, and he found himself marvelling not for the first time at how Anakin's sensitivity to the Force surpassed even the wisest of Jedi - and at age eleven, no less.

Ben thought suddenly of Feemor, of the way the Sith had infiltrated his solidarity and coerced him to violence through the power of suggestion alone. Was that what it had been like for Anakin, during the war? Had Palpatine intruded on his thoughts like he had with Feemor? Had he lied about Padme, about Anakin's children, about Obi-Wan himself? Had he corrupted the Force that Anakin breathed, the Force he felt more deeply than any Jedi?

Ben felt very small, and could only think that he should've seen it all happening a lifetime ago.

"The Force gives us light to see in the darkness, Anakin," Ben chose his words carefully. "But the Force is still present, even in the darkness. The people who died are with the Force now, though we cannot see them anymore."

Anakin was frowning deeply, and Ben realized he'd been cryptic. He wasn't sure Anakin had ever had to deal with the concept of death before. He opened his mouth to explain again, but then the boy said, "But what if all the light goes out?"

Ben shifted his reply. "Well, then we must cling to the Force more fiercely than ever."

"But if the Force is light, how can the Force be there when there is no light?" Anakin wanted to know.

Ben found himself thinking of Tatooine. Of hiding, of listening to the news and keeping a tally of the Jedi that Vader had hunted down. He found himself thinking of Luke. Luke had looked at him like this, once, eyes begging for answers, but Owen hadn't let Ben come close enough to speak. Obi-Wan had already ruined one Skywalker, Owen reasoned, he shouldn't have the chance at another.

Anakin stared up at him with wide blue eyes.

"We only ever see light clearly when it is surrounded by darkness." Ben's voice was soft, but cut
"Oh." Anakin said quietly. Ben wasn't sure if the boy had understood or was pretending to understand. They sat together in the silence of the stars. After a while, Anakin ventured,

"Master?"

"Yes, Anakin?"

"I'm glad you made it out alive. And Master Qui-Gon. And Aola."

Ben's heart ached for all those that had not. But presented with the light, he gave the boy a smile.

"As am I, padawan."

By the time they reached Coruscant's atmosphere, the clock had already begun ticking. The Jedi Order was hardly the Republic's only intelligence-gathering agency, and it would be mere hours - if that - before the entire galaxy knew of the disaster on Geonosis. The entire Jedi Council knew now, and not even Mace Windu would be able to put off his reports. If the Order wanted to escape accusations of a cover-up, they would have to notify the SBI presently, especially with Cody in critical condition. After that, if by some chance the Chancellor hadn't already learned through other channels, the SBI would alert the Chancellor, and the Chancellor would decide whether or not to tell the Senate.

Mace Windu knew Finis Valorum, and he knew that it would take less than a day for him to make the announcement. The entire Republic had been living in fear of the Federation's droids for half a decade. Dozens of worlds had poured trillions upon trillions of credits into the hunt. Many of the benefactors were the Chancellor's political allies. Finis wouldn't keep the intelligence to himself.

And then, all eyes would be on the Jedi Order. Whatever happened following Geonosis would be tied to them.

"Finis will want to speak with you." The Master of the Order watched through the Council room windows as the Herdessan cruiser pulled alongside the temple. Vokara Che and her team were already waiting at the docks.

"Avoidable, Geonosis was not," Yoda said, stoic and calm. "Worse it could have been."

"Yes, I know." Mace did not understand everything Ben had told him about the past, but the body count had been plain. "The Chancellor may disagree. The Jedi are not representatives of Coruscant alone; they are the Republic."

Far below, they could see the Herdessans escorting Cody and Aola into the hands of the Jedi Healers. Whereas Cody was on a stretcher, Aola was able to walk on her own, limping slightly from her injured thigh.

"Wish to speak with Padawan Tarkona, he will," Yoda said.

Aola was the primary agent on the mission mandate. For right or wrong, she and her actions would be under intense scrutiny from all levels of leadership. Mace's brow softened in pity. "Perhaps she was not ready," he mused aloud.

Yoda tapped his cane in disagreement. "Ready, she was. Ready she is. But..." the ancient Jedi
hesitated. "Perhaps not meant for one Jedi these trials were. Stand by her, we must."

"We will take care of our own."

Aola stayed by Cody's stretcher from the ship into the Temple. Yoda hummed, ears tipping slightly downward.

"A trial, Geonosis was," he said. "More trials yet to come young Tarkona has."

They'd taken Cody to the Jedi Halls of Healing. The Jedi rarely had guests in the Halls, and Vokara was sure the SBI would contact her to transfer Cody to a outside hospital, but for now, it was the least they could do.

"How long will he have to be in there?" asked a voice. Vokara turned to see Aola Tarkona standing nearby. The watery lights of the bacta tank swam across her face in waves uneasy as her footing. Purple bags clung to the flesh under her eyes, suspended by the sheer willpower in her gaze that now turned to Vokara for answers.

"Legs usually take longer than arms," Vokara told her plainly, watching her face. "And he's not Force sensitive, so... perhaps another twelve hours?" Aola stared at Cody's submerged body with an expression of guilt far too too deep for one so young. "You should rest, padawan," Vokara said softly.

"I have to finish my report for the Council," she said. Vokara couldn't fault her for it. She'd heard rumors of what had happened on Geonosis, she'd seen the Herdessan ship, half-staffed and scorched by cannonfire. She'd had to sign death certificates for nearly the entire Gold Squadron - including one for Garen Muln, a close friend of Aola and Aola's lineage. It broke Vokara's heart, but she knew their fight wasn't over yet, so she kept her mouth pressed thin and busied herself with saving what was left of Cody's leg.

"Lola?" a surprised voice said from behind, and both Twi'lek women turned.

"Master," the word wasn't out of the padawan's mouth before she was running to him. Feemor caught her in both arms and held her as if she'd float away. Vokara lowered her gaze, checked Cody's vitals, and stepped away to give the duo privacy.

Jedi weren't inclined to affection or strong emotions, and even Aola had only ever experienced occasional gestures from her kind, soft mentor. But now, Feemor clung to her like she were the last thing in his world, and all she could do in reply was bury herself beneath his chin and cry like an infant. At length, she gathered herself and pulled away, noticing for the first time that he was in white hospital robes.

"Why are you here?" She wiped her nose and looked him up and down. He'd been crying, too, and his eyes were puffy and red. Something about it made her think it wasn't just from worry. She frowned at him and asked, "What happened?"

The whole story toppled out like the tears they'd already shared. He told her everything. Palpatine's words, Obi-Wan going after him, his attack. How he'd very nearly gone dark because of his fear, how he'd been ready to steal a ship and fly to Geonosis himself because of his worry for her. She'd listened in disbelief and horror, and when he saw it, he seemed to shrink.

"Trials are supposed to be for padawans, not masters," he said, small and sheepish. "But... I'm afraid I didn't pass. I'm so sorry, Aola." Aola's expression softened, but she couldn't look him in the eye.
"I'm not sure I passed, either," she admitted. She couldn't help but look back at Cody, whose leg was strung up in wires and tubes, bacta pumping to and fro in a bid to ameliorate catastrophe.

Feemor drew her back into his arms. He didn't know what to say to comfort her, so only said, "You need rest, lass." With paternal concern, his eyes scanned the scratches on her face and arms, the bloodied bandage on her leg that showed below the edges of her robe. "Come on."

He led her back to her hospital bed and held her hand until she fell asleep.

Qui-Gon was alive. Aola was alive. Dooku and Asajj were alive. Cody was alive, if maimed. For all of the miracles of the day, Obi-Wan couldn't ignore the pit of loss in his chest. His ears seemed to ring, his focus seemed to stall, his very heart seemed to slow for the rest of the day.

Time meant nothing until around four in the afternoon, when his commlink began to chirp. He waited a moment before answering it.

"Kenobi," his voice was hoarse.

A droid answered. "Master Kenobi, the Supreme Chancellor would like to speak with you."

Obi-Wan stiffened his jaw and let his eyes fall shut. "Of course."

Night fell over Coruscant, but at the Jedi Temple it felt like a dream, a nightmare pressing into the waking day. By sunset, the Chancellor knew about Geonosis. By daybreak, every Herdessan and every Jedi involved in the operation had been summoned for questioning, and Master Yoda himself had been asked - ordered - to testify before the Senate. The gears of political process were moving at an unbelievable pace, galvanized by the sudden threat of war.

The Senate had summoned Aola and Cody to appear for questioning as well, but neither of them would be forced to appear until Vokara released them from the hospital. For this reason, the healer made excuses for both to stay, to give them time to regroup before they stepped out of the frying pan and into the fire.

"Agent Cody's just out of bacta, so don't push him too hard," Vokara told Obi-Wan when the knight came to visit.

"I wasn't planning on it," he said, not looking at her. "Thank you, Master Che."

She opened his mouth to say something about the mission, to apologize for Garen's death. But then she saw his face, the red eyes, the sunken cheeks. Nothing she said would heal him, so she shut her mouth and let him go.

The Halls of Healing were a busy place, but Vokara had found a secluded back corner to keep Aola and Cody away from the rest. Obi-Wan wandered down the quiet hall, peeking in doors in an unsuccessful bid to locate Cody's room.

"Obi-Wan," the knight turned to see Feemor Gard approaching him, dressed in white robes.

"Master Gard," although Obi-Wan was relieved to see Feemor recovered, he couldn't make himself smile.

Feemor moved as if to embrace the younger man, but stopped short when he saw Obi-Wan's expression. "I... I never had the chance to apologize for what happened," he said. Obi-Wan's heart
was too heavy to handle the guilt evident in Feemor's face.

"There's nothing to apologize for," he said, shaking his head. "You weren't yourself."

"But I did do it," Feemor insisted seriously. A darkened look came over his face. "Even if I did have help." He met eyes with Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan stared back, a sinking feeling in his gut. Did Feemor… did he know?

"Ben told me," Feemor said. Obi-Wan was nonplussed.

"Told you? About..." The knight glanced around to make sure they were alone. "He told you about Palpatine?"

"Yes. He's shaken about what happened - with me, with Geonosis… I don't think Ben understood what Palpatine was capable of."

Obi-Wan didn't know what to say. "He should know," he found himself saying with no small amount of bitterness, "he lived through it. He died because of it." Feemor's eyebrows shot up, and Obi-Wan realized he'd taken it a bit far. He pursed his lips. "I'm sorry. I'm glad you know - I wanted to tell you myself. I should have told you sooner."

"I'm not sure if it would've mattered," Feemor admitted, and rubbed the worried creases of his forehead. It was often hard to tell how much grey was mixed in with Feemor's blond, but Obi-Wan thought it looked considerably more silver than it had weeks ago. "After this is all over, I think I should step away a while. From the field, I mean."

Obi-Wan couldn't blame him. "How is Aola?" he asked, and Feemor shrugged. They began walking together down the hallway.

"Exhausted. The Council hasn't addressed her trials yet, because of the mess they've stirred up. They haven't even held normal sessions, from what I hear, because they're all at the Senate. Whole rosters have been suspended until they're able to convene again."

Obi-Wan knew this, but hearing it was still shocking. "And Cody?" he pressed on.

"Missing a leg, and handling it surprisingly well. Some of that may be medications, though - do you know," a manic kind of amusement crept into his tone, "he called Aola and myself by our first names?"

Perhaps it was the gravity of the past day that made such a triviality so striking. "Cody?" Obi-Wan said, and if he weren't so deep in grief he would've smiled. "Our Cody?"

Feemor nodded, and found a small smile that was enough for both of them. "We'll have to see if he does the same with you. They're just in here."

They were not exactly as Obi-Wan had expected them.

"Ben," he said, surprised. "I didn't know you were here, too."

Ben Kenobi, Cody, and Aola all turned to look at the newcomers. "He's come to tell me what intel I've given my leg for," Cody mumbled from the bed, obviously recovering from the aftereffects of bacta. "You come to tell me something else?"

Obi-Wan made himself ignore Ben and looked instead to Aola and Cody. He went to stand at the
foot of Cody's bed, eyes inexorably drawn to the absence where a leg should have been. Aola was perched on the edge of the mattress by his head, and Cody seemed surprisingly comfortable with it. "I came to see that you were both alive," Obi-Wan said somberly.

Cody did not seem bothered. He shrugged. "So far." His flippancy garnered a smile from Aola, which put Obi-Wan more at ease, if only by one iota. The corners of his mouth eased into the beginnings of a smile. Then, Ben spoke, and ruined it.

"Master Che is confident he'll make a full recovery."

Obi-Wan didn't mean to glare when he looked over at his older self, but his irritation was suddenly a palpable mass.

"So the cryptographers are finished with it, then?" Feemor turned to Ben, hoping to cut the tension.

"Yes," Ben replied, happy for the diversion. "I didn't get a personal look at it, but I gather it's comprehensively incriminating. The Council has forwarded it onto the Chancellor without redactions."

"Did the files include the identities of the Sith?" Obi-Wan asked. Ben looked at him.

"Not as such," he said, eyeing the younger man. "Master Windu said it's much the same as the Naboo tapes."

Obi-Wan bit his lip and looked away, trying to hide his disappointment.

"Will it be enough to prosecute them? To prove the droids are theirs?" Aola asked.

"Prosecute?" Ben said. "A mild way of putting it. It's enough to dig the Trade Federation even deeper into their grave, certainly, and tie Geonosis to their whole operation. As for prosecution, however... it may be impossible. Geonosis is not part of the Republic, and at least under Poggle's rule, doesn't recognize intergalactic law. There's no court to judge a prosecution."

"What else can we do?" Aola asked. Feemor and Ben exchanged glances. If she'd been less tired, Aola would've understood for herself.

"War," Obi-Wan said for the room. "Or at least, the beginnings of it." This time when he glared at Ben, he meant to. Ben did not return the look, only clenched his jaw and his hands together.

"Oh," Aola's voice sounded as small as she felt.

Several heartbeats passed in silence, before a knock sounded on the doorframe. "I hate to interrupt," Vokara Che appeared, a datpad propped up against her hip. "But I need to borrow the good agent for a round of x-rays," She smiled at Cody, who only nodded. "Also, Padawan Tarkona," she looked to Aola, apology written all over her face. "I'm very sorry, but even with your leg, I can't give them a valid reason to keep you. Master Windu is waiting with a detachment from the SBI to debrief you."

Aola stood and squared her shoulders, trying to disguise how her exhaustion made her sway on her feat. "Very well," she said stoically. Feemor saw through it.

"I'll escort you," he said softly, and offered his arm. Aola went out with him, trying not to lean on him too heavily for support.

"Thank you, Master Che," Aola said as she passed.
"Force be with you, padawan."

A young medical apprentice approached the room, wheeling large x-ray machine ahead of him.

"Masters Kenobi, you're both in the way. I'll have to ask you to leave," Vokara said, maneuvering the machine through the door to sit above the stump of Cody's leg.

"Of course, Vokara," Ben said, and put his hand on Obi-Wan's shoulder, ignoring how the younger man flinched. "We'll see ourselves out."

They squeezed out of the room and walked down the hallway together. Ben waited until they were out of earshot before before speaking.

"I realize you're mad with me," he said, not looking at Obi-Wan's face. "And I realize I probably deserve it."

"You told Feemor about him," Obi-Wan cut in. Ben stopped walking and turned to face his younger self. He crossed his arms and leaned against the wall.

"Yes."

Vestiges of bitterness played over Obi-Wan's face. He'd accepted Ben's reasons for not telling him, but the chasm where their trust had once been continued to erode.

"Why didn't you stop me?" Obi-Wan asked suddenly.

Ben was perplexed. "What?"

"Why didn't you stop me?" Obi-Wan repeated, more firmly. "When I went to the Council, when I suggested this whole… this whole mess. You knew it could go wrong, you knew it would go wrong, yet you let me do it anyway. Why?"

Ben didn't know what to say. "You blame me for this?"

The younger man looked suddenly at the floor, trying to keep his breath from hitching on the lump in his throat. How could he blame Ben? Mace had warned him. Feemor had warned him. But Ben hadn't. "I didn't know who was behind Geonosis, I didn't realize… I didn't realize how big it was," he spoke quietly, sounding lost. "If I hadn't rushed in, if I hadn't suggested the plan, the squadron, the reconnaissance…" Obi-Wan seemed to choke. "If I hadn't been so brash… Garen might still be alive right now."

Ben's response died on his tongue. He'd heard of Muln's demise, but he'd thought – hoped – that Obi-Wan hadn't.

"Why didn't you stop me?" the knight begged. Ben's eyes fell closed.

"I didn't know that Garen would be there," he said softly. And though it was a balm to Obi-Wan's pain, the wound remained. "I didn't know how to get involved," Ben confessed. "I was too absorbed with Anakin, with my own fear. I'm so sorry, Obi-Wan." Despite his scar and his knighthood, Obi-Wan was in many ways still a boy, and the fact played out on his face in expressions of hurt and uncertainty. Ben's own face took up the same uncertainty and mixed it with guilt.

"Given the opportunity, I would have done the same thing as you." Ben hesitated. "Or at least, I should have done the same thing," he amended. "You did what I wasn't strong enough to do."
"If I had known how it would happen, I wouldn't have," Obi-Wan insisted. Ben looked at the floor.

"Then perhaps we're both cowards."

Obi-Wan let his chin fall to his chest, eyes downcast. Ben only realized he was crying when he sniffed and wiped angrily at his eyes.

"Will this all be worth it?" Obi-Wan asked angrily.

Ben didn't want to answer. "I hope so," he said.

Obi-Wan looked back up once he'd gained control. Eyes pink, he looked down the hall as medical apprentices scurried to and fro in the never-ending demands of their work. The banality of their movements was comforting, and Obi-Wan would've happily stayed there on the wall watching nothing at all, but it could not last.

"The Chancellor has called a war council," Obi-Wan announced. "I'm to report after the hearing this afternoon." Ben turned to stare at him in surprise, but it took several moments before Obi-Wan could make himself meet the master's gaze. "Is there anything I should know? Anything I should or shouldn't do?"

A war council? Ben's mind was reeling. There hadn't been time for a council, last time. They had the Grand Army of the Galactic Republic; they fought their way out, and the war was declared. The idea of negotiating war, the idea of avertin war was a new one. Ben wasn't sure what to do with it.

Obi-Wan interpreted his silence as censorship. "Would you tell me, even if there were?"

"I did not live through anything like this," Ben admitted. "I don't know what's going to happen. I can't tell you what you should do."

"But you could tell me something, anything," Obi-Wan begged him. "I can't make a mis-step like that again. Who will it be next time? Qui-Gon? Aola, You?"

"You can't live your life in that kind of fear, Obi-Wan," Ben warned.

"Isn't that what you do?" Obi-Wan snapped back. "Is it not what you've done since the day you stepped foot in our galaxy? Fear keeps us alive, you most of all," he recited, remembering Yan Dooku's wisdom.

"Fear can kill us, too," Ben shot back. "You're walking a very dangerous line."

"And what else can I do?" The knight put out his hands in desperation. "Tell me what to do, where to go. Tell me how to keep more people from dying, and I'll do it."

He sounded like Anakin, and it set Ben's nerves on edge. "Listen to the Force, padawan, let it guide you above your fear."

"Listen? I am," Obi-Wan said helplessly, gesturing to Ben with a shrug. "But the Force gave me you, and you prefer silence."

"I am not the Force," Ben said.

"Do you listen to it?"

"Yes."
"And what does it say?"

Ben opened his mouth to say something, and Obi-Wan waited on him. The words never came. Obi-Wan shook his head. "I need to meditate," he said, disappointed. He left Ben standing by himself in the empty hall.

"Collect reconnaissance on many Outer Rim worlds, the Jedi Order does. Know this, the Senate does," Master Yoda was saying. His voice, projected by microphones, echoed around the vast chamber hall. He looked up and down at the pods that lined the vaulted walls. It was a packed house that day. "Remarkable this mission was not. Remarkable only for what came after."

There was a long queue of Senators waiting their turn to ask Yoda their questions, small yellow indicator lights glittering on the microphones of dozens of pods. The next to have their turn was Senator Lo-El of Goroth - a Republic world so close to Geonosis the trip barely merited a hyperspace jump.

"If the Jedi believed that the Geonosians were manufacturing a droid army – the same droids that we have been fighting and fearing for five years since their discovery on Alaris Prime – why was there no contingency plan in place? Reports are circulating that the Herdessan Navy was called in to cover a large portion of the extraction efforts. Was the Order aware that such force would be necessary to recover their intelligence?"

The Jedi were not in the habit of admitting failure to a large audience, but Yoda leaned forward and said, "No, senator. Understand the scope and size of the Geonosian production we did not. Prepared we were not. Paid the price, we have."

There was murmuring; some of it sympathetic, others outraged that the Jedi could be so naive. Some Senators attempted to shout out their questions across the room, interrupting the queue, driving Mas Amedda to pound his staff on the ground and call for order.

It was in this lull of disorientation that a tall, cloaked figure ducked into the booth of Serenno. The planet was unusual for its status as a Republic world in the Outer Rim, and had remained silent throughout the hearing. Nevertheless, the young Count and his mother both leaned forward to watch the Jedi Grandmaster defend the Order's recent actions on Geonosis, which had escalated tensions in the Outer Rim overnight.

Only the clone advisor, Echo, saw the newcomer. He inclined his head respectfully.

"Master Jedi," he said, loudly enough for the booth. Aden turned in his seat.

"Uncle," the Count said, surprised, "I didn't expect to see you today."

Yan Dooku stepped past the advisors and guards and into the sequestered front half of the booth where the Count sat. "The Jedi Order is my business," he told his nephew. "I can already tell you what their internal report will say. I want to hear what they're telling the rest of the Galaxy."

"I was led to believe you were on Geonosis, uncle," Aden said, carrying a certain shrewdness in his voice that he'd learned from his mother. "I expected you to be detained for debriefing."

"Not as such." Yan replied. Aden arched an eyebrow high in curiosity, but at that moment, the Senator from Denon took the floor to question Master Yoda. Aden turned around to watch the speaker. Yan took a seat next to Constanza, who watched him from the corner of her eye.

"Was it as bad as they all say?" she asked him, quiet enough that Aden might not hear. Dooku and
Constanza both looked straight ahead as they spoke in stoic tones.

"I'm afraid it was worse."

"And what is to come of it?"

"Finis has called a war council."

A pause. If Constanza were a different person, she might have gasped. She did not blink. "Are you a part of it?"

"No."

"Do you know anyone who is?"

Dooku craned his neck to see the booth of Alderaan, where Bail Organa had accommodated Obi-Wan Kenobi as a visitor. The young Jedi was brooding more darkly than Dooku had ever seen him.

"Master Windu," Yan said, "as well as Obi-Wan Kenobi."

"Obi-Wan?" Constanza paused to remember. "Qui-Gon's boy?"

Boy. Yan's gaze remained steady on the young Kenobi, who was a capable and accomplished man in his own right. Yet he knew that sufficient pressure applied at the right time could reduce any man to boyhood. "Yes," he said. "He's represented the Jedi on the Galactic Commerce Committee for almost a year. He served on Eriadu, and Naboo, and, if we're to believe the reports, on Alaris Prime itself."

"I had no idea," said his sister-in-law with respect. She followed Yan's gaze to the Alderaanian party and the visiting Jedi. "He's very young for it."

"It's never stopped him in the past," said Yan, quieter and more uncertain that was his wont. Constanza cast him a look.

"And now?" she prodded.

Obi-Wan was talented at overcoming himself and his emotions; far better than Qui-Gon had been at his age, far better than any of his peers. He was not, however, inhuman.

"His whole lineage was on Geonosis," Yan said. "His best friend from childhood was killed in our escape. Jedi are not easily compromised, Obi-Wan least of all. But... this may be a rare occasion."

"Do you think he will misguide the Chancellor?" Constanza asked, watching her son. Aden was doing his best to remain aloof, but she could tell he was eavesdropping.

"Not intentionally," Dooku said. Constanza watched the young Kenobi a moment more before turning her attention back to Master Yoda, who was reciting the same information for the umpteenth time. No justification seemed to satisfy the panicked senators. The edges of the room seemed to shiver from collective anxiety.

"War does not wait for good intentions," Constanza said, brow set in the stern lines of someone who knew.

Yan clenched his jaw shut to avoid saying what he was thinking: that Obi-Wan was not yet old enough to have learned the same.
"Kenobi."

Obi-Wan and Bail Organa both turned to see Mace Windu standing to one side of the hall, beckoning. Obi-Wan glanced at the prince.

"Excuse me, senator."

"Of course."

Bail continued on into the conference room, and Obi-Wan weaved through the incoming throng of senators, agents, admirals, and aides toward Mace Windu.

"Master?" he said.

Mace gripped Obi-Wan's shoulder hard and pulled him closer to the wall. He looked him dead in the eye. "I need to know that you're ready for this."

With effort, Obi-Wan didn't flinch. "Why wouldn't I be?"

Mace cast a look up and down the hall. "Palpatine was summoned as well," he said. Obi Wan betrayed no reaction, but Mace could feel him and stiffen under his grip. The Master of the Order stared down the knight until he relaxed.

"I need to know that you're ready for him."

Obi-Wan's eyes were squeezed shut, mental walls built so high and thick that it gave even Mace Windu pause. "I've been meditating all afternoon," Obi-Wan opened his eyes. Mace sighed and nodded.

"As have I."

"What do you think he'll try to do?"

It was unnerving to see Mace Windu at a loss. "I couldn't say. Don't pay attention to him. This is about Geonosis. If called upon, what will you advise Valorum to do?"

Obi-Wan had been turning the problem over and over in his mind, but there was no simple solution. The Republic had no bargaining chips. They had no army. Poggle did not recognize their laws. They had intelligence that Geonosis had manufactured the droid army that'd been terrorizing Republic citizens for half a decade, and gave no apologies for the way in which they'd acquired it. Yet there was no clear way forward that did not demand immediate and costly warfare.

"He has to negotiate some kind of deal," Obi-Wan said. "If he has more of those armies hidden in his hives, stashed elsewhere, the Republic has no way to fight him, not without massive casualties."

Mace didn't look so sure. "After that show, do you really think Poggle will make a deal?"

Obi-Wan opened his mouth but found nothing to say.

"Masters Jedi," a protocol droid shuffled up to them and bowed. "The Council is preparing to convene."

As the Jedi walked in together, Mace grabbed Obi-Wan's wrist surreptitiously but firmly under his sleeve.
"Let the others speak first," the Master hissed. "Keep that silver tongue behind your teeth. This isn't a committee room spar."

Obi-Wan felt that he did not need to be told, but he nodded and took his seat at the massive conference table, three seats away from Master Windu. On his right was Senator Iblis of Corellia, and beyond him Senator Dameara Thane of Kuat – an old nemesis of Ben's, from what Obi-Wan understood, now appearing docile and wary. She was accompanied by the Secretary of the Kuati Navy, which was undoubtedly the largest military force the Core had to offer. Mace Windu's attention was taken by Senator Bail Organa on his right, who was whispering quiet concerns to the master, though Obi-Wan could not hear what he said. There was a naval commander with Bail bedecked in Alderaanian colors, and, from what Obi-Wan could see, he looked like a clone.

The Director of the SBI was in addenance, as were senators from Duros, Carida, and nearly every Core World of substantial military force. There were senators from farflung planets, too, some mere stones' throws away from Geonosis itself. Milarian, Christophis, and Herdessa had all sent representatives. Alongside her senator, Admiral Titian sat straight-backed next to Mas Amedda, unique in the group for her involvement in the battle itself. Everyone in the room looked afraid, but Obi-Wan felt his eyes lingering on the deep creases in Titian's pink-skinned brow, the puckers near the corners of her mouth that made it look like she'd swallowed poison. He looked past Mas Amedda to the occupant of the seat directly opposite him - the Chairman of the Committee on Galactic Commerce and senator of Naboo, Sheev Palpatine. As if sensing his gaze, Palpatine glanced up and gave the Jedi a short, companionable nod.

Suddenly, Obi-Wan imagined he could see Garen's face smiling back at him instead of Palpatine's. He blinked, and then it was the pilots' faces, dozens of them alternating in a nauseating slideshow across the senator's face as he looked down and at his notes. Obi-Wan could hear Aola screaming, feel the snap and tear of Cody's leg as if it had been his own. For just a fleeting fraction of a second, he felt a brush of a memory – the sound of mechanical breathing, the blinding pain of a red lightsaber through his neck.

He blinked again, and the moment passed. He saw only Palpatine shuffling through his notes, sweating.

The Senator was sweating.

Something like adrenaline hit Obi-Wan's veins, and he realized that it was possible that their subterfuge had paid off. Maybe they'd succeeded in surprising Palpatine. Maybe he hadn't been prepared for Geonosis. Here he was sitting with his hands wrung into knots and he was sweating. Palpatine was worried, Obi-Wan realized. He was afraid that something could - would - go wrong for him.

All Obi-Wan had to do was to prove him right.

As the last members took their seats, the doors hissed shut and locked with a loud and sombering thunk. In the ensuing silence, Finis Valorum stood and straightened his tunic.

"Senators, Agents, Masters Jedi, Secretary, Admiral. Thank you for clearing your schedules on such short notice." It was a surreal nicety under the circumstances. The Republic itself had not gone to war in centuries. The thought of dismissing such a summons was laughable. No one said anything. Finis glanced through his notes, squared his jaw, and looked back up to the assembled company.

The Chancellor reviewed their situation in a taciturn tone. The mission and the subsequent battle, the involvement of the Herdessans, the massive losses. The intelligence gathered by Aola and
Cody that implicated not one but four major droid manufacturing plants, and detailed the full number of droids ordered by the Trade Federation, over a fourth of which was still unknown by the Republic. Furthermore, Poggle's archives seemed to indicate that the king had at least some control over the droids, even though they nominally belonged to the Trade Federation. Finally, there was the reason for their meeting: King Poggle the Lesser's threat of war.

"The Republic relies on this company to craft a solution," Finis told the assembly. "Peace is our goal. But after years of of Republic-wide attacks by the droid armies of Geonosis and the Federation, peace may be beyond us." The Chancellor glanced around the room. "If it is to be war or peace, we must decide how we will win. Master Windu," Finis turned to face the Korun leader, and all eyes turned with him. "Of everyone in this room, I believe you best understand the breadth and depth of the Federations' military presence throughout the Republic. What is the current standing of the Federation armies?"

Mace drew a long breath, and the War Council launched into the fray. Speakers switched around the room and back again with interjections and questions at lightspeed.

"The incident on Eriadu is a prime example of our incomplete knowledge," Master Windu was saying after several interjections. "The Federation was able to hide a massive cache of droids there for years undetected. There could be more, similar sleeper cells all across the galaxy that we don't know about. If we fly headlong into war, Geonosis may gain control over what remains of the Federation and wake up their hidden armies. It would be bedlam, and we don't even know where the fighting would be the thickest. It is not as simple as declaring war on Geonosis - we would be declaring war on a hidden enemy."

"Which is exactly why we must pursue a diplomatic solution before it comes to bloodshed," said Bail Organa, and Obi-Wan gave a quiet nod in agreement. "Poggle's entire reign is built on the funding of the Trade Federation. With his sole benefactor in ruins, he has no more upward mobility,"

"Only hundreds of thousands of battle droids hidden throughout the galaxy," cut in Admiral Titian.

"Poggle is not the head of a snake we can just cut off," added Senator Iblis. "The Federation's money for the droids may disappear, but the manufacturing plants stay with Poggle. The more droids we find, the nastier they are. If he has any control over them -"

"My point is," Bail came back forcefully, "Poggle is ready for war not only because of the Republic's reconnaissance, but because we've blown the cover on his largest source of income, a Federation that we've been hunting to extinction for years. He's not defending his pride, he's defending the financial prosperity of his whole kingdom."

"And what would you suggest, Senator?" cut in the Kuati Secretary of the Navy. "That the Republic pay him back for his troubles? After all he's cost us in death and damages?"

Bail shrugged. "Are you suggesting we roll the dice on which Republic worlds will be overrun by droids the moment we declare war? Would you like to lead the charge on Geonosis?"

"If it means protecting the Republic from the extortion of a warmongering tyrant."

"It would be a suicide run for all your men, Secretary," said Admiral Titian, with considerable venom.

"We may not have to choose," Sheev Palpatine spoke up, and all eyes turned to him.
The hairs on the back of Obi-Wan's neck stood on end, and he clenched his fists in an effort to keep his mental walls stacked high. There was still sweat beading on Palpatine's brow, and it made Obi-Wan's forehead knit together, mind straining to sense the senator's anxieties, his fears. If Palpatine was behind the Federation, behind Geonosis, then he would surely try to sabotage any attempt at peace. The Jedi clenched his jaw and listened.

"Senator Organa makes an important point. Poggle's interests are largely financial. The only reason he can possibly afford a war with the Republic is because we don't know where all of his armies are. But Poggle is taking a gamble just as much as we are. He's holding the last five years of terrorism over our heads to keep us afraid of him. However, we can call his bluff without resorting to war.

"Suppose we arrange to pay Poggle, as Senator Organa has implied, and in exchange, we demand the surrender of all outstanding Federation armies to the Republic."

Perhaps fueled by the same suspicion as Obi-Wan, Mace Windu did not seem impressed. "Poggle would never turn over all of his armies for money alone," the Jedi said sternly. "He's not stupid, and we cannot ransom what we don't control."

"Quite right, Master Windu," Palpatine said. "But if we also pay for Poggle to manufacture an army for the Republic, we can keep whatever armies he does give up, earn his good will, and arm ourselves. If it's money he wants, he'll have to give us legions to earn it. By the time he has enough funding for himself, he'll have provided us with more than enough droids to kill off whatever leftover armies he has hiding in our cellars."

The room was silent for a long moment. It was a bold gambit, and would be inordinately expensive, but no more expensive and far less deadly than a war.

Obi-Wan was scandalized, because it sounded like something he would come up with. But this was Palpatine. Sith Lord Palpatine. If Palpatine was suggesting this plan, it was because he would turn it to his advantage. Maybe he would pay Poggle under the table to make more droids for his cause, or maybe he would funnel away squadrons or whole armies from the Republic's cut or find someone else to manufacture an opposing army - maybe he was already extorting the Banking Clan. While the Republic enjoyed peace and a new military outfit, Palpatine would turn around and create new war puppets to challenge them. Poggle didn't want war, he wanted money. The Republic didn't want war, they wanted safety.

Obi-Wan knew that Palpatine wanted war, and saw now that he would hypnotize all sides with the objects of their desire until the Sith's army was big enough to pin the entire galaxy under his thumb.

"Senator Palpatine," Obi-Wan broke the silence, leaving Master Windu's advice by the wayside, "are you suggesting that we trust one of the most prolific arms dealers in recent memory to equip the very Republic that has destroyed his business?"

"Poggle is still struggling to validate his sovereignty," Palpatine replied easily. "If the Republic becomes the highest bidder, Poggle is not only gaining a new client, he's earning Geonosis economic recognition from the Republic. To Outer Rim worlds, that is no small boon." The Senators of Milarian and Christophsis bobbed their heads in agreement.

"Poggle is warlord," Obi-Wan insisted, "he's terrorised dozens of worlds."

"He's outfitted terrorists, but the terrorists themselves have fallen to ruin, thanks to your illustrious Order," Palpatine said. It was a compliment, and yet it stung like an insult.
"If he is willing to outfit terrorists, I don't trust him to not double cross us," Obi-Wan glared across the table. "This galaxy needs fewer battle droids, not more. The intelligence gathered on Geonosis implies that Poggle may be capable of controlling the droids he's created, even though they belonged to the Federation. Who is to say he wouldn't retain control of any droids he made for the Republic? It's a fool's errand."

"So is war, Master Kenobi," Palpatine snapped.

"Knight Kenobi," Mace Windu said in warning. Obi-Wan ignored him.

"War against a half-decimated army is better than inviting an entire militia through our front door," the Jedi snapped.

"Our militia," countered Palpatine.

"Made by man who slaughtered eighteen Jedi and nearly half of the Herdessan Fleet!" Obi-Wan raised his voice, indignant. "If he paints Republic insignias on the droids who did it, does it cover up his crimes?"

"Master Kenobi," Mace Windu was glaring at him. Even Bail Organa looked uncertain. It made Obi-Wan uneasy, but then he saw Palpatine's face, and knew that opposing the Sith was more important than pleasing his allies.

"Chancellor," he turned toward Finis, ignoring Mace. "We all want peace, but we cannot achieve it through more armies."

Finis was sitting tall at the head of the table, hands clenched so tightly together Obi-Wan could see the bones of his knuckles. "Sometimes we achieve it exactly so, Master Kenobi," the Chancellor said coolly, "though you may not have come across such solutions in your limited experience in legislation."

While the Jedi smarted from the blow, Senator Thane cleared her throat.

"We had an army," she reminded the group, and glanced at the naval commander who sat at Bail's right side. "If we re-assembled the clone army from Kamino-" but she did not get any further.

"Absolutely not," Bail exclaimed, and Senator Iblis and both Herdessans rose to echo the Prince's outrage. A blur of argument erupted.

"Sir," Obi-Wan turned to face Finis, cutting short the squabbling. "Negotiate with Poggle, pay for his peace and the surrender of existing armies, if you really think it wise, but do not let him turn peace into war. We've destroyed enough battle droids. We can't invite more into the Republic, no matter who paid for them."

"He won't turn them all over, Master Kenobi, as we have already discussed," said Mace Windu, fixing the younger Jedi with a glare of concentrated warning to shut up. Obi-Wan ignored it.

"Poggle knows that we can destroy his armies. With the intelligence gathered on Geonosis, we know exactly how many droids the Federation commissioned from Poggle, and we know we've destroyed seventy-two percent of them. Finding and destroying the rest is a matter of time. Poggle has no hope of standing up against the Republic."

"We may know that armies exist, but we do not know where they are," said Senator Thane. "If it comes to fighting, they will still cost us more damages, probably more lives."
"We've made it this far against them," Obi-Wan insisted. "We know how to destroy them. I'll hunt them down myself. But," he turned to look at Finis, "we cannot pretend as though buying droids from this warmonger is a solution to fighting."

Three different people began talking over one another, and three more. Finis Valorum rubbed at his temples. Mace Windu glared at Obi-Wan. Obi-Wan glared at Palpatine. Palpatine continued to sweat.

The Council took recess after four hours for Valorum to consider his final decision. Obi-Wan was one of the first members out of the room, and Mace Windu had to jog to catch up with him.

"What did I say about that silver tongue?" Mace hissed, grabbing Obi-Wan by the shoulder and half dragging him down a quiet hallway. Obi-Wan was ready for it, and shrugged off the Master's grip.

"We cannot let him have the ear of the Chancellor," the knight said.

"Palpatine?"

"Of course, Palpatine," Obi-Wan hissed in low tones. Mace closed his eyes and shook his head like he were trying to reign in a child – and perhaps he was.

"Obi-Wan, I told you to ignore him. What's happened on Geonosis is more important right now. This isn't about Palpatine."

"Of course it's about Palpatine," Obi-Wan shot back. "It always is. No matter how often you and Ben say otherwise, it has always been about him. He's been manipulating all of this, all of us for years, he's the reason all those people died. If we have the chance to throw him off, we have to take it. Why else did you send Qui-Gon and I to Kamino? Why send Aola to Geonosis?"

Mace took a deep breath to steady himself, and Obi-Wan almost took a step back when he sensed the sudden tendrils of Vaapad anger whirling around the elder Jedi. Mace reached out and gripped Obi-Wan's shoulder near his neck, hard enough to hurt. The Knight looked the Master in the eye and found it hard to look away. He felt small.

"Obi-Wan," Mace said, voice steady and terrifying in its calm, "I am the keeper of over ten thousand Jedi, here on Coruscant and across the Galaxy. When I authorize missions, that is my purview. But when it comes to war, I have no control. Once war is declared, the Senate has control. People like Bail and Valorum, yes, but Palpatine too." He let it sink in, brown eyes still staring into blue. "I sent you to Kamino, I sent Aola to Geonosis because I knew that whatever happened, I could take care of you. But if you encourage Valorum to war..." he paused, and a flicker of uncertainty passed over his face. "Jedi do not have the same rights as citizens, Obi-Wan. If they tell us to fight, there's very little we can do to say no."

"We can fight against Geonosis, we have been for years without knowing it."

"Not while the Senate is calling the shots," Mace corrected.

Obi-Wan felt cornered, helpless. "And would you rather follow Palpatine's advice? Play into whatever he has planned?"

Mace opened his mouth to speak, and closed it again. He let go of the man's shoulder and rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "War is what he wants, Obi-Wan."
Obi-Wan's brow was taut like the Master's, new age lines having appeared within the last few days. "I know that. But are we going to let him have it on his own terms?"

Within an hour, Valorum had reached a decision.

"We will ask to negotiate a price," Valorum announced to the re-assembled council, "one payment for every thousand droids surrendered to Republic custody, and," Valorum spared a glance at Obi-Wan, "a second payment for every manufacturing plant closed."

The Secretary of Kuat's Navy scoffed. "With all do respect sir, you don't honestly think he'll agree to such terms -"

Finis was unmoved. "It is a moot point, Secretary, but it is far better to offer an open hand before rushing into war."

"If you intend on losing it, yes."

"Chancellor," Palpatine piped up, "Expecting Poggle to surrender his armies for payment is one thing… expecting him to shutter his plants is an insult. He won't destroy his source of income. If we're not willing to pay him to use the plants, someone else will. He won't agree to it."

"Every man has his price, Senator," Finis insisted. "I think we can all agree our citizens have endured enough battle droids for one generation that we might endeavor to put a stop to the whole thing. Worlds from Core to Rim would agree that their wallets are more easily replaced than the lives of their citizens."

And so it was settled. Valorum's office delivered the communique to Geonosis within the day. The Senators returned to their offices. The Jedi returned to the Temple.

When Obi-Wan arrived at his apartment, to exhausted to think, Qui-Gon was waiting for him in the living room. His robes were pressed and clean, his hair combed straight, and he was shrugging on the cleanest, darkest brown cloak he owned.

"I was afraid you wouldn't make it," the master said. "Did you not get my messages?"

Obi-Wan stopped short at the door, frowning. "What messages?"

Qui-Gon shook his head, pulling up his hood. "Get yourself cleaned up. I told Bant we'd pick her up from the landing docks. We need to be at the halls by twentieth hour."

Obi-Wan remained baffled, and blinked several times, trying to rationalize. Bant was scheduled to be off-planet for another three months, a preparation for her Trials. Why was Qui-Gon picking her up from the docks - and in formal dress, no less?

"The halls?" Obi-Wan asked aloud. Qui-Gon looked at him in sympathy, now recognizing the haze in the knight's eyes.


Garen's funeral was only the first in a long line of funerals held for the Gold Squadron that evening. None of the pilots' bodies had been recovered, so thick memorial shrouds were placed on the pyres in their place, each adorned with the rank and class of the Jedi. Clee Rhara herself placed Garen's shroud on the pyre, looking smaller and and thinner than Obi-Wan had ever seen her.
Reeft and Bant had both flown in for the event, and sat at Obi-Wan's side in the front row as Master Yoda reminded them of the Force that carried all Jedi past the gross matter of this life.

Bant was crying, though she was trying hard not to show it. Reeft reached over to hold her hand, sniffing past tears of his own. Obi-Wan could feel Qui-Gon's eyes on him, emanating concern from afar, but he was so tired he could not find any tears to shed. His heart weighed as heavy as a star, threatening to burn him up and sink through the floor.

Once the funeral had ended, Jedi began filtering out one by one, some lingering to pay their respects while the pyres continued to burn. The contingent of faceless temple guards would stand guard until the last flames were out, and would then inter the ashen shrouds with their brothers and sisters in the catacombs.

As the night crept on, Qui-Gon, Reeft, and Bant all quietly left. Obi-Wan remained, unwilling to leave the warmth of fire, unable to imagine the coldness of the world after.

Garen had been at his side since the beginning, since before either of them could talk. They'd learned to walk together, learned to hold a saber together. They'd studied together, fought together, dreamed of what they'd be in the future together. As boys, they'd even talked about how, one day, in some heroic act of stupid, magnificent bravery that would land them straight in the history books, they might even die together.

Now freed of prying eyes, Obi-Wan stared at the burning shroud and let the flickering flames grow fat and watery through his tears.

There were only a handful Jedi left in the hall around the row of burning pyres; masters, padawans, friends left to rationalize. Grief acknowledged no Code, and so long as the flames lived on, there would be no judgment cast on the emotions of those left behind.

Clee Rhara sniffed loudly, and Obi-Wan realized she was sitting not too far away. She was desperately trying to stifle her tears, wiping at her eyes and nose beneath her hood. After a moment's hesitation, Obi-Wan moved to sit beside her and wrapped his arm around her thin shoulders. The master stiffened, and then realized who it was. She unravelled.

Obi-Wan was larger than she was, so he was the one holding her as she cried, but his tears fell as freely. When her sobs subsided, the Master sat back up and wiped her eyes. Her hood had fallen back to reveal a cropped head of silver where once there had been lively red.

"I didn't feel it," Clee spoke, the hoarse brokenness of her voice as unfamiliar as the hole in Obi-Wan's own chest. "When he died. I didn't feel it. I thought… I thought I should feel something. Feel him torn away. I've felt death before. In others. I thought… I thought if ever something happened, if he… he died, I'd sense it. But I..." she choked on her guilt. "I didn't even know until someone told me. I didn't realize I couldn't feel him until he was hours gone." Her tears began anew.

Obi-Wan hadn't thought of it before, but realized now that his experience was the same. He'd been friends with Garen since the crib, and their bond was as close as any might be outside of a master-apprentice team. He realized with a renewed sense of loss that he hadn't felt anything when Garen had died, hadn't even known to feel his loss until Celi had told him at the docks.

"It's not supposed to happen like that," Master Rhara was saying. "I should've felt something. He shouldn't have… have disappeared without my knowing. Surely. Surely I should've felt it."

"I didn't feel it either," Obi-Wan confessed. Clee looked to him, surprised, and in turn, comforted.
She nodded, and absurdly, shrugged. Chin wobbling, voice shaking, she complained:

"That damn boy never tells me anything."

Obi-Wan let out a laugh, which changed into a sob before it was through. The tears he'd missed all day surged forward all at once, and he cried aloud into his hands as a boy who'd lost his brother. With maternal grace, Clee drew him in and pet his hair as they both wept and waited for the flames to die.

Obi-Wan was an empty shell by morning. He slept in, and Qui-Gon let him. But around nine o'clock, someone else let themselves into the Jinn/Kenobi apartments and pounded on Obi-Wan's door before barging in.

"Get up," snapped Mace Windu, startling the younger man awake into a world of mid-morning light and a leftover headache from the night's tears. "The Chancellor's called us both back to the Senate. It appears Poggle has delivered his response. Negotiations, if you can call them that, begin today."

"Is it war?" Obi-Wan asked, voice hoarse.

It has been one year and eight months since I started writing this arc, and we're finally, finally at the end.

On to Reprise IV.

There hadn't been time to arrange a conference room, so the Chancellor's war council - or at least the members who hadn't left Coruscant for their home planets' own war councils - met in his office, pressed in around his desk in a crowded circle. Mace and Obi-Wan squeezed into the room and found seats near Mas Amedda and Bail Organa.

Palpatine was the very last member to arrive, taking a seat at the back. Obi-Wan swivelled in his seat to see the Nabooian raise an apologetic hand to the Chancellor as he sat. Something in Obi-Wan's gut began to burn with anger, but Master Windu caught his eye and glared a warning. Obi-Wan turned back around and closed his eyes. Drawing on the Force for strength, he threw up the shields surrounding his mind, blocking out all thoughts of Palpatine and the Sith. He was too tired, these negotiations were too important. He clung to the thought of Garen, of the comfort of his friends and Master Rhara. **Courage**, he tried to tell his own heart, but he was a dismal optimist. **Courage.**

The sound of doors hissing shut made Obi-Wan open his eyes. Then, the doors locked, and the office swelled with a soup of claustrophobia and anxiety. The council sat in audience as Finis explained the situation. His tone was easy and his words were so clipped that they made madness sound mundane. It took a full fifteen seconds before anyone could find something to say.

"A meeting?" Mace Windu broke the silence with uncharacteristic incredulity. "A meeting?"

"Yes, Master Windu," Finis said, with the smallest bur of irritation, "that is what I said."

"It's unheard of." Even Bail Organa, diplomatic to a fault, wore a frown.

"He doesn't actually think you'll meet with him." The Kuat's Naval Secretary was incredulous, looking between the Chancellor and the council. "It's a trap, obviously."

"I'm not so sure it is," said Finis, and while many senators erupted into scoffs, many others waited and listened, including Obi-Wan. "The Republic has never had official dealings with Geonosis. We've never had reason to. As... inopportune as the current moment is, Poggle may very well see this as a singular opportunity to make contact with the most powerful polity in the Galaxy."

"And its leader," Senator Thane reminded. "He's not the head of some up-and coming planet, he's a warlord."

"Geonosis hasn't waged a war with another sovereign planet in centuries," Finis pointed out.

"Because they've been so busy warring with themselves," Thane countered.

"And have been seeking political stability ever since they started," Finis shot back. "The Republic
can offer them that."

"As did the Federation, for a time," Kuat's Secretary came back. "With all due respect, your excellency, the Geonosians have no reason to spare any goodwill for us, not after this disastrous mission."

Senator Iblis was twisting his mustache between forefinger and thumb. "The Geonosians are first and foremost engineers," he said to the group. "That's why they allied with the Federation. Their handiwork is dangerous, but they themselves are self-absorbed fighters. They fight each other, they kill each other for stability, but they can't afford to attack the Republic, not at this moment, when we've destroyed their largest benefactor."

Finis fixed the Corellian with a blank stare. "You're saying I should agree to meet with King Poggle, Senator?" he asked.

Iblis faltered. "I'm saying Poggle's desperation could make him amenable. It's still incredibly dangerous."

"Too dangerous," Sheev Palpatine piped up from the back. His forehead was wrought with worry and reservation. "I have advocated for negotiations, Sir, and I stand by my recommendations. However, meeting in-person seems an unnecessary risk."

"If I refuse," Valorum said, "Poggle will not accept the terms we've put forward. He'll want more. He may decide to declare war, after all."

"Then extend the offer," Palpatine said. "Propose a contract for droids; an exclusive contract."

Obi-Wan could not believe what he was hearing. "Offering Geonosis political validation is one thing," the knight said, turning to glance at Palpatine before looking back at the Chancellor, "offering them lucrative business to manufacture killing machines is quite another."

Mace Windu cleared his throat. "Sir, you know I do not relish the idea of a droid army in the Republic." His eyebrows were drawn into a deep and wary angle, but his voice was steady. "However, in this case I must agree with Senator Palpatine. The meeting is far too dangerous. Concessions may be your only viable option."

Obi-Wan stared. To feel betrayed required understanding; Obi-Wan's confusion displaced trust completely. Mace glanced at him, and maybe the master was trying to communicate something in that look, but he was no longer speaking a language that Obi-Wan understood.

Palpatine looked surprised; surprised and vindicated. Obi-Wan felt the Force crawling under his skin.

"They are hardly equivalent alternatives," Obi-Wan said eventually, and turned beseechingly to the Chancellor. "The droids are the most dangerous part of the Geonosians, as Senator Iblis has said."

Obi-Wan gestured to the Corellian, who looked uncertain in being included in the Jedi's argument. "Paying the Geonosians to manufacture droids is paying them to manufacture more danger - and to usher it right into the Republic. There are too many unknowns surrounding the Geonosians' management of the droids."

"If I do not bargain with the purchase of an army, Master Kenobi, what do you propose I bargain with?" Valorum asked.

Obi-Wan paused. He didn't like what he was going to suggest, but he hated it less than agreeing with a Sith lord. "If you meet with Poggle now, you are meeting with him at his weakest. His
armies have been decimated, his benefactors are dissolving as we speak. If you extend your hand now, he'll be compelled to take it."

"Poggle is a warlord," Thane reiterated.

"But if we deny him the right to his droids, he won't be for much longer," Obi-Wan shot back.

"It wouldn't negate the need for a bargain," Bail Organa spoke up, face rippling with uncertainty, "even if - and that is a very large if - you meet with him to negotiate, Chancellor, he will want something larger than a lump sum."

"Then grant him the political validation he's looking for," Obi-Wan broke in, appealing to Valorum's own sensibilities. "Meet with him, show him that you acknowledge Geonosis as it hasn't been for centuries, consider reopening their trade routes."

"Trade routes?" Admiral Titian, silent the whole meeting, was outraged. "So they can hijack our hyperspace lanes and reroute entire economies?"

"I'm not sure you're qualified to bandy about trade routes, Master Kenobi," Valorum said, voice even but not condescending. "However, I take the point."

"Forget trade routes," said Senator Iblis, "lower their tariffs, and it's all the economic motivation Poggle will need."

"We're talking about a weapons dealer, your excellency," Sheev Palpatine cut in. "If you want to cut any kind of deal with him, you're going to have to speak their language. Take the weapons he's dealing, or destroy them through war."

"Or trade what droids he already has in exchange for diplomatic sovereignty and access to an economy that doesn't necessitate dealing with the Hutts," Obi-Wan said.

"You honestly think he won't deal with the Hutts after this?" Admiral Titian was looking at Obi-Wan as if he were a child. "The Hutts have the whole damn system in their pockets."

"And many worlds besides, we deal with them when we have to. The Genosians haven't always manufactured battle droids, they can't have forgotten so quickly." Obi-Wan replied. He looked to Valorum. "I don't relish the idea, Chancellor, but it's better than outfitting ourselves for war in armor we don't fully understand."

Valorum was quiet. While the senators buzzed about their ideas and suggestions, the Chancellor chewed on the inside of his lip.

Obi-Wan glanced at Palpatine, and at Mace Windu. The elder Jedi looked almost in pain, muscles bunching in nervous rhythms along his jaw, around his eyes, in his neck. He had one finger pressed firmly into his mouth, as if he was stopping himself from speaking.

Behind Mace, Palpatine wore a similar expression of worry. Quietly, he tapped the Master of the Order on the shoulder. Mace turned, and the two began conversing in low tones beneath the buzz of argument in the room. Obi-Wan watched helplessly, unable to hear what they were saying. He turned and saw Titian arguing with Bail Organa, Iblis with Thane, the Kuati Secretary with everyone. Valorum sat silently at his desk, immobile.

"Master Windu." The Chancellor's voice broke through the noise, and the room quieted. Mace turned away from Palpatine to look up at the Chancellor.
"Sir?"

"What would you recommend?"

Anxiously, begrudgingly, all eyes turned to the Jedi. Mace Windu was, excepting perhaps Mas Amedda – and even that would be contestable – the second most powerful man on Coruscant. Considering the Jedi Order's involvement on Geonosis, his opinion would have no insignificant bearing on the Chancellor's decision.

It took a long moment for Mace to respond. When he did, he did so with reservation. "There is no comfortable solution, Sir, and none that I can fully support. However," Obi-Wan wondered if the master was trying to avoid his eye, "this meeting is far too dangerous."

The room was silent, but Obi-Wan's mind was blaring. Images flashed in his mind, of Feemor, of Palpatine whispering in Feemor's ear, in Mace's ear, of his own fading vision as Feemor choked the life out of him.

"I agree with Master Windu," Sheev Palpatine said. Obi-Wan's jaw wanted to fall open.

"I disagree," he said, and when the assembled company looked at him aghast, it took him a moment to realize that he was a low-ranking knight who'ld just contradicted his ultimate superior, in public, in front of the Chancellor. He dug in his heels. "Buying peace through a tainted army is more dangerous than meeting with Poggle to find a diplomatic solution."

"It is very likely a trap," Mace held his ground.

"And we know it is, and we can be ready for it."

"And if things go wrong, it's non-negotiable war," Mace said.

"And if things go wrong with an arms deal, it will be non-negotiable war, and his troops will be housed in our barracks," Obi-Wan shot back. "I apologize for my impertinence, master, but I cannot condone it."

Mace stared at him, a mixture of anger, worry, and deep disappointment. Obi-Wan looked to the Chancellor instead.

"Thank you, Masters Jedi, senators." He looked at his desk. "I have much to consider. I will let you know when I have made my decision."

They waited in the senate building for the Chancellor to reach a verdict. Mace and Obi-Wan sat together in uncomfortable silence on a small balcony high above the surrounding skyline.

"It will be a trap," Mace said eventually. Obi-Wan didn't even look at him.

"Then we spring the trap."

"Is that what Qui-Gon taught you?" he let out a humorless laugh. "Sounds about right."

"Buying an army is a much larger trap," Obi-Wan shot back at him. "And far more costly."

"An army is something we can take in one by one, something we can ingest, scan, scrub, take apart and put back together again," Mace told him. "We can ensure neither Poggle nor the Sith get a hold of them again."
"But Palpatine wants us to buy Poggle's army," Obi-Wan protested, "he obviously has a plan for it once it's in Republic Space." Mace was unfazed.

"Yes, he does, because he thinks that we don't know who he is. He thinks we don't know that he'll try to turn them back to his side. But we do know. We'll find whatever darkness he sneaks in with them, whatever could be used to turn them against, and well snuff it out – just like we did with the clones."

"With the clones?" Obi-Wan whipped his head up, confused. Mace looked at him, and realized belatedly that Obi-Wan hadn't been privy to Dooku's hunt for the biochip programming. He gave a regretful sigh. Ben Kenobi and Obi-Wan Kenobi were two vastly different people, but when it came to matters of galactic importance, Mace often forgot where one ended and the other began. He wished he had the luxury to feel guilty about it.

"You know who had them made," the Master said. "We made sure he couldn't touch them. We can do the same with the droids." But Obi-Wan was still reeling from this new revelation.

"You're saying he could - could have turned the clones against us?" He thought of Cody, of the chubby-cheeked boys he'd seen on Kamino.

"Could have. We put a stop to it. Bail Organa, the Kamino Accords, the Coalition of Sentient Rights. They helped legislate a solution without letting the Sith know we knew."

Obi-Wan's mind was still reeling. "Droids aren't sentient," he burst. "We can't use the same excuse twice,"

"No, but we can find a new one. The army isn't going to march in here over night, Obi-Wan, they're going to have to go through process, and we can press our advantage while they do. Bail is not our only ally. The whole Coalition, Herdessa especially, even Valorum is a close ally of our Order. If I warn him, if I ask him to do something as the droids are in holding, there is a high chance that he'll listen."

"And a high chance Palpatine will be right there, whispering in his ear, and we don't even know what that can do to someone weak in the Force-"

"I think we do," Mace said, eyebrows raised, glancing at Obi-Wan's neck.

"Feemor isn't weak," the knight hissed.

"No," Mace hissed, tired of arguing, "but he was afraid, as are you."

"And you're not?" Obi-Wan demanded.

Mace glanced at the bruises still evident on Obi-Wan's throat where they peaked over the top of his collar. "Of course I am," he said, looking away. "I just know how to control it."

The noise and stench of air traffic filled the pause between them.

"You're giving him exactly what he wants," Obi-Wan said.

"I'm doing what I sense is right," Mace replied.

"As am I."

The Jedi looked to one another, and neither could find anything else to say.
"Masters Jedi," said a droid, peeking through the doorway, "The council is called to reconvene for a verdict."

The headline would spread like wildfire through the afternoon: Chancellor Valorum to Meet with King Poggle for Peace Talks.

Obi-Wan and Mace returned to the temple, where they held their breath with the rest of the galaxy.

The smell of bacta and disinfectant was a shortcut through Ben's memories, and as the Jedi master approached Cody's hospital room, he was reminded of a time he'd gone to visit his commander in medbay after a particularly nasty battle, one that had left Cody with a long, jagged scar down the side of his face.

The sound of Feemor Gard's laughter had no place in Ben's old memories, and brought him into the Here and Now.

"Meaner than Vokara Che? Force, I hope not," the Jedi was chuckling in the other room.

"You've never been in the military," Cody griped back, and though Feemor might not have heard it, Ben knew to recognize the humor hidden there. "But what are they gonna do, chop off my other leg?"

"In my experience, it's best not to give military doctors reason to think anything needs chopping off," Ben said as he came through the door - and of course, he would know. "Be it leg or otherwise."

"Master Kenobi," Cody nodded respectfully from his seat on the bed.

"You really ought to call me Ben," Ben said, and glanced Cody up and down. Though the clone appeared more recovered than he had the previous day, his opioid drip was gone and in its place was a courageous but tired scowl. "How are you faring?"

The agent shrugged resignedly. Ben noticed that he was looking anywhere - at Ben, at Feemor, at the ceiling - but at his own lap and legs. "Apparently, they've ordered a prosthesis fitting already. They're transferring me to a civvie hospital in the morning. Was supposed to be today, but HQ's a bit preoccupied with finding an escort guard for the Chancellor."

"Ah," Ben's face found a frown. They'll all heard the news of yesterday's verdict. "Do you know anyone in Secret Service?" he asked the clone.

Cody raised his eyebrows. "Oh, is it SS they're sending? Makes sense. They haven't told me anything. I'm not sure if its because I'm in hospital or because I was on Geonosis."

Ben shrugged. "It may be both – they've not told me anything either. I gather Valorum wants everyone involved in the fighting to stay well away until after the negotiations."

"Wise of him," Cody said.

"Aye, even me," Feemor sighed, crossing his arms over his chest. "I've heard nothing but what's on G-RAN." The three men shared a short silence of communal ignorance. Ben was happy to see Feemor back in his normal nut-brown robes and tabards. However, there remained a haunted, gaunt look about him, and it made Ben remember the toll of Geonosis not felt in flesh and bone.

"How's Aola?" Ben asked at length.
"I don't know," the older master answered. "The Council's holed up with her. Or at least, Master Yoda is." He looked Ben in the eyes. "He's seeing her through the Trials Chamber."

"What?" Ben's eyes widened, brows coming down to meet them. "More trials? After Geonosis?" Perhaps it had been wishful thinking, but Ben had hoped Geonosis would substitute for Aola's Trials, much as Kamino had for Obi-Wan's.

"It's not a full run of all five," Feemor explained. "Just the trial of Spirit. Master Yoda is… worried for her." He paused, and visibly wilted as he whispered, "as am I."

It was a daunting prospect. Ben knew that Aola had not done well in the aftermath of the fighting. Perhaps they'd crafted this Trial as a mercy; if she was truly not yet ready to be a knight, they would save her from herself early. "She will honor your teachings, and will be an excellent Jedi Knight," Ben encouraged him. "She's too stubborn not to."

It made Feemor smile, as fleeting as the sun on a cloudy day. "I hope so," he said.

"Ugh, kriff." Cody's exclamation drew the attention of both Jedi, who turned to see the clone bent over the stump of his leg, wincing through pain. He grabbed hold of the rail on his bed hard enough to make it creak.

"I'll call a padawan," Ben said, "to get you something stronger for the pain."

"No," Cody grit through his teeth. "Don't. I have to…" he paused as the pain intensified. "I have to get used to it."

Ben wanted to insist otherwise, but then he remembered when Anakin had lost his arm, and the painful, sleepless weeks after the injury. He went to perch on the edge of Cody's bed and grasped the man's shoulder, exuding a sense of calm and health through the Force.

"The pain will lessen considerably when you have a prosthetic," he said.

"Oh yeah?" Cody growled, preoccupied. "Know from experience, do you?" Cody glanced at Ben's hands and legs, as if expecting one of them to sprout wires.

"From a certain point of view."

Cody grunted. He remained bent halfway over his leg until at last the cramps subsided, and he propped himself back into a sitting position, sweat lining his brow.

Ben's commlink chirped at him. He answered it.

"Ben," it was Mace Windu. "Do you have a moment?"

Caught off guard, Ben stumbled over his answer: "Ah, of course."

"Meet me in the Council Spire." The connection cut off, and Ben shared a taut look with Feemor. They both knew that Mace was the Chancellor's de facto war advisor; they both knew what he would want to talk about.

"Excuse me," Ben said, dipping his head politely, "I should go."

His absence left Feemor and Cody alone in the quiet room, monitors beeping, hospital bustling beyond the closed door.

"Aola told me about the datachip," Feemor broke the silence first, expression kind and guilty. 
"None of us can thank you enough."

Cody didn't respond, because if he had, he would've had to admit that when he took the chip, he'd done it for her.

Feemor may have sensed the direction of his thoughts. "You said you'd give your life to protect her, and I'm glad it never came to that," he glanced at Cody's leg. "But I am very sorry it's cost you so dearly."

The ghost of a memory resurfaced, a brief but vivid recollection of Aola holding him in the cramped ship, hands slick with his blood, skin covered in sweat and sand. She'd held him together by Force and her own sheer willpower. "All things considered, I think I got off pretty well," Cody said, trying to make light of the weight on his mind, "I think I was too afraid to die with her around. She would've followed me down and flogged me for it."

Feemor let out a laugh and nodded. "So she would have. It's her way."

"Her way seems to work alright," Cody conceded.

"Aye, so it does."

Each man to his own mind, they fell silent and considered the raw, unbending strength of the woman they'd grown to love.

The Council Spire was empty. Ben rode the lift alone in silence, and crossed the wide, richly appointed hallways overly aware of the noise his boots made on the marble steps. There were not even guards on the councilroom doors. Inside, Ben found the council seats abandoned but for the hunched form of Mace Windu. The Korun was facing away from Ben, perched on the back of the chair that, in another life, had belonged to Obi-Wan. Ben could see the Master's deep scowl reflected in the window.

"This never happened before, did it?" Mace asked.

"The parlay, you mean?" Ben moved slowly to lean up against the adjacent chair.

"Mmm," Mace hummed a reply. Ben glanced at him. Under the dark skin of his jaw, muscles ticked away to the rhythm of his uncertainty.

"No, it didn't," Ben answered. Mace sighed, crossed his arms, and leaned back.

"Obi-Wan's the one who convinced him to do it,"

Ben turned his head in surprise. "What?"

"I told Finis that the meeting was far too dangerous - incidentally, so did Sheev Palpatine."

"Oh," Ben could see where this was headed.

"Obi-Wan disagreed with us both. Valorum, it appears, took his dissent to heart."

"I see."

It was a windy day. They watched the pockmarked clouds play shadow puppets with the setting sun. Behind them, the gold mosaics of the councilroom floor danced in light and shadow, but neither Jedi was in a mood to appreciate it.
"Perhaps Obi-Wan was right to oppose Palpatine," Ben said. Mace sighed.

"I'd expect better from you, Ben."

"What?" Ben looked at him.

"You honestly think this parlay is a good idea?"

"Do you think agreeing with a Sith Lord is a good idea?"

"I don't know," Mace admitted. "I can't know his mind. But he's a master manipulator, impossible to read. I can't tell where he's headed next."

"Neither can I. Or Obi-Wan," Ben said mournfully. "I wish I had an answer."

"So does Obi-Wan. He's scared, you know. Terrified. After what happened to Feemor, Aola, Cody, Garen…"

"You think he should have been pulled from this assignment."

"It was not my call to make, unfortunately," Mace snapped. "And Obi-Wan has certainly made up his mind about this meeting." Mace said the word with pronounced distaste.

Ben's shoulder sagged. "If he's made up his mind, there's no changing it."

"Obi-Wan's mind hardly matters; but he's managed to turn Valorum's head, and the rest of us must follow wherever he leads - and it may be to war."

"Maybe," Ben said, hoping desperately that it was not.

"I suppose we'll know soon enough," Mace said, expressionless. "He left with his escort this morning."

"Did we send anyone to guard him?"

"I wanted to. I would've gone myself, but with all that happened on Geonosis… Finis thought it best the Jedi were not involved." Mace gripped the loose fabric of his sleeves in stressed clumps. "And I suppose he could be right."

"I suppose so," Ben wasn't sure what else he could say. The conversation fell away.

They stared out of the windows and watched as the wind drove the clouds away so that pillars of sun shone down on the sparkling skyline below like spotlights. After a long moment, Ben said, "This really is one of the best views in the city."

Mace scowled. "The best view to sit helpless and watch," he grumbled, and Ben did not try to cheer him up. Though neither would admit it, Mace and Obi-Wan were alike in that regard: once they'd resolved to think or feel a certain way, there was no moving them.

However, Ben mused, Mace had learned his lessons of forbearance long ago. He was not sure Obi-Wan had had the chance.

Since returning from the Senate, Obi-Wan had sought solitude. He wandered the gardens, the loneliest halls, or else hid in his own room. Today, he found refuge in the planetarium, Qui-Gon's
favorite haunt. Though Qui-Gon himself was not there, there was something profoundly comforting about the deep hum of the bronzium planets moving in their courses, a resonance that reached into Obi-Wan's chest and made him remember.

Remember his days as a child when Qui-Gon was there to absorb the blows of the world, the days when Tahl would sit here with him while Qui-Gon made an ass of himself in front of the Council. The days when his knighthood was only a daydream. The days before he'd met Ben, before he'd known about the Sith, about Palpatine, about everything. Obi-Wan's heart continued to beat, but it felt slow and tired. He tucked his chin to his chest and fell into a meditation trance.

He remembered this place. It was the mountain range he'd seen before, as a young boy of fifteen, as a man of twenty-two about to be knighted. He looked back over his shoulder, and saw far in the distance, a younger version of himself, freshly scarred and standing clean and bright in the fresh air. He was not looking down at his older counterpart, but looked instead out across the sky, the sun, the dark clouds.

Obi-Wan turned to face his own environs, and his bare feet squelched in tarry mud. It was not raining, but it must've rained recently. There were trees blown over by wind, and shrubs drowned by water. A jungle lie ahead, eerily quiet. Lightning crackled in the dark clouds above, but no thunder followed it. Obi-Wan remembered seeing those same clouds in the distance, before he was knighted. He remembered dreading them. He realized that he'd never actually thought he'd have to see them up close.

He turned his eyes to his feet to see where the path led, but there was only mud and silence. In the place of his mind where the had Force whispered its wills for decades and more, he felt nothing. He ached.

"Obi-Wan," a voice spoke, and Obi-Wan lifted his head and opened his eyes. Master Yoda was a few paces away, leaning heavily on his gimer stick.

"Master," the knight was surprised to find his voice hoarse from disuse. He must've been there for hours; the windows were alight in an orange sunset that limned Yoda's sparse hair in furious gold. "I'm sorry," Obi-Wan said, "I didn't hear you coming."

Yoda did not seem to care. "Obi-Wan," he chided again, and came closer, tilting his head to peer at the young man through the dusk. "Always look inside you do; find the Force there, you may, but not only there. Look outside, look to the horizon, you must."

"Master, I've tried, but I-"

"Do or do not," Yoda began, and Obi-Wan closed his eyes in regret. "There is no try, hmm." He poked the knight with his cane. "Taught you that, I did."

"Yes, Master, many times," Obi-Wan replied. "But I've yet to understand it."

"Hmm," Yoda hummed, more subdued than before. "Young, you are. Time to learn, you have."

"I wish to learn, Master, but the Force is silent. I cannot hear it, I cannot feel it." He shook his head. "And of all times…"

"Silent is the Force, or silent is Ben Kenobi?" Yoda guessed, and it made Obi-Wan pause. "The Force, is he? A whole horizon, is Ben Kenobi? Conceit, it is." For emphasis, Yoda clunked Obi-Wan on the head with the knob of his cane.
"Ow," Obi-Wan rubbed the spot.

"Feel that, you did," Yoda griped as only ancient men can, and added in complementary wisdom, "Feel the Force, you can. Broaden your mind, broaden your focus, you must. Choke yourself you do."

Obi-Wan wanted to try, he wanted to do, but he was far too tired. If Yoda sensed this, he ignored it.

"Get up you will. Up, up. Leave you brooding I will not, but other things to do I have. See Knight Tarkona to her chambers, I must."

That gave Obi-Wan pause mid-crouch. "Knight…?" he began.

"In two days time," Yoda confirmed, hobbbling on. When Obi-Wan remained frozen, Yoda looked back at him.

"Surprised, are you?" the wizened Jedi asked with some offense.

"No, Master," Obi-Wan rose and the smile on his face felt foreign. "Not at all."

Obi-Wan fell into bed that night and slept fitfully, plagued by dreams of dark clouds and silent lightning. He awoke somewhat disoriented and found that he'd slept in. Qui-Gon was probably waiting outside with tea, ready to harangue him for it.

As he pulled on his trousers, he kicked a book that had fallen off the edge of his bed, and he remembered that he'd promised Aola he'd return it weeks ago, before Geonosis.

Aola. A smile spread across his face, and Obi-Wan dressed quickly, scooping the book up under one arm.

He was surprised to find the living room empty, but Qui-Gon was an early riser and was likely well into his schedule for the day. Obi-Wan pulled on his cloak and, holding the book under one arm and trying to contain the smile that threatened to break through, jogged his way to the Gard/Tarkona apartments. He knocked and let himself in.

"I'm looking for Knight Tarkona," he grinned, coming into the apartment to peer into the main living space. "Has anyone seen her? Short, testy, sharp elbows, you'd know if you met her."

"Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon looked up from his spot on the couch. He wasn't smiling. Beside him, Feemor and Aola hadn't yet noticed the newcomer, and were staring wide-eyed at the holoscreen in front of them. Aola looked close to tears. Obi-Wan could not see the screen, but the Force was shattered in dark blue, and his smile dissolved.

"What's this?" he asked timidly. Qui-Gon waved him over. Obi-Wan moved around the console to stand at Qui-Gon's side where he could see the news broadcast.

"...unclear at this time where the shots came from, whether from the crowds or from the Geonosian delegate itself."

"Geonosis?" Obi-Wan repeated. Qui-Gon said nothing.

"For those of you just now joining us, at 0743 this morning, CHB News reported that a single ion shot has been fired in the middle of the Peace Talk meeting between Supreme Chancellor Valorum and Geonosian ruler Poggle the Lesser. We've just now received a report confirming that..."
newscaster had to pause in her report, apparently stunned by what she read on her prompter screen. "That Chancellor Valorum was struck by the blast and was pronounced dead at 0902 onboard his cruiser following evacuation. It is reported that Herdessan fighters are en route once more to Geonosis, to be joined by the Kuati Fleet..."

Obi-Wan's entire awareness tunnelled in on the holoscreen, and he imagined that lightning struck in dark clouds above; this time, he heard the thunder split The world in two. Aola's book fell from his grasp and clattered to the floor.

Shock was not a sufficient concept. When the news of Valorum's death broke, the whole galaxy stood still. And then it began moving again at lightspeed. There were protocols in place for just such a circumstance; Finis Valorum was not the first Supreme Chancellor to die by assassination, and as soon as his death certificate was authenticated by his personal physician, the wheels of political process began turning.

The senate convened. Mas Amedda drafted articles of war. The Senate voted to enact them. Every Navy from every Core World and every Mid Rim and Outer Rim world who could muster a fighting force were put on standby. Geonosis was put under instant embargo. A Republic blockade appeared overnight. Between Kuat, Herdessa, and Corellia's combined forces, Geonosis would be occupied for a while yet.

On Coruscant, Valorum's young assistant typed up a ballot with shaking fingers. The Republic had many political parties, and within hours of the news, all twelve had submitted their nominations for the next supreme Chancellor. The Senate would take a vote that evening.

Finis' wife and daughter were put under twenty-four hour protection.

In the Jedi Temple, the High Council was locked in their spire under guard, crafting a response to Geonosis and drafting a full report for whomever would become the next supreme Chancellor.

Yan Dooku slipped into the Senatorial booth of Alderaan midway through the candidate hearings.

"Senator Organa," he greeted. Bail turned to see him.

"Master Dooku." The prince seemed uncharacteristically shaken. "Please, sit." Dooku did, and cast a sideways glance at the senator as he rubbed his goatee nervously between thumb and forefinger. There was only one aide in the booth. All others were presumably occupied with comm calls and emergency plans. An intern ran past their booth down the hall, a comm and a datapad in had.

"I'm surprised young Obi-Wan didn't beat me here," Dooku had to raise his voice as the room swelled with applause as the young senator stepped down from the podium after delivering her platform. "He's become very keen on political process these past years."

Bail looked at Dooku in surprise, but just as the applause died down into eerie quiet, Bail's expression evolved into first sadness, then resolve. "You should tell him to stay away," the prince said coolly. "At least for now."

Dooku felt a tremor in the Force. "Why?"

Bail realized the master must not know. "He was the one who suggested Valorum agree to the meeting," Bail explained. "Obi-Wan was the one who pushed him to go to Geonosis in the first place."

Dooku felt not unlike he had all those years ago on Galidraan; betrayed, saddened, angry. But this
time, he did not feel it for himself, but for the whole Order, and for Obi-Wan. "I see," he said.

"There were only a handful of people on the committee," Bail said, "and they'll forget in time - or at least they'll pretend to. But until then… oh, here's one of them now," Bail sat up a little straighter, and Dooku turned with him to see Sheev Palpatine step up to the podium.

Dooku could not have explained what he felt, seeing the Sith Lord there, smiling, his brow set in stern and wizened lines. It felt like a deja vu, a memory of a memory. Perhaps he was experiencing the same undefined dread that generations of Jedi had been feeling for eons. Perhaps the great spiked wheels of the cosmos had finely turned around to prod at reality once more, pricking some distant ancestral memory in the Force.

Or perhaps it was his old Sentinel's heart frozen by the sight of his lifelong fears come true.

"I did not realize Senator Palpatine was a candidate," Dooku said, masking his horror with professional skill,

"He's grown fairly popular," Bail told the Jedi. "He's been the chairman for The Committee on Galactic Commerce for over a year. That committee has been instrumental in guiding efforts to eradicate the droids, I'm sure you know. Given current circumstances, that experience alone makes him an attractive candidate. He was also…” Bail paused, looking down at the ground, "he was very vocal in his opposition to the parlay with Geonosis. He and Obi-Wan had a bit of a row. I understand they argued quite a bit in committee meetings as well."

The slight against Obi-Wan was unpleasant for both of them. "I was led to believe Knight Kenobi offered the most productive contributions to the committee," Dooku said.

"Yes, he did, but he's not a politician. He was never going to get the credit."

Dooku took in a long breath and let it out again.

"-ust be prepared to fight this Federation, fight the Geonosians, fight whatever armies they have hidden amongst us," Palpatine was saying, voice fluttering in between politic composure and righteous conviction. "But we must take heart. We have been standing our ground against the mindless attacks of the Federation and their allies for years. We know our enemy. We know how to fight them. And, most importantly, we know how to win!" The crowd erupted in cheers, and Dooku stared, frozen in place where he sat.

"And we know we will win! The Republic remains the last bastion of peace and justice in a war-torn galaxy, and we will always extend the hand of truce before the armaments of war. Finis Valorum gave his life for that belief. I will uphold that belief to the best of my ability. But there comes a time when peace cannot be protected with peace. When good men die and innocent worlds are made to suffer death and war, it is no longer time to reach out our hands, but time to reach out our shields and our swords." More cheering. Bail scrubbed his beard harder, shoulders hunched.

"Senators of the Galactic Republic. We have reached out our hand, and we've lost our leader; a wise man, a good friend. If he were still here, I know that Finish Valorum would not let the Geonosians lead us into more lies. He would fight back! I have been leading the fight against the Federation since the crisis on my own dear Naboo. Now, in this time of galactic crisis and tragedy, I invite you to join me in the fight for freedom and peace in our dearest Republic."

Uproarious applause. Dooku could not move. Bail sank deeper into his seat.

"For whatever he said in the war council," Bail said, glaring as Palpatine basked in the ovation, "I
trust Obi-Wan a thousand times more than I trust that man."

Dooku glanced at the plauditing masses, and then at the new frontrunner of the campaign. "You seem to have a lot of people to convince, your highness," he said.

Bail looked sad. "I always do."

That evening, Sheev Palpatine was elected by a wide margin to become the next Supreme Chancellor of the Galactic Republic.

"Obi-Wan?" a voice echoed through the darkness.

Obi-Wan closed his eyes, not wanting any company at all, least of all his own.

"Obi-Wan, I know you're– ah." Ben Kenobi shuffled to a stop at the base of the crumbled wall and looked up at his younger self.

"If I join you up there, are you going to push me off?"

Obi-Wan said nothing. Ben shrugged, and began to climb.

When the elder man arrived at the top and found a seat, Obi-Wan did not even turn and look. Ben gazed out at the wall that stretched above the main doors. It was a massive mosaic set with ancient, foreign runes and symbols, depictions of Jedi as they appeared centuries ago, as they still appeared today. The top of the wall stretched into blackness, too tall for the small lamps the Kenobis had brought with them. Peering down to the floor, Ben could see the cracked place where he'd appeared from the past, eleven years ago.

Eleven years. Eleven years to change. Some things, it seemed, never would.

"You heard the news," Ben assumed. Obi-Wan took in a breath like a statue coming to life.

"It's my fault," he whispered.

"Is it?"

"I told him to go. I told him to agree to the meeting. Palpatine said not to. Master Windu said not to. Feemor tried to warn me. I…" Obi-Wan stared at nothing. "I thought I knew better. I thought I was following the Force, but it's so quiet, it's so silent, I can't…" the knight closed his eyes and rubbed his face. "Valorum is dead because of me. Palpatine - a Sith is our Supreme Chancellor because of me. Because I was too afraid to see what was happening until it was too late."

"You and I have a nasty habit of taking credit for things that are much larger than ourselves," Ben said. He thought of the guilt that had weighed him down for decades, the fear, the self-loathing. "Do you really think that Valorum would have lived if he'd taken Palpatine's advice?"

Obi-Wan was very still.

"If there's one thing I've learned about the man in all my years," Ben continued, "it is that he has contingencies for contingencies. Perhaps he was banking on you to convince Valorum to go to Geonosis. Perhaps he was setting up an equally nasty trap for him if he decided not to. We'll never know. But to pin this all on your own actions is sheer conceit. You did not make Valorum's decision for him."

Obi-Wan sat up and stared at the wall with Ben. "He's still dead," the knight said. "And I cheered
him on as he jumped off a cliff. Force, I've been so blind."

That guilt, Ben knew, was not a selfish one. He nodded sadly. "I'm very sorry."

They were quiet for a long while, savoring the silence of the chamber around them. Stories and stories above, the Galaxy descended into chaos.

"Ben," Obi-Wan asked, sounding like a boy of fifteen. "What do I do?"

Ben didn't answer right away. For weeks, months, even years, Obi-Wan had been begging him for guidance, waiting on him to instruct his every move. Ben knew he was too far removed from the galaxy he'd known to offer Obi-Wan any real insight into the present day, but he also knew that Obi-Wan was treading water in a ocean far deeper than anything anyone had ever prepared him for. Maybe he wasn't looking for help, Ben realized. Maybe, he just wanted to understand his place in the bizarre cosmos.

"What does the Force tell you?" Ben asked quietly.

"The Force is silent," Obi-Wan said around a lump rising in his throat. "I can hardly feel it at all."

Ben took Obi-Wan's hand in his own and gave it a tight squeeze. "Can you feel that?"

It was the kind of reassurance creche masters offered younglings, but Obi-Wan leaned into it as a man with nothing else. "Yes," his voice wobbled.

Ben drew on the Force and willed a bit more strength into his grip, into Obi-Wan's hand, his heart. "What about that?"

Obi-Wan closed his eyes, too tired or too weak to draw on the Force for himself. "Yes," he said.

"Good."

They sat with hands gripped together while Obi-Wan tried to hold onto the Force. Ben could feel his heartbeat in his hand, growing to beat in time with Obi-Wan's. He watched the younger man's face, and for the first time in years, remembered how incredibly young he was.

"I would have only just now taken Anakin as an apprentice, he realized. He remembered those hard early days, the tears, the fear, the grief. He remembered Mace Windu's teaching and comfort, and considered how lost he would have been without it. I had the destiny of a child on my shoulders - but Obi-Wan is trying to carry a galaxy he doesn't even understand."

"Obi-Wan," Ben broke the reverie with a soft voice, but in the empty hall it pierced the air like a shot, "I think it's time you knew."

Obi-Wan's eyes fluttered open. "Knew what?"

Ben's braced himself. "Everything."

Obi-Wan looked up at him in surprise, but Ben only gripped his hand harder. "Meditate with me."

They fell into a trance together, Ben leading, Obi-Wan following along. As they plunged headfirst into the childhood memories they shared to the divergent lives they'd lived, tears ran down Ben's face. He couldn't be shielded as he had been with Mace; Obi-Wan knew his mind too intimately for that. The truth of his past tumbled out in vivid tableaux of friends, enemies and strangers framed in the tragedy of before. Obi-Wan, Qui-Gon, Padme, Cody, Mace, Palpatine, Anakin, and in the midst
of it all, Obi-Wan Kenobi, the Jedi who could not die.

Ben escaped the meditation and opened his eyes to see Obi-Wan jerk his way back to the present with a shout. The knight's face was ashen white, as white as his knuckles that gripped Ben's arm for support even as he lost his balance and began to fall.

"Obi-Wan - Obi-Wan, no no no," Ben caught the knight by the arm just as he fell fully backwards from the wall. Obi-Wan's dead weight cast both Jedi over the edge. Ben caught his younger self and cushioned their fall, boots crunching in the gravel of the crumbling wall. He sat Obi-Wan up against the base of the wall and the knight leaned into the cool stone.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Obi-Wan said, swallowing hard. His face shone with sweat. "How… how do you," he glanced at Ben, a new light of understanding and horror in his eyes, "how do you keep that all in your head? How do you stand it?"

"Because the Force put me here to see wrongs turned right." Ben gripped Obi-Wan's shoulder. "And whether or not I can feel the Force working, whether or not I can see it, I move forward. I don't know what end I'm running to, but I know exactly what I'm running from, and every small change is a victory."

Obi-Wan was struggling to maintain composure. He shook his head, mind still running circles. "Palpatine-" the name held new abhorrence. "This isn't a victory, Ben."

"No, it's not, but we must hold onto the Force."

"How? It's too much, it's too dark. I can't feel the Force, or hear it."

"Then you must hold on more tightly."

Obi-Wan curled in on himself - whether to cradle his head or to stop his nausea, Ben couldn't say. He spread a hand on Obi-Wan's back and gripped the base of his neck reassuringly. "As long as there is darkness, there will be light to meet it - even if its so small now you can't see it. You must hold on. You must move forward, just as I have."

Head bent into his knees, hands wrapped around his head, Obi-Wan began to cry. Ben couldn't blame him. After a while, however, he said,

"Get up."

Obi-Wan sniffed, and lifted his head by a matter of millimeters.

"Get up," Ben said again, and coaxed his own creaking limbs to stand. He heaved his younger self up by the arm. Obi-Wan stood, looking and feeling like a ghost. Ben looked him in the eye.

"You have seen the worst. You've seen the galaxy fall, as I did all those years ago. You've seen the Sith rise and conquer, and are about to step out into a galaxy where they've won their first real battle." He gripped Obi-Wan's shoulder hard until the knight met his gaze. "But the war is not over. It's hardly begun. Now come on. We all have work to do."

Ben never told him what work belonged to him, so Obi-Wan passed the next several days in a haze, not wanting to speak to anyone about whatever role he may have played in Valorum's assassination, not able to speak to anyone of what Ben had shown him of the past. He sought refuge in the familiar: in Qui-Gon's morning routine of tea, in duels, in the archives, in meditation.
He meditated more than anything, more than he spoke, more than he slept. It amounted to little, but slowly, something like a suspicion was forming in his mind. He kept it to himself.

As worlds around the galaxy braced for droid incursions, as the Kuat Shipyards fired up their forges, as Sheev Palpatine prepared to take the oath of office, Obi-Wan gathered with the rest of his lineage to celebrate a small victory amidst catastrophe.

"Congratulations, Lola," Feemor was the first to say when Aola had emerged from the Hall of Knighthood. "You've done us all proud - me most of all." The master hugged his former apprentice and kissed her on the forehead. Aola was beaming when she drew away, bouncing with excitement. She turned to her friends and peers and raised her severed silka braid aloft, and they all cheered and began distributing celebratory snacks.

Obi-Wan picked at a slice of Bant's homemade muja jam cake and remembered Garen's knighting party, where they'd intentionally poisoned him for the fun of it. He found himself smiling despite the pain.

"And it's Master Gard now, properly this time," Qui-Gon smiled as he approached his former padawan a ways away from the excitable young people. "Twenty-four years later and he's finally gone and grown up."

"Not all of us can become masters in our thirties," Feemor absorbed the badgery. "You're welcome, by the way."

Qui-Gon laughed and wrapped an arm around Feemor's shoulders. Both men were facing away from Obi-Wan, and it gave the knight a better view of their grey hair. Qui-Gon's hair still had a bit of brown clinging at the ends, but it was faded and dim. He wondered if there would be any brown left at all, next time he saw his old master.

"-Obi-Wan's next, you know." Hearing his name snapped Obi-Wan out of his reverie.

"I'm sorry?" he said, and found that Feemor and Qui-Gon had both turned to face him.

"Qui-Gon says you're next," Feemor grinned. "What do you say, you think you can break Qui-Gon's record and make Master before thirty-eight?"

"Thirty-seven," Qui-Gon corrected.

Obi-Wan huffed. "I don't think I want to try." Feemor laughed.

"Record or no, you should take an apprentice," Qui-Gon encouraged. "You'd make a marvellous teacher."

In his melancholy, it did not occur to Obi-Wan to take the praise lightly. "I'm not so sure that I would," he confessed. Qui-Gon and Feemor seemed surprised by his pessimism, but did not pry.

"Well," Feemor said, "I'll let you know if I spot any promising young ones in the Clawmouse clan." He smiled. "I'm to be the new clanmaster by the spring quarter."

"What!" Qui-Gon exclaimed.

"Feemor, that's fantastic," Obi-Wan said. Feemor was grinning wide.

"Master Trelalay is retiring, and she's agreed to train me as her replacement. The Council approved it just this morning."
"Does Aola know?" Qui-Gon asked. Feemor laughed.

"Yes, I didn't even have to tell her - she had a vision, apparently." Feemor looked back over his shoulder at his former apprentice. "She says my first class will be adorable, but the second one will be nightmarish." He shook his head and glanced off to where Aola was posing with friends who wanted to take still-holos to commemorate the occasion. "I'm not sure why she felt compelled to share that second part."

Qui-Gon laughed.

"Master!" Aola called, and waved Feemor over. One of Aola's friends from the medical corps was holding a camera.

"Ah, excuse me," Feemor stepped away. "I'll be right back."

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan watched as the master went to take pictures with his former pupil.

"He'll make a good clanmaster," Qui-Gon mused aloud. "I've always known he didn't have a heart for the field. He's a braver man than I."

"Hmm," Obi-Wan agreed. His eyes strayed to some distant point, and his smile faded. Qui-Gon watched him with a sad expression. Obi-Wan had been stuck in a depression since the assassination. Qui-Gon understood why, but he had no purchase on the situation to bring him out of it.

"I meant what I said," he spoke eventually, and waited for Obi-Wan to look back at him. "You would make an excellent teacher."

Obi-Wan mustered a small smile, but there was little heart in it. "Maybe one day," the knight said. "No time soon, I should think."

Qui-Gon smiled. "Don't speak too loudly; that's just what I said before you foisted yourself into my life."

They shared a quiet chuckle, each reminiscing to themselves. "I ought to say my congratulations in person before I have to leave," Qui-Gon said regretfully.

"Leaving already?" Obi-Wan said, unregistered panic hiding in his voice.

"Master Drallig is sick, and I'd promised I'd cover Ataru lessons today," Qui-Gon explained. "I'll see you at the apartment for dinner." As the leonine master strode away, Obi-Wan blurted,

"Master, I-"

Qui-Gon turned, confusion on his face. He waited while Obi-Wan floundered.

Obi-Wan blinked a few times, staring at Qui-Gon's brow, the lines on his face, the set of his nose, the bright grey of his hairline. "Never mind," he said with a smile. "I'll see you then." Qui-Gon gave him a slight frown, but shrugged and turned away. Obi-Wan watched him go.

"Are you gonna eat that?" asked a voice. Obi-Wan jumped and looked down to see Anakin Skywalker peering hungrily at his uneaten cake.

"Um, no, I don't suppose I am." He handed the cake to the padawan and watched it disappear in three massive bites.
Ever since Ben took him as apprentice, Obi-Wan had not been closely involved with Anakin Skywalker except for occasional meals in the refectory and the occasional run-in on the academic levels. But looking at him now, the knight could not help but feel that his heart was being pulled toward the boy by the gravity of a star. Hope and fear mingled together in the face of the young Chosen One, and Obi-Wan fought against the visions of what had been to consider what could be. It was wonderful and terrifying.

"Force, how did Ben do it?"

"Omffng," Anakin mumbled appreciatively, licking jam off of his thumb, "so good." Icing and jam clung to the edge of the boy's mouth, and he licked it off and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "Do you think there's more?" The padawan pivoted around to look not only at the snacks table, but also at the plates that other celebrants carried with them around the hall. Obi-Wan laughed.

"Not for you, I suspect. How many slices have you had so far?"

"Two and a half."

"And a half?"

"Master Ben only ate half of his."

"Well I think two and a half is more than enough." Obi-Wan frowned suddenly, looking at Anakin's neck from behind. "What happened here?" He pulled down the boy's collar to uncover a red burn mark just below his hairline.

"Oh, that was Sarsan," Anakin complained. "We were sparring, he got me pretty good that time."

"Rude of him, to aim above the neck," Obi-Wan said, folding hands into opposite sleeves with a disapproving frown. Anakin only shrugged.

"Nah, I was poking fun at him. I deserved that."

The knight contained a chuckle. "I see."

"I told him I'd get him back tomorrow, though." Anakin was hit by an epiphany. "You should come and spar with us! Sarsan didn't believe me when I said I'd sparred against you, he'd be so surprised, it'd be wizard!"

"I'm sure it would be, but I'm afraid I'm busy tomorrow, Anakin."

"Aw," the padawan deflated. "Why?"

"I'm leaving on an assignment."

"What?" Anakin seemed genuinely distraught. "Where are you going?"

"I'm not entirely sure yet," Obi-Wan confessed. Anakin's frown grew deeper and more hurt.

"When are you coming back?"

"I…" Obi-Wan glanced up and saw Ben watching him from across the room. He hadn't told anyone but Mace Windu of his plans, so it was impossible that Ben knew. But somehow, Obi-Wan thought he would have been able to guess. He wrenched his eyes back toward Anakin. "I don't know, Anakin."
Anakin wilted, and Obi-Wan was suddenly reminded how young the boy was. "Hey," he said, "I'll be back," he promised. "You'll be the first to know, and we can have a spar then, alright?"

"Okay..." the padawan muttered, unconvinced. The fact that Anakin seemed so affected when they saw each other so seldom gave Obi-Wan pause. He took a knee to meet Anakin at eye-level.

"You shouldn't worry about unknowns, Padawan Skywalker."

Anakin's eyes gazed into his own. Piercing and blue, they looked far older than their owner. "You're running away," the boy accused. Obi-Wan blinked and leaned back.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Why are you running away?"

Obi-Wan could not answer. He was running away, and he knew it. It was his plan to run away, Away from the Temple, away from Coruscant, from the funeral, from the politicians. But how could this boy understand that?

"Are you running away from the Jedi?" Anakin asked, fearing the worst. Now, Obi-Wan shook his head.

"No, Anakin, no, never that." On some compulsion buried deep in another man's memories, he brushed his hand over Anakin's hair. "Just..."

"What then?"

*Everything else.*

Obi-Wan glanced at Ben, who was watching the pair with fascination and apprehension. Obi-Wan looked back at Anakin.

"I have work to do away from here."

"What kind of work?"

Obi-Wan shrugged absurdly, "I'm not sure yet." The knight glanced again at Ben. "Listen to your master, Anakin, he's a wise man. And... and look after Master Jinn, too, will you? He worries when I'm away, though he won't say so."

"Okay," Anakin promised, still unsure, "but when will you be back?"

"When the Force guides me home." He stood, and gave the boy a smile. "May the Force be with you, Anakin."

"And also with you," Anakin watched, dumbfounded as the knight turned to leave.

Obi-Wan gave his congratulations to Aola and Feemor and left for the landing docks without telling anyone why.

By the time Qui-Gon arrived back at his apartments that evening, Obi-Wan was already well into hyperspace. The Master found a small note left for him on the kitchen table.

*Master-

Ben has told me all that he knows. I've gone to find answers, to try and make things right. I don't
know how long I'll be gone, but I know that I've outstayed my welcome here on Coruscant. The galaxy is large and the Sith's plans are vast. I have to do what I can.

Before you are angry with me, remember I am only honoring what you taught me after a lifetime at your side. There is spicy dorha pasta in the 'fridge, please don't cook yourself into an early grave while I'm away. I look forward to the lecture I'm sure you will have prepared for my return.

May the Force be with you,

Obi-Wan

Qui-Gon read it and sank into his seat. He looked over at Obi-Wan's empty bedroom and sighed.

Palpatine was inaugurated later that week. Though Ben tried to keep Anakin occupied within the Temple, there were holobroadcasts everywhere.

"Who is that?" Anakin asked around a mouthful of tubers, gazing up at the silent news broadcast playing in the refectory. Ben followed his gaze to see Sheev Palpatine, bedecked in the robes of office, waving to crowds packed into the legislative district for the inaugural parade.

Glancing between Anakin's unassuming face and Palpatine's carefully crafted mask, Ben couldn't help it when a memory resurfaced, a lifetime old.

"And you, young Skywalker; we shall watch your career with great interest."

"That's the new Supreme Chancellor, Anakin," Ben replied shortly, and stabbed his salad harder than he needed.

"So he's in charge of the Jedi?" Anakin said.


Anakin was squinting. "But aren't the Jedi part of the Republic?"

"Eat your dinner, Anakin."

The padawan didn't need to be told twice.

Ben lost sleep that night.

Mace Windu had been required to attend the inauguration, but as soon as he returned to the Temple, he went to work.

"It's an expansive to-do list, that's for sure," the Master of the Order grumbled, scanning the docket projected in the map-room. "You sure about all of this?"

"Master, have you been sure about anything Ben has said for the last ten years?"

Mace glared at the comm. "I didn't ask for your cheek, Kenobi." He looked back at the research he'd compiled with Obi-Wan's help and scratched at his chin. Hutts, Pykes, Mandalorians, Dathomirians, crime syndicates, and more. If Palpatine wanted to dismantle the Republic from the inside out, they'd have to dismantle his empire from the bottom up.
"Well," said the Master of the Order to the disgraced Knight, "you've got your pick of the lot. Where would you like to start?"

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