STARE WARS Episode I: The Random Premise

by WongBal

Summary

[CURRENTLY UNDERGOING A REWRITE]
Things get progressively worse for the stubborn, irresponsible teenage queen of Naboo when an incompetent Viceroy invades her planet as part of his terrible business plan, and the only "help" she receives comes in the form of an impossibly stupid Jedi and his long-suffering apprentice. Thanks to Qui-Gon's spectacular blundering (and the meddling of an all-powerful being known only as "George Lucas"), their katamari of disaster picks up an indestructible frogman, a perverted droid and the creepiest little boy, whom Jinn firmly believes is the Chosen One (or at least the latest Chosen One to catch his attention). Will Queen Amidala ever convince the Galactic Senate to give a shit about her problems? Will the Jedi Council put their weed down long enough to notice the looming Sith threat?

Probably not.

Notes
PLEASE DO NOT BOTHER READING THIS WORK RIGHT NOW. IT IS CURRENTLY UNDERGOING A REWRITE

Among the usual pop cultural references and obligatory lampshading of story problems, I have tried to maintain consistent voices for each character (or rather, my versions of them) and take every significant joke to a satisfying conclusion. I hope you enjoy it!
The Negotiator

A slightly longer time ago in a galaxy far, far away…

STARE WARS

EPISODE I: THE JEDI, THE WITCH, AND HER WARDROBE

TURMOIL HAS ENGULFED THE GALACTIC REPUBLIC.
THERE IS NO DEATH STAR, NO REBELLION AND NO
DARTH VADER, SO THE MOST EXCITING THING
GOING IS THIS BROUHAHA ABOUT TRADE ROUTES.

UNDER THE PRETENSE OF PROTESTING UNFAIR
TAXES OR SOMETHING (BUT REALLY HOPING TO
SCORE A DATE WITH THE NUBILE QUEEN AMIDALA),
THE VICEROY OF THE FEDERATION (NOT THE
STAR TREK ONE) HAS BLOCKADED A PLANET CALLED
“NABOO” (NO, REALLY).

WHILE THE SENATE ENDLESSLY DEBATES WHETHER
THIS PLANET’S NAME IS STUPID OR REALLY, REALLY
STUPID, CHANCELLOR VALIUM HAS SECRETLY
DISPATCHED THE ONLY TWO JEDI WHO WEREN’T
DOING ANYTHING ELSE AT THE TIME, AND
COULDN’T THINK UP A GOOD ENOUGH EXCUSE,
TO SETTLE THE CONFLICT…

On a ship freshly emerged from hyperspace, a figure hooded in brown robes looked out the viewport at the bright yellow words scrolling past into oblivion, and nodded approvingly. A second, identically robed and hooded figure stepped forward and stood at his side.
“Master,” asked the second figure, “where are we going?”

“Can’t you read?” replied his master, gesturing impatiently at the words now disappearing into the void. “To Naboo, to settle the conflict.”

“Oh.” A pause; then, “Are the hoods really necessary?”

“Of course,” his master nodded sagely. “This is a secret mission.”

The sleek Consular-class diplomatic cruiser, Radiant VII, cruised gracefully across the Naboo system, its occupants blissfully unaware that soon they would all be dead (with two exceptions). Vivid red paint reflected the light of the Naboo star like a flaming torch in the heavens, making the Radiant live up to its name. In half an hour, it would look even more like a torch, because it would be on fire. Soon there would be a Radiant VIII, living up to its name in some other star system, somewhere, provided the shipyards did not run out of red paint what with all these starships named Radiant they had to keep building. Nobody aboard ever asked what happened to Radiant I through VI, but perhaps they should have. Maybe then they would have thought twice about taking a ship with the number seven in its name.

One of the ship’s occupants, a young man in a brown hooded robe, did think twice about taking a ship with the number seven in its name, and on the whole concluded he had “a very bad feeling about it”; but he had a bad feeling about everything, including sunspots, so nobody paid much attention to him. His companion, a slightly older man in a matching robe, seldom thought once about most things, let alone twice.

The thirtyish blonde woman in the cockpit, Captain Maoi Madakor, knew what happened to Radiant I through VI, but thinking twice was above her pay grade, and so she concentrated on the approach to Naboo. A sign, mounted on an asteroid, drifted past her cruiser; it was supposed to welcome visitors to Naboo, a certified peaceful planet, but what it read instead was “WE COME TO NABOO — A PEACEFUL PLANET” because there were gaping, charred holes where the first L and last E should have been.

“Are we there yet?”

Captain Madakor jumped about three feet from the deck, banging her elbow painfully against the life support controls. Rubbing her arm, she glared at the robed figure that had appeared so suddenly behind her.

“Master Jedi, I must ask you to stop creeping up on me like that.”

The robed figure shrugged. “I’m a Jedi. It’s what we do.”

Returning her attention to the screens, Madakor saw the Trade Federation blockade hovering directly ahead. Dozens of grey saucer-shaped battleships guarded Naboo as if it was Helm’s Deep and not an oversized golf course with a corner on the broken statuary market. A signal came through; without thinking, she answered it, and the screen above her head flickered and resolved itself into an image of a rubbery green alien in an absurd hat. This bug-eyed, noseless wonder was the Neimoidian Viceroy of the Trade Federation, Nute Gunray (yes that was his real name).

“Greetings, captain.”

Wincing slightly at his awful accent, she replied, “Viceroy. The ambassadors wish to board immediately.”
“Of course, of course. Let me remind you that this blockade is completely regal.”

“Yes, Viceroy.”

“Totarry aboveboard.”

“Sure.”

“No secret agendas.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Have I pointed out how regal this blockade—?”

Madakor cut him off.

“We’ll be landing on the flagship shortly,” she told her Jedi passenger.

“Finally,” said a new voice.

Madakor jumped another six feet out of her chair, bruising her other elbow on the copilot’s chair.

“Stop that!”

The other Jedi apologized and turned to his master. “Qui-Gon—”


“Er, sorry, I meant Firebird—” Madakor suppressed a snicker “—what do we do once we’re on the flagship?”

“We negotiate, Obi-Wan.”

“How come I don’t get a codename?”

“I’m too tired to think up another one,” Qui-Gon flippantly replied before elbowing Maoi away from her flight controls.

“I’ll take it from here, captain.”

“Er, master, perhaps we should leave the flying to ARGH!” screamed Obi-Wan as the cruiser listed suddenly and sharply starboard.

“Nonsense. The Qui-Guy can fly anything.”

Everyone yelped as the ship lurched to port.

“Anybody know what a landing bay looks like?”

Minutes later, the Radiant VII’s nose protruded through a brand-spanking new hole in the Trade Federation flagship’s outer hull. Hatch seals hissed as they decompressed, and when it had popped open, Qui-Gon leaped lightly to the deck.

“See? Piece of cake.”
“An excellent start to the negotiations, Master,” quipped Obi-Wan, landing behind him. “Viceroy Nute Gunray will be most impressed by the brand new hole we’ve put in his ship.”

“‘Negotiations’ is my middle name, Obi-Wan.”

“I thought it was Quigley.”

“Shut up, Obi-Wan. I’ll have Viceroy… uh…”

“Nute Gunray.”

“…Whatever His Name Is eating out of my hands. In fact: new codename. I am henceforth known as The Negotiator.”

“Does this mean I get to be Firebird?”

“…No.”

“My gods!” Captain Madakor was halfway through the hatch now, examining the damage to her ship where its hull met the interior of the Federation starship. “The paintjob! Do you have any idea how much Flaming Torch Red Nº 1733 costs?”

Qui-Gon called up to her. “Stay with the ship, captain! Play canasta or something.”

Whirring servos heralded the approach of a protocol droid, a brightly polished-silver model hurrying down the battleship’s stark grey corridor in that prissy manner protocol droids seemed so good at effecting.

“Greetings. I am Not-See-Threepio, your—”

Qui-Gon wasn’t listening. “All right, Raygun! Let’s talk turkey.”

From nowhere, he produced a turkey, an awkward, brown bird that squawked and gobbled and flapped out of his hands and ran away down the corridor with its wattle fluttering behind it.

“Now eat out of my hands.”

Reaching into his pockets, he pulled out two heaping handfuls of greenish-brown pellets, presumably turkey chow, and offered them to the droid.

“That’s not the Viceroy,” sighed Obi-Wan, palm to face. “That’s a protocol droid.”

“…I knew that.”

“I have a bad feeling about this…”

Actually, the Viceroy had no intention of being with them at all. Nute Gunray, leader of the Trade Federation, shareholder in the Techno Union, patron of the arts, and twelve-time winner of the Ludicrous Headgear Award, was quite calmly drawing up his Action Plan. So far, it read thus:

1. Blockade Sector
2. Occupy Naboo
3. ??????
“I think you may be missing a few steps, sir,” announced his faithful assistant, Rune Haako. “Several steps, in fact.”

“Don’t rush me, Rune. I’m new to this whole ‘planetary conquest’ business. Haven’t even put together a Mission Statement yet.”

“I thought your mission statement was ‘Get some hot underage action from the Queen of Naboo’!”

“Rune, keep your voice down,” Gunray hissed. Three or four fellow Neimoidians continued about their work, huddled over workstations placed around the bridge of the Profiteer. None of them seemed to have heard, although one of the battle droids could be heard to ask, “What does ‘underage’ mean?”

“And besides,” blustered the Viceroy, “fourteen is totally legal on fifty-two hundred worlds, including this one. Now what is it, Rune? Can’t you see how busy I am?”

“Well, I have bad news and… No, scratch that; I only have bad news. The Supreme Chancellor’s ambassadors—”

“Oh, send them away. Give them a gift basket or something.”

“—are Jedi.”

“WHAT??”

His yelp caused the bridge crew to jump, and the droids swivelled their tin can heads around, looking for something to shoot.

“Oh gods, oh gods, oh gods oh gods oh gods oh gods oh gods!” Snatching Rune’s conical hat off his bald head, Gunray jammed it over his mouth and breathed into it until he stopped hyperventilating. Then he placed the limp, slightly moistened chapeau back on his assistant’s head.

“All right. Get rid of them.”

“How?”

“I don’t care. Tell them to come back in a week. Tell them we’ve changed our minds. Tell them I died. Give them the toll-free hotline number.”

“But nobody ever answers the toll-free hotline.”

“Exactly.”

“Look, these are Jedi. They’re not just going to go away.”

“I know, I know. Oh gods! What a terrible idea this was.”

“Let me state for the record that this could all have been avoided if we had followed my suggestion and blown their ship up before it landed.”

“Don’t be stupid, we have to establish the shadowy mastermind behind these events!”
“You mean that hooded weirdo who looks like Emperor—”

“Yes, him!”

“I can’t believe we’re taking advice from someone we’ve never met who won’t show his face or even tell us his name.”

“He has a name.”

“If that’s his real name, then I’m the Queen of Alderaan.”

Gunray shuddered at the thought, but Rune was right; Sidious, as their enigmatic benefactor called himself, was probably an alias. Still, the man (if he was a man) could make things happen. It was best not to sweat the details.

Firing up the holoprojector, he put on his best game face as a flickering, three-dimensional image of Sidious appeared. Oddly, the man appeared to be having some sort of seizure.

“Gods,” breathed Rune, “is he… dancing?”

Heavy bass notes accompanied by a female’s throaty voice boomed from the projector’s speakers: “Can’t read my, can’t read my, no he can’t read my poker face…”

Realizing he was on, Sidious cut the music with a twitch of his hand and turned to face them. As usual, the hood of his nondescript cloak was up, leaving the upper three-quarters of his face in absolute shadow and rendering his true identity an utter mystery to people who had never seen Return of the Jedi.

“Damn it, Viceroy,” he said, “I told you not to contact me. I’m the Big Bad; I call you.”

He had a sumptuous bass voice that carried a perpetual sneer, as if he was licking each syllable on the way out of his mouth.

“I aporogize, Rord Sidious. We have an ulgent deveropment.”

“Drop the accent, you nincompoop. It may fool everybody else but I’m getting tired of it.”

“Yes. Right. Um.” Gunray fiddled nervously with his hands. “We have a slight hitch in the plan.”

“The only hitch in the plan is you, you halfwit. What now? Have you forgotten how to tie your shoes?”

“No, we…” He swallowed, hard. “We think the two ambassadors might be Jedi.”

“What? Are you sure?”

“Well, they’re wearing Jedi robes, and carrying Jedi lightsabers. And they said they were Jedi.”

“This changes nothing. Skip to Step 2, and add Step 1½.”

“Step 1½?”

“Kill the Jedi.”

“Is that legal?”

“Of course it isn’t legal, you complete arse,” Sidious snapped. “Neither is invading Peaceful
Planets, now stop—bothering—me! Sidious out.”

His image flickered one last time and disappeared.

Gunray gestured impatiently at his assistant. “You heard the man. Kill our guests.”

“Again, there are several logistical problems with that sentence.”

“Use that poison gas we’ve been saving.”

“Poison gas? I thought that was air freshener.”

As one, they looked over at the opposite side of the bridge, where a crewmember was about to enter the executive washroom.

“Don’t—!”

Too late. The doors slid shut behind him, and moments later they heard his body hit the floor.

In the Profiteer’s waiting room, Obi-Wan Kenobi, Padawan apprentice to Jedi Knight Qui-Gon Jinn, paced anxiously while his master happily leafed through a back issue of Wookiee Living. He was a rather handsome young man, with short brown hair and a pale complexion, the sort of fellow you might expect to spot trains or get brassed off. His master’s blithe and erratic behaviour made him nervous, but then, a lot of things made him nervous: bounty hunters, volcanoes, waiting rooms, suspicious moons. Recently he’d had a recurring nightmare about a small moon that turned out to be a battle station. It was preposterous, but then again…

“What’s taking so long, master?”

“First part of the negotiations, Obi-Wan: the head games. They try to sweat you out.”

“I don’t know about sweating, but if that droid brings us one more tray of canapés I’m going to vomit.”

An distant explosion rumbled through the ship, and instantly he sensed what it was.

“Master, they have destroyed our ship!”

Qui-Gon seemed unperturbed by this development and remained glued to his magazine.

“Patience, my young Padawan. Everything will work out just fine.”

The door slammed shut.

“And they’ve locked us in.”

“Patience.”

“And now they’re trying to gas us to death,” Obi-Wan cried as sinister vapour began seeping from the vents.

“And I’m trying to read this article.”

Calmly, Qui-Gon took a sip of his coffee.
“That coffee’s decaf,” his Padawan quietly said.

Brown liquid spewed from Qui-Gon’s mouth, drenching a photo of a Wookiee housewife demonstrating the proper etiquette for beating a rude houseguest with his or her own severed arm.

“That does it,” he growled, rising to his feet. “Time to find Viceroy Gunboat and negotiate his face off.”

He sniffed the air.

“Do you smell… lilacs?”

|—o—|

Sergeant 0H-5H1T of the Federation’s Droid Army couldn’t help feeling nervous as his unit approached the waiting room door. You’d expect a robot to be without fear, but the Powers That Be had decided it would be funny if droids reacted like they had emotions. When 0H-5H1T met the person responsible, he swore he would blast them if he ever got the chance. He decided to ease the tension with a joke:

“Knock, knock,” he said as they came to a halt.

Misunderstanding, one of his battle droids leaned forward and rapped on the door.

“No,” he sighed, “you’re supposed to ask, ‘Who’s there?’ Knock, knock.”

“Who’s there?” came the obedient response. Before 0H-5H1T could reply, however, the door slid open and a pair of Jedi burst through with lightsabers drawn.

“Jedi,” he shouted. “Blast ‘em!”

Really, they tried. They really did. But what chance did cookie-cutter mooks have against a pair of protagonists armed with laser swords and telekinesis? It was an extremely short fight. As 0H-5H1T lay on the floor, wondering where his legs had gone, he heard one of his subordinates mumble…

“I don’t get it…”

|—o—|

“Sergeant, do you have them?”

“Had to re-prioritize, sir,” buzzed 0H-5H1T’s tinny voice. “Currently working on locating my lower body.”

“You mean they got past you?”

“Through us, to be exact.”

“Stang!” Gunray threw the comlink in the corner and glanced up just in time to see two robed figures dashing down the corridor towards the bridge.

“I’d like a word with you, Viceroy Gundam!” shouted the leader, a bearded man with a brown ponytail.

What? “Seal the bridge!”
Heavy durasteel doors slammed shut over the entrance. There was a muffled clang and an “Ow!” from the other side. “Activate security perimeter,” Gunray added as a precaution. A battle droid near the door braced a chair against it.

“There,” said Gunray, exhaling. “That should hold them.”

Rune raised a green finger. “Don’t Jedi have plasma swords that can cut through durasteel like hot butter?”

In response, a bar of green light slid through the door and traced a circle of molten metal. It withdrew just as the piece fell to the floor with a clang. The bearded Jedi’s face appeared in the hole, grinning brightly.

“Thereeeeeeeeeeeere’s Gonny!”

Panic crept up Gunray’s chest and constricted his throat. It was never supposed to go like this. He was a man of profit margins and growth strategies, not military strategy. For fuck’s sake, he ran a corporation! He wasn’t exactly sure what his company did (the script was rather vague on that point) but he had a notion it involved mergers and acquisitions. Now he was trapped on the bridge of his own ship, besieged by berserk Jedi, one of whom had just called him “Gundam.” Oh, why did he take the advice of a figure that kept his face hidden in the shadows? It was so clichéd...

“Close the blast doors!” That was Rune. Brilliant idea. Surely even lightsabers could not penetrate triple reinforced, premium grade tritanium.

Short answer: they could.

As the metal around Qui Gon’s lightsaber started to glow orange and soften, Gunray smiled brightly at Rune and said, “Maybe we can convince them to use the executive bathroom.”

Rune rolled his eyes and slapped an enormous blue button labelled “DESTROYERS.”

“— o —

“But master, wouldn’t it go quicker if we both used our lightsabers?”

“I am the senior Jedi here, and as such it is my duty to cut through doors. You keep watch. And quit calling me Buttmaster.”

“Keeping watch,” Obi-Wan sighed, scanning the corridor. Battle droids wouldn’t have been much of a threat, even if they did somehow manage to get the drop on two men with precognition. He supposed that, if he had both hands tied, was blindfolded, and his lightsaber was made of cheese, dispatching the droids might take longer than passing gas. Faintly he wished for a challenge, but he forgot you should always be careful what you wish for.

Sinister steel orbs rolled around the corner, gaining speed. At first he was confused; what possible danger could enormous metal balls possibly pose? Then they got closer, and he realized the orbs were actually more droids, rolled up into spherical shapes for ease of transit. This confused him further; why go to the trouble of building a droid that rolled up like an armadillo? Why not just give it wheels or something? Being a man, he already knew the answer: because it wouldn’t look cool.

Cool was the only way to describe destroyer droids. Deploying tripod legs, they unfolded to a height of almost seven feet, bristling with weaponry and armour. It would have been a lot cooler if the dizzy droids had unleashed a barrage of blaster fire, rather than stumble around bumping into each other and trying to determine which way was up.
“Master, destroyers!”

Qui-Gon looked up from his work. “What...?”

Getting their bearings, the droids faced their Jedi quarry and opened fire. Obi-Wan swung his lightsabers about, bouncing the shots back to their owners, but it didn’t seem to be doing much.

“Oh, for—they have force-fields!”

“Well that doesn’t seem very fair.”

“No,” sighed Obi-Wan. Master and Padawan exchanged glances. Together they arrived at the same conclusion.

“RUN AWAY!”

|—o—|

“Are they gone?”

“Check.”

“You check.”

Grumbling, Rune poked his green head out from under the table and sneaked a peek. After awhile the gunfire had stopped, only to resume seconds later. Amid much swearing, the green lightsaber disappeared from the blast doors, and the gunfire receded into the distance again. Viceroy Gunray had suggested they wait a bit longer, in case it started again. Twelve minutes had since passed.

“I don’t see anything,” Rune said, resuming his position under the table beside his boss.

“They could be invisible.”

“Jedi cannot turn invisible.”

“How would anyone know?”

Silently they digested the implications.

“Maybe we ought to stay here a little while longer.”

“Good idea.”

They would have stayed there longer if the incoming transmission alert had not sounded.

“Oh no,” moaned Gunray. “People always call at the worst times.”

“IT’s the Queen of Naboo, sir,” said a battle droid crouched beneath one of the other workstations. “Shall I put her through?”

“Don’t answer!”

“Answer? Okay!”

Gunray gasped. At the droid’s confirmation, the battleship’s enormous circular forward screen rippled like a mercury fishpond and displayed an image of Queen Amidala in all her glory. With
her extravagant makeup, she looked rather like a geisha—a geisha wearing Liberace’s bathrobe and a gold lame model of the Taj Mahal on her head.

“Viceroy.”

“Oof!” Rune fell into the screen’s line of sight on hands and knees, pushed from behind by Gunray. Scowling, he rearranged his robes and stood up.

“I am the Viceroy’s assistant, Rune Haako. How may I be of service?”

“By getting the Viceroy out here,” Queen Amidala demanded imperiously.

“Tell her I’m not here,” hissed Gunray.

“He says he isn’t here, your highness.”

“You—!” Growling at his assistant, Gunray emerged from his hiding place. “Ah, hello—hum. Ahem. Harro, Queen Amidala. So pleased to see you. You could not let us be those text messages of mine, yet heal you awl, talking to me.”

“Cut the crap, Viceroy. I’ve spoken to the Chancellor. He says he dispatched two ambassadors and they’re going to make you leave us alone and stuff.”

“Ambassadors? I did not see any ambassadors. Did you see any ambassadors?”

“Only the hole they made in our door,” replied Rune, *sotto voce*.

“WERL, as you can see, there awl no ambassadors here. So I whirr be seeing you velly soon.”

“I’m telling!” Face screwed up in anger, Queen Amidala terminated the transmission.

Rune sighed. “That could have gone better.”

“Do you think she liked me?”

“Sure, she liked you,” nodded Rune, not really meaning it. With a touch, he jammed all communications to and from Naboo.

|—o—|

Battle droid M-03 hated guard duty. After all, there was a reason his kind were called “battle droids” and not “guard droids.” He’d rather be planetside, blasting away at... little furry creatures. That felt right for some reason. Failing that, he’d settle for frog people.

“...had to go back for my lightsaber...”

What was that? Cocking his head, he aimed his auditory receptors at the air vent behind him.

“...want to know why we can’t have force fields.”

“Because it wouldn’t be fair, would it? We’ve already got unstoppable plasma swords and telekinesis; what more do you want?”

“Force fields would be nice, that’s all.”

“You’re never happy, Obi-Wan. Never happy.”
Shaking his head, M-03 decided he would report to maintenance first thing when he got off duty, and get his aural sensors checked.

—o—

After an hour in the ventilation ducts with Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan was about ready to swallow his lightsaber.

“I’m just saying, Obi-Wan, that the window for negotiation is not yet closed.”

“But master, they tried to gas us to death! And then shoot us! Twice!”

“Obviously—remember what I said about the Buttmaster thing—the negotiations haven’t started. Once they meet The Negotiator, it’ll all be over in seconds.”

“Somehow I doubt that.”

“Ho-hum. Master, Padawan,” Qui-Gon gloated, pointing first to himself and then at Obi-Wan. “Ergo, I’m right.”

He would have gone on, had he not suddenly mashed his face up against the metal grille of the air intake. Obi-Wan failed to stop in time and they fell through, landing in an undignified heap on the floor. Cautiously, they peered around a crate of explosive ordinance at the Profiteer’s enormous hangar bay. Droids bustled every which way, carrying loads of equipment, ammunition, and “PROPERTY OF THE TRADE FEDERATION” placards. Armoured transports and battle tanks rumbled up loading ramps into the bellies of huge landing craft with the words “NABOO OR BUST” painted on their flanks. A Neimoidian’s voice echoed over the loudspeaker: “Invasion Fleet Squadron One, prepare for takeoff. Invasion Fleet Squadron Two, stand by.”

“Hmm,” mused Qui-Gon, scratching his chin, “it seems they are preparing to invade the planet.”

“Wow, master, your Jedi intuition skills are frightening sometimes.”

“I know. Don’t worry, Obi-Wan, yours will come in time. Perhaps we had better relocate the negotiations to the surface. Get the Queen and everybody around a table, and we can resolve this.”

“Master, I don’t think—”

“Question is, how to get there from here.”

Scanning the hangar, Obi-Wan spotted an opening. Two droid transports had collided, leaving the landing craft unguarded while the drivers shouted at each other about who had the right of way. Using stealth, he and Qui-Gon could easily slip into the ship undetected.

“Master, that starship! We could—”

“Quiet, Obi-Wan, I’m cogitating. Now... if we held our breaths, and leapt from the airlock, we could UHHHHHHHHHHHHH.”

“Sorry, Master,” Obi-Wan apologized, lowering the ventilation grating he had used to knock Qui-Gon unconscious. Keeping an eye out for alert droids, he began the arduous task of dragging his master into the undefended ship that would carry them to Naboo.
Bad Hair Day

Chapter Summary

We meet the Queen of Naboo and her court, Obi-Wan learns an important fact about himself, and Qui-Gon discovers a friend.

Naboo: an oasis of tranquility in a turbulent galaxy. Or at least, that’s what it said in the travel brochures, because it sounded better than “Naboo: so boring nobody has ever bothered to invade before because we have nothing of value.” It harboured a modest human population, mostly architects and sculptors, and presumably some farmers, because the food had to come from somewhere, although nobody had ever seen one; a blurry hologram circulated the Net, showing a distant figure rapidly walking away that, if you squinted at it, appeared to be carrying a pitchfork, although it was widely rumoured to be a hoax. Children rebelled against their parents by becoming plumbers and mechanics and police officers. There wasn’t much of a brain drain, because it’s difficult to get people to take you seriously with a planet named “Naboo” on your résumé. Scenery exports propped up the economy. Rumour had it that Naboo harboured an indigenous species called the Gungans, who were far more interesting, as well as several fascinating varieties of sea monster, but the Secretary of Tourism was a nervous little man who hated to get wet, and everything not level and covered with grass made him queasy.

Prior to the blockade, the only recent event of any significance whatsoever was the coronation of a new queen, chosen by due democratic process, which kind of defeats the purpose of being queen in the first place. It was front-page news for weeks, relegating a report on possible farmer sightings to the rear page (Naboo newspapers only had one page—double-sided, if you were lucky). What made this queen so unusual was that she was fourteen years old. This should tell you all you need to know about the Naboo: they deliberately chose to let a pubescent girl run their entire planet. Eventually all that bucolic scenery and never-ending tranquility did funny things to one’s mind...

After calling the Viceroy out, Queen Amidala immediately contacted Senator Palpatine, who represented Naboo in the Galactic Senate. Being the Senator from Naboo was kind of like being the Ambassador to Tatooine: you got a nice office, invites to all the best parties, and your name on a plaque, but nobody expected you to actually do anything. Palpatine (nobody ever thought to ask about his first name; he seemed embarrassed by it, as if anything could sound more embarrassing than “Palpatine”) spent most of his time playing video games, staring out the window, and assuring all within earshot that he had no political ambitions whatsoever. This statement of his will seem a lot funnier in Episode III.

While Queen Amidala attempted to communicate with him via hologram, he appeared to be playing a rather unusual game-like stationary hopscotch. His feet kept stamping four very specific spots on the floor below him, while raucous Eurotrance played in the background and a male voice occasionally shouted, “Marvellous! Good! Good! Perfect!”

“Senator, things are getting worse,” said the Queen, but Palpatine ignored her. How anyone could ignore Queen Amidala was a mystery. Her hair was practically a courtier in and of itself, a jaw-dropping array of brunette strands and Feng Shui, ranged around her head like a pillow (presumably in case she slipped on a banana peel) with a headdress most Hindu goddesses would have rejected as “too ostentatious.” Add the Kabuki makeup and sleeves you could lose a Wookiee in, and it was a wonder she wasn’t visible from space. She lounged in a velvet-backed...
chair, surrounded by her seven hundred handmaidens, all cloaked in orange cowls like a bunch of monks with lipstick. In the centre of her gaze, a projection of Palpatine continued his strange, frantic motions.

“Fine, thank you, your highness; the weather here is magnificent as always,” he replied.

“Senator Palpatine, you’re not listening. Our planet is under attack.”

“Good! Good!”

“Senator! I’m trying to tell you something important. Men in green rubber masks are threatening to invade us.”

The song finished, and so did Palpatine, wiping the sweat from his brow with a cloth.

“Wait a second. You’re being invaded by the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles?”

“No! For the last time, the Trade Federation—”

“I’m sorry...highness...breaking up,” said Palpatine, but he was the one breaking up. His image twitched and flickered like Onslow’s television before fading away completely.

“Damn it.” One of the handmaidens presented herself before the Queen, who slugged her. As she crawled back to her place, Queen Amidala turned to the hologram technicians, who were sampling a sticky, strawberry-coloured substance that seeped down the front of their equipment.

“They’re jamming our communications,” said one, withdrawing his finger from his mouth with a pop.

“I need ideas, people. This blockade thing is giving me frizz, which means a bad hair day, and when my hair has a bad day, we all have a bad day. Suggestions?”

“We could form an underground resistance,” said Sio Bibble (no, really), the elderly man to the Queen’s left.

“There isn’t anything to resist yet.”

“Exactly! We’d be getting a head start.”

“That’s absurd, Bibble.”

“Well, don’t blame me if I don’t know anything! I was the janitor, but you promoted me because you saw my nametag and thought it was funny.”

“It is funny.” She giggled. “Bibble, Bibble, Bibble.”

“We could try actually defending our homes,” muttered the black man standing behind her.

“Fighting isn’t an option. Come on, I just renovated this palace.”

“Wow, you’re an inspiring leader. Whatever happened to fighting them on the beaches and the landing grounds, on the fields and in the streets?”

“Please, Captain Panaka. We’re a Peaceful Planet, remember? Our ‘army’ is you and your old college buddy. You have one gun between you.”

“Actually, it’s in the shop.”
Snapping her fingers, she inhaled utterly unabashedly as a lit death stick appeared in her mouth; the handmaidens’ robes barely rustled. Exhaling a cloud of noxious smoke, she looked around at her circle of advisors and said what everyone was thinking.

“We’re fucked.”

Miles and miles away, Obi-Wan Kenobi was coming to a similar conclusion. Having arrived safely on Naboo, he now perched on the roof of a droid carrier, a cumbersome, rumbling monster that mowed down whatever foliage stood in its path. Pretty soon, the entire planet would look like a fairway, instead of just ninety percent of its landmass. That was probably Viceroy Gunray’s plan, he thought ruefully: market the entire planet as the galaxy’s biggest golf course. Miniature golf, to judge by all the statue heads lying around. Still, the sun was shining, he was out of danger for the moment, and Qui-Gon was still unconscious.

“Muh… muh… Goeth… Goeth would have b-bought this…”

He was muttering in his sleep again, curled up like a sleeping dog on the tan-coloured durasteel. Maybe he ought to wake Master up. Surely that was the proper thing to do. Yet it was so peaceful...

“More people… I could have gotten more out… More out!”

Qui-Gon lurched upright like a rebooted protocol droid, gasping for air.

“Good of you to rejoin us, master.”

“Obi-Wan! Where are we?”

Silence, broken only by the rustle and crunch of vegetation beneath the transport, followed as Obi-Wan glanced around at the undeniably peaceful and lush jungle their ride was cutting a swathe through, rendering it decidedly un-peaceful.

“Not entirely sure, master, but I think—and this is going out on a limb here—that we probably aren’t on Tatooine.”

“Don’t be too sure, my young Padawan.”

A billboard drifted past, welcoming visitors to “Scenic Naboo: Home of the Elusive Farmer!” When Qui-Gon continued to peer about with furrowed brow, stroking his beard in deep concentration, Obi-Wan could no longer take it.

“For Force sake, we’re on Naboo!”

“I knew that. But how did we get there?”

Obi-Wan’s mouth went dry. If master found out about being cold-cocked, he’d get awfully upset...

“Ah, I recall now! You leapt from the airlock, and I grabbed you and carried us safely to the surface. Obviously all that expenditure of the Force caused me to lose consciousness.”

“Yes, master, that is exactly what happened.”

“What would you ever do without me, Obi-Wan?”
“Several things,” he muttered under his breath.

“Okay, on the count of three.” Qui-Gon stood up, gathered his robes about himself, and tensed for a spring. “One, two—”

“Master, wait! What are you doing?”

“I am bunching up my leg muscles in order to propel myself from the top of this vehicle to the ground. In most circles it is referred to as ‘jumping,’ Obi-Wan.”

“No! I mean—Why?”

“Why not?”

“I thought our job was to find the queen.”

“Right.”

“Well, the queen is in Theed, the capital city.” Another billboard slid past. *Now Approaching SCENIC THEED* — *Too boring to have a motto.* *Population: who cares?*

“Right.”

“Which we are rapidly approaching.”

“Right.”

“So why don’t we just stay where we are? We’ll be in the capital city in minutes, and ahead of Federation forces.”

“Because it’d be boring! We have to have exciting chase scenes, and pointless conversations with weird aliens, and scenery porn. Besides, once Viceroy Gunship meets the Negotiator, it’ll all be over. Now as your Jedi mentor, I am ordering you to jump from this transport.”

“No. I am going to stay right here.”

Taking a few steps to the far side of the transport, he folded his arms defiantly and firmly planted his feet for about two seconds until a heavy tree branch swept him over the side.

“See,” gloated Qui-Gon as he landed lightly beside his Padawan, “the tree agrees.” Lying facedown in the muck whisked up by the transports’ repulsorlifts, Obi-Wan could only curse the day he was born.

“Come Obi-Wan, no lying about. We have a Queen to find!”

“...Hate you...”

“Let’s see... all of these tank thingies are heading in that direction, so logically we should go... this way!”

He set off in the opposite direction, striding the purposeful stride of the utterly oblivious. Mud squished beneath his boots and splashed on his robes. Jerking free with a mournful sucking sound, Obi-Wan shook what he could off his clothes and set off after his errant master, calling down all matter of maledictions under his breath against the Jedi Order, battle droids, peaceful planets, and the Master/Padawan system.
"By the Force," he swore, "when I have an apprentice it's going to be different. I'll be his best friend. I'll be the best mentor ever." This statement will also seem much funnier in Episode III.

Qui-Gon hummed a jaunty tune, one that sounded awfully familiar.

"Da-da-da-DA, DAAAAAA, da da da DA-DAAA, da da da DA-DAAA, dun dun dun-DUNNNNN. I say, Obi Wan, isn't this fun?"

"Master, the queen could be in mortal peril."

"Ridiculous. You told me she was in Theed."

After backtracking for a few dozen meters, he veered off to his left.

"Exactly where we need to be, my young Padawan."

"Lost in some godforsaken jungle?"

"Lost? Ha! I scoff. The Qui-Guy has an innate sense of direction."

"Really? Was it your 'innate sense of direction' that got us lost on Cartos, the Planet of Maps and Clearly Marked Pathways?"

"Have I ever led you wrong?"

"Yes! We ended up in a nest of gundarks! And there aren't even any gundarks on Cartos!"

"It wasn't my fault. They should have put a sign on that zoo exhibit."

There had been a sign, ten feet high, and Obi-Wan was opening his mouth to say so when a blaster bolt zipped over his head and scorched a hole in a tree.

"Bloody hell, what now?"

Qui-Gon ducked behind the tree as a battle droid flew through the jungle towards them, riding a strange contraption rather like a flying Segway, albeit an armed one. Deep down in his heart, every man knows he has secretly wanted a flying Segway equipped with guns. Drawing and igniting his lightsaber, he anticipated the vector of the next two shots and intercepted them with his blade, calculating the precise angle of return that would send them through the battle droid's head. Yoda always made it look so easy, but Force powers didn't extend to complex geometry at the speed of thought. Luckily Obi-Wan paid attention in Lightsaber Trigonometry classes, because the flying... thing floated neatly to a halt, whereupon its decapitated driver slid off with a clank and a splash.

"Marvellous."

He nudged the droid aside with one toe and looked for a way to mount the flying bike doohickey. Here, finally, was his ticket out of this mess and into a timely arrival at the Royal Palace, preferably just as the queen fell from some high place and into his outstretched arms. I wonder if there's a King of Naboo...

"Obi-Wan, look out!"

Green-tinged plasma sliced across his field of vision, bisecting the air Segway before sliding back into Qui-Gon's lightsaber. Both halves toppled into the mud and caught fire. Twitching slightly,
Obi-Wan rounded on his master.

"WHAT THE BLOODY HELL DID YOU DO THAT FOR??"

"It looked dangerous, and you don’t have a helmet."

As if that explained everything, he set off into the jungle again, with Obi-Wan trailing along behind him and muttering like a senile Rodian.

"Helmet... fucking jungle... or is it a swamp? ...Bugger."

This last exclamation came as he saw Qui-Gon running back towards him, ominous shapes ploughing through the swamp/jungle up ahead.

"Run away, run away!"

Ponytail flailing, he knocked his apprentice over in his pell-mell rush to escape. Struggling to his feet, Obi-Wan saw the trees fall away like a curtain pulled from its rod (or, if you’ve seen The Jungle Book—not the live action one, the Disney version—like trees collapsing under the feet of militarized elephants on patrol) in front of a row of Federation MTTs, at least eleven across. No time to run to either side, he desperately took off after his fleeing master, slipping in the muck, but the growling behemoths drew inexorably closer. He felt something poking his behind, and turned around to see: it was a blaster cannon, the muzzle of which could easily accommodate his fist.

Yelling at the top of his lungs, he pressed his pace, willing the Force to grant him more speed, but the Force was a fickle mistress and failed to tell him about the knotty root that snagged his foot and turned his world into a tumbling blur of green and brown before the MTT drove over him and replaced it with a blissful white:

|—o—|

"Greetings, Lord Sidious."

"Dispense with the chitchat, Viceroy. Why are you bothering me? Again?"

Fidgeting nervously, Nute Gunray glanced at Rune for help. His assistant shrugged. All around the bridge of the Profiteer, Neimodians and droids alike were abuzz with reports of troops advancing unimpeded, asking for further orders. All signs pointed to an invasion that was going off without a hitch.

"Um... We control over sixty percent of the planet’s surface."

"Oh good for that. What do you want, a medal? An achievement unlocked for 60% Completion?"

"Our troops report zero resistance."

"Surprise. The Planet of Sunlit Meadows and Liberal Arts Majors offers zero resistance to your deadly robot horde. That was utterly unexpected."

"Nothing stands in our way."

"Is there a point to this conversation, Viceroy? Because I have a quiche in the oven."

Please don’t ask about the Jedi, please don’t ask about the Jedi...

"Just wanted to let you know that Step Two is going swimmingly."
“So basically you contacted me for the express purpose of telling me everything is proceeding according to plan.”

“Basically.”

“That’s my job, you prat. This scene establishes absolutely nothing we don’t already know. I will contact you when the plot develops further. Do—not—contact—me!” Blue holographic spit flew from Sidious’ mouth, disappearing at the limit of the projector’s range. “Understood?”

“Yes, Lord Sidious.”

“You didn’t tell him about the missing Jedi,” Rune burst out when the transmission ended.

“Fine. You call him back and tell him.”

“Forget it.”

Yawning, Nute stretched his arms and glanced at the crew.

“We won’t be needed for hours. Want to play Scrabble™?”

“You always cheat at Scrabble.”

“I do not!”

“Do too.”

“Do not!”

“Do too times infinity.”

—o—

Peaceful.

That was the first word to come to Obi-Wan’s mind when he opened his eyes.

It’s because Qui-Gon isn’t here.

He surveyed the white expanse. No details he could discern and absolutely nothing to be sensed through the Force. Except… except a strange presence. One greater than all he had ever felt. It filled the infinite space with essence to spare.

“OBI-WAN.”

“Um… yes?”

“OBI-WAN!”

“Er. Here I am… Lord?”

Like an entire multitude of people withdrawing into one, the Presence coalesced before his very eyes, resolving into the overweight, middle-aged figure of a bearded, bespectacled man with an abundance of grey-curlly hair. Rising from a rickety folding chair that sagged beneath his weight, he put down his cup, wiped the coffee from his moustache, and straightened his XXXL-plaid shirt.
“Call me George.”

“O…K… George. I’m dead, aren’t I?”

“Not quite,” the bushy-haired man explained. “You see, Obi-Wan, there are great things in store for you. Grand, impressive things vital to the plot.”

“Oh. I guess that’s good to know. Thank you for um, sparing me?”

“I didn’t really have any choice. The things I mentioned; they’ve already happened.”

Obi-Wan shook his head. “I’m sorry, what?”

“See, the audience already knows what you’re going to do, and when. So I can’t allow you to be gunned down by a random battle droid, or impaled by some angry Zabrak—”

“Angry Zabrak?”

“Forget I said that. Point is, Obi-Wan, you have to be alive to complete the actions you will someday commit, from your perspective.”

“My head is starting to hurt. Are you saying I can’t die?”

“Not until the first movie. Fourth movie. Woo, now my head hurts.”

“If Qui-Gon goes on like this, I might wish I could die.”

“Oh, you won’t have to worry about Qui-Gon much longer.”

Obi-Wan blinked. “Beg pardon?”

George ignored him. He raised one meaty hand, and a laptop computer appeared in it.

“See you around!”

Qui-Gon Jinn, greatest Jedi ever, could not believe how lazy his Padawan was being. What was this, his third time lying down since they set out on their adventure? Such behaviour would never do. The Qui-Guy would have to administer a little constructive discipline. He would accomplish such by approaching his wayward apprentice and putting his face as close to Obi-Wan’s as he could without them actually touching. It was a favourite technique of his, and always seemed to make the lad uncomfortable for some reason.

Slipping a little on the mud, he clasped his hands behind his back, bent over as far as he dared and stared at his Padawan’s closed eyelids. Any closer and a bystander would think Qui-Gon was administering CPR. Which he might need to, if Obi-Wan didn’t wake up soon. Provided he could recall how it worked. It involved punching the victim in the stomach. Or was that the Heimlich Maneuver? His magnificent brown tresses slid forward and lightly brushed Obi-Wan’s nose. The boy’s nose twitched a little, muscles activating throughout his face, eventually causing him to open his eyes.


“AUGH!” Legs and arms flailing, Obi-Wan scuttled a good ten feet backwards through the mud
before colliding headfirst with a partially crushed tree. Such liveliness in one so shiftless, Qui-Gon thought sadly.

“I am disappointed in you, my young Padawan. While I bust my bottom trying to complete our objective, here I find you slacking off again.”

“Slacking off?”

Oh, dear. Seemed the tree trunk had done more damage than he thought, for now the boy was clutching his head and whimpering.

“Do try not to let it happen again.”

Now, why had he come over here again? Oh, yes. The new party member. He sensed the frogman trying to edge away, and snagged its arm.

“Look, Obi-Wan! I’ve made a friend!”

His apprentice remained on the ground, covering his face. “Don’t tell me: another ‘Chosen One’?”

“No.”

“Good. The last one you ‘discovered’ lasted five minutes.”

“That wasn’t my fault!”

“He tried to hold his lightsaber by the wrong end.”

“Never mind that. This charming fellow is going to get us to Theed!”

“Let mesa go,” squawked the charming fellow. Long floppy ears flapped about his elongated neck as he tried to pull away. “My already told yousa, Theed besa right ober dalee!”

He pointed in the direction the tank-things had gone, at the elegant minarets and cupolas just visible over what foliage remained. Qui-Gon frowned; this guy didn’t get it. Not an addition to the party, then, but some hapless native tribesman, overawed by encountering such advanced beings.

Obi-Wan stared at the newcomer. “Was that Basic?”

“No. Evidently this lowly savage has no grasp of the complex concepts required for linguistic intercourse.” Heh. I said ‘intercourse.’” “Allow me to attempt to communicate.”

Throwing his chest out, Qui-Gon tried his best to communicate.

“ME, FRIEND. ME, JEDI. ME… NEED… FIND… QUEEN.”

“Oie boie,” sighed the alien, clutching webbed, scarlet hands to his eyestalks. “Dis guy, hesa asken but hesa no listenen!” Total gibberish.

“Tell me about it,” Obi-Wan replied.

Qui-Gon tried a different tack. “TAKE… ME. TO… YOUR… LEADER,” he boomed, pounding his chest.

“Boss Nass?! Hesa no helpen yousa get to da queen!”

Perhaps the lightsaber, with its bright colours and strange sounds, would impress this poor
primitive. He drew it and held it in front of the frogman’s face.

“For Force sake, master, what are you doing?”

“ME HAVE FLASHY MAGIC LIGHTSTICK. ME SHOW YOU CHIEF.”

The frogman had grown very quiet, pacified by the brilliant light.

“Please… my no wanna be dyen…”

Still making no sense. Qui-Gon waved the weapon around, circling the savage’s head like a halo.

“Okey-day,” he screeched, ducking frantically, “okey-day! My show yousa da way to Gunga City!”

Good. The awesome display had mesmerized the savage, and he now bowed to them as superior beings. Next step would be to enthrall the tribal chief.

“Yes. Good. You take us to village. We follow.”

“Take yousa dere? My no can go back dere. My have been banished.”

Hm. The creature appeared to be hesitating. Perhaps an additional display was needed to ensure he recognised them as gods.

“Obi-Wan, pull out your lightsaber.”

“No!”

“Do it!”

“No!”

“Do it or I’ll make you clean the Huttese toilets at the embassy again.”

Gulping, Obi-Wan quickly pointed his lightsaber towards the primitive being and turned it on. When a second rod of contained plasma shot towards his face, the creature’s eyes almost leapt off the ends of their stalks, and then wobbled about and rolled upwards. Gurgling uncontrollably, it fell backwards into the muck with a splash, an unbelievably long tongue rolling from its mouth to the waist of its rudimentary garment.

“You know, Obi-Wan, I think you may have overdone it.”
Our intrepid Jedi meet the Gungans.

Few people know it, but underneath all that manicured green grass, Naboo is mostly water. This makes very little sense to those in the know: geologists, planetologists, oceanologists, ecologists... “A planet can’t be filled with water,” they say. “That’s stupid.” Nevertheless Naboo continued to exist, and those scientists should just be grateful it isn’t a gigantic disc on the back of a turtle.

Naturally any planet of mostly water is going to have frog people living on it, just as a moon with below-average gravity and glow-in-the-dark flora is going to have sparkly blue catmazons living on it. It’s science. The Gungans always insisted to anybody who would listen that they were not native to Naboo, but descendants of the great Hey-Lisa-Lassie: star traveler, Galactic Messiah, and proponent of various psychotropic substances. They’d been living there long enough, however, that they are generally regarded as the “original” inhabitants even though the true original inhabitants of Naboo were near-microscopic diatomaceous life forms that populate the planet’s vast oceans in incalculable numbers. Since diatoms can’t hold weapons, only Gungans and humans are listed as “resident species.”

Over time, the Gungans did rather well for themselves. They built a large metropolis (imaginatively christened “Gunga City”), but stopped at one because they got to jamming and celebrating with a little herb, and after a while none of them could remember what they were doing.

After resuscitating the poor, terrified frogman (Obi-Wan preferred not to think about it), Qui-Gon had insisted he take them to this underwater city.

“Looken,” he sighed, “Gunga City issa underwater, okee day? Yousa can breath underwater?”

“After a fashion,” grinned Qui-Gon. “Obi-Wan, your Jedi breathing device.” Qui-Gon pulled one out of his robes. It was a simple piece of engineering: a tube, worn in the mouth, capable of extracting breathable air from the surrounding water. Obi-Wan had never imagined he would need one on this mission.

Qui-Gon folded his arms in disapproval. “Don’t tell me you didn’t bring one.”

“We were supposed to be negotiating a peace treaty!”

“Yes, but a Jedi is always prepared. Good thing I brought two.”

So now, after what felt like an eternity of swimming, they were approaching a cluster of underwater pagodas lit up like a Life Day Tree. At least they were arriving in a city, even if it was the wrong one. Maybe he could find a HoloBooth and report Qui-Gon to the Council. No, Obi-Wan decided. He was no snitch. And anyways, the Council would probably ignore his complaints. Hell, they probably wouldn’t even take the call. They were the ones who put him in
Qui-Gon’s charge in the first place, despite the fact that Jinn didn’t want any Padawan except this prophesied Chosen One he obsessively sought after.

According to Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan wasn’t in the running because supposedly the Chosen One had to be “discovered,” and Obi-Wan had been brought to the Temple as an infant like the others. Qui-Gon had sort of a thing about finding the One (there had been six so far), to the point that it was a minor joke amongst senior Jedi. When Plo Koon brought that little Togruta girl back from Shili as a lark, Qui-Gon became furious that somebody had “scooped” him; but the child, Soaker something, had turned out to be a quite ordinary and capable youngling, which was more than could be said for any of Qui-Gon’s discoveries.

Oh, now they were entering the city, pushing through some sort of awful translucent membrane that touched every part of their bodies in a way that made Obi-Wan feel completely violated. Once through, he spat the breather out and took a good look at his surroundings.

It was difficult to see through the sickly-sweet smoke that hung everywhere, but he could pick out more creatures like their guide (who had introduced himself as “Jar Jar Binks”), wearing brightly coloured clothing. Several, mostly the men, had their long ears encased in beaded rainbow sack-hats as they wandered from stall to stall, greeting each other and picking through the variety of fruits (Obi-Wan wanted to know how they got fruit underwater) and seafood available. Snippets of conversation floated to his ears, although the Gungans might as well have been speaking Shyriiwook for all the sense it made.

“Him a rude bwoy. All de while him depon de bashment.”

“A lie! Hesa no ‘at-stepper!”

“Ah nuh mesa fi say dat.”

While Obi-Wan was distracted by all this, a small red crab scuttled up to the visitors.

“Welcome, surface dwellers,” it shouted with a slightly tempered Gungan accent.

Qui-Gon shrieked, “Oh my god, a talking crab!”

Unabashed by his outburst, the talking crab snatched a pair of drumsticks out of a passing Gungan’s pocket and began banging away on a steel drum.

“Oh my god, a drumming crab!”

Hearing the music, other market-goers gathered around and began playing along on saxophones, bass guitars, and what-have-you. The crab opened his oddly anthropomorphic mouth and began to sing at the top of his lungs:

“The seaweed is always greener in somebody else’s lake. You dream about staying up there, but that is a big mistake! Just look at the world around you, right here on the ocean floor. Such wonderful things surround you! What more is you lookin’ for?”

“Oh my god,” Qui-Gon shouted, scarce heard amidst the din, “a singing crab!”

“Under the sea! Under the sea! Darling it’s better down where it’s wetter, take it from me! Up on the shore they work all day, out in the sun they slave away; while we devotin’ full time to floatin’ under the—”

A Gungan dressed in military apparel (the same colourful rags as the others, but with a badge) waded through the crowd on his bipedal reptilian-stead. With one swift motion he impaled the
crab on the end of his spear, which was apparently electrified, because the talking drumming singing crab became a twitching crackling smoking crab and the smell of perfectly cooked crabmeat filled the air.

“A’ right, bashment over,” he announced around a mouthful of crustacean. “Back a work. Jar Jar!” Qui-Gon’s new friend and the soldier swallowed at the same time. “Yousa half ee-dee-at? Di bosses dem gween bun dung yousa.”

“Oh, mesa knew comin’ back here was a mistake!”

“Let’s follow this man,” Qui-Gon muttered in Obi-Wan’s ear. “He killed that awful singing crab, so he must be trustworthy!”

Against his better judgment, Obi-Wan followed Qui-Gon, who followed the Gungan soldier, who herded Jar Jar along with occasional prods of his crab-stained electric spear. Crowds of curious civilians followed them, pupils dilated despite the bright light. For a short time, Obi-Wan managed to forget that there was an invasion on and a queen who needed rescuing and started to enjoy himself. The smoke stopped stinging after a few inhales and although he felt a bit light-headed the locals were extremely friendly and easygoing. Some of them kept passing him a funny-looking homemade death stick, but he politely turned it down. Then, in the sea of jostling duckbills, wobbling eyestalks and ears like mud flaps, a human face caught his eye. He broke away from the crowd for a moment and approached the girl, who turned out to not be quite human.

Wearing two cockleshells that nature had coincidentally grown in the perfect shape for use as a brassiere, she lay on her stomach with bent elbows supporting her chin. Red hair (not redhead red, but actual red, the colour of strawberries) cascaded down her back and stopped just above her waist, exposing a brief stretch of skin before the scales started. Her lower body bulged significantly where a human woman’s hips would be before tapering to a standard fishtail. Batting too long to be real eyelashes, she asked him if he was looking for a good time.

Obi-Wan eyed her tail carefully. “There are several anatomical concerns that need to be addressed first.”

Sadly he never learnt the answer to those pressing questions, because Qui-Gon seized his arm in the grip that meant business.

“Come on, my young Padawan! We’re going to meet their chief! Maybe we’ll be worshiped as gods!”

He couldn’t have been further from the truth.

Without fanfare, they were ushered into a smaller chamber with slightly less smoke than the rest of the city. Someone had slapped a pair of handcuffs on Jar Jar along the way; he looked so utterly miserable that Obi-Wan almost felt sorry for him. Qui-Gon’s typical mule-headedness, he realized, was the reason they were both in this mess.

After a few minutes of standing around, twelve more sombre-looking Gungans wearing austere robes emerged from the door at the far end of the room and assumed places around the elevated table that encircled the room. One by one, each councillor opened an umbrella and held it aloft like a shield.

“Why the umbrellas?” Obi-Wan wondered aloud.

His question was answered presently when a thirteenth Gungan with an impressive collection of
chins entered and stood behind the unoccupied center chair. Rather than bang a gavel or something equally pedestrian—pedestrian would’ve been nice, Obi Wan later thought—he furiously shook his jowls until spit sprayed from his wobbling lips like rain, spattering against the councillors’ umbrellas and drenching Obi Wan’s hair and robes, making an awful “BLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBL” sound. Jar Jar heard it and whimpered instinctively under his floppy ears, which he had thrown over his face in anticipation of the sudden shower. Qui Gon had his eyes closed and a beatific expression plastered across his face, most likely imagining himself under a waterfall or something.

“Oh,” sighed Kenobi, trying to wipe his face on his dripping sleeve, which actually made it worse. “That’s why.” With a flash of understanding, he realized these must be the “bosses” the crab-killer had been on about.

“Big up ‘im Boss Nass,” shouted a herald, or maybe he was a policeman; other than the bosses, all Gungans seemed to wear the same glad rags. Presumably this cryptic statement was a call to order, because the fat one—Boss Nass?—flopped into his chair, chin collection jiggling imposingly, and the others furled their umbrellas and stowed them under their chairs.

“Wah a gwan, Johnny?” Nass inquired at length.

What the bloody hell does that mean? Obi-Wan wondered, before his master clapped a hand to his chest, knocking the wind out of him.

“Stand back, Obi-Wan,” he said. “I’ll handle this.”

“Stand back, Obi-Wan,” he said. “I’ll handle this.”

“Keep quiet, my young Padawan, you’ll ruin everything.” admonished Qui-Gon. Raising his voice, he continued. “Me need submarine! Me come from sky. Need go through big, big water to big, big city.”

“Ah, they’ve had dealings with the Republic before,” Qui Gon whispered excitedly in his apprentice’s ear. “Sadly they have somehow mistaken me for Senator Mothma. Me not Mon Mothma,” he shouted, thumping his chest. “Me Qui Guy. Me great Jedi.”

This statement seemed to stump Nass, so Obi Wan stepped in before his master decided to recount their journey through the medium of interpretive dance.
“Er, we need the sub—the bongo to get to Theed.”

“Babylon,” scoffed one of the sub-bosses. He pronounced it “Bah-bee-lon.”

“Wah mek yousa wan go dehya?”

“We are on a mission to rescue Queen Amidala—”

“Cha! A nuh wesa fi a help dem bait.”

Okay, he was making progress on understanding their particular variation of Basic, if not on gaining their assistance; he had distinctly made out the word “help” and something that sounded like “no.” Suddenly Obi-Wan recalled why the Naboo might be a sore subject: it probably had something to do with the enormous pipe he had seen, “THEED SEWAGE AND WASTE WATER DEPT.” stencilled on the side, dumping gallons of stang and indeterminate fluids into the center of Gunga City.

“Well, there are a lot of lives at stake. More than there would be if we hadn’t detoured here; certainly, but lives all the same.”

“Nah way, mon! Gweh.”

“After the droids take over the surface, what makes you think they’ll leave you—?”

“BLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBL!” Nass interrupted by simply shaking his jowls again. Obi-Wan paused for a moment and gave it another try.

“Alright then. As I was saying, the Naboo people—”

“BLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBL!”

“—form a—”

“BLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBL!”

“—symbiont circle—”

“BLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLB—”

“For Force sake, stop doing that!” bellowed Obi-Wan, wringing saliva out of his robes. “I’m trying to—” There was nothing to wipe his face with, nothing at all. Maybe this is what Hell is like, he thought; spit all over your face and nothing to wipe it.

“This isn’t going very well, Obi-Wan,” Qui-Gon hissed. “Have you any bright shiny objects with which to distract them?”

“I never bring any. They always distract you.”

“I suppose we’ll have to use the lightsabers again.”

“NO!”

“What?”

“I don’t think that would be a good idea.”

“There are no bad ideas, my young Padawan.”
“It won’t work this time.”

“Why not?”

Obi-Wan thought fast. “There are too many of them and not enough lightsabers.”

“Well reasoned. Perhaps we can come back later with the Council.”

“Look, master, we can’t just wave our hands and make them give us what we want.”

For a moment neither of them realized the significance of that statement. Then, slowly, they locked gazes.

“Can’t we?”

ONE JEDI MIND-TRICK LATER

Seawater pressed claustrophobically against the windows of the “bongo,” reminding Obi-Wan how high submarining sat on the list of Things He Had a Bad Feeling About. Possibly it rated higher than flying; no, flying was worse, far worse. At least underwater there was no chance of suddenly plummeting towards the surface, because you were already under the surface. Explosive decompression was impossible; as an added bonus, a liquid medium surrounded your vessel and permitted escape, provided you had a breathing device. Also you were rarely shot at.

On the downside, Qui-Gon Jinn was singing. That almost made blasterfire, gravity wells and the cold, lifeless vacuum of space seem welcoming.

“...Take one down, pass it around; one bottle of beer on the wall! One bottle of beer on the wall, one bottle of beer! Take it down, pass it around; no more bottles of beer on the wall! One more time!” Pausing to take a superhumanly deep breath, he continued. “Ninety-nine bottles of beer on the wall, ninety-nine bottles of beer! Take one down, pass it around; ninety-eight bottles of beer on the wall! Ninety-eight bottles of beer on the wall, ninety-eight bottles of beer! Take one down, pass it around; ninety-seven bottles of beer on the wall! Ninety-seven bottles of beer on the wall, ninety-seven bottles of beer! Take one down...”

Of course he was driving; the “Qui-Guy” could drive anything. Jar Jar quivered and moaned beside him; why his master had insisted on bringing the useless, terrified creature—and given him the front seat—was a mystery. That voice was starting to get on his nerves.

“Master,” Obi-Wan interrupted, losing forever the answer to what happened when there were ninety-one bottles of beer on a wall and you took one down and passed it around, “why did you bring the Gungan?”

“Jedi rules, my young Padawan. They were going to do painful, horrible things to him. We couldn’t leave the poor creature in that predicament.”

“A predicament he was in because you forced him to take you there.”

“Details,” shrugged Qui-Gon.

Obi-Wan turned to Jar Jar and asked, “What in the universe did you do, anyway?”

“Well,” sighed the frogman, “my no big fan of Bob Marley...”

It sounded like the beginning of a lengthy and convoluted tale that somehow led to the teller crashing somebody’s speeder through an exotic pet shop, thus causing an amusing allergic
reaction in a prominent figure of authority who was already out to get him and resulting in banishment; but Jar Jar stopped there.

“That’s it? You don’t like Bob Marley’s music? And for that, they banished you?”

Jar Jar just shrugged. Obi-Wan was beginning to wonder if he should have left Qui-Gon with the Gungans; they were all as crazy as he.

“No need to worry about the past,” the crazy Jedi in question was saying. “Look where we are now!”

“Hundreds of fathoms from where we are supposed to be?”

“Watch your mouth, Obi-Wan. The toilet threat is still on the table.”

“Toilets would be a cakewalk compared to this nightmare.”

“You’re always so pessimistic, my young Padawan. It could be worse.”

Could be worse. He just had to say that, thought Obi-Wan, didn’t he? Now, according to the immutable laws of the universe regarding Things Being Worse, their situation was about to worsen.

Jar Jar was the first to notice it, and his gibbering gained tempo. In the sphere of dark shapes surrounding them, a slightly darker shape moved. It was the same when sensed through the Force: dim leviathan presences, minds as slow and as old as the sea. There was a spark now, travelling miles long neural pathways with glacial slowness. It was hurrying towards the cerebellum like an overanxious messenger, probably to say, “Hey! Wake up! Let’s go eat that thing over there.”

Blasted spark. Feeling the creature’s predatory instincts tauten, rather than seeing it approach in the sub’s running lights, Obi-Wan prodded his singing master.

“Master, we’ve got company.”

“But seventy-seven is the tricky part!”

“Doesn’t this thing have a throttle?”

“I hardly think some overgrown goldfish is a match for the Qui-Guy’s elite piloting skills.”

That “overgrown goldfish” had teeth the size of the Radiant VII (and Radiants I through VI—and presumably IX and beyond now) and was rapidly gaining on them, while Qui-Gon zigzagged the sub back and forth like a sightseer, singing a different tune to himself.

“Just keep swimming, just keep swimming…”

“Dear God,” Jar Jar was muttering, “my berry sorry mesa crashen dat heyblibber, and my berry, berry sorry for all dem swearen words, and my mui sorry for dat one time behind da Hooble Hut with Muemie Togs. Please be forgiven mesa and no senden mesa to hellfire.”

At this rate, they’d be fish food. Reaching over Qui-Gon’s shoulder, Obi-Wan found a button labelled “drive faas” and punched it. Instantly he was thrown back in his seat not just by the sudden acceleration but also a disturbance in the Force, as if millions of voices cried out and were suddenly silenced. It seemed to be localized around the water jet intakes; but they weren’t drawing anything in bigger than near microscopic diatomaceous life forms, and those couldn’t be sentient.

“Told you I’d outrun him.” Qui-Gon gloated as the über-goldfish fought to keep up. “Pretty
impressive. Eh, Jar Jar?"

“My wishen mesa no getten outta bed dis mornin’!”

“Master, isn’t there any way you could use the Force to… oh, I don’t know… keep the indigenous wildlife from noticing us?” Now that he considered the facts, it was a miracle everything wasn’t coming after them, lit up as they were like ten million fireflies.

“What for? I’m sure our native friend will keep them away with his innate connection to nature.”

“I don’t think he has an innate connection to anything except his bladder,” Obi-Wan replied as a puddle spread across Jar Jar’s seat. Liquid sloshed around his feet and he cursed loudly, but then he realized even the Gungan didn’t have a bladder that large.

“Master?”

“Yes?”

“When you convinced the Gungans to give us this sub, you forgot to ask for the keys, didn’t you?”

“I might have…”

“So you punctured the locks to get in, didn’t you?”

“Maybe…”

“Wesa dyen! Mesa regretten everything!”

“Relax. Things could be—”

“DON’T SAY IT!”

“—worse.”

Right about then was when the whale swallowed them.

Chapter End Notes

I spent three days researching Jamaican slang for the Gungans, and I still think it came out wrong. Hopefully I haven’t offended anyone.
Qui-Gon pre-empts the queen’s escape for negotiations, but she has her own ideas.

Battle droid J-03 eyed battle droid M-03 sceptically. “Air vents can’t talk.”

“This one could.”

“You’re fantasizing again.”

“I wasn’t fantasizing when I tapped that fine piece of chrome on the *Profiteer*.”

“The protocol droid?”

“Yes,” replied M-03, knowing damn well it had been the toaster.

He was in a foul enough mood about the toaster never returning any of his calls, and the invasion had only made things worse. For starters, there were the hours spent racked inside a transport with his nose jammed into his arsehole. Actually battle droids did not possess any of these abovementioned biological accoutrements, but something about the position still felt wrong. Then he was deployed several kilometres outside of Theed and made to march across the ground. M-03 hated earth. Things lived in it, and it could mess up your servos like nobody’s business. Give him solid deck-plating under his feet any day.

As if marching for hours with one visual sensor pointed downwards waiting for some terrible mole person to pop out of the ground was not bad enough, when his column finally reached Theed he was denied even a satisfying firefight. Annexing Naboo had all the excitement of robbing a corpse. Most of the struggle had been in getting residents to put their paintbrushes and draft pencils down long enough to surrender. Aside from the occasional farmer-hunting crackpot, nothing stirred in the quiet corner M-03 and J-03 guarded except several enormous potted plants fluttering in the breeze, and some neoclassical architecture a particularly flamboyant draftsman might describe as “stirring.”

“Hey, isn’t that Queen Amidala?”

Tearing his nervous gaze away from the dirt crouching sinisterly inside the planters, M-03 scanned in the direction J-03 indicated. With great surprise (insofar as droids can experience surprise), his visual sensors registered the approach of Queen Amidala, or at least a figure who matched the various makeup and headgear parameters defined in the mother database. Come to it, there were an awful lot of images of Queen Amidala in the database. Ninety-seven percent were tagged as recently accessed by the Viceroy himself, multiple times.

“Oh, hold it right there, your highness.”

The figure corresponding to most definitions of the Queen of Naboo drew to a halt, causing the forty or so people following her to bump into each other like a drunken conga line. Fleshy parts of her face designated as “lips” in the anatomy recognition table curled upwards.
"I'm not Queen Amidala."

If M-03 had eyes he would have blinked. "You look like Queen Amidala." From an automaton's perspective this was fairly relative. Given the differences in wardrobe and appearance, even a flesh and blood guard might have trouble recognizing the woman in front of him. Had the Queen changed her outfit before escaping she might have avoided questioning entirely.

"I'm... a professional Queen Amidala impersonator."

"Oh, in that case, you may proceed."

"Wait a moment," interjected J-03. M-03 would have rolled his eyes, if he had any to roll. J-03 was always the more suspicious one. Probably a manufacturing defect, some crossed wire in his brain. M-03 made a mental note to schedule J-03 for maintenance, and then promptly forgot it, because he was a battle droid.

"Who are all these people?" J-03 asked.

"Hairdressers."

Good enough. "Proceed."

Nodding politely, the not-queen and her considerable retinue began filing past M-03 and J-03.

That was when the mole person popped out of the planter.

TEN MINUTES EARLIER

"Why are you the only one who gets a mechno-chair?"

"Rune, this is not the time to discuss this."

"I want my own mechno-chair."

"No! It's not in your contract!"

"I don't have a contract."

"If you had a contract, it most certainly would not include a mechno-chair."

"Well, it should."

"I cannot believe this! Next you'll be wanting to give Queen Amidala her own mechno-chair! Then what? Mechno-chairs for all the battle droids? Mechno-chairs do not grow on trees!"

Rune sighed. Granted, the conquest of Naboo had been no less bloodless than the Trade Federation's typical aggressive takeovers, albeit with slightly more battle droids involved than usual. It was only natural for Gunray to trot out his mechno-chair and gloat. The halls in Queen Amidala's palace seemed built for it. Maybe they were, come to think of it. Some past king or queen with bigger balls than the current one—figuratively speaking, of course; Rune was not an expert on human anatomy but he was fairly certain literal balls were one accessory Queen Amidala lacked or else Gunray would not be nearly so interested in her, and in the case that she did not and he still was, then Rune did not know his boss nearly as well as he thought—had built some expansive corridors for the express purpose of strutting around looking important. It would require a level of hubris rarely seen outside the Galactic Senate, and certainly above that of Naboo's current population of artisans. Rune had a hard time imagining them littering the...
landscape with enormous decapitated stone figures, except to be ironic or something.

“Besides, we only have the one mechno-chair, anyways.”

Rune was about to make a retort when the permacrete around the door ahead broke loose and crumbled to the floor. It was a wide door, but not wide enough for Queen Amidala’s hairdo. She looked even more impressive in person, and as she glided regally towards them, red and black robe contrasting brilliantly with the plain marble floor, sunlight from every window glittering beautifully on her crown…helmet… thing, Rune could almost see why the Viceroy was so attracted to her. It had to be the headgear. Gunray loved that stang.

The trio of death sticks clamped between her majesty’s admittedly full but oddly painted lips spoiled the effect, sadly.

“Stang,” hissed the Viceroy, “it’s her! How do I look?”

“Like a douche in a mechno-chair,” Rune replied without thinking. Luckily for him, his employer was distracted by the immediate proximity of the Queen:

“Werl, werl, werl, if it isn’t Queen Amidara. Such a pleasure.”

“Shut it,” she snapped, stubbing the death sticks on a handmaid’s robe. “You assholes have got a lot to answer for.”

“Oh? Rike what, play tell?”

“Rike invading my fucking planet, that’s what rike!”

“Youl majesty, we awl not heal to subjugate the peeper of Naboo. We are here as friends.”

“Whoa. Wait. What did you just say? Something about peelers?”

Gunray slammed his fist into the mechno-chair’s armrest, and it stamped a spindly leg in response. The accents he and Rune employed usually served to create a false aura of incompetence in negotiations; hardly needed in this case, as they already controlled the planet.

“Fine. Forget the accents then. As far as the galaxy is concerned, we are simply welcoming our newest member into the Trade Federation family.”

“Like hell am I going along with that,” the Queen replied.

“Then I hope you enjoy watching your people suffer.”

Oh gods, thought Rune. Gunray is steepling his fingers. I hate it when he does that.

Her Royal Teenage Majesty’s expression changed from one of pouty defiance to utter horror. “You’d make my people do…” A poorly suppressed shudder vibrated her frame. “Manual labour?”

“I would.”

“What do you want?” she asked, head lowered. Rune was unimpressed. He really thought the Queen had more spunk than that. If she felt terrible now, she was going to feel a lot worse when the Viceroy made his… ugh… demands.

Lowering himself to eye level, Gunray stared into Queen Amidala’s face and said, “I would like to take you to dinner.”
"Her head snapped back up. "'Scuse me?"

"Name the place. The universe is the limit."

"Hold on. You want me to go on a date with you?"

This caused quite a stir among members of her entourage, especially a youngish black man who kept reaching for a sidearm he did not actually have, and ended up jabbing his index and pointer fingers awkwardly into the empty holster over and over. The other officials stared at each other in bemusement, but the handmaidens remained stoic.

"I must be dreaming," mumbled the Queen. "This can't be happening."

Like clockwork, her nearest handmaid slapped her across the face. It looked like it really hurt, too. Rune almost flinched.

"Alright," she chirped, suddenly cooperative. "Let's do this. Meet me by the Tree of Galactic Peace in Theed Square at seven!"

"You...ah...wah..." Gunray had not expected her to comply, and he had told Rune as much. Rune had his own suspicions about her majesty's motives, but Gunray did not pay him nearly enough to voice them. Finally, he rallied. "Right. I shall rook forward to it. I mean, look folwald to it. I mean—dammit!" Swinging his mechno-chair into a skittering, flailing bootleggers' turn, the Viceroy beat as hasty a retreat as the device allowed, with Rune following at a brisk walk.

He drew alongside Gunray and asked, "Shouldn't we leave some battle droids to guard her?"

"You're far too suspicious, Rune. Don't you think I know when to take a lady at her word?"

No, thought Rune.

FIVE MINUTES BEFORE THAT

It was pleasure as usual at Theed Pool. Not business as usual; that would imply something actually happening. Only relaxation was in store. There'd been some talk of a global invasion or something, but the pool was cool, the bodies were bronzed, and the sun was shining.

Naaré Genlaba knew her new swimsuit had every eye on her as she floated on an air mattress in the centre of the pool. She loved being the center of attention. Moments later, she was still the center of attention, but not because of her tiny bikini; all eyes were glued to her, or rather to the whale that had risen from the water underneath her and lifted her twenty feet into the air. Her startled screams guaranteed it.

Unperturbed, the colossal aquatic mammal opened its mouth and spat a slightly gooey blue stingray-shaped craft onto the poolside. Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon emerged from the partially-digested organic submarine, followed shortly by Jar Jar.

"Wesa no dyen!" squawked the excitable Gungan.

"Yes, I suppose we are fortunate Master speaks whale," Obi-Wan grudgingly admitted.

"THAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAANK YOOOOOOUUUUUUUUUUUU," Qui-Gon wailed. The whale bellowed a reply, and sank back into the water. "Right then. To the palace!"

People stared as they marched towards the exit, including a little boy clutching a beach ball, frozen
in mid-toss. Qui-Gon eyed the colourful toy, and Obi-Wan immediately knew what was coming next.

"YOINK!" the Jedi shouted, holding his prize aloft as he fled in the general direction of the palace. Obi-Wan and Jar Jar jogged behind, red-faced, as the child’s screams echoed throughout the swimming area.

NOW

"Wow," murmured Queen Amidala as the battle droids waved her onwards. "That was easier than I thought it would be."

A shower of dirt clods exploded from the planter to her immediate left as a long-haired man popped up inside it, shouting, "Hold it right there, your majesty!"

"Oh my maker," screamed the first battle droid, "mole people!"

"The queen," shrieked its partner, and both began blasting away.

Everybody yelled and tried to find cover, but the only cover available came from each other. One handmaiden—Eirtae? Sabé? She could never keep them straight—tore a hit to the chest, screamed, and fell. The bearded man in the planter stood up, bits of earth dropping from his monastic robes, and craned his neck to look at the windows on the upper level. Where had she seen robes like that before? He threw out one arm almost casually, and both battle droids tumbled backwards as if slapped by a gigantic hand. One landed atop the other in a heap of tangled mechanical limbs.

"Well this is awkward," it said.

Panaka was the first to react, snatching up the fallen blasters and passing one to his college buddy. Queen Amidala walked slowly over to her fallen servant. She hated to do this, but sometimes being queen meant doing things you did not like and this handmaiden was the one carrying the death sticks. She began rifling through the dead girl’s robes.

An unearthly screech sounded from above, emitted by the Gungan that suddenly crashed headfirst into the pavement beside her. Its neck bent at an awkward angle and it flopped over beside the dead girl, just as motionless. That was all the queen saw before another one landed on top of her and crushed her ribs.

"Oh bollocks, I am so sorry, your majesty." So he was not a Gungan; he was human. As he helped her up and brushed her off, she noticed he wore the same robes as the other man. They were together.

"Obi-Wan," said the mystery man, stepping out of the planter with considerably more grace than one would expect, "why didn’t you move on my signal?"

"I didn’t know the signal! You just said ‘wait for my signal’ and that was that!"

"Jar Jar knew the signal."

"He didn’t want to go! I had to push him!"

Queen Amidala poked Jar Jar with her foot. Yep, definitely dead.

"Question," she announced, interrupting their banter. "Who exactly might you two be?"
“Where are your manners, Obi-Wan?” Obi-Wan rolled his eyes as the older man bowed. “I am Qui-Gon Jinn, also known as The Negotiator.”

“I thought it was Firebird—”

“Shut up, Obi-Wan. We are here to rescue you, your majesty.”

“Good job,” she replied, shoving the younger man away when his brushing got a little too intrusive.

“We were sent by Chancellor Valorum to negotiate an end to the blockade,” he said apologetically.

“Wow, you guys are on a roll, aren’t you?”

“Are you all right, your majesty?” Obi-Wan persisted. “Should you feel a need to collapse suddenly into my arms for any reason, know that I will be ready.”

“I’ll let you know.”

“Anytime.” Suddenly braced and held his arms out as if to catch her. She stared at him until he straightened back up. “Maybe later.”

“Probably not.”

“Are you sure you’re alright? I mean, I could check you for bruises…”

The Queen shoved him away again and folded her arms. “I was doing just fine before you two came along.”

“Now, now,” admonished Qui-Gon, “running away never solves anything.”

“It will in this case.”

“No, it won’t. Once we get Viceroy Gun-shy around the table we can talk this through.”

“I just got away from the Viceroy!”

“Do you see this?” He twirled his deactivated lightsaber. “It means Jedi, which means I outrank everybody. Including you.”

“Oh, yeah? While since it’s your job to protect me, then you have to go wherever I go, right?”

“Right.”

“So I’m going to Coruscant. See you there!”

While Qui-Gon was still thoughtfully stroking his beard, the Queen and her entourage beat feet. Obi-Wan muttered, “I don’t know how she moves so fast in that outfit.”

“New mission, Obi-Wan: retrieve Queen Amidala for negotiations.”
Expendables

Chapter Summary

The Trade Federation's blockade proves highly ineffectual at its only job.

Several minutes of sustained laser fire, one half-destroyed shield generator and five astromech droids later, the Queen and her handmaidens had finally finished using the ladies’-room. Panaka made a big show of rolling his eyes and checking his watch, but Amidala threatened to take his gun away and give it to his college buddy.

“That isn’t fair! He already has a gun!”

“He has two hands, doesn’t he? And you’re making me nervous waving it around like that.”

“This is called protecting your life, your highness. Isn’t it the reason you hired me?”

Amidala hired him because she always wanted to bang a black dude, but she did not say that.

“Tanks in the streets, oh that’s just fine,” he mumbled, “but me doing my job makes you nervous.”

“You aren’t very good at it,” she retorted. “I didn’t see you keeping me from getting captured.”

“I’d be better at it if you’d spend less on upholstery and more on defense! Our entire homeland security contingency is a NO TRESPASSING sign.”

“Deal with it,” she snapped, instead of admitting she had reallocated the entire defense budget to her manicurist.

“Queen Amidala! Oh, your highness, wait up,” called the alleged Jedi, several blocks behind. Several battle droids swivelled around and raised their rifles.

“Queen Amidala? Open fire,” they droned. Panaka casually blew their heads off. After a moment’s reflection, he collected their guns.

Two more droids did an about face, but the bearded asshole slammed them face-first into the street before they could draw their weapons. His young companion paused to reposition them so they looked like they were performing 69. Amidala rolled her eyes.

“Will you stop shouting my name? Honestly. I thought Jedi were stealthy.”

“Your majesty, Stealthy is my middle name,” Qui-Gon replied.

“I thought it was Negotiations,” interjected his apprentice whose name Amidala could not be bothered to remember.

“People can have two middle names. Qui-Gon Stealthy Negotiations Jinn.”

“Wouldn’t that be Qui-Gon Stealthy Negotiations Quigley—?”

“Shut up, Obi-Wan.”
“Shutting up, master.”

During their repartee, the queen had put another three blocks between herself and them; she heard them rushing to catch up. Invasion or not, it was criminal to make her walk this far.

“God, my feet are sore,” she moaned. Ten-inch heels seemed like a good idea at the time, but that was this morning. Her crocs were safely stored in the secret armrest compartment of her throne, back at the palace. “Don’t we have public transit or something?”

“For the last time, this is an occupation,” whined Panaka. “The trolleys aren’t going to be running while we’re—” He was interrupted by the ding-ding of a streetcar loaded with tourists trundling past. Amidala flung her arm out as if to say, “See?” Panaka shrugged. She snapped her fingers, and five handmaidens hoisted her onto their shoulders. Problem solved.

It was not until they had reached the hangar that Panaka’s college buddy asked the obvious question: “Do any of us actually know how to pilot a ship?”

“The Qui-Guy can fly anything,” bragged Qui-Gon.

“So, to answer your question,” Obi-Wan added, “no.”

“We could always use those pilots being conveniently held captive right over there,” said Panaka, pointing. Surely enough, a handful of pilots sat in the corner with hands on head, battle droids watching over them.

“Chausseurs go with the speeders,” one was saying, “and pilots go with the ships! It makes perfect sense!” It was a very droid way of thinking.

“I hate to imagine what they’ve done with the plumbers,” quipped Obi-Wan. Amidala had to admit that was kind of funny.

Qui-Gon was already striding up to the ranking droid. “Excuse me.”

“Halt!” it shouted, even though Qui-Gon was already standing still. “Um… did I say ‘Halt!’ yet?”

Qui-Gon smiled beatifically. “This statement is false.”

“Uh. Uh. That does not compute. Uh…”

Trapped in a self-reference loop, it offered no resistance as their group strolled past and approached the launch bays. Obi-Wan calmly pushed it over and regarded the long row of starships before them.

“So,” he inquired, “which of these well-armed, heavily shielded ships is going to carry us to—”

“Fuck that,” Amidala interrupted, “we’re taking the luxury cruiser.”

Producing a set of keys from her sleeve, she pressed a button. A sleek, silver ship with a totally reflective hull chirped as its alarm system disarmed. Several handmaidens immediately began checking their makeup in the mirror-like surface.

“I’ll be in the cockpit,” proclaimed Qui-Gon, marching up the gangplank.

“Um, perhaps you should have someone… experienced in there with you,” said Panaka, slowly, as he exchanged glances with his college buddy. “Just in case.”
“Of course,” Qui-Gon replied. “Jar Jar, be my co-pilot.”

“Okey-day,” said Jar Jar, walking up the gangplank after him. Obi-Wan stared in shock.

“Weren’t you dead?”

“Mesa got better.”

“I have a bad feeling about this…”

Nobody was listening.

—o—

Nute Gunray stood in front of the Tree of Galactic Peace, holding a bouquet of the most expensive orchids he could find on Naboo. He had originally planned to import some exotic blooms from off world, but then he remembered, silly him, trade embargo. Actually his original original plan had been to give her a handful of traditional Neimoidian grub larvae but for some reason Rune had absolutely refused to allow him to do that.

Now he waited, in his nicest robes and most ostentatious hat, for that exquisite young creature whose headgear rivalled his in terms of extravagance. A gentle breeze was blowing, the moon was rising, and then the explosions started.

He turned his head towards the sounds as Rune ran to his side. The crashing of stonework and metal-on-metal screech grew closer until a reflective silver starship ploughed through the near wall of the Theed Centre for Really Avant Garde Sofas… backwards. He gasped in shock, the thruster backwash knocking his hat off, Queen Amidala staring at him from the window, as the ship pitched precisely ninety-seven degrees forward and shot ass-first into the stratosphere.

“Looks like you’ve been stood up,” Rune observed.

Gunray angrily hurled the orchids in his face. “I told you I should have gone with tube grubs!”

“Whatever,” Rune replied, pulling out his communicator.

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“So much for a quiet getaway,” snapped Queen Amidala. Obi-Wan could not help admiring the way her full lips protruded when she pouted. Already they had something in common: utter exasperation at Qui-Gon.

“They’ll never expect us to try escaping backwards!” Master replied.

“No they won’t, because that’s crazy!”

Ignoring her as he usually did, Master peered out the cockpit window. “Where are the rear-view mirrors on this thing?”

“The whole ship is a rear-view mirror,” sighed Panaka. As soon as he said this, their ship crossed the terminator, and sunlight lit them up brighter than the Radiant VII ever was.

And Obi-Wan remembered what happened to the Radiant VII.

Deck plating lurched beneath his feet. He kept his footing, of course, and applied a little of the Force to keep Queen Amidala standing as well.
“It seems they’ve noticed us,” Qui-Gon declared, winning the Statement of the Obvious Championship for the tenth year running.

“It’d be hard not to notice us in this flying disco ball,” Obi-Wan remarked. Immediately he clamped a hand over his mouth and looked at the queen, but she seemed not to have heard.

Glancing at the navicomputer, she yelled, “We’re flying right towards them!”

With a look of utter Zen on his hirsute face, Qui-Gon activated the comm system:

“This is the Negotiator calling Trade Federation. Come in, Trade Federation.”

“This is Captain Daultay Dofine of the Sock Puppet! Cut your engines and return to the planet at once! In case you haven’t noticed, we’re trying to run a blockade over here!”

“Negative, Sock Puppet. We are carrying Queen Amidala. Please transmit landing vectors so we can begin negotiations.”

It sounded like the enemy captain was choking. “...What?”

“What?” echoed the queen. “Are you still trying to negotiate??”

“Perhaps we ought to raise shields?” Obi-Wan helpfully suggested.

“I’m in charge of this mission,” Qui-Gon smoothly answered, as laser fire slammed the ship again, “and I think we ought to raise shields. Jar Jar, take the helm.”

Jar Jar sat in the copilot’s chair, hands clamped firmly over his eyes. “Why yousa hate me?” he sobbed. With nobody manning the controls, the ship began to spin. Obi-Wan surreptitiously activated the auto pilot with a flick of the Force and the ship finally began flying forward.

Rage coloured Queen Amidala’s face, even through several layers of Halloween-grade makeup. “You are the worst Jedi ever! Panaka, do something!”

Huddled in a corner of the cockpit, cradling a dozen blaster rifles, Panaka snapped, “No! You were going to take my guns away!”

“Ugh!” She whirled on Qui-Gon, who was studiously scanning the controls. “I swear to gods, if you don’t turn this ship around I will—”

He interrupted her. “Which button is shields?”

“The yellow one,” she answered, pointing.

“This one?” Wiper blades began swinging back and forth on the cockpit canopy.

“No, the other one.”

“This one here?” Nothing happened, except a faint clunking sound.

“No, you’ve just jettisoned all of our repair droids.”

“How about this one?” The cockpit went dark and raucous dance music began assaulting their eardrums. A strobe bulb flashed rapidly until Qui-Gon hit the button again, restoring normal lighting.

“That button isn’t even yellow,” sighed the queen.
“Let’s try this one.” Qui-Gon pressed it, and a strange elongated object began extending upwards from the seat beside Obi-Wan, whirring loudly as it slowly rotated. “What the Force?”

Obi-Wan stared. “It looks like a—”

“NOTHING! Nothing! That was nothing,” exclaimed the queen, hastily shoving the device back into its compartment.

Qui-Gon broke the silence. “This one!”

Cold vacuum invaded the cockpit as a hatch popped in the ceiling. Obi-Wan braced himself, instinctively reaching into the Force, but Jar Jar’s seat ejected him through the gap, and the hatch closed immediately.

“You know,” said Queen Amidala when she could breathe again, “I think it’s actually an orange button. My bad.”

“This has given me an idea,” mused Qui-Gon. He was stroking his beard, which was never a good sign.

Moments later Obi-Wan and the queen were in the cargo hold.

“What now, master?”

Qui-Gon, over the intercom, said, “We’re too heavy.”

“I’m just retaining some fluids,” screeched Amidala before Obi-Wan could say anything.

“If we drop as much excess weight as possible,” Qui-Gon continued, “the ship will go faster.”

“I don’t think it works that way,” muttered Obi-Wan.

“Wait a moment. I can do it from here, there is a lever marked ‘Manual Cargo Dump’—”

After their chorus of “NO DON’T FOR THE LOVE OF EVERYTHING” died down, Obi-Wan told his master they would take care of it. As laser cannons continue to pummel the exterior hull, he looked around at the hold. Every available square inch was filled with crates of industrial-strength hairspray, Colonel Shiny’s™ Silver Starship Polish, and a very small percentage of the royal wardrobe (about 700 outfits in total).

“Surely,” he said, “there are plenty of nonessentials that we can part with.”

After throwing the emergency rations and the hyperdrive repair kit out the airlock, they were at a loss.

“I just don’t know what else to do,” moaned the queen.

“That still isn’t enough,” said Qui-Gon from the cockpit. “Is there anything else we can afford to lose?”

The door opened and several handmaidens glided in.

“How can we assist, your majesty?”
Obi-Wan and Queen Amidala looked at them. Then they looked at the airlock.

“Look, captain,” Rune shouted into his communicator, “the queen is on that ship. Stop firing!”

“I don’t care who it is,” Captain Dofine replied. “First they flew at me backwards, and now they’re tossing people out of the airlocks! They’re obviously insane!”

He lowered the device with a beleaguered sigh and turned to his employer, who had consumed half of the exotic flowers out of nervousness.

“I told you we should have taken her keys. Or, you know, blown her ship up.”

Gunray stared back, his lower lip beginning to quiver.

“Oh gods,” Rune thought. “Not now.”

His prayer apparently reached no-one, because the Viceroy broke down and began to cry.

Queen Amidala was on the verge of crying, too.

“Do you know how much that reflective hull coating cost? And now it’s going to be covered in scorch marks!”

She and Obi-Wan were back in the cockpit with master, watching Trade Federation cruisers grow larger in the viewport. Angry red streaks of light zipped all around his line of sight like demented fireflies, rocking the luxury craft with every blow.

“They only put ships on one side,” she continued. “Can’t we just go around?”

“I told you,” Qui-Gon replied, “it isn’t a matter of trajectory; it’s a matter of speed, or lack thereof.”

“We’re all going to die today,” sighed Obi-Wan. “Well, I’m not,” he added, chuckling darkly. Then the thought of drifting in a vacuum for decades sobered him immediately.

“At least,” Panaka proudly declared, “I’ll die how I lived: surrounded by blasters.” He sank happily into his pile of firearms.

Just as Obi-Wan wondered how it would feel to survive explosive decompression, the blockade grew exponentially larger and flashed past. There was a corresponding surge of movement, as Obi-Wan realized when he landed on top of the queen. Even through approximately five layers of clothing on both their persons, he could feel her body heat, and hoped she would assume the protrusion slightly prodding her hip was his lightsaber.

“Your majesty,” he asked, “do you require mouth-to-mouth resuscitation?”

“Get off me!”

He hastily got up (technically for the second time) and helped her to her feet. To his surprise, she actually allowed him to do so.

“Tsk, tsk,” chided Qui-Gon, pronouncing it “tisk” rather than clicking his tongue, because he was an idiot. “Once again, my apprentice is lazing about, practicing his wrestling moves while I save the day.”

Seriously doubting Qui-Gon had anything beneficial to do with their sudden escape, Obi-Wan
asked Panaka what happened.

"It was one of our repair droids," the security chief replied. "He rerouted the power supply from the queen's hair dryer to the engines! He's entering the airlock now."

As one, they rushed to the rear of the ship. A squat astromech droid, painted white with blue highlights, beeps and whistles at them.

"What's that he's towing?"

"By the Force... Is that Jar Jar??"
“I will admit the negotiations could have gone better,” Qui-Gon frowned.

Obi-Wan groaned. “Are you still on about that? We have bigger problems.” He referred, of course, to the hyperdrive, which currently boasted a hole big enough to put his head through. He knew because he had already shoved his head through and made the obligatory birthing process joke.

“Don’t we have a repair droid?” asked Queen Amidala, somehow smoking three death sticks at once. She yelled in alarm as said droid, R2-D2 as it was designated, appeared from behind her; swiftly produced a tiny fire extinguisher from one of its many compartments and sprayed the queen’s death sticks where they had landed on the floor. Obi-Wan felt an irrational urge to high-five the little thing.

Instead he said, “Get on with it, then.”

R2-D2 (or “Artoo”) rolled over to the stricken hyperdrive, gave it a cursory examination, and then shrugged. It actually shrugged, while emitting a series of warbling sounds typical of its kind. Obi-Wan long suspected astro droids were conspiring behind everyone’s back, so two years earlier he taught himself to understand their “language.”

“What do you mean, you don’t do hyperdrives?”

Beep, boop, whistle. A vaguely phallic probe emerged from the front of its chassis, which Artoo began rhythmically thrusting it into the hole while laughing.

“Now you’re just being vulgar.”

Amidala rolled her eyes. “Captain Panaka, I suggest we give this droid a commendation for exceptional service.”

He sputtered. “What? A droid? You might as well award the toilet a citation for bravery.”

“Take it to my quarters so I can ride around on it like a giant Roomba.”

Two handmaidens saluted and left the room with Artoo in their wake. It swivelled its head 360 degrees to look at Obi-Wan. He could swear it was taunting him. Lighting a fourth death stick, Amidala stared at the hyperdrive again.

“We’ll never get to Coruscant with this.”

“Coruscant?” queried Qui-Gon.

“Yes, Coruscant. The Supreme Chancellor can’t ignore my pleas for help when I’m standing on his desk.”
“Hate to burst your bubble,” Obi-Wan interjected, “but he already sent you help. He sent us.”

She looked at him and his master for a very long time. “As I was saying, I need to ask him for help.”

“Coruscant would be an excellent neutral site for the negotiations,” Qui-Gon mused. “How about we call the Viceroy up and ask him to give us a lift?”

“No!” Obi-Wan and the queen shouted simultaneously. “That would… give him an unfair advantage,” he lied.

“And give me a fuckload of roaming charges,” the queen added.

“Ah, I see.” Qui-Gon frowned determinedly at the hyperdrive. “Then we’d better get this fixed.”

“If only we had, I don’t know, some engineers,” Panaka pointedly remarked.

“I told you, I won’t hire those hipsters,” the queen snapped.

“Never fear,” Master pronounced, “Qui-Gon is here!” After raising a three-foot phase wrench over his head, he brought it down on top of the hyperdrive.

“Great,” said Obi-Wan when things had stopped exploding. “Now we need a new hyperdrive and a new phase wrench.” Qui-Gon still held the handle, although the head was now a glowing lump of slag. Queen Amidala shook pieces of hyperdrive out of her robes, and her hair looked to be at least ten feet shorter. One of her handmaidens had melted.

Qui-Gon dropped the ruined tool. “Very well. Everyone get out and push.”

“Sure,” retorted Panaka, “or we could just strap my gun collection to the back end and fire them all at once.”

“Would that work?”

“No, but it’s less stupid than your idea.”

“Perhaps not; blasters are crude and uncivilized, but fireworks might work, if we have enough of them!”

“I need a drink,” said the queen, storming out of the engine room.

“Master…” Obi-Wan paused to massage his temples, wishing he could join the queen for that drink. He tried again.

“Master, I’m sure there are plenty of nearby planets where we can set down for repairs.”

“Ooh! I bet they sell fireworks!”

Calling up a list of planets on his Guide to the Galaxy took Obi-Wan only moments. He had gotten so good at finding planets, he wondered if he might one day be able to locate a planet that was not there, or even sense when one was destroyed. The list of known worlds in their sector was short but held many promising results.

“Let’s see. We have Meddo, the planet of unusually soft grass; P’Radyce, the planet of free alcohol and extremely friendly women; or Wall M’Art, the planet of reasonably priced consumer goods including hyperdrives.”
Shoving him aside, Qui-Gon clicked the “Random” button. “Here’s our destination.”

“Tatooine? The planet of sand and assholes?”

“Yes. That is where we are going.”

“But Tatooine is the bunghole of the galaxy!”

“Don’t judge a planet by its cover, my young Padawan.”

“I’m not.” He pointed to the article. “Tatooine, also known as: Hell, this rock, Planet Farthest From the Bright Center of The Universe, Bunghole of the Galaxy.”

“I have a feeling about this. Something… I think the Force is trying to tell me we need to go there.” Qui-Gon switched the computer off, and Obi-Wan momentarily thought he saw a bloated face and a flash of plaid in the reflection, behind his master.

Qui-Gon could not help humming to himself as he skipped down the corridor. Everything was going his way. Then again, didn’t things always go his way? Being always right about everything ever probably helped. Yes, it truly was a great day. He had one side of the negotiations safely in custody, Obi-Wan was being less annoying than usual, and now they were all headed to a planet sure to be rife with Chosen Ones and illegal fireworks.

More than a few fireworks went off in his head when he walked face-first into the queen’s door. Doors usually opened for him. Well, a minor application of the Force would provide. He made a simple gesture and the door slid aside, revealing the queen and one of her handmaidens in a state of undress.

“Don’t Jedi ever knock??” she shrieked, slamming the door. By the time he opened it again, they were both fully clothed, although the queen was standing on the other side now. Her handmaiden hastily finished cramming the crown onto her head; it must have fallen off when they switched places.

“Your majesty,” he began.

Both women replied, “Yes?”

He started over. “Your majesty, I have decided we shall head to Tatooine, where—”

“Wait,” the handmaid rudely interrupted, “you’re taking us where??”

“Excuse me,” he chastised her, patiently. “The queen and I are having a conversation.” To underscore his point, he interposed himself between them, with his back to the impolite young lady. “As I was saying to your majesty: I, in my inimitable wisdom and innate Force-guided intuition, have decided to set a course for Tatooine. There we may purchase fireworks in bulk quantities, and possibly get a tan.” This pale monarch could certainly use it, he thought. In fact, she looked even paler than usual; she seemed to be sweating as well.

“Um… what she said,” the queen replied, headdress sliding down the side of her head.

“Your highness, you must trust my judgment.”

“Okay,” she quickly replied. Then she looked over his shoulder and began shaking her head. “I mean no. Nope, nope, not okay.”
Qui-Gon tilted his head to one side. "So it’s settled then. We go to Tatooine."

The handmaiden made an odd choking sound.

"Will you excuse us a moment, master Jedi? The queen and I need to talk."

She shoved him out the door and closed it. He heard angry shouting behind it, and assumed the queen was giving her handmaid a good, stern talking-to about manners.

"It is a simple yes or no question, your majesty," Qui-Gon said to her when the door reopened.

"Where are we taking this ship?"

"That isn’t a yes or no question."

"Semantics."

"Well the answer is most definitely no."

"Why?"

So confident only hours ago, the queen was now at a loss for words. "Because, we, uh, we would... Two words."

The last sentence was such a non-sequitur that Qui-Gon turned around out of sheer disinterest. He saw the annoying handmaid holding up two fingers. She quickly tried to hide them, but he had sharp eyes—too sharp for her.

"I saw what you did there," he admonished. "Yes, the queen and I should finish our discussion in about two minutes. You were saying, your highness?"

She continued to stare behind him, rather than at him. Probably some arrogant affectation of royalty, he supposed. Not allowed to look the common people in the eye. He felt an urge to point out that Jedi were pretty much better than anybody and deserved an exceptional amount of respect, but Naboo was a fairly backward world. Not even a single skyscraper.


She turned her gaze on Qui-Gon. "Duck you."

The handmaid burst out again, "No, you stupid—!"

Flinching, the queen snapped, "Padmé! Go... go clean the droid or something."

"What? You’re telling me to—?"

"Yes. Because I am the queen and you are my handmaiden. And clean the toilets, too, while you’re at it."

"Kill you..." seethed the girl almost inaudibly, stomping out of sight.

"I fear I may have to protect you from more than battle droids," Qui-Gon sighed. "Your handmaiden has made a threat on your life." He reached for his saber.

"No, no," the queen replied quickly, "it’s all right. She’ll get over it. Just... take the ship wherever. I have a wicked headache."
Having seen his superior reasoning, she slammed the bedroom door. Qui-Gon smiled in satisfaction at another job well done, and meandered off to brainstorm codenames.

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“That could have gone better,” sighed the queen as she wandered into her bathroom. Her Jacuzzi rivalled most competition-grade swimming pools in size, and she had forgotten to drain it since its last use. As a result, its contents had thoroughly drenched the royal bathroom during their tumultuous takeoff. Padmé was lounging in the sudsy water with only her head and shoulders visible. Her expression was one of bliss, until her eyes opened. Then she glared angrily.

“Tatooine?”

“Hey,” the queen protested, “you try saying no to that guy. I think his brain is perpetually flying around in hyperspace somewhere.”

“Fine. Here’s the plan: as soon as he drags you off somewhere for negotiations or whatever, I’ll make a break for the nearest comm station and alert the Supreme Chancellor. Then he’ll drop everything and help me.”

“What about me? You’ll be leaving me in the clutches of the galaxy Supreme Idiot! He’ll be able to sense any escape attempts I make.”

“I’m surprised he can sense his own ass.”

“His apprentice seems okay.” The queen grinned. “I think I’ll go flirt with him.”

“What? You wouldn’t dare!”

Padmé’s cheeks flushed. The queen wagged a finger in rebuke:

“Ah-ah-ah, no talking back to the queen. Anyway, don’t you have toilets to be cleaning?”

“You told me to clean that droid. So I’m cleaning it. Sort of.”

An R2 unit’s periscope popped out of the water at the far end of the pool:

“Yikes. Have fun with that. I’m off to find out if that young Jedi can handle more than just his lightsaber.” Glancing around at the waterlogged upholstery, she added, “Have this place cleaned up by the time I get back, handmaiden.”

She shut the door an instant before the soggy loofah splatted against it.
There were many planets listed in the *Guide*. Coruscant, Alderaan, and Kashyyyk all had lengthy articles with multiple headings, footnotes, and links to other articles. Naboo’s article consisted of two words: “Mostly harmless.” The entry on Tatooine contained no information and trying to read it triggered a recording of the author laughing hysterically for fifteen minutes before saying, “Seriously though; just don’t.”

This was the planet on which the queen of Naboo found herself.

It was even ugly from space: an unbroken expanse of sand as far as Padmé could see. According to Obi-Wan, Tatooine was once covered with oceans; now, water was so scarce people actually had to *farm* it. Other than farmers, the primary inhabitants were ruthless criminal types and savage inbred raiders. As excited as she was about maybe seeing her very first farmer, Padmé still thought it was a shitty place to visit, and she certainly would not want to live there.

She had barely finished toweling off when she was summoned to the cockpit moments before atmospheric entry. Qui-Gon emerged from wherever the hell he was hiding to pilot them in for a so-called landing, bouncing along the tops of several sand dunes before crashing to a halt. He immediately left the ship to survey the surrounding area, which primarily featured more sand dunes. Although loath to leave her air-conditioned comfort zone, Padmé stormed down the gangplank to yell at him anyway. The mirror finish—what parts were not already ruined by laser blasts—was hopelessly scratched from all the sand, and there was not a sign of civilization in sight.

“Why are we parked in the middle of the god damned desert?”

“The space port of Mos Espa is only a few hours’ walk from here,” he replied.

“Oh, a space port. You know, where spaceships land. Like this one!”

“We don’t want to attract the attention of the Hutts. I would hate for her majesty to end up in a metal bikini on a chain.”

Obi-Wan sighed wistfully, nearly making Padmé jump out of her robes. Somehow he had arrived almost simultaneously, without her noticing. Spooky.

Qui-Gon went on. “I’ve been thinking —”

Padmé snorted derisively at the very notion.

“Don’t interrupt, young lady; the Jedi are talking. As I was saying, I feel our adventure is missing something.”

“A sense of purpose?”

He glared at her again. “A protagonist.”

This Jedi was further off the deep end than she thought. Even his apprentice was staring at him in confusion. She began inching quietly towards the ship; now that both Jedi were on the surface, she could simply take off and be done with them.

“I obviously am not the protagonist,” he continued. “Since I am clearly the wise mentor. And the queen can’t be our protagonist either—too bland and inaccessible.”
Padmé stopped inching to shout, “Who are you calling bland and inaccessible?”

Obi-Wan asked, “Mightn’t I be the, um, protagonist, master?”

“No, because you’re staying here while I go into town.”

“What? That isn’t fair!”

“Somebody has to protect the queen, Obi-Wan.”

“Against what? Sunburn? Isn’t that what Panaka and the legions of handmaidens are for?”

Perhaps, but the queen’s stock of human shields—handmaidens, Padmé corrected herself—were severely depleted and Panaka did very little but guard his ever-expanding stockpile and play Kessel Hold ‘Em poker with his college buddy, using blasters as chips.

“Keep the queen safe until I return.”

“But master—!”

“Obi-Wan—!”

“I mean, master, shouldn’t you take someone along with you? To… help carry?”

“How thoughtful of you, my young Padawan. Jar Jar, you’re with me.”

Looking around, he suddenly spied Padmé. “And in case we need a hostage, YOINK!”

Throwing her into a fireman’s carry, he loped away over the shifting sands with ridiculous ease. She screamed and pounded on his back with her fists and even threatened to pee on him, but nothing reached him. So much for the queen’s plan, she thought as the hot sun beat down on her. Well at least maybe I’ll get a tan.

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Obi-Wan sighed theatrically as his master disappeared into the blazing desert with a clueless Gungan and an unwilling girl. Moments after their departure, the little astromech raced down the gangway and scooted away, beeping and blooping about “rescuing” her. Knowing Qui-Gon, he would return several days late with a cartload of “discount” (read: defective) fireworks, a pocketful of shiny trinkets, two or three Chosen Ones and zero hyperdrives. The entire mission was a colossal clusterfuck, thanks mainly to Qui-Gon’s actions. The blockade had become an occupation, they were literally and figuratively even further from achieving their goal, and soon everyone would get sunburnt. Worst of all, master had utterly abandoned him in the middle of nowhere.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” he complained to nobody in particular.

Stomping up the boarding ramp, he found himself surrounded by the queen and her coterie.

“Um… hello.”

“Hello,” the queen replied huskily. He wondered if the heat was making her voice sound that way. Obi-Wan had never been a ladies’ man, what with Qui-Gon looking over his shoulder all the time reminding him to “focus,” the Order’s odd attitude towards relationships notwithstanding. It occurred to him that Qui-Gon was far away, and the Jedi Council even farther.
She asked, “Is your… teacher gone?”

“Yes. Long-gone.”

“What about the qu—Padmé?”

“If you mean the girl, she’s with him. They likely won’t be back for a while.”

The women exchanged glances of various degree and meaning.

“Well ladies,” the queen said at length, “we’re stuck here. We may as well enjoy ourselves.”

With concurrent sighs of relief, Amidala and her attendants began peeling off their multiple layers of garments, revealing a delightful assortment of swimwear and negligee underneath. An unfamiliar warmth began creeping over Obi-Wan, from his toes to his brow, and he gradually recognized it as joy. Pure joy, so pure that he scarcely felt the back of his skull hit the deck plating.

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“Has she signed the treaty yet?”

Gunray and Haako stared anxiously at the hologram of Darth Sidious, giving joint presentations of the Bemused Stare.

Gunray ventured to ask, “Treaty?”

“Yes, the treaty giving control of Naboo to your federation. The entire reason you organized this blockade. Or have you forgotten that too, you asshat?”

“No, of course not,” blustered the Viceroy. “She just… hasn’t signed it yet.”

“What is taking so long? You aren’t the only plate I’m spinning, Viceroy. I have schemes to facilitate and time is short.”

After fidgeting for an agonizing eternity, Gunray began. “Here’s the thing…” He laid out the whole humiliating debacle, from losing track of the Jedi to the queen’s daring escape. Then he muted the audio while Sidious swore at them for seven solid standard minutes.

—bantha-blowing nerf herder!” he finished as Gunray unmuted his hologram. “How difficult can it be to keep tabs on one teenage girl?”

“We could send someone after her,” Haako offered. “It can’t be hard to find a ship that shiny.”

Sidious appeared to think about it. “No. We’ll sell more Halloween costumes if I send my apprentice.”

He beckoned to someone off-screen, and a second menacing hooded figure walked into view. This one showed his face, a fearsome visage covered in tribal markings. Eyes like a beast glowered ferociously at the two Neimoidians as he bared his teeth.

“Maul, dearest,” Sidious told him, “you’re going to go queen hunting. There’s a good boy. Come, come, you can give me a backrub before you go.”

He walked off camera, leaving his apprentice to peer anxiously into it. Milliseconds before the signal cut out, Maul whispered:

“Help.”
“Great,” sighed Gunray when they were alone, “now there are two of them.”

Rune did not bother pointing out once again the insanity of this alliance, but let his employer continue ranting:

“She rejected me, Rune. Now I have nothing. Well, okay, I have a massive fortune, a profitable company and an army of droids, but I don’t know why I’m staking it all on the orders of some anonymous cult leader. I don’t know what I’m going to get out of it, or what he expects to get out of it. I inherited this job when every other eligible person wound up dead. I don’t even know what our company does! I mean, have you looked at our website? ‘Expediting the facilitation of accelerated transference and simultaneous decoupling of pecuniary materiel.’ What the hell does that even mean?”

Rune shrugged. If he waited Gunray out, the Viceroy would forget this entire conversation before Naboo finished rotating on its axis. He gave his boss a moment to calm down. Then he suggested, “Why don’t we play Monopoly™?”

“Oh yes!” Gunray brightened immediately. “I like Monopoly™.”

“Dibs on the speeder.”

“Damn it!”

Padmé supposed it could be worse.

Yes, she was trudging through a desert on the galaxy’s second-most inhospitable planet against her will with a man who was quite possibly insane, heading towards a town undoubtedly filled with all sorts of criminal lowlifes, with a hostile force occupying the homeworld to which she currently had no means of returning, but it could be worse. She could lose all of her limbs and fall into a volcano. That was about the only scenario she could think of worse than her current predicament.

Tumbleweed blew by. Perspective kicked in, and Padmé realized it was actually a mile away. Holy shit, she thought, that thing must be the size of a house. Qui-Gon had grown tired of carrying her, so the blood no longer rushed to her head. Her shoes were filling with sand instead. This arid climate was going to give her split ends on her split ends, and she was certain she had felt a sweat drop somewhere on her body. Had she known what “rescue” would entail, she would have gladly submitted to whatever absurd demands Gunray put forth.

She took a good look at the Gungan. Most of her peers knew little to nothing about Naboo’s “original” inhabitants, except that they had the best weed (a fact to which Padmé could personally attest), and one or two colorful limericks about their long tongues. Surely an amphibious creature would suffer in this harsh sunlight, and she was proven correct when cracks began to appear in Jar Jar’s body that made her ship’s hull look pristine by comparison.

Something metallic prodded her backside; the astro droid was following her much too closely again. How the stupid thing’s joints were not hopelessly jammed with ground-in sand was a mystery. At least she had some sort of friendly company on this hike, even if it was a mobile toolbox.

After several thousand hours (by her estimate) a dot appeared on the horizon. Eventually the dot grew into a “settlement” (Padmé’s refined Naboo tastes would not permit her to even call it a village) composed of ugly adobe huts. An enormous sign proudly identified it as “Mos Espa—
“Here we are,” announced Qui-Gon. “Everybody spread out and look for a place that sells fireworks in bulk, and keep your eyes open for any suspicious child prodigies. Try not to step in any bantha poodoo—that stuff is nasty.”

“Water… please…” pleaded Jar Jar, now a mass of blisters and flaking skin, dragging himself along the ground.

“Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go ask that nice fellow with the enormous knife and shifting stare if he knows where to find a good hyperdrive.”

“Wait,” Padmé asked, “You’re going to leave me alone in a seedy space port?”

“Yes.”

“Oie boie,” screeched Jar Jar, somehow buried up to his neck in bantha poodoo.

“Everyone in this town is so unhelpful,” Qui-Gon sighed. That young man with the huge blaster and twitchy fingers hadn’t even given him a chance to ask about hyperdrives, and now he returned to find the handmaiden clowning about with the locals.

“Panda, stop fooling around,” he admonished.

“Mmmmf,” replied Panda, because the large man grappling her had his hand over her mouth.

“This is no time for games. Tell your friend he’ll have to come back some other time.”

“Oh!” He had underestimated Panda’s initiative. That left him free to pick up fireworks. “Carry on, then! Unless you wish me to tag along and help negotiate.”

“Um, no, that’ll be fine,” the salesman answered hastily. “OW BUGGER!”

That secondary expletive was due to Panda elbowing him in the groin. Qui-Gon, impressed, decided to offer encouragement.

“Excellent negotiating tactic, Panda!”

“My name is not Panda!” she screeched. To the salesman, she added, “If you don’t back off, that Gungan will give you a hug.” She pointed to Jar Jar, who stood some fifty feet away radiating stink lines visible through the Force.

“Shit, lady, I don’t want any trouble,” the salesman stammered before he ran away. Qui-Gon frowned; clearly Panda was not the negotiator he thought.

“That wasn’t bad for your first attempt,” he coached her, “but try to be less aggressive next time. Reciprocity is key.”

“God, you’re dense.” Her nose wrinkled. “A little further, Jar Jar.”

Jar Jar obediently moved several meters farther downwind.
Glancing around for any sign of the astromech, Qui-Gon asked, “Where is R2? I could use him as a bargaining chip.”

“Probably went off to have sex with an ATM. Anyway, if you trade him, who’s going to install the hyperdrive?”

“I am, of course.”

She made an odd coughing sound through her nose. “You’re kidding.”

“I never kid,” he answered truthfully. “If the queen would agree to part with some of her extensive wardrobe, I wouldn’t need to bargain.”

“We’ve been over this,” she replied. “Those are Lynaa originals. I—I mean, the queen—will not give them up. Not that anyone would want them on this planet anyway.”

His mind began to wander. She went off on a tangent, making several specific references to “the queen,” but Qui-Gon was already calculating optimal firework placement around the ship’s dorsal hull in his head. Then he began to invent new codenames for himself. He was just deciding between “Darkman” and “Hannibal” when Jar Jar’s shrieking foiled his concentration. Keen Jedi senses quickly located the primitive Gungan near a cantina with some diminutive alien’s long fingers wrapped around his neck. He jogged on over to help negotiate.

“If all the hyperdrive salesmen here are this aggressive, we’ll be out of here in no time!”

“Where do you think you get off,” the new salesman was growling, “standing upwind of my food smelling like that?”

Jar Jar gurgled and flopped onto the hard-packed ground. A quick glance into the Force showed he was dead.

“Oh. Do we get a discount for that?”

“Oh my god,” Panda squealed, “he is so cute.” She reached out to pat the alien’s forward-jutting head, but he stepped back and pointed a spindly glowing finger.

“Watch it, lady. I’m only here because Lucas lost a Superbowl bet, so back off.”

“Lucas who?”

“What’s a Superbowl?”

“Shut the fuck up. I’m not even gonna bother with the idiotic name that was in the script, so you assholes can call me E.T.” He rocked on his heels expectantly, as if that meant something.

Qui-Gon asked, “How do you spell that?”

“How do you spell—look, do you not know me? E.T., the extra-terrestrial!”

Panda shrugged.

“We know an R2,” Qui-Gon offered, “but no E.T.”

“I cannot believe this. First your friend ruins my lunch—”

“He wasn’t our friend,” Panda was quick to point out.
“—and now you don’t even know who I am! I’m going to tear your faces off for that!”

“Hey, ugly!”

Qui-Gon looked around, searching for the source of the incredibly shrill voice; it was even more annoying than Obi-Wan’s. Momentarily he located a small boy with a bowl cut, standing a few feet away. This boy held a handful of tiny orange, yellow and brown pellets, which he flung past the alien with startling accuracy.

“Fetch!”

“Damn it,” snarled E.T., diving for the pellets and cramming them into his mouth. The boy watched with evident satisfaction. Clearly introductions were in order.

“Thank you for your assistance, annoying little boy. I am Qui-Gon, and this is Pomade—”

“Pamé!”

“—and my associate, Jar Jar, who appears to be deceased.”

“Name’s Anakin,” the lad replied, “but most people call me Annie.”

“Annie?” Panda giggled. “What kind of name is that for a boy?”

“What kind of name is Padmé for anybody?”

She scowled and said nothing more.

“Run along now,” Qui-Gon said, making shooing motions with his hands. “My party and I are looking for cheap fireworks and souvenirs.”

“And a hyperdrive,” Panda rudely interrupted.

“We sell all of those where I work,” Annie told them, pointing to an establishment only one block distant. A large garish sign advertised “WATTO’S 23-HOUR CONVENIENCE STORE AND PAWN SHOP—CHEQUE CASHING, PAYDAY LOANS, HOLOGRAM REPAIR, LOTTERY TICKETS, BOOKMAKING, ORGAN TRANSPLANTS, USED HYPERDRIVES!”

As they followed Annie through the door, a siren went off, triggering an avalanche of balloons and confetti.

“Congratulations,” grunted a startling ugly creature as it flew towards them, “you is customer number twelve—”

“Million?”

“No, just twelve,” it finished. Moving with surprising agility for its tiny wings and overweight body, it buzzed over to the boy and slapped him upside the head. “What’s with the balloons? I said put rocks in there! Balloons are expensive.”

“Sorry, Watto,” Annie replied, rubbing his head. “I was busy dreaming of a better life.”

“Sheesh.” Turning back to his customers, Watto continued. “Welcome to my fine establishment. I have here some fine Tatooine sand, a real bargain—”

Qui-Gon was prepared to make the purchase, but Panda interrupted again.
“Actually, we’re looking for a hyperdrive.”

“Really? Well as it so happens, I have precisely the one you are looking for.”

“Sounds legit,” Qui-Gon said.

“If you will follow me out back…”

The curious creature called Watto flew towards the rear of his establishment. Padmé started to follow, but Qui-Gon stopped her.

“You remain here, young lady. This is a job for... the Negotiator.” Were it not for his Jedi training, he would be jumping up and down clapping his hands in glee right now. His time to shine had arrived, and he would surely go down in the annals of history as one of the galaxy’s greatest negotiators. He straightened his robes and stepped through the rear exit, to meet with destiny.

Padmé sighed theatrically, but it was wasted on her present audience, which consisted of Annie and the remarkably resilient Jar Jar. The former had been staring at her since Qui-Gon left, and the latter was bumbling around the shop like a “comic” relief on a bad HoloNet special.

“You’re hot,” the kid mumbled, practically emitting a streamer of drool.

Padmé grimaced and asked, “Aren’t you a little young to start liking girls?”

“I’m going to marry you someday.”

Holy crap, this kid moved fast. “Hit puberty, and maybe we’ll talk.”

“Then I’m probably going to strangle you to death.”

“Aaaaand zero to creepy in ten seconds flat. Good job.”

Trying to discourage further conversation, she pointedly turned away. Jar Jar had activated some kind of pan-headed droid and it was chasing him around the shop. A familiar popping sound recaptured her attention: the kid had opened a bottle of whiskey and was swigging it enthusiastically.

“Okay, I know you’re too young to drink.”

“No,” he protested, “the legal drinking age here is seven.”

Jar Jar collapsed against the counter. The droid had procured some sort of axe and began plunging it into his skull, spraying the floor with Gungan blood.

Padmé emitted a second sigh, this one genuine. “Pass me that bottle.”

“We’ll take it.”

“Really?” Watto sounded utterly surprised, probably in awe at Qui-Gon’s amazing negotiating skills. “You haven’t even seen it yet.”
“I don’t need to.” Decisiveness was another key element to successful negotiations. “How much?”

Watto shrugged. “Two thousand?”

“Unacceptable.” Qui-Gon shook his head. “I will pay three thousand—no more, no less.”

Watto was dumbfounded at this, and Qui-Gon privately congratulated himself for being on a roll. Finally the alien found his tongue and stammered. “Four thousand.”

“Ten thousand.”

“Sold.”

“Excellent. I have here my Bank of Coruscant platinum credit card—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Didn’t you read the friggin sign out front? Cash only, buddy.”

Qui-Gon thought for a moment. Then he waved his hand in front of Watto’s face.

“My credit card will be just fine.”

“What are you, nuts? Besides, I’m conveniently immune to Jedi mind tricks.”

“Very well then. I’m very sorry to do this,” Qui-Gon apologized, cracking his knuckles, “but you leave me no choice.”

MOMENTS LATER

“And my lightsaber as well,” he concluded, throwing it on the pile that contained his clothes, his breathing devices, the beach ball, his communicator, his Order-issue beard trimmer and Whale-to-basic Dictionary.

“I don’t know.” Watto wavered, tilting a hand back and forth.

“Fine, I’ll throw in my apprentice. Not the brightest bulb in the box, but he tries hard.”

“No deal.”

“And the ship, as well.”

“What good is a ship without a hyperdrive?”

“Fine, you can have the hyperdrive as well.”

“Deal!”

Feeling rather pleased with himself, Qui-Gon got dressed and returned to the store proper to find Panda slumped over an empty bottle, missing the majority of her clothing.

“No need to offer your wardrobe; I have taken care of that.” He asked her, “How long do you think it will take us to walk to the ship and back?”

“How the fuck should I know? Do I look like a pedometer?”

“I'm not sure what a device used for measuring the inappropriateness of a Jedi’s relationship to their Padawan has to do with this, but you appear to be intoxicated.”
“Fuck off! I’m queen I’ll do whatever I want,” she slurred.

“She drank all my whiskey,” complained the annoying boy.

“Off with your head!”

“Decapitations will accomplish nothing,” Qui-Gon reminded her. “I must return to the ship to obtain the agreed-upon materials for barter.”

“The queen disproves—disappear—disparate—doesn’t like this. The queen is me.”

Shaking his head, Qui-Gon threw her into a fireman’s carry and moved towards the exit.

“Wait a minute,” Watto interjected. “You gotta leave something as collateral.”

Eyeing Jar Jar’s corpse, Qui-Gon asked, “Do you take Gungans?”

“No!”

“Couldn’t you have left something else as collateral?” The annoying boy was still following them, much to Qui-Gon’s chagrin. “Like your boots?”

“And go barefoot on this hot sand? Of course not,” replied Qui-Gon, completely nude except for the aforementioned boots. Panda, dangling over his shoulder, sang quietly to herself.

“She keeps mumble-de-shamble, in a pretty cabinet… Let them eat cake she says, just like mamba-babble-blah…”

“Run along now, young one. We have a long way to go.”

Annie squinted in the direction they were walking. “Why did you park in the desert?”

“To avoid unwanted attention,” Qui-Gon explained, strolling naked down the main thoroughfare with a drunken teenager over his shoulder.

“But you can’t go back now,” the boy whined.

“And why not?”

“The sandstorm.”

Looking up, Qui-Gon saw an immeasurable mass of sand on the horizon. Some kind of colossal, open-mouthed face appeared to be forming in the center.

“Why don’t you come back to my place? I could show Padmé my droid. Chicks like that kind of thing, right?”

“Whatever you say, annoying small child.”

The child led them to a small hovel on the outskirts of town. Both suns were rather low in the sky by this point, so Qui-Gon presumed they would have to rest for the night. He followed the boy inside and was immediately greeted by the ultimate vision of beauty. An angel, surely, with brown hair arranged artfully atop her head and a death stick between her thin lips. Upon seeing their
party she immediately dropped the stack of dishes she carried. She looked at him. Then she looked
down. The death stick dropped from her mouth.

“Greetings, madam,” he said, staring.

“Annie,” she sighed, staring back, “you have got to stop bringing random people home.”

Some shabbily dressed local emerged from an adjoining room.

“Lady, you’re out of toilet paper.”

Without taking his eyes off of the breathtaking loveliness in front of him, Qui-Gon casually drew
his lightsaber and severed the vagrant’s arm.

“Oh gods,” screamed the man, “why would you do that?” He fled.

“I do not want to think about where you were keeping that,” mumbled Annie.

“My hero,” the woman sighed.

“Think nothing of it,” Qui-Gon told her. They drew closer, and he was certain he heard violins.
Whistles and excited beeping sounds reached his ear, and suddenly the spell was broken. R2-D2
rolled past them, into the kitchen, and rhythmic clanking sounds echoed from within soon after.

“What is that droid doing to my dishwasher?”

“I believe he is upgrading it,” Qui-Gon answered. “Now what’s for dinner?”

“Are you sure this is necessary for my safety, master Jedi?”

“Oh, absolutely, your highness,” Obi-Wan replied from the other side of the bed. “Assassins
always strike when one is lying helpless in bed.”

“If you insist.” The queen smiled enigmatically. “I must warn you however—I sleep in the nude.”

Obi-Wan’s smile could have powered several battle stations the size of small moons.

“Let me get the lights.” Darkness enveloped the opulent royal bedchamber. He heard several
muffled thumps of clothing hitting the floor, followed by a gong-like clanging he assumed came
from her headdress, and then the gel mattress shifted ever so slightly as she slipped under the
covers beside him. This, he thought, almost makes the whole thing worthwhile.

A minute passed.

“Master Jedi?”

“Yes, your highness?”

“Is that your hand?”

“…Yes.”

“Interesting… continue.”

“With pleasure, your highness.”
A sharp intake of breath came from the far pillow.

“By the Force, that’s furry,” Obi-Wan could not help blurt-ing.

“Oh, that’s my Little Wookiee,” explained the queen, sounding confused.

“Is that what you call it?” He felt an amused grin cross his face as he continued groping in the dark. Then he frowned and grabbed his lightsaber from the bedside table. The blue glow illuminated a pygmy Wookiee, crouched on the bed, growling warningly.

“Oh, bugger.”

Away in the moonlit desert, a bantha lifted its head. Some human somewhere was screaming but the sound seemed to be very far off, so it did not warrant attention.
Bright light assaulted Padmé even through her eyelids. So intrusive was the light, she concluded that Qui-Gon the Moron had miscalculated their jump to hyperspace and flown right through a star. Then the pounding sensation kicked in, like an army of Ugnaughts pounding on her skull, and she realized she was hung over. It was a very familiar feeling.

Waking up in fuzzy “Jake the Jedi” pyjamas on a bed shaped like a racing speeder, however, was not. She slowly opened her eyes. A droid stared back. She screamed.

The droid screamed almost as shrilly and shielded its goggle-eyed face with half-finished arms. “Oh! Please don’t hurt me!”

“Stop making that noise and I won’t have to,” she groaned, rubbing her temples.

“Threepio! I told you to tell me when she woke up,” said the creepy kid from yesterday as he entered the room.

“Threepio?”

“Yeah, C-3PO,” the boy explained. “I built him to help my mom.”

“Isn’t this a protocol droid?” she asked in spite of her galactic headache. “What does an impoverished single mother need with a droid that tells her how to properly greet foreign dignitaries and which fork is the fish fork?”

Annie shrugged. “I don’t know. I just built him. Some fat guy in a plaid shirt told me it would be a great idea.”

“Greetings,” the droid said, extending a skeletal hand. “I am C-3PO, human/cyborg relations, although I would like to point out that a ‘cyborg’ technically refers to an amalgam of organic and synthetic parts and is therefore an inaccurate descriptor. I am fluent in over six billion forms of communication, all wasted on my—”

Padmé slapped her hand over the droid’s vocal projector and turned to the boy. “What happened last night?”

“You were kidnapped by sand people,” the boy replied. “I had to defeat fifty of them to save you. You’re probably really grateful.” He pursed his lips like a flirtatious fish, closed his eyes, and leaned forward expectantly.

She stared at him for a full minute before asking Threepio, “Hey droid; what happened last night?”

Nodding, Threepio tilted his head back and began:

I am only a droid, and not much of a storyteller. I have no active memory of the previous day until Mistress Shmi activated me to assist with the dinner preparations. She informed me there would be three additional guests joining us. I set five places at the table, for Master Anakin, Mistress Shmi, Madam Padmé, Sir Jinn and Sir Binks. Sir Binks began using his elongated tongue to steal food from others’ plates in a most discourteous fashion, until Master Anakin pinned said tongue to the table with an eating implement. As we were hosting company, I provided a bottle of wine for the
Madam Padmé immediately began drinking directly from the bottle, in flagrant violation of etiquette. While intoxicated she made several references to the monarchy of Naboo, until succumbing to her condition. After I cleansed and sanitized the areas covered by her vomitus, Master Anakin pointed out that there were only two beds on the premises, logic dictating that he share his own with Madam Padmé. Sir Jinn replied enthusiastically, declaring that he would share with Mistress Shmi. Despite being hostess, Mistress Shmi allowed the guest to dictate her course of action and departed the dining room with him, displaying various mammalian human behaviour patterns such as pupil dilation, heightened pulse rate, and “giggling.” Unfortunately, my behavioral database is incomplete, preventing me from making an analysis at this time. I loaded the dishes into the dishwasher, in the process upsetting a most unpleasant astro-droid whom I am told is the property of a Queen Amidala, whereupon I assisted Master Anakin in carrying Madam Padmé upstairs. Master Anakin began insisting I remove her clothing, but I upheld protocol and discreetly dressed her in available materials as her other garments were stained by her stomach contents. Then I monitored Madam Padmé’s condition until sunrise.

Padmé got bored seven words in, but it was nice to have an accurate, unbiased account of what went on during her latest bender—although she could have done without the ridiculously accurate sound effects. Perhaps she ought to invest in a protocol droid.

She asked the kid, “Where’s your ‘fresher?”

“Down the hall; but uh, water is so scarce that we usually take showers together. And um, keep holographic recordings of them,” he added.

Despite Creepboy’s protests, Padmé treated herself to a ninety minute shower alone. She emerged from the steam billows wrapped in every towel she was able to find. Anakin’s mother was watching her anxiously when she stepped out of the refresher.

“You’re still out of toilet paper,” Padmé helpfully informed her, “and now you’re out of shampoo, hairspray, skin lotion and tampons.”

“We’ll have to make do,” the simply dressed woman replied, wringing her hands, “considering our water bill will now take seventy-four years to pay off.”

“I wasn’t lying about the sharing thing,” Anakin piped up.

“Quite alright,” blustered Qui-Gon, appearing with typical Jedi stealth and taking his place at Shmi’s side. “I can easily cover your expenses with my Platinum Bank of Coruscant® credit card. What’s in your wallet?” he asked nobody in particular.

Padmé raised an expertly tweezed eyebrow. “The hell?”

He shrugged. “I earn an additional 500 credits every time I say that.”

The eyebrow went down, but then it shot back up again. “Are you wearing a dress?”

“Yes. My sweet snookums has kindly agreed to loan me a portion of her wardrobe until my Jedi raiment is out of hock.”

“Such a caring man,” Shmi sighed. “And what a provider! And so talented with his lightsaber.”

She stared lovingly into Qui-Gon’s eyes, and Anakin pantomimed vomiting behind her back.

“So, Annie,” Qui-Gon said, “how about you and I spend some quality time together today?”
“Maybe toss the old football around, or talk about girls.”

“I can’t,” Anakin replied. “I have work.”

“Can’t you get the day off?”

“Um, no? We’re slaves. We don’t really get days off.”

“Slaves?” Qui-Gon was righteously aghast. “But slavery is illegal!”

“So is blockading peaceful planets,” Padmé pointed out, “yet here we are.”

“But… but slavery is illeeeeeeeeegal!”

“And inducting children into your Jedi cult isn’t?” Shmi asked.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” protested Qui-Gon. “Who said I’m a Jedi?”

“Uh, doy,” Anakin replied, “you’re carrying a lightsaber. It’s kind of a giveaway.”

“Well, maybe I killed a Jedi and stole it from his corpse.”

“Yeah, right. Nothing can kill a Jedi.”

“Wait until the next movie, kid; we die like animals.”

“Speaking of dying like animals,” Padmé interjected, “but don’t we have more pressing issues at hand? Like the whole hyperdrive thing?”

“Breakfast first,” Shmi insisted, firmly marching them all to the table. “French toast? Your droid upgraded my toaster.”

“Uh… no thanks.”

Qui-Gon rapped on the glass of a small terrarium beside the table. “Sleep well, Jar Jar?”

Folded into a space smaller than most glove compartments, Jar Jar could only murmur, “Help… mesa….”

Padmé continued rubbing her head, wincing every time utensil clinked against dish.

“Excuse me,” she said to Shmi, “do you have any coffee ready?”

Shmi’s forehead wrinkled. “What is ‘coffee’?”

Miles away, a certain bantha paused its routine and glanced around nervously in the morning sun; there sure were a lot of humans screaming around there lately.

Even more miles away, a certain hungover Padawan slowly drifted towards consciousness in a nest of pillows, satin sheets, and handmaidens. He was awakening from the strangest dream. In it, he had been in a room with the mysterious being who called himself “George” and another man he did not recognize. This unknown man asked George a question.
“So how are they going to get the hyperdrive?”

“I was going to have Qui-Gon rob a convenience store, but then I decided on a twelve-minute CGI sequence that has no bearing whatsoever on the plot.”

“I smell a video game,” crowed the man, and he gave George a high-five.

Obi-Wan shook his head to clear any recollections of the dream from his cobwebbed, sleep-addled mind. Qui-Gon’s nonsense talk of plots and narratives was starting to get to him, he decided. He rolled over and tried to get comfortable again, punching his pillow a few times.

Except it was not a pillow; it was the pygmy Wookiee.

“I can’t believe saying ‘Pleeeeeeeeease’ a bunch of times didn’t work.”

Qui-Gon slumped on the front steps of Watto’s, feeling defeat for the first time ever. Yes, he was making headway in the negotiations—he had haggled the price down to two pints of Obi-Wan’s blood and six years’ pay—but they were no closer to getting the fireworks they so sorely needed.

Lowering her sunglasses, the handmaiden asked, “Why don’t we just sell my—I mean the queen’s ship? I’m sure we could get more than enough for it to buy one with a working hyperdrive. Isn’t like I can’t buy a replacement when I get home. If I ever get home.”

“I have an idea,” Anakin said, leaning on his broom.

“Call me ‘Dad’,” Qui-Gon told him.

“No.”

“Very well. I suppose these things take time.”

“Time we don’t have,” the girl burst out. Qui-Gon was starting to regret bringing her.

Ignoring her, he asked the boy, “What did you have in mind?”

Anakin jerked his thumb towards a large poster advertising the Poontang Eve Podrace.

“Get jobs putting up posters, and raise the money that way. Hmm.”

“No! I mean win the prize money and use it to buy the hyperdrive.”

Panda started talking again. “What the fuck? That’s both convoluted and time-consuming, not to mention highly-unlikely. This is an entire fucking planet here; surely we can find some other store in some other city that sells hyperdrives.”

Qui-Gon shook his head. “It would never work. Jar Jar is too valuable to risk as a driver in some race.”

“Couldn’t you drive the pod?”

Qui-Gon had had enough of this teenage girl; it was time for some constructive discipline. Using the Force, he animated her generous ponytail and wrapped it around her head so securely that even a Rodian would have trouble removing it. This would hopefully be an effective lesson on lecturing one’s elders and betters and have the additional benefit of silencing her.
“I can drive the pod,” the boy said.

Qui-Gon stared incredulously while Pomade struggled furiously with her new hair mask.

“I’m a champion podracer,” the child went on. He fidgeted slightly under Qui-Gon’s gaze. “Well, okay—I’m not a champion, but I’m really good. Well, actually, I’ve never won a race, but I came close! Okay, okay, I came dead last, but I didn’t die!” Qui-Gon continued staring in amazement.

“Okay, okay, okay,” the boy continued, “full disclosure: I’ve never been in a race but I built my own racing pod—OKAY! Um, maybe you should just come see…”

After work, Anakin led them to a disused lot behind his house and showed them the “pod”, which consisted of a cardboard box with racing fins taped on and “FASTEST POD-EVAR” scrawled on the side.

“It’s a fixer-upper,” the boy admitted.

“Never underestimate the power of a montage,” Qui-Gon replied.

Anakin was ecstatic. “A montage? I can sing about how difficult my life is! Spin it, Threepio!”

Threepio produced a small disc, which R2 slid into a slot on the front of its chassis. Music began to play, and Anakin began to sing:

- It’s a hard knock life for me
- It’s a hard knock life for me
- ‘Stead of moving, we get shipped
- ‘Stead of homework, I get whipped
- It’s a hard knock life!

- Gotta work in Watto’s shop
- Cleaning ‘til I think I’ll drop
- Hear him yelling, “Get to work!”
- Owns my mother—what a jerk!
- It’s a hard knock life!

- Don’t it feel like the wind is always blowing
- Don’t feel like there’s nothing here but sand
- Once a day you think about just going
- But they’ll blow your head off by remote command
No one cares when you're acting kinda creepy
No one cares if you build an awesome droid
No one cares if you act all sad and weepy
Sometimes I really start to get annoyed

Oh! Heat waves forever life!
You're a slave forever life!
Stupid-bowl-cut-life!
Sand in your butt life!

Santa Claus, we never—wait
Who the fuck is Santa? Great
No one cares one smithereen
When you live on Tatooine
It's a hard knock life!

ONE MONTAGE LATER

"Wow," Panda said, hands on hips as she admired their work, "I must admit I was skeptical, but... the results speak for themselves."

"Yeah," grumbled Shmi, taking a drag of her death stick, "another thing that is of no possible use to me. Best son ever."

"Can I have a death stick?"

"For the last time, no!"

The handmaiden folded her arms and scowled as Qui-Gon walked around the pod. "Yes, this should be about perfect for our purposes."

Pomade replied, "Risking an innocent nine-year-old’s life in a roundabout method of obtaining something we could get a hundred other ways?"

She glanced at Anakin, who was standing so close he was practically touching her.

"Well, I wouldn’t say innocent..."

"Such a shame that Jar Jar was caught in the turbines and killed," Qui-Gon opined. "I wonder how that happened..."
“Yeah,” Panda replied somewhat shiftily, “I wonder about that too. Must’ve been a total freak accident.”

The pod was small but bulbous, with odd fins along the cockpit’s leading edge that seemed counterintuitive to anyone who knew anything about aerodynamics, but since R2 was the only one who knew anything about aerodynamics and it kept its vocoder shut, this was not a problem. The turbines were also small, but remarkably efficient despite the chunks of Gungan embedded throughout. All it needed was a driver.

“Well,” Qui-Gon continued authoritatively, “from what I’ve heard, young Annie is quite the racing prodigy.”

“Sure,” Annie replied.

“Well. All of our problems are solved.”

Pomade opened her mouth, but Qui-Gon was too fast for her and wrapped it in her own hair again.

“Great job, everyone; let’s meet in the exact same place tomorrow.” He clapped his hands in an inspiring manner and waited while everyone dispersed. Suddenly, a thought occurred to him. This was a frequent event for Qui-Gon, and the source of his limitless creativity. However, unlike his strobe lightsaber idea or what he was covertly referring to as the Fu Manchu Contingency, this particular revelation pertained to the here and now; and Qui-Gon was very much a believer in the here and now.

Piloting a homebuilt vehicle at breakneck speeds in service of a desperate monarch’s only hope was very stirring; in fact, it was almost certainly the sort of thing a Chosen One would do.

“One moment, Anakin,” he said, drawing the boy aside.

“Look, if this is some kind of heart-to-heart chat about how special you think my mom is, trust me, I can probably repeat it from memory—”

“Your mother is indeed very special, Anakin; but I’m thinking about you.”

The boy’s eyes grew very wide. “Am I about to need an adult?”

“Anakin… have you ever felt like you were special?”

“All the time.”

“Really? Hmm. Has anything… unusual ever happened to you?”

“One time I had a dream that Watto gave me a hundred bucks.”

“I see. And this dream came true?”

“No, but then I made his pants fall off just by thinking about it.”

Qui-Gon stroked his beard thoughtfully for several moments. “Anakin, I need you to pee in this cup for me.”

—o—

“I’m sending you the sample now.”
“Yes, master,” sighed Obi-Wan, turning down the volume on his Jedi comm unit while thinking wistfully of the hot tub he was not currently occupying. Gods, it was always so bright here… He massaged his temples until the comm beeped and analysis readouts appeared on the ship’s computer, displaying various medical statistics and extrapolations. Whoever this kid was, he had obscenely high blood alcohol content and was going to contract diabetes by the age of 25. Obi-Wan shrugged and flipped over to the midi-chlorian measurement, because that was all Qui-Gon cared about. What he saw rendered him speechless.

“Obi Wan? Obi Wan! What does the scanner say about his midi-chlorian levels?”

“They’re over nine THOUSAND!” screamed Obi-Wan, unconsciously crushing the communicator with his fist. He stared down at the splintered plastic in amazement. Not sure why I did that, he thought. Oh well, one less way for Qui-Gon to annoy me.

“Hey Obi-Wan,” a handmaiden called from the next room, “we’re playing naked Twister™!”

He never gave the unusually high midi-chlorian concentration or its owner a first thought, let alone a second one.

Qui-Gon could scarcely contain his glee as he skipped towards Watto’s 23-hour Convenience. Not only had he met the most enchanting creature in the galaxy, but her son was surely the Chosen One. The best part? These new developments meant further negotiations.

As usual, there were no other customers in the store when he arrived. Watto fluttered out from behind the counter to greet him.

“Well, well, well. You bring me that blood?”

“Watto, I have a wager to make.”

“A wager?”

“Yes, a wager on the outcome of the upcoming race.”

“You don’t have any cash.”

“Nor do I wish to win any. If my racer wins, I get Anakin and his mother. If he loses, you get everything I promised you for free.”

Watto momentarily forgot to flap his wings, nearly dropping into a bucket of dusty bulk candy. “Are you serious? You got any idea how much two slaves cost? You have to wager something pretty costly against them.”

Qui-Gon wracked his brain, trying to think of something he had not yet pledged against the hyperdrive. He looked down at his clothing. “This dress?”

“No, you jabroni!” Watto sighed. “Look, that girl you had with you yesterday… Her ovaries would fetch a fine price on the organ market.”

“Done! I’ll even throw in my apprentice’s ovaries as well.”

“I thought you said your apprentice was male.”

Qui-Gon nodded, nonplussed.
“Oy vey,” Watto muttered, shaking his head. “Look, I can’t give you both of ‘em. They’re too valuable. However, I happen to have this… uh, chance cube with me.” Grabbing a pair of blue and red markers and a paperweight from behind the counter, he turned away from Qui-Gon for a moment, and then presented a cube with five red sides and one blue. “If it lands on blue, you get the boy; red, you get his mother. Capisce?”

“Sounds completely fair.”

“Really? Alright then. Here we go.” Watto tossed the cube on the floor, and Qui-Gon watched it tumble across the tiles, adrift in an ocean of probability.

“Come on, red,” he murmured almost under his breath, but the cube stopped on blue. “Damn it!”
Pods are raced, and Qui-Gon finds a simple solution to a simple problem.

Flags fluttered in the hot breeze like overexcited butterflies too drunk to achieve liftoff, held by the tattered masses that had turned out in record numbers to watch a nine-year-old child die a painful and public death. Padmé could not understand why Tatooine, a backwater criminal hangout at best and bleeding, carbuncled anus of the entire galaxy at worst, was such a mecca for podracing—until Anakin explained about their utterly unregulated insurance market.

He sat in the cockpit of his pod looking all precocious and shit, as if he was not about to fly a flimsy, unprotected gondola at impossibly high speeds into an obstacle course of rocks while in close proximity to large amounts of shrapnel and flammable or explosive materials. Padmé almost admired his resolve, until he made some comment about “dying without boobs” and tried to grab hers.

Qui-Gon came over, grinning like an idiot—which, to be precise, was the only manner in which he was capable of grinning—and started speaking to Anakin.

“You said you were a champion racer.”

“Well, I play a lot of video games.”

“Hey! Anakin shouted in protest as Qui-Gon flipped down the blast shield on the boy’s helmet, completely covering his face.

“It’s all right, Anakin. Trust your feelings. Your senses can deceive you.”

“Sure. It’s where the Jedi get their power, right?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“What is the Force, anyway?”

“That’s not important,” Qui-Gon blithely replied. “What is important is that you learn to use it.”

“How can I use something I don’t understand— HEY!” Anakin shouted in protest as Qui-Gon flipped down the blast shield on the boy’s helmet, completely covering his face.

“It’s all right, Anakin. Trust your feelings. Your senses can deceive you.”

“But with the blast shield down, I can’t see a thing.”
Padmé’s jaw dropped in shock as Qui-Gon began stripping out of Shmi’s dress. What the hell was he planning on doing? Should she call an adult? Tell him to check his pedometer? Oh my god, how did he walk upright when he was lugging that thing around? Her pupils dilated just to take in the whole, big picture. No wonder Shmi seems to walk funny, she thought. She was so taken in by Qui-Gon’s…equipment that she failed to notice what he was doing with the dress until he had already crammed it into an intake port on one of the huge engines, out of Anakin’s line of sight.

“Hey! What—” Her hair crawled into her mouth again, stifling her protest.

“Okay, Anakin, you can lift the blast shield now.”

Anakin lifted it, glanced at Qui-Gon, grimaced, and stared up at the sky. “I wish I hadn’t.”

“I know you’ll do well, son.”

“You’re not my father!”

“No; I am your father.”

“That’s impossible!”

“Search your feelings, Annie. You know it to be true.”

“Not buying it,” the boy said, shaking his head, “but points for execution. That whole ‘search your feelings’ line isn’t half bad.”

Qui-Gon shrugged and waved him on. “May the Force be with you.”

Padmé struggled to pull the hair from her mouth as weird lizard-horses towed Anakin’s pod with the others to the starting line, Jar Jar’s head dangling from the cockpit as a grotesque hood ornament. Shmi ran up behind her and yelled, “Win that race, Annie! Or I won’t love you anymore!”

“Geez, no pressure,” Padmé mumbled, spitting out hair. Anakin would never hear her over the roar of the crowd now. She looked at Qui-Gon who was watching with his arms folded, his third arm swinging in the breeze.

“What the hell is wrong with you? Why would you do that?”

Qui-Gon smiled. “If that boy wins that race against these impossible odds… then he really is a Chosen One. Perhaps the Chosen One.”

—o—

“Ladies, gentlemen and hermaphrodites,” boomed a male voice from the track’s loudspeakers, “Welcome to the seventeenth annual Poontang Eve Podrace! I am your announcer, Two-Headed Howard—”

“AND I’M JIMMAY!” screamed a piercing, slurred voice way too loudly.

“Yes, you’re Jimmy, my other head, we know. Go back to your finger painting.”

“JIMMEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!”

“We have quite the lineup of racers today! Aldar Beedo, Ark Roose, Dud Bolt—no, wait a minute, this is just a bunch of shit Jimmy scribbled on the back of the list in crayon. Actually, I’m not even
Anakin craned his neck, trying to see around the various vehicles between him and the starting line. He caught a glimpse of that wrinkly thumb-headed prick enthusiastically hoisting a single glowing fingertip at the audience from the cockpit of some absurdly oversized pod.

"Holy shit," Howard went on, "they let a human in this race? Yikes. Anyways! Gentlemen... Start your engines!!!"

"ENGINES! YAAAAAY!

"Shut UP, Jimmy!"

Turbines roared to life all around Anakin. He looked down at his controls. There were certainly a lot of buttons, but none of them were labelled with A, B, X, Y, or squares and triangles. He took hold of the two large handles in front of him and tentatively pushed them forward.

Nothing happened. He frowned as three lights above the starting gate came on. He took the handles and pulled them backwards. Still nothing.

The leftmost light blinked out. Anakin tried yanking the handles back and then immediately pushing them forward. His pod remained as silent and stationary as Jar Jar's corpse. The middle light blinked out, followed by the one on the right. The moment it went dark, every other pod zoomed away in a cloud of sand, with the exception of a flashy red number to his rear that possessed four turbines.

"Hey," Anakin shouted, "how come that guy gets twice as many engines?" Nobody heard him because the flickering beams of unstable energy holding the turbines together suddenly flickered out, causing all four to fly off in separate directions. Three out of the four slammed into the viewing gallery and exploded, scattering debris and wet lumps of shredded flesh in all directions. The fourth became airborne and ended up on an improbable collision course with the only other object in the sky: some sort of two-story house, held aloft by thousands of brightly coloured balloons. The loose turbine ploughed through these balloons, making a sound like bubble wrap under a steamroller, and flew several hundred feet more before shredded latex clogged its blades and it also exploded. The house dipped violently and began drifting towards the horizon.

"Holy guacamole, folks," yelled Howard, "looks like the betting pool just got a lot smaller, and the pot just got bigger!"

"PEEPLEE!"

"I don't know why they don't just tie those goddamn things together. E.T. takes the lead—of course—and that Annie kid can't seem to get his motor running!"

Anakin exhaled. This was it. This was his last-ditch effort, laying it all on the line, everything or nothing. He pushed the handles forward first, and then tugged them both backwards:

Nothing happened, although he did notice the button that said "START ENGINE." Moments later he was flying across the sand so fast it seemed like he was stationary, and the rocks were whipping past him at blinding speeds. Before he had time to realize what was happening, his pod collided with a hovering translucent green-and-purple cube. The cube shattered and seconds later three red objects appeared, orbiting his pod as it sped along. He could not quite make out what they were; vaguely dome-shaped, about the size of R2 and covered in interlocking plates. He noticed one of the buttons in his cockpit had started flashing, so he pressed it and one of the red
things went speeding away over the dunes. Another pod rose into view and the red thing veered right and collided with it, sending it into a destructive spin and ultimately scattered its smoking wreckage across the desert.

Anakin grinned. “Hey... it is just like video games.”

Chuckling madly, he gunned his throttle and began catching up to the rest of the pack. One of them glanced backwards, and lobbed a banana peel over his shoulder. It landed squarely in the sand and Anakin’s pod passed harmlessly over it. He shrugged and sped up even more.

Thanks to a button labelled “BOOST” that lit up from time to time and strange neon chevrons on buried in the canyon bed that inexplicably made his pod surge ahead, he was in seventeenth place as he entered the second lap.

“Things are really getting shaken up here, folks! The standings are—GOD DAMN IT, JIMMY STOP BITING ME—are really changing up quickly! But look out,” boomed Howard as Anakin raced past, “the Sand People have arrived and they’re looking for some action!”

“Shit,” Anakin swore to himself, “not the sand people.”

He could see them up ahead, with their tattered lawn chairs and their pyramids of empty beer cans and their brightly-coloured caps that probably said something like “GIT R DONE”, which made no sense. What was it even supposed to mean? Sand People were the worst.

A few of them raised their rifles and began taking pot-shots at the racers passing their perch. One of them scored a hit on a cockpit stabilizer, and the pod whipped about like a dust bunny in the Jetstream from its own turbines until the cables tangled and the whole mess exploded. The Sand People shook their rifles above their heads and screamed, “YEE-HAW!”

Anakin just shook his head.

——o——

Qui-Gon continued to smile beatifically despite the harrowing scenes being broadcast on the handheld screen they were all sharing. Padmé, on the other hand, was twisting and turning her shoulders with every zig and zag of the pods; coming from Naboo, she certainly was not used to anything more intense than a standoff at a four-way stop sign. Shmi watched out of the corner of her eye, chain smoking and making bedroom eyes at Qui-Gon.

“Yousa thinken hesa gonna be dyen?” asked a familiar screeching voice over her shoulder. Padmé nearly dropped the viewer.

“Jar Jar?? I thought I—I mean , I thought you tragically fell into that turbine. Accidentally.”

“Mesa made a full recovery,” he replied. “My haven good genes, mesa guess.”

“Oh, just you watch,” Qui-Gon pontificated. “Anakin will win this race.”

“He’s in seventeenth place and clearly has no idea how to drive,” Padmé countered.

“Exactly. With odds like against him, how can he not win?”

“He has a point,” Shmi chimed in. “After all what were the odds I’d miss my birth control twice the year I had Anakin?”

Padmé stared at her.
“I mean,” Shmi stammered, “what were the odds I’d spontaneously become pregnant with him? That’s what I meant to say.”

Qui-Gon shrugged. “Sounds legit.”

Watto interrupted them by fluttering up to Padmé with a tape measure. He held it in front of her belly, first vertically, then horizontally. Then he grasped her simple robe and tried to lift the front of it.

“What the fuck are you trying to do?” she snapped, slapping his hands away so hard he did a cartwheel in midair.

“Just inspecting my future merchandise,” he grunted.

She shrieked, “What?!”

Suddenly, as if seized by an invisible hand, Watto shot into the air like a baseball, landing headfirst in the bleachers some fifty meters away. Qui-Gon lowered his arm and whistled loudly, his eyes rolling around in his head in a way he probably thought was unsuspicious.

“Oh my gods,” Howard roared, interrupting Padmé’s indignity, “that Annie kid’s in trouble!”

She returned her gaze to the screen in time to see Anakin’s left engine explode.

Anakin had just moved up to sixteenth when smoke began pouring from his left engine. He caught a glimpse of burning floral-patterned fabric fluttering from his air intake.

“What the—?”

Fire filled his field of vision and his world turned upside-down, the sand and the sky swapping places repeatedly and alarms beeping from every corner of his cockpit. One of the warning lights said “ENGINE MISSING” and he yelled at it in terrified frustration,

“I know the stupid engine is missing! It exploded!”

With only one turbine to pull it along, his pod dangled behind like a stray leaf in a hurricane, twirling around the remaining cable at breakneck speed.

“Who even designed these things, anyway?!”

“He’s gonna die!”

Padmé waved the viewer frantically under Qui-Gon’s indifferent nose. “A child is going to die because you are completely deranged!”

“Patience, young Pomade.”

“PADMÉ!”

“You’re letting your worries of the future detract from the here and now. In the here and now, Anakin is still alive.”

“And in last place,” Shmi pointed out.
"Tense up your buttholes, folks! They’re coming up on Conveniently Off-Screen Canyon, where..."

Loud squelching and thumping noises interrupted his announcement, accompanied by screeching feedback that forced Padmé and Shmi to cover their ears.

"...Sorry folks, Jimmy had the mic in his mouth—and if he does it again he gets his crayons taken away!"

"JIMMAY!"

"SHUT UP!"

As indicated by the canyon’s name, all racers disappeared from the viewer screen for a few moments. The camera panned to the other end, where a massive plume of smoke emerged, preceded by E.T.’s pod. Anakin, now with one of the other pods’ engines attached in place of his own missing one, sliced through the smoke moments later.

"See?" Qui-Gon looked smug. "Now he’s in second place."

"Fuck," Padmé breathed. "how the hell does anyone even agree to drive in these races? How can anyone place bets when half the racers explode before the third lap?"

"It’s coming down to the wire, folks!"

She nearly forgot to breathe as Anakin pulled alongside E.T., only to be forced onto a braking ramp. The steep ramp launched him sharply upward, and his out-of-control pod shot out of sight. As one, she, Shmi, Jar Jar and Qui-Gon glanced upward to track his progress into the sky.

"Oie boie!"

"He’s gonna hit that house!"

"Nope... nope, there he goes... how high is he going to...?"

They lost sight of him. "Maybe," Qui-Gon mused, "we should forget about the hyperdrive and just buy one of those..."

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The air became thinner the higher Anakin flew. He looked back; E.T.’s pod looked like an ant crawling along a crack in the wall. The viewing stands were a moldy spot further down that crack. The braking ramp that sent him up here was no longer even visible.

A purple speck appeared in his field of vision. As he flew further skyward, it resolved into a purple rectangle with tasseled corners and an ornate pattern like the carpet in his mother’s front hallway. Actually it was a carpet, much like the one in his mother’s front hallway. He heard singing as he drew closer.

"A whole new world," sang a man and a woman, with voices as clear and strong as the sunlight, "a dazzling place I never knew! But when I’m way up here it’s crystal-clear that

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

The screaming was their response when the Anakin’s brake fins snagged a corner of the carpet, yanking it out from under them. The woman toppled headfirst into his cockpit; the man was not so
lucky. He plummeted towards the ground, his puffy white robes billowing around him as he fell. Anakin hoped they would maybe slow the man’s descent somewhat. He quickly forgot about the falling man when he saw what had landed in his chair.

The woman was human, with dark skin, with large brown eyes and long black hair. She was dressed like a dancer from Jabba’s palace, with low-cut blue satin everything. She stared at him in utter shock. Anakin stared back for a different reason. The spell was broken when a bolt of green light soared over his head with a loud crack.

He looked around again and saw that he'd flown right into the middle of a battle. At first he thought the combatants were on high-altitude speeder bikes, but then he looked closer and saw they were zipping around on wooden rods with straw on the end like his mother used to clean the floors. They waved tiny sticks at each other in a completely serious fashion and shouted nonsense phrases like “Smelly armpits” and “Abracadabra!” and little jets of coloured light shot out. Then he did see a speeder bike fly past, except it was piloted by some sort of overgrown Wookiee and had a tiny one-person compartment attached to one side. A hairless, pale man in black robes swooped after it, somehow flying without any repulsorlift or even a broomstick, laughing maniacally and screaming about a boy who lived. He only got a few shots in before getting too close to the pod’s turbine, whereupon his flowing finery was sucked into the blades and him along with it.

“Gross,” was Anakin’s response, but it came out sounding like Wookiee talk because the girl’s screaming had rendered him temporarily deaf. Higher and higher he climbed, until he began to see stars overhead. Another flying man, this one wearing some sort of modified red and gold Mandalorian armour, flew up alongside him in that moment and said,

“Not bad, kid; but did you ever solve that icing problem?”

Anakin frowned. “What icing problem?”

His engines stalled completely, and he noticed a thin layer of ice had suddenly formed on them. His breath made tiny clouds in front of his face.

“I’ll take that,” said the armoured man, plucking the woman from Anakin’s pod with ease. The pod finished its arc and began plummeting towards the ground again. Anakin began frantically pushing buttons, but everything was dead. As the desert raced up to meet him like the inevitable hand of fate, he thought about restarting the engines, but that would just send him towards the ground faster. In desperation, he grabbed the only lever he had not tried, and yanked it as far as it would go.

His vehicle halted in midair with no regard for inertia or trajectory and coasted onto the racetrack once more, in front of E.T.

“Lucky for me this thing had air brakes,” Anakin wanted to say, but all that came out was “AAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

Turbines roared in his ears as E.T. closed the gap, his absurdly oversized X-shaped engines looming behind the cockpit. Either was more than large enough to accommodate Anakin’s entire pod.

“Get out of my way, you little shit,” the extraterrestrial screamed.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAA...” Anakin screamed back.

He frantically jinked the controls, moving aside just as E.T. tried to grind him up. The orange pod
“I have had enough of you,” screamed E.T., and reaching into his glove compartment he produced a blaster and levelled it at Anakin.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

Suddenly E.T. noticed he was pointing a radio at the boy and not a blaster.

“What the fuck?”

His right-hand engine failed a second later, spewing smoke with a faint odour of banana peel. Anakin pulled away from the shrieking, cursing little alien as E.T.’s pod broke apart, the oversized and overpowered turbines disintegrating utterly. Only his cockpit remained, skidding slowly to a stop on the gravel.

E.T. sighed and pointed his glowing finger towards the heavens. “E.T…. phone… OnStar!”

A shadow loomed overhead. He looked up, and saw the balloon-tethered house drifting in for a landing directly on top of him.

“Oh fuck this,” he groaned as it landed.

With nobody to get in his way, Anakin shot forward and crossed the finish line unopposed. Gliding to a stop in front of the gallery, he removed his helmet and waited for the raucous cheers, the crowd going wild, the ticker tape and the champagne.

Nothing happened.

Nobody ran out to cheer him because they were already gathering around another pod that had crossed the finish line before him, white with a number 5 on the side and an enormous letter M on the front.

“And the winner is Speed Racer! What an upset! Truly he is a demon on repulsorlifts!”

“JIMMEEEE! HAPPY!”

“Oh, I just can’t stay mad at you. Kiss me.”

Weird slurping and moaning sounds echoed over the loudspeakers. Anakin growled and took his helmet off as Jar Jar and the others ran towards him. His mother sighed and shook her head.

“Well, kid,” Qui-Gon said, arms folded, “you blew it.”

“Well, kid,” Qui-Gon said, arms folded, “you blew it.”

“Yay,” the Gungan screamed, “Annie got second place! Yousa bombad!”

Anakin snarled and knocked the Gungan unconscious with his helmet.

Darth Maul knew the unwritten first rule of being a Sith was: always make an entrance. So it was with great care and decorum that he slowly walked down the gangplank of his custom infiltrator starship, with his billowing black robe’s voluminous hood carefully obscuring his face. Three probe droids exited in his wake, and flew off in separate directions to search for the queen. Glare from a ship like hers on this sunny, barren planet would probably be visible from orbit.

Sadly there was nobody around to witness his dramatic appearance it seemed, with the exception
of an extremely bemused bantha, casually chewing its cud. Maul was mildly disappointed and prepared to remove his hood when some adolescent voice off to his left shrieked, “EXPECTO PATRONUM!” and a shining monster with antlers crashed into him.

The bantha shook its head and wandered off to find a quieter spot to eat; it was becoming hard to get any peace these days, what with all the screaming.

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“In a stunning upset yesterday, the Poontang Eve Classic was won by a human. Sixteen-year-old Speed Racer crossed the finish line first after E.T., favoured to win today’s podrace, was knocked out of competition by some second-place winner nobody cares about.”

The HoloNet news anchor smiled into her teleprompter, oblivious to the glum stares of Anakin, his mother, Padmé and Qui-Gon as they slumped in Shmi’s living room.

“Local law enforcement has yet to apprehend the man seen here, wanted for vandalism and public indecency.”

Grainy hologram footage played of Qui-Gon fleeing naked from the scene of a vending machine sliced cleanly in half.

“Also Jabba the Hutt was there!”

Jabba appeared on the projector for all of two seconds, long enough to belch loudly.

“And now we’ll hand it off to Garrett, with weather. Garrett?”

“IT’S STILL SUNNY!”

A knock sounded on the door. Qui-Gon rose to answer it despite still being naked, not even noticing when Anakin reflexively sprayed the chair he had just vacated with fabric freshener. Padmé watched blearily through bloodshot eyes. Her hangover had a hangover.

Qui-Gon opened the door; it was Watto.

“Morning! I’ve come to uh, collect my winnings.”

Then Qui-Gon surprised her in a way she never thought possible: he held his lightsaber out and triggered the blade.

“Whoa! Hey! What you got to do that for? Hey, I don’t want any trouble—shit! Hey! You’s crazy!”

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Two hours later, Qui-Gon’s little band stood poised for departure. He had his robes and equipment back, as well as a six-foot-by-ten-foot package with “HYPERDRIVE” stencilled on the outer wrapping, and three crates of fireworks.

“So sorry it didn’t work out,” he said to the boy. “Sometimes the Chosen One must suffer a setback on his journey to greatness, but those kinds of Chosen Ones usually have some kind of epic-sounding name like Odinson or what have you.”

“So you’re just gonna leave?” Shmi was smoking more than usual. “Just like that?”

“I’m sorry,” Qui-Gon explained, “but the Jedi Order strictly forbids attachments.”
“I noticed it doesn’t forbid penetrations.”

“What was that?”

“Nothing.”

“Farewell, then. I’ll miss all of you.”

“I’m going to miss you, Padmé,” the boy said.

“Die in a ditch,” she replied. “I mean, thanks.”

“Here’s looking at you kid,” he said, and stood on his tiptoes all puckered lips and closed eyes.

“Ew, I’m not that grateful.”

As they prepared to leave, Qui-Gon’s toe struck something sitting in the sand.

“Oh, it seems someone knocked your mailbox over.” He picked it up and brushed it off. Then he stopped cold.

“Skywalker? Your name is… Skywalker?”

“Yup,” replied Shmi. “I’m named after my grandfather.”

Padmé raised an eyebrow. “Your grandfather’s name was Shmi?”

“No, it was the last sound he made when he was sucked into a speeder engine.”

“Skywalker…” Qui-Gon kept repeating the name as if in a trance. He slowly walked over to Shmi and placed the mailbox in her hands. Then he grabbed her son and held Anakin over his head as he ran for the dunes with only a single word:

“Yoink!”
Trying Not to Skulk

Chapter Summary

Darth Maul makes his entrance.

After about an hour of smelling Qui-Gon’s sweaty ass crack, Anakin finally persuaded the lunatic to let him walk on his own. He trudged cooperatively through the sand, but kept his eyes open for any means of escape. Since none presented itself in the form of some friendly Jawas, or perhaps another one of those convenient floating purple carpets, he decided to ask a few questions of his captor.

“Where are you taking me?”

“To the Jedi Temple, on Coruscant.”

“What happens there?”

“Oh, typical Jedi stuff.”

Well that was informative. “Are there women?”

“Oh, yes.”

For a moment, Anakin brightened; perhaps this wouldn’t be so bad.

“They exist alongside us,” Qui-Gon continued, “in a blissful state of genderless equality.”

“Oh.”

He made it about twenty feet before he heard Jar Jar scream, and then something struck his ankle. It dragged him backwards and he scrambled futilely at the sand until he saw Qui-Gon’s shadow over him. Jar Jar’s tongue retracted from Anakin’s leg, and the Gungan began rubbing the back of his head where Qui-Gon had hit him.

“I don’t wanna be a Jedi,” Anakin shouted. “It’s just another kind of slavery!”

“Don’t be silly,” Qui-Gon admonished. “You’re going to be the greatest Jedi ever.” He cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, “How are we doing back there, Padmé?”

Padmé, dragging the hyperdrive across the dunes with a single rope, screamed back, “I HATE YOU!”

Darth Maul was beginning to regret not wearing sunglasses as he approached the Queen’s star cruiser. The harsh desert light was bad enough, but add in the glare from several hundred square feet of reflective hull plating and you ended up with a punishing experience for a Sith who spent most of his time skulking around dark rooms.

His Master disapproved of the skulking. A Dark Lord of the Sith ought to grandstand, Sidious
said. Maul tried, but he was proud of his skulk. It was a professional skulk, perfected by years of practice. He just couldn’t manage to chew the scenery the way his Master could—which, he supposed, was why Sidious was the Master and he the apprentice.

He pondered this as he stepped off his speeder bike and approached the ship’s hatch. Originally his plan had been: slice through the hull, skulk into the Queen’s bedroom, and strangle her with her own bedspread. Now he was rethinking that idea. Perhaps he ought to try more grandstanding. Give the dramatic entrance another try.

About an hour passed while he stood outside the entrance hatch, waiting for someone to open it so he could dramatically be there on the other side. Surely it would shock and discombobulate them! Sadly, nobody came. He sighed and knocked politely on the door.

An extremely dishevelled young man answered. He had a Padawan braid, which meant he must have been the notorious Obi-Wan Kenobi. Maul began to question his casual approach. Despite his disorganized appearance, the young Jedi reacted quickly. His eyes widened, and every muscle in his body appeared to go taut.

“Oh my gods,” Kenobi shouted. Maul surreptitiously gripped his saber under his cloak, but the Jedi was looking over his shoulder. “Is that the Razalon FC-20 speeder bike?”

Puzzled, Maul nodded. “Custom,” he added, truthfully.

“By the Force! Can I have a go?”

Maul could hardly believe his good fortune. The Force must be with me, he thought. Kenobi was out joyriding through the desert on his speeder, leaving him with the run of the ship. He tried not to skulk as he made his way down the corridors, but still caught himself sidling a time or two. He ghosted into a room and found a dark-skinned man in light battle garb crouched around a small card table with another unremarkable man. Both men had to hunch severely, owing to the rifles and pistols piled around them.

“Hey” said the dark man, “don’t expect us to deal you in unless you’re going to ante up! Minimum bid is three blasters.”

Utterly confused by this statement, Maul quickly backed out of the room and headed in a different direction. These people were insane, he thought, and dangerously so. The sooner the Sith brought some order to the galaxy, the better. He heard voices echoing out of that room as he retreated.

“Hah! No stomach for the game, I guess.”

“Ready to lose the rest of your stockpile?”

“No way! Double or quits, and deuces are wild...”

A few turns and Maul found what he assumed were the queen’s quarters. The carpet was incredibly plush, in the few places where it was not covered by empty bottles and cans. He walked as carefully as he could, and spied a lump under the voluminous covers. She lay asleep in her bed, in the middle of the day! How typical for an arrogant, spoiled monarch. Truly, he would be doing the galaxy a favour by throttling the life out of her delicate, privileged neck. Feeling that this was a good time for skulking, he began to move slowly, but had to step even more carefully as the frequency of discarded beverage containers increased more than he thought possible. Once his foot clinked against a manacle dangling from a leather strap on the bedpost, and he froze; the lump under the sheets moved slightly, but did not awaken. He continued his belaboured progress...
until he stood directly over the bed. Now he saw there were four of the shackles in all. Did the
queen suffer from fits that required her to be restrained? And why use such flimsy restraints that he
could burst out of with one tug? So strange, he thought, but back to the business at hand.

Seizing a corner of the bed sheet, he flung it aside with a flourish so the queen would see his
fearsome appearance and quail in fright as he strangled her. Sidious would commend him for his
theatricality, and hopefully not demand another “backrub”. Instead of a frightened monarch,
however, he discovered fifty pounds of pygmy Wookiee, enraged at having its nap disturbed. Its
rattling growl filled the room, rising in volume.

“Shit.”

Qui-Gon was in high spirits when they reached the ship, even for Qui-Gon. He had acquired not
only several choice fireworks, but a Chosen One who, despite a flimsy grasp of what being
Chosen entailed, had thus far not put rocks in his backside or attempted to eat the sun. Also that
Pandean girl had stopped screaming.

His high spirits evaporated a little when he saw that Obi-Wan had left the door open. That would
have to be addressed, he thought, perhaps with some disciplinary staring or a nice therapeutic
chipping of Master Yoda’s toenails once they reached Coruscant. Then a much more severe
thought struck him: maybe Obi-Wan should be barred from participating in the upcoming
negotiations. It was a little harsh, yes, but Padawans required a firm hand. He usually applied said
firm hand to the offending Padawan’s buttocks, but the Council seemed to frown on that sort of
thing for some reason. He’d offered to use a paddle, but that made them even more upset. Some
days he just did not comprehend the strange manner in which the Jedi Order operated. None of his
former Padawans had ever complained, and in fact Cherutia Pashi had become quite
enthusiastically accepting of his disciplinary process, frequently volunteering herself for spankings
and even reminding Qui-Gon of minor transgressions he had overlooked. Sometimes he
encountered her around the Temple, and she would ask for one for old times’ sake, or to keep her
mind on the here and now, or to help her stay centered in the Force. She seemed a little flushed
afterwards, though, so he decided he might have to go a little softer on her from now on.

A horrid snarling interrupted his nostalgia, and he stopped walking just as a dishevelled Zabrak
tumbled down the ship’s gangplank. The man stood up and glared at Qui-Gon with red-rimmed
yellow eyes that sharply contrasted with his red-and-black facial tattoos. His black cloak was in
tatters, and several bite marks created different colours of red on his face.

“Good day to you, sir,” Qui-Gon said, cheerfully. “Do you require first aid?”

The Zabrak lunged at him with an inarticulate snarl, producing a lightsaber. It sprung to life, a
brilliant red blade that coordinated artfully with its bearer’s stripes.

Qui-Gon said, “Oh, that’s champion. I have one of those too.” He ignited his own green saber in
response. If this fellow wanted a friendly duel, well, he supposed he could oblige. The
negotiations weren’t going anywhere.

“He! Ha-ha!”, he shouted. This was exhilarating. It was ages since he’d enjoyed a good duel.
Obi-Wan always wimped out after the first three hours. This energetic fellow, whoever he was,
seemed like he could go on for days.

“Ha! Guard, turn, parry, dodge, spin, thrust!”
Obi-Wan nearly fell off the bike. He had meant to go just for a quick spin around the desert, and ended up taking much longer than anticipated. Someday, he decided, he would grab a couple of mates and make a proper circumnavigation of a planet, on bikes. Perhaps even film it for the HoloNet.

Now, he returned to find his master engaged in a lightsaber duel with what appeared to be some kind of Dark Jedi, possibly even a Sith! Oh, he’d had several Bad Feelings this morning, but had put it down to the bacon. He never anticipated this…

While he wondered if the bacon would cause as much trouble going out as it had going in, he realized he had no idea where the brake was on an FC-20. Worse, Qui-Gon and the Sith who had so uncharacteristically loaned Obi-Wan his bike—Obi-Wan thought Sith went around shooting lightning at helpless orphans while eating helpless little furry creatures and cackling, presumably with their mouths full—were slowly wandering into the bike’s path.

Breathlessly he called out, “Master! DUCK!”

“This is no time for identifying waterfowl,” Qui-Gon called back, never removing his eyes from his opponent. It looked like Obi-Wan would ascend to the rank of Jedi Knight forcibly by pasting his master across the front of a speeder bike, but something metal glinted on the ground and caught Qui-Gon’s attention like a Felucian magpie.

“Ooooh, a penny!” He bent down to pick it up, and the already high-riding bike skimmed over him and slammed into the fierce Zabrak about to chop his head off. When the machine finally coasted to a stop, its owner was out cold.

“Oh, no, it’s just a washer,” Qui-Gon sighed.

“Master,” Obi-Wan said, scrambling off the bike, “are you all right?”

“Yes, I’m fine. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“We have to get out of here!”

“I suppose. It pays to be punctual in negotiations, after all.” Qui-Gon hung his deactivated lightsaber from his belt and began casually strolling up the gangplank like a tourist boarding a sightseeing cruise.

“Master, aren’t you going to arrest him?”

“Arrest whom? This poor transient?” He gestured to the unconscious Sith. “No, I don’t think so. Poor fellow. He was probably just after some spare change.” He tossed the washer onto the Zabrak’s chest.

“But Master—”

Qui-Gon wheeled on his apprentice with the determined look of a man who has a six-hour lecture prepared on the detriments of using a certain word in conjunction with a certain other word, and Obi-Wan quailed.

“Sorry.”

Qui-Gon nodded sharply and turned to shout at Padmé. “Come on then, let’s not dawdle, Payday!”

Padmé, who had resorted to shoving her burden across the sand towards the ship, gave him a glare
that could have melted phrik. A little boy with the dumbest haircut Obi-Wan had ever seen ran up
behind her and shrilly offered his help. She grunted assent, and he moved forward to help push.

“Obi-Wan, are you absolutely certain about the midi-chlorian count of that sample I sent you?”

“Yes, master. I ran it through the MALDI-TOF and everything. Who is that boy?”

“The Chosen One, if I’m correct. Which I always am,” Qui-Gon replied.

Obi-Wan’s heart sank, although his more sarcastic side pointed out he anticipated this eventuality. Another Chosen One, although this one at least seemed to have some talent. Of course, midi-chlorian count wasn’t always a good indicator of Force potential; assuming such was like measuring how healthy someone was by how many antibodies they had. Still, this one wasn’t wearing his underpants on the outside or, worse, mistaking his underpants for a parasitic monster. Perhaps there was hope for this one.

As he thought this, the boy attempted to help push by placing both hands firmly on Padmé’s bottom. She kicked him like a horse.

Obi-Wan sighed, “I have a bad feeling about this…”

He should have had a bad feeling about everything. Qui-Gon began unwrapping the hyperdrive as soon as Padmé huffed it into the engine room; when Obi-Wan, Panaka, and the Queen and her retinue joined him an hour later, he was still unwrapping it. Packing materials were piled high beside the device, and Obi-Wan noted they were larger than the actual package by this point.

“Err, how small is this thing, master?”

The queen looked much more haggard than she had this morning, and was smoking multiple
death sticks while fending off Artoo and his little fire extinguisher with one hand. He soon forgot
about her changed demeanour, because Qui-Gon had finished unwrapping his delivery.

“It’s a blender,” the queen said in a flat monotone.

“Ah,” Qui-Gon chirruped, “we can make smoothies!”

“It’s a blender.”

“Look at the lovely chrome finish, your highness!”

“It’s a blender.”

“Seventeen settings and a special juicer attachment.”

“It’s a blender.”

Obi-Wan could feel the tension in the room; he could sense it in the Force, too, like a spider web
made of high-tension electrical wire. One snapped cable in the right location and it would fly in all
directions, shredding anyone unfortunate enough to be in its path.

The queen looked like she was considering which imaginative method of killing Qui-Gon would
be the least painful, possibly after shoving her death sticks where Artoo’s fire extinguisher would
never, ever reach them. Obi-Wan had seen people lose their patience with Qui-Gon before, and it
was never pretty. Someone would wind up dead… and it wouldn’t be Qui-Gon. The man wore
obliviousness like a shield, and attempts on his life seemed to fail by dint of him simply choosing to ignore them.

Obi-Wan cleared his throat loudly. Qui-Gon turned, but Queen Amidala seemed reluctant to tear her gaze from him, in case she spontaneously developed the ability to kill people with a hard stare.

“Actually,” Kenobi explained, “we’ve mostly managed to reassemble the original.”

With dramatic flair, he Force-lifted an unassuming cloth off the piecemeal hyperdrive, which was standing in the corner. The queen had ordered her handmaidens to reassemble it, seemingly for no other reason than to assert her authority over them. In fact, she had become something of a tyrant in Qui-Gon’s absence. Obi-Wan had joined the handmaidens because puzzles were fun, it gave him an excuse to get away from the queen’s voracious sexual appetites, and he had no blasters to ante for Panaka and his college buddy’s obsessive card-playing.

“In fact,” he went on, “all we are missing... is an L-shaped piece.” He took the blender from his master’s unresisting hands, turned it sideways, and fitted it neatly into the hole in the hyperdrive. It was a perfect match. He had no idea what he expected would happen when the puzzle was completed; maybe it would light up or start humming or something. Nothing of the sort happened.

“That’s all well and good,” sighed the queen, “but—”

“A moment, your highness,” Obi-Wan interrupted. While inserting the blender, he noticed something that had escaped him before: a tiny filament of dark brown, protruding from the device’s workings. He tugged on it, and discovered it was quite long.

“That’s the problem. Just a hair stuck in it.”

Indeed, he heard promising sputters and whirs as the offending strand was removed. He pulled and pulled, and it just kept coming. It had to be over three feet long.

“I think it’s one of mine,” the Queen offered, in what she presumably thought was a helpful tone. R2-D2 bleeped a retort, which only Obi-Wan understood. In Basic it translated roughly to 
\[
\text{offal/waste/feces} = 0 \quad \text{[//ZERO.STATE]-abs!}
\]

He puzzled over it momentarily, trying to work out what the droid was saying. Zero feces... oh.

No shit.

While Kenobi helped Panaka install the reinvigorated hyperdrive and the Moron went off to meditate, Queen Amidala took the opportunity to check her messages. There was only one, from that Sio Bibble guy. She gave it a play.

“Ah, yes... is this thing on? Right. Hello, your highness: Bibble here, just calling you to let you know that the situation is pretty dire here. The vile conquerors have taken away our Wi-Fi. All of our data plans are going to incur extra charges by the end of this month, and thousands of our less-privileged citizens have gone days without streaming video or social networking. I don’t know how much longer we can hold out! You must contact me!”

A suspiciously rubbery voice from somewhere outside the camera’s range hissed, “And tell her this isn’t a ruse to find out her location!”

“Ah, yes. Your highness, this is not a ruse to find out your location. Please contact me as urgently as possible. On the upside, the floors are extremely clean!”
The message ended. Bibble was always the opportunist, she thought. Probably he thought he could convince her to give him his old job back. She supposed the capital could use a man who could run a floor buffer in the midst of military occupation, especially with battle droids probably leaving unspeakable scuff marks on her premium-grade linoleum. Such unimaginable atrocities, she thought, taking a swig of absinthe from the bottle in her other hand. Strange; how had that gotten there?

Fucking hell, here was that annoying Annie kid again. He entered the comm room and crouched in a corner, hugging his sides and shivering in a comically exaggerated fashion.

“Brrrrrrr,” he stuttered. “It’s so cold here. And I’m from a d-d-d desert planet. Oh-h-h-h.”

She almost rolled her eyes. “Doesn’t it get very cold in the desert at night?”

He shrugged and shivered extra hard. She decided to take some measure of pity on him; after all, she knew what it was like to be shanghaied by Qui-Gon the Oblivious. Poor kid had just lost his home and his mother in one fell swoop of brown robes. There were blankets in one of the drawers. It took her only a few moments to find them, and she unfolded one and draped it over the boy’s shoulders.

“Thanks,” he said. “Care to join me? The body heat would help.”

“Uh, no.”

“Hey,” shouted Panaka from somewhere in the hallway, “who turned down the environmental controls?”

Anakin suddenly looked nervous. “I, uh, I have to go… I have to be somewhere else.” He left the room in a hurry, not even bothering to shiver anymore. On his way out he nearly collided with Obi-Wan, who looked like he had come here on a mission.

The queen fought the urge to smooth her hair, and put on what she thought was an inviting smile that stayed regal and unapproachable, but not too unapproachable or too inviting. It was a difficult balance indeed.

“May I speak with you, your highness?”

“Of course, master Jedi,” she answered. “My robe—door is always open to you.”

If he noticed the gaffe, he didn’t show it. “I’d like to have a chat about setting some… boundaries.”

“Boundaries?” What was he talking about?

“Yes. See… it’s not that I feel unappreciated. Maybe just a little bit too appreciated? So appreciated, in fact, that I have developed a troublesome rash.”

What? Her brain was spinning in circles now. The only rash she had was heat rash, and hopefully it would go away before she got the chance to show Obi-Wan her royal prerogative, as it were.

“Not that I’m not a fan of cake toppings, in the proper context,” he went on, “but it seems a waste to use the entire can if you’re going to mix it with axle grease and make it inconsumable. And the bit with the crocodile was going a little too far, I feel.”

Now she was tumbling through deep space, conversationally speaking. She managed to weakly
ask, “Crocodile?”

“Isn’t that what it’s called when a group of people line up like that? Don’t misunderstand me, your highness, I was more than in favour of getting your handmaidens involved, but did it really have to be all of them? At once?”

“Well, I like to remind them who their mistress is,” she responded, brain flailing about in an attempt to connect with what he was really saying.

“Oh, you reminded them several times. With a riding crop. You reminded me, as well, I seem to recall. Told me to scream your name ‘like a man on the execution block’, to be precise.”

Oh, gods… now it was dawning on her…

“And in fact,” he plunged ahead, “that is not the proper use of a lightsaber! It’s quite dangerous to use one in that manner! You certainly seem to have no shortage of… useful devices, so I felt that was rather rude. And I still find bits of dried syrup in the strangest places.

“So,” he concluded, “in keeping with the Order’s policies against attachments, I feel it is for the best that we discontinue our activities. For the greater good, of course. Nothing personal.”

Queen Amidala stared, open-mouthed. There were no words. Obi-Wan nodded and said he would take his leave. He left her alone in the room, as the litany of offenses unspooled inside her head and then rolled itself up again, retroactively filtering their conversation through the harsh lens of hindsight. Her mouth clamped shut, teeth grinding so hard they squeaked. One clenched and turned her knuckles white while the fingers of the other turned into claws. The queen screamed a single word, causing a bantha to choke on its lunch.

“**DORMÉ!**”

The holoprojector sprang to life rather loudly, interrupting Gunray and Haako in a rousing game of tiddlywinks. A flickering image of Sio Bibble, the janitor elevated to leader of Naboo, presented itself.

“*Am I disturbing you gentlemen?*”

“No, not at awl, Bibber; we were just praying tiddrywinks,” the Viceroy explained, while Haako smirked behind his hand. The words “Bibble” and “tiddlywinks” were never meant to occupy the same sentence, especially when mangled by Gunray’s adopted accent.

“I was wondering if I might persuade you to let us have our internet back. The people are getting restless. They cannot tweet!”

“You should have thought of that before you let yourselves get occupied,” the Viceroy replied breezily. “In the meantime, I’m sending our droids to root out these underwater cities I keep hearing about.”

“The Gungans? But they’re just a bunch of pot-smoking slackers. No threat to anyone.”

Nevertheless.” No explanation was forthcoming; Gunray had a habit of ending discussions by just saying “nevertheless” and sitting tight-lipped until his opponent gave up out of frustration.

“Well, your silly ruse failed. Her highness is probably well on her way to Coruscant by now.”
“And so what? We own the Senate! It will make no difference.” Gunray was blustering, but Rune knew he was nervous when he forgot his accent.

After Bibble signed off, Rune asked, “What are we going to do if she does reach the Senate?”

“Nothing,” Nute said. “Nothing at all. Sidious will take care of it.”

“So nothing to worry about?”

“Absolutely not!”

“You’re not worried?”

“Not one iota! Why should I be? What makes you think I’m worried?”

“Because you’ve just swallowed your squidger.”
Qui-Gon presents his latest Chosen One to the Jedi Council.

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

“Behold the gleaming spires of Coruscant,” Qui-Gon said.

“HUURGHK,” the queen replied, filling her seventh airsick bag.

Qui-Gon insisted on piloting the ship, of course. Obi-Wan thought it would be fun seeing the little boy from Tatooine try to take in the sight of a planet-sized city, but the way Qui-Gon weaved in and out of the skyscrapers and lanes of aerial traffic made it difficult to take in anything except anti-nausea capsules.

“Master, I believe this lane of traffic is supposed to flow in the opposite direction.”

“I know that, Obi-Wan, but everyone’s driving the wrong way!”

“YAAAARF,” added the queen, six handmaidens holding her hair back. Perhaps that’s what they’re for, Obi-Wan thought, in a flash of inspiration.

Something warm and wet dribbled down Obi-Wan’s upper lip. He tasted it and realized his nose was bleeding. Then he noticed Jar Jar’s mouth open and felt the pressure on his eardrums, a not-quite sound in the supersonic register.

He backhanded the Gungan across the face, and both the pressure and a sharp pain in his head, which he had not noticed until then, stopped.

“Harghblxptl,” the queen nodded, which was probably supposed to be a thank-you. He nodded back, and asked a nagging question.

“Why didn’t you get airsick on the escape from Naboo?”

Queen Amidala and one of her handmaidens exchanged uneasy looks. “I’m… not sure. All that sun, maybe.”

“Weren’t you inside the ship the entire time?”

She laughed, a little too loudly. “I think I’m finally out of things to throw up. Whoop, spoke to sooooooughrgh! Wharghf!!”

“Good grief, what was that?”

“My duodenum, I think,” she mumbled, peering into the bag and wincing. “Eugh. Put this with the others,” she ordered, as she tossed it to the unluckiest handmaid ever.

“Ooh look, Obi-Wan!” Qui-Gon was pointing excitedly out the front viewport. “That enormous
screen is playing an episode of *Ewoks*!"

“…That’s very nice, Master, but—”

“Obi-Wan, the moratorium on calling me Buttmaster extends to variations such as ‘Master Butt’ as well."

“Sorry—but isn’t it true that looking at something will cause you to fly towards it?”

“It was my favorite show as a child,” Qui-Gon went on, oblivious. “I even had a stuffed friend. His name was Ewok Ruxpin.”

“Master, you’re going to hit the—!”

Indeed, Qui-Gon’s fixation on the classic cartoon had led their course straight to it. The Queen’s cruiser slammed nose-first into the enormous screen with a shattering of glass.

| —o—|

After extricating themselves and their ship, plus promising the Jedi Order would pay for the damages and the crane rental, they arrived at their original destination, the Senatorial Priority Landing Pad, via air taxi. As they exited the vehicle, Obi-Wan surreptitiously pressed a credit chit into the driver’s hand.

“Fifty credits to take the Gungan somewhere unsafe,” he whispered, before Jar Jar could get out.

“You got it, guvnah,” saluted the cabbie, peeling out with Jar Jar trapped in the backseat.

Obi-Wan permitted himself a small, satisfied smile and turned to face their welcoming party.

“Coruscant welcomes you, your majesty,” began the senator awaiting them. He was a small, benign-looking chap with poufy sleeves. Obi-Wan could not pinpoint a reason, but he disliked the man immediately. “On behalf of the Galactic Senate and the Republic, I would like to extend—”

“Yeah, yeah,” the queen interrupted, “welcome and all that shit. Can we get to the hotel? I just threw up seventeen times and I have sand in my everything.”

“But she never left the ship,” Obi-Wan said, although nobody seemed to hear him.

The senator shrugged as Queen Amidala hustled past and turned to Qui-Gon.

“Ah, Qui-Gon… Jinn, is it?”

“Hello, Senator Listerine!”

“It’s Palpatine, actually. And who,” he gushed, crouching in front of Anakin, “is this charming little fellow?”

“That’s Anakin,” Qui-Gon explained. “He’s the Chosen One, impossibly strong with the Force.”

“Really?” Palpatine seemed to take significant interest in this, and stood up.

“Yes, he’s got some attachment issues pertaining to his mummy that could prove hazardous down the line, but I have confidence that he’ll be fine.”

“Fascinating,” nodded Palpatine, scratching away at a small notepad. “Well, young Anakin, I do hope we can be good friends.”
“You’re old,” the boy bluntly replied.

“And you have a stupid silly haircut, but I’m not whining about it,” said Palpatine without missing a beat. He turned on his heel and trotted off.

Anakin sagged slightly, and Obi-Wan immediately felt bad. Sure, the kid was annoyingly precocious and a little young to be eyeing Padmé the way he did, but in the end he was just a nine-year-old taken from his mother.

Qui-Gon placed a fatherly hand around the boy’s shoulders. “There, there, Mannequin.”

“Anakin.”

“Cheer up. Soon you’ll get to see the Jedi Temple. It’s where all the Jedi live.”

“Really?” Anakin’s face brightened. “What do you do there?”

“Contemplate the cosmic mysteries of the Force.”

From the bottom of a water bong, Obi-Wan mentally added.

“But what,” Anakin inquired, “is the Force?”

“Oh look, we’re here. Last one in is gundark bait!” With that, Qui-Gon ran up the massive steps.

Obi-Wan paused a moment to admire the view, more for Anakin’s benefit than anything. Colossal statues of Jedi long passed, dwarfed by the great temple spires reaching into the sky... Surely it was more grandiose than anything on Tatooine.

The boy was giggling.

Obi-Wan asked, “What’s so funny?”

“You temple sure looks happy to see you,” he chortled, pointing to the towers.

“I don’t see what’s that amusing.”

“I’m saying your temple looks like a bunch of erect penises, dude.”

“I know that! I just—argh, whatever, just go on in. If you keep Qui-Gon waiting he might try to...” Obi-Wan shuddered uncontrollably. “Discipline you.”

“Whatever.”

As he shooed Anakin inside, he took another look at the towers. A tiny suggestion of a grin wriggled into the corners of his mouth:

——o——

“We all wound up on Tatooine,” Qui-Gon sang. “That’s where... we found.... this boy.”

He grinned and looked up from his guitar as the Jedi Council began clapping.

“Yes, thank you, Qui-Gon,” said Master Mace Windu.

“But you haven’t even heard the chorus yet.”
“Get the gist of it, we do,” replied Master Yoda.

Obi-Wan rolled his eyes; of course Qui-Gon would elect to deliver their mission report in song. Not that the Jedi Council would ever stop him; their primary concern seemed to be sitting on cushy chairs in a well-lit room atop the Temple’s tallest structure. Obi-Wan sincerely hoped he would get to sit on the Council someday. He sniffed the air and coughed a little; he knew he had smelled that weird smoke from Gunga City somewhere before.

“So, tell us about this boy,” sighed Master Windu.

“I believe him to be the Chosen One,” Qui-Gon replied dramatically.

The masters began chuckling.

“Hrm, found another Chosen One, Qui-Gon has!”

Master Ki-Adi-Mundi, whose head was as pointy as his name was stupid, asked, “Is this one at least potty-trained?”

“Hey,” objected Qui-Gon, “this one’s for real! He’s the Chosen One! From that prophecy!”

Obi-Wan frowned. “Prophecy, master?”

“The Gospel of George,” Qui-Gon recited, and Obi-Wan’s ears pricked; “chapter eleven, verse 37, quote: ‘And lo, a whiny boy from the sands of Tatooine shall be brought forth. He shall be called the Chosen One, and bring balance to the Force, whatever that means. Or destroy the Sith, I dunno,’ unquote.”

“That could be anybody,” Windu answered with a dismissive wave of his hand. “How do you know he’s the Chosen One? Does he have any oddly-shaped scars? Unusual arrow tattoos? A magic ring from his uncle?”

“He drove really fast in a race.”

“Oh, a race,” jeered Yoda. “Settles everything, that does. Sign him up immediately, we will.”

Another spate of sniggering made its way around the circle of chairs.

“Besides,” Windu went on, “the Sith are extinct. We iced those motherfuckers millennia ago.”

Obi-Wan cleared his throat. “Actually, Master Windu, with all due respect I think I must disagree. We encountered a Sith on Tatooine.”

“Bitch, was I talking to you?”

“A two-for-one deal this is,” chortled Yoda. “Found the Chosen One Qui-Gon has, and seen a Sith Obi-Wan has!”

“I had a poo this morning,” Ki-Adi interjected, “and it was shaped like an S! It must be an omen!”

“OOOOOO,” wailed some other master who looked like a fuzzy snake with arms and whose name Obi-Wan could not remember, with mock spookiness.

“Laugh if you like,” Obi-Wan told them, and many took him up on his offer, “but he had a red lightsaber, which, if I’ve done my reading correctly, is the hallmark of a Sith.”

“Sure,” snapped Master Windu, “and every goth wannabe badass motherfucker from here to

null
Kessel. Lemme guess: he also had a black cloak with a hood and some bitchin’ facial tattoos?”

“Well, yes, but—”

“Called it.”

“It’s all right,” Qui-Gon said, serene as the morning sun. “My Padawan hasn’t been himself since our mission. Too much swamp gas, I think.”

“What? I—”

“Shut up, Obi-Wan. Now, about this boy?”

“Alright,” sighed Yoda, “give him the tests we will.”

“Think fast,” shouted Windu, throwing a crumpled wad of paper. It bounced off Anakin’s face. Yoda produced a deck of cards and drew one at random, holding it so it faced away from Anakin.

“See on this card, what do you?”

Anakin shrugged. “Uno?”

Yoda shook his head and turned to Ki-Adi, who asked,

“What am I thinking?”

“That Qui-Gon’s an idiot.”

“Well, one out of three isn’t bad.”

Over the masters’ guffaws, Qui-Gon intoned, “If I may have a moment of the boy’s time?”

“Sure, take all the time you need,” Master Windu replied, tears streaming down his cheeks.

“Watch out for Sith,” called Master Plo Koon, his mouth somewhat muffled by the breathing mask his alien physiology required.

Obi-Wan missed the barb, as he was too concerned over with what Qui-Gon might threaten the boy. His master drew Anakin aside, near a window, and crouched down and spoke so softly Obi-Wan could not hear what he was saying. Kenobi drew on the Force, using it to heighten his senses, and Qui-Gon’s voice gradually became audible.

“...And you will be thrown out of the Jedi Temple. Do you understand?”

Anakin followed Jinn’s gaze to the window, which was very high up, and gulped. Then he nodded.

“Excellent!” Qui-Gon stood up and turned back towards the Council. “Just a spot of stage fright,” he explained. “He’s good to go now.”

“Alright,” Windu sighed, pulling out a basketball. He whipped it at Anakin with no warning, shouting, “Think fast!”

The kid ducked, putting Obi-Wan into a world of pain when the ball hit his, well, balls. By the time his breathing returned, he saw Yoda had the deck of cards out again.
Yoda began, “On this card—”

“Ace of spades,” Anakin barked.

Yoda’s eyes narrowed. The card was not even halfway out of the deck. He pulled it the rest of the way and by his expression Obi-Wan guessed it was indeed the ace of spades.

“What am I thinking about?” asked Ki-Adi again.

“You’re still thinking Qui-Gon’s an idiot.”

Ki-Adi chuckled softly and shrugged.

“Now,” Anakin continued, “you’re picturing Yoda naked.”

Ki-Adi stopped laughing and suddenly became studiously fascinated with the ceiling. While Obi-Wan spitefully kicked the scrotum-bruising basketball off to one side, Master Windu stroked his chin thoughtfully.

“Somebody bring in the official approved testing device,” he said.

Various bizarrely-shaped heads swiveled around, pointy ears or whatever the fuck was going on with Master Plo’s head wobbling slightly in confusion.

“Well, I don’t have it,” said Master Ki-Adi.

“I thought you had it,” said the fuzzy snake guy, pointing at Plo Koon.

“You can’t tell because of my goggles,” Master Plo replied, “but I’m rolling my eyes.”

Yoda raised one tiny green hand for calm.

“Alright it is. Have my iPhone, I do.”

He pulled out the oblong device and fiddled with its touchscreen for a moment, a task rendered difficult by his ridiculously long fingernails.

“Hrm. On the screen, what do you see?”

“It’s a picture of a cat doing something dumb,” the boy answered, “with a caption.”

“The text, to us read.”

“‘I can has cheezburger.’” As Yoda swiped through the pictures, Anakin continued. “‘I made you a sandwich but I ate it’, ‘Do you even lift’, uh, ‘Master Yoda sure is bald’, ‘Lol not as bald as Master-Windy’.”

Yoda frowned at these last two and stopped scrolling to glare at two Jedi on the opposite side of the chamber, who quickly put their phones away.

“Goddamn,” ejaculated Master Windy—Windu, Obi-Wan hastily corrected his train of thought, hoping to preemptively avoid future embarrassing freudian slips. “We might have to go to level two.”

“Obi-Wan!”

Qui-Gon’s urgent whisper came so unexpectedly and so close to Obi-Wan’s ear that Obi-Wan
“This is the real deal,” his master hissed. “They’ve never gone to level two before.”

Obi-Wan had to agree. “Yes, master, you’re right; usually the Chosen One would have found an electrical outlet by now in which to stick his or her fingers. Or tongue, that one time.”

“Those Chosen Ones weren’t chosen at all. They were just… slightly preferred.”

He glanced conspiratorially over at the Council, who were all leaning forward in their big squishy chairs trying to make a hologram projector descend from the ceiling.

“Descends when you clap, the screen does.”

“I did clap.”

“Clapped twice, you did.”

“You’re supposed to clap twice.”

“No, if you clap twice, tells it to go back up that does. Why it is not coming down, that is. Hmmmm!”

“I never know what the fuck you’re saying, Yoda.”

“Maybe the battery’s dead?”

“It isn’t—oh, there it goes.”

“Because three times that time, you clapped.”

“Seriously, I never know what the fuck you’re saying.”

“Can we hook your phone up to it?”

“No, the adapter is all weird.”

“Just transfer it on the Wi-Fi.”

“I can never remember the password.”

“jeditemple123, the password is.”

“Okay, but it’s not showing up in my networks.”

“Hit refresh?”

“Still nothing.”

“Beam it to the projector, motherfucker.”

“I can’t, it isn’t compatible.”

“Yes, patched it in the latest update they did. In front of the projector, your phone wave.”

“I am waving it. Is it side-to-side, or back and forth?”

“You’re both wrong, you tap it on the other device to transfer files.”
“How can he tap it when it’s on the motherfucking ceiling?”

“Just download the original from our website.”

“Hang on; it says I need to update Jabbascript.”

“Taking forever this download is.”

“Yes, because someone is hogging the bandwidth. Are you torrenting Bothan gangbang porn again?”

“Hey! Many Bothans came to bring us that fornication!”

After several minutes of ineffectual gesturing, trying to figure out how to turn the gesture-based interface off, and enabling and disabling of cookies, Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon and Anakin finally got to see what all the hoopla was about: a chart. A simple, unembellished schematic detailing the challenges Anakin would have to face. Mace Windu explained.

“First, you gotta get past some rotating spikes, big heavy smashing stones, a lava pit—kid stuff, really. Then there’s a door that says ‘push’ but actually pulls. If you survive that, you gotta balance our budget, win a staring contest against this goldfish, untie the Gordian Knot with your teeth, pick up this cherry using only your butt cheeks and carry it across three chairs before dropping it into a cup, and then divide the square root of negative infinity by zero.”

“What?” Anakin spoke up for the first time. “Most of those tasks are impossible. Except for the cherry one. That one’s just… weird.”

“Every Chosen One has to pass all of these tests, kid. It’s the only way.”

Qui-Gon sighed heavily. “Any chance of a montage?”

“No!” chorused the entire Council.

Several minutes, a misleadingly labelled door, three impossible tasks and one cherry later, Anakin returned to the Council chamber and faced the bald-pated black man again.

“I imagine that right now,” the man said, steepling his fingers, “you’re feeling a bit like Alice. Hm? Tumbling down the rabbit hole?”

Anakin raised an eyebrow. “What’s a rabbit? And who’s Alice?”

“Unfortunately,” he went on as if the boy had not spoken, “no one can be told what the Force is. You have to see it for yourself. This is your last chance. After this, there is no turning back.”

His hands reached into his pockets and emerged clenched tightly. He held them out, palms up, and slowly they opened to reveal a translucent capsule in each; one blue, one red.

“You take the blue pill, the story ends; you wake up on Tatooine and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill, you stay on Coruscant, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes.”

Anakin stared at him for a long time before asking weakly, “Uh… are those prescription?”

Suddenly the Jedi Council burst in, with the real Mace Windu leading the charge. He brandished
a broom with equal aplomb as if it were a lightsaber.

"Morpheus," he yelled, "gitch yo black ass outta my seat!"

Morpheus, if that was the other man’s name, squealed like a small rodent and jumped over the back of the chair, toppling it, while Windu rushed in and began administering blows with the straw end of the broom.

"I told you nigga! I told you not to be coming in here. Motherfucker," he added. Morpheus squealed some more and ran around the room, Mace in hot pursuit with the broom, before finally jumping through one of the windows. Windu watched him go, and tossed the broom aside. "We chase him off every time," he explained, "but he keeps creeping back in through the phone lines or something."

"Called the exterminator, I did," Yoda added helpfully.

"Good." Mace crouched in front of Anakin, showing concern for the boy’s well-being for the first time since his introduction. "You all right? Did he offer you drugs?"

Anakin nodded. "Yeah, but I didn’t take any."

"Too bad. Morpheus has some good shit."

The Council reassumed their seats, Mace pausing to set his upright and brush it off a bit before sitting down. They all settled in comfortably, Yoda wiggling around like he was trying to find his ass groove, and calmly regarded the boy. Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan stood on either side of him, the latter letting his eyes wander uneasily.

"So," Master Yoda began, "exceeded our expectations the boy has."

"Marvellous," Qui-Gon exulted. "When can I begin his training?"

Ki-Adi raised a hand. "Wait, Knight Jinn; you already have a Padawan, and no Jedi can have two."

"Obi-Wan?" Qui-gon glanced at his apprentice and shrugged dismissively. "Eh, I’ve given up on him. He’ll never be a Jedi Knight."

Obi-Wan fairly exploded, "What?

"Wait just a goddamned minute," interjected Master Windu. "We never said we would train the boy. In fact, we’re against it."

"Whelp," shucked Anakin, clicking his tongue, "that sure is a shame. Guess I’ll be going now."

He turned and started walking out, but Qui-Gon snagged his shirt collar.

"Hold on," Qui-Gon said, gesticulating at the Council with his free hand, "if he passed the tests and did even better than you thought he would, what gives? Obviously he’s the Chosen One. Thus he ought to be trained. I’m so serious right now! Can’t you tell? Look at this beard! Could this beard be wrong?"

"Carry a lot of weight with us," Yoda replied, "beards do not."

Obi-Wan shrugged, but had to concede the point; out of all the Jedi in the room, only Qui-Gon and Ki-Adi had any kind of facial hair. He’d always wanted a beard, but his master wouldn’t allow it, because there was only room for one beard on Team Qui-Gon and since the team was
called Team Qui-Gon then the member named Qui-Gon should have first dibs on beard privileges. Those masters that could grow facial hair seemed to favor the clean-shaven look, although Obi-Wan has heard rumors about some embarrassing holograms of Yoda’s abortive attempt at a goatee.

“Besides,” Plo pointed out as Anakin struggled against the fabric pinning his throat, “he’s too old.”

Obi-Wan suppressed a shudder; he knew the Council’s intentions would never require what Qui-Gon called a “pedometer”, but their insistence on only the youngest of younglings always made him feel… skeevy.

“Also,” added Yoda, “much fear and anger we sense in him.”

“Fear and anger?” Qui-Gon scoffed, maintaining his tight grip on Anakin’s neckline. “Nonsense, the boy’s a veritable Buddha.”

“Really? Look how red his face is getting!”

Qui-Gon looked down, and let go of the boy’s collar before red turned into purple. Anakin coughed a bit and regained his access to oxygen.

“Look,” smarmed Mace Windu, “we still have three other Chosen Ones to see today. Can we get back to you?”

“Don’t call us, we’ll call you,” shouted Ki-Adi as Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan left the chamber with Anakin, and the entire Council laughed uproariously before resuming their previous business, which was fighting over pizza toppings.

Chapter End Notes

Any feedback on my portrayal of the Jedi Council is highly appreciated.
Chapter Summary

Queen Amidala gets her first glimpse at the wheels of democracy.

Coruscant’s Galactic Senate was the talk of the galaxy. How did one political body contain thousands of worlds and twice as many species? Elected representatives sent hundreds of light years, with constituents numbering in the trillions? How did it all work? Short answer: it didn’t.

Long answer: it reeeeeeaaaalrrrryyyy didn’t, and Queen Amidala was about to find that out the hard way. Senator Palpatine met her in the lobby at precisely the appointed time, his hair as immaculately groomed as ever and his face bearing the benign expression of a slightly dotty grandparent. He exchanged meaningless pleasantries that… come to think of it, she could not recall a single word of them. The man had a gift for erasing memories, he was that unmemorable. She followed him to a door that reminded her of an opera box. It was quite similar, actually, although the seats were more comfortable and there was a computer terminal with dictation software. She wondered if Palpatine was a good dictator.

The box was circular, so not really a box. There were over a thousand of them, arranged in spirally staggered rows going down the building’s massive interior. An enormous (and phallic) podium began rising from the bottom of the cavernous space, reminding the queen of a certain device in her ship that she had to disable until this crisis was over, before the Jedi stumbled across it again. Chancellor Finis Valorum stood in the center, with a creepy dude with horns, and some braided lady whom Amidala assumed was his secretary. Valorum looked like a statesman should look, as if some nebulous power had sent a casting call out for “middle-aged politician, beleaguered but honourable.” His gray hair stood up, giving an impression of vitality as well as seasoned experience. Perhaps, if he resolved this crisis for her, she would bang him. She had always wanted to bang an older man, political scandals be damned.

His demonic blue buddy called for order, and announced that they would commence playing “the anthems of the Galactic Republic.”

“Wait,” the queen hissed at Palpatine, “anthems? As in, plural?”

Palpatine was playing some idiotic game on his phone that involved firing tiny birds at Gamorreans, and ignoring her. She sighed.

“Please rise for the Aaeton planetary anthem,” blue devil man announced. Amidala sighed and dutifully got to her feet along with the rest of the Senate. The whole process took almost ninety seconds. She stood patiently during the 2½ minutes of cloying synthesizer music and tinny trumpets that apparently comprised Aaeton’s anthem, and sat down as quickly as was polite. Eventually, the various creatures in the Senate found their seats as well—some after quite a bit of anatomical investigation—and she braced herself for the proceedings.

“Please rise for the Aargau planetary anthem.”

Her royal brow furrowed as everyone in the chamber once again began the ponderous undertaking of standing up. She followed suit, and tapped her foot impatiently to the surprisingly catchy two minutes of tribal drumbeats that followed. After everyone was seated again, she...
muttered to herself, “They’re not seriously going through every anthem in alphabetical order, are they?”

“Please rise for the Aargonar planetary anthem.”

“…Fuck me.”

After four minutes of guttural growling and and screeching sitars that presumably made people from Zyluria feel very patriotic, Queen Amidala slammed her ass into the seat so hard she nearly bruised her tailbone. “Tell me that was the last one,” she growled.

Palpatine nodded.

“Good,” she replied, but no sooner was the word out of her mouth then electronic tones began resonating throughout the chamber. “Kriffing mother of fuck! Another one?”

“No,” Palpatine explained, pocketing his phone. “That signifies that it is time for our mid-morning senatorial coffee break.”

“You’re joking, right? You’re joking!”

Senators and aides began laboriously filing out of their boxes, and Amidala’s teeth ground together. She felt like folding her headdress in half and throwing it at the Chancellor, who met her eyes with an expression that said he probably went home and drank seven martinis every day after work.

“We had best hurry, your highness,” Palpatine said, “before they run out of biscotti.”

Queen Amidala took a sip of her mocha-vanilla-frappe whip-hazelnut-lychee-soy-carob-cappuccino-latte-and sighed. To her initial delight, the round and therefore not actually boxes were repulorpods capable of mobility. She wanted to crash theirs right into Valorum’s podium and demand he begin carpet bombing Cato Neimoidia this instant, but Palpatine explained that they had to observe order. That meant waiting some more, while Mas Amedda (she had learned the freaky blue man’s name, out of boredom) read out the minutes if their previous session, starting with the first item, which was the reading of the minutes from the session before that one.

Once the minutes were finished, it was time for brunch. Every being in the chamber filed sedately out again, for a nice omelette of mynock eggs and Mon Calamari caviar (from the planet, not the actual species themselves, although Palpatine waited until after the queen had puked to tell her that). Then they filed back in and took their seats for the first item on the agenda.

“Item #1,” droned the Supreme Chancellor, “is a proposed bill by Senator Organa of Alderaan that would ban corporations from maintaining their own droid armies.” He looked around the chamber for a few seconds before almost everyone present, including himself, began laughing. He produced a small death stick lighter and flicked it, holding its tiny flame to the flimsiplast documentation of the proposition. It curled up and melted away.

“Let’s hope that doesn’t come back to bite us in the ass,” he chuckled. “Item #2: From the planet...” He squinted at the sheet of flimsi in his hand. “Na boo? Really? The Senate recognizes Queen Amidala of——”

“I must protest!”
She glared as a box containing two Neimoidians flew suddenly in between her and the Chancellor. Why the Senate allowed corporations representation in the Senate was beyond her. Another sniveling green worm, who could have easily been Gunray (Amidala could never tell them apart) was cycling her with obstructive bureaucratic determination.

"Against all better judgment," Valorum sighed, "the Senate recognizes Trade Federation Senator Lott Dod."

"I don't recognize her at all! What proof has the Senate of this... 'queen' Amidala's credentials? How do we know she's even a real queen?"

"The Senator of Malastare concurs with the Trade Federation," came the voice of some surly-looking Gran (Senator Aks Moe, as his name tag indicated) hovering near the periphery of their little assembly, which included Dod's pod, Palpatine's pod and Valorum's pulpit. Try saying that five times fast, the queen mused.

"I propose a debate," Dod furthered.

"The Senator of Malastare concurs with the Trade Federation."

Valorum threw his hands up. "Fine. A debate will occur. Activate the Debate-o-tron."

Amedda nodded and flipped open a protective transparent panel inside the pulpit. The switch he flipped brought a large machine down from the ceiling, with two large displays labelled “FOR” and “AGAINST” and an illuminated blue button. Valorum pressed the button, and apparently random names of senators began flashing past. How awkward would it be if one of them landed on Palpatine? Eventually the senatorial roulette ceased, and Valorum announced the results.

"Very well. Senator Orn Free Taa of Ryloth, and Senator Grifaaragh of Kashyyk, will debate this matter. Go!"

A new pod rose—very slowly—into view right beside Palpatine's. Its slowness was owing to its repulsorlifts working overtime with their passenger's ponderous bulk. Senator Taa saw all-you-can-eat as a challenge, and never met a cake he didn't like. Annie and his mother could have lived comfortably inside one of Taa's sleeves. He had a pair of scantily clad Twi'leks with him, being a Twi'lek himself, most assumed they were erotic masseuses but ninety percent of their duties consisted of helping Taa locate his genitals. They were very well paid, and experienced enough at their job to take just long enough finding Taa's organ that he inevitably went into a sugar coma before any naughtiness could commence. They had vibrant red skin tones, whereas Taa was so round and blue he could have found a home in Naboo's oceans.

"So," burbled Taa, causing seismic disturbances throughout his rolls of fat that would probably force his skin mites to pick up stakes and seek shelter elsewhere, "the question has been posed. Are you real? More importantly," he went on, his piggy little eyes zeroing in on Amidala's chest despite the three or four layers of velour between it and the air, "are those real?"

A Wookiee battle cry buffeted the queen's eardrums, but Taa had twenty kilos of lard between his ears and any incoming soundwaves and thus did not anticipate the enormous chair that collided with him. Amidala glanced across the chamber and saw Grifaaragh lower his (her?) arms, and Taa's pod, burdened with just enough additional mass to overwhelm its already taxed repulsors, dropped from view. A collective gasp went up from the senate.

"Well," said the chancellor, a faint grin tweaking his features, "I suppose that round goes to Grifaaragh. The Senate hereby recognizes Queen Amidala."
Nodding in thanks, she drew in breath to speak.

“She’s lying,” shouted Dod.

Valorum scowled at him. “She hasn’t even started speaking yet.”

“Well, she looked like she was going to lie,” Dod backpedaled. “She looks shifty. Doesn’t she look shifty?”

His aide, to whom the question was addressed, nodded. “I think she looks shifty.”

“The Senator of Malastare concurs with the Trade Federation.”

Valorum glanced at Vice Chair Amedda, who shrugged. “Very well,” the chancellor intoned. “Senator Dod moves that the Queen of Naboo looks... shifty.”

“Point of order,” shouted Taa with a spray of wet crumbs, having apparently located a sandwich bar somewhere in the recesses of the Senate Chamber. “The Senator of Ryloth moves that she looks hot!”

Dod scowled at the interruption. “Fine. Then I move that Senator Taa has no chance with Queen Amidala, and furthermore that he is fat.”

Taa’s jowls jiggled impressively. “I move that Senator Dod’s mother was a harvester beetle!”


“The Senator of Malastare concurs with the Trade Federation.”

“I object to your objection,” shouted Taa.

“You’re all objectionable,” shouted a fourth senator, an Ithorian, as his pod joined the growing cluster around the podium. It began gaining critical mass, as senators poured into the scrum with proposals, motions, counter-proposals, riders, and points of order.

“Please let me bring your attention,” one Rodian began pontificating, “to the plight of the Felucian rancor. This conservation bill, which, coincidentally, also supports fuel drilling on Hoth...”

“This is a travesty,” sighed Queen Amidala, as pods full of bickering senators continued gathering.

“No, it has to have a P in it,” replied Palpatine, glued to his phone again, “but ‘trapeze’ will give me the triple word score. Thank you.”

This time around, everyone heard Grifaaargh’s yell and the swarming senate pods scattered around the chair hurled with meteoric force through the center of their mass. They quickly returned to their positions, and Valorum inclined his head to the Wookiee senator.

“Thank you, Senator Grifaaargh,” he said, six migraine pills falling out of his mouth. “Now, where were we? Ah, yes. Queen Amidala, you have the floor.”

The “floor” was some eighty feet below her, thought the queen, but whatever, now her moment had come, her time to make a difference. She ordered her thoughts, mustered every bit of monarchical confidence she could radiate (Dormé called it her “queen face”), and began:

“Honorable representatives of the Republic, distinguished delegates, and Your Honor Supreme Chancellor Valorum, I stand before you a queen in exile. The droid armies of the Trade
Federation have occupied Naboo, my homeworld. My people are—"

“Objection,” screeched Dod, “object! All of the objections!” His pod zipped around in front of her, as if trying to block her from Valorum’s view. “There is no proof of any occupation. Or that there’s even a planet called ‘Naboo’, I mean, seriously.”

“Hang on, that’s ridiculous,” interjected Valorum, “Senator Palpatine is from Naboo.”

All eyes turned on Palpatine, who shrugged unequivocally. Technically, he represented Chommell Sector, and they all knew it. Murmurs made their way around the chamber, the general consensus being that yes, Naboo sounded like a name that was totally made up. Dod glared triumphantly at the queen, with the smug assurance of a lifelong tattletale. She pulled one of the metal bangles, each weighing about two kilograms, off her headdress and flung it at him; but it merely knocked his hat off. He had a backup hat on underneath. Neimoidians loved hats.

“The Senator of Malastare concurs with the Trade Federation.”

Her angry glare turned on the Gran. “I’m surprised the Senator of Malastare can do anything with the Trade Federation’s hand so far up his ass.”

“Hey,” Moe replied in a wounded tone, “that hurt.”

“Oh please, you’re just playing a recording.”

“Am not,” he retorted, even as his gesturing hand clumsily struck the Play button on his voice recorder and caused it to announce that the Senator of Malastare did, indeed, concur with the Trade Federation on whatever Lott Dod was currently talking about.

“Yes,” snapped Valorum, “we heard you the first time. Queen Amidala, it is the consensus of the Senate that a committee be assembled and dispatched to determine whether or not your planet... exists.”

“I volunteer for the committee,” shouted Taa. “We’ll find out if Naboo is real. And whether these are real,” he added. “I’d like to take a hands-on approach.”

Sighing like a deflated puffer fish, Amidala sat down heavily and began banging her forehead against the dashboard of Palpatine’s pod, leaving several grams of pancake makeup behind in the process. When she lifted her head next, she looked like a mime that had been in a fistfight. Her hair drooped, going from ostentatious royalty to severely depressed Pippi Longstocking in a matter of seconds. Mother of bantha, the two idiot Jedi had provided more help than this lot—and that was saying something. She stayed sitting there, even during scheduled senatorial lunch break, post-lunch snack break, teatime, and pre-supper pick-me-ups. In between scheduled breaks, the senators discussed what colour of badges the official Committee for Selection of Candidates for the Official Committee of Ascertaining Planetary Veracity should have, and whether or not some sort of tasteful sash ought to be involved. Even with expensive imported coffee racing through her bladder like Anakin’s pod, she stayed. She had lost all hope.

“I brought you some complimentary energy bars,” Palpatine chirruped, rejoining her in the box after post-pre-supper refreshment recess. She turned one over; it had the Trade Federation logo on it. Sigh.

Plaintive false-lashed eyes turned on him. “Isn’t there anything we can do?”

“I’m afraid not, your highness. The Senate is a bit of a circus these days. And that is not a metaphor.”
Somewhere to their left, Senator Taa was catching peanuts thrown into his mouth by Senator Moe whilst his Twi'lek attendants juggled flaming batons and a Mon Calamari in garish facepaint rode a unicycle around the rim of Moe's box.

“They do love their committees,” Palpatine went on. “And once the preliminary selection process has begun, there is no stopping it. Unless someone were to call shenanigans, of course.”

The queen leaned closer; now there was a word that sounded like it belonged here. Furrowing her brow, she asked, “Shenanigans?”

The entire chamber went silent. A thousand floating pods rotated to face her.

Pointing, Taa shouted, “She said shenanigans! You all heard her!”

Valorum looked horrified, but the other senators were pumping their fists and chanting, “Shenanigans! Shenanigans!”

“Wait,” Amidala tried to say, “I don’t know what it means; I was just trying to—”

“Ah-dah-dah-dat-dap,” snapped Amedda, raising a hand for silence. “Shenanigans have been called.”

“Shenanigans,” squealed Taa, like a child learning his first word.

“In accordance with Article 73 of the Constitution of the Galactic Republic, as ratified at the Conference of Corellia, I shall now summon the Magistrate of Shenanigans to carry out his most solemn duties.” With that sober proclamation, Amedda carefully laid his staff of office, which identified him as Lord Speaker and Vice Chair of the Senate, down behind his chair. He rummaged around and emerged with a different staff. It was thicker, shorter and brightly coloured. “Magistrate of Shenanigans reporting for duty,” he said, and swiftly brought the rounded end of the staff down on Valorum's head. Rather than shattering his skull, it bounced off. Apparently it was padded. Valorum looked more than a little subdued, although he rubbed his pate and mumbled, “Ow.”

“The declaration of shenanigans has been formally delivered to the Supreme Chancellor,” Amedda proclaimed. “Now let the electoral process commence!” Cheers went up from the assembled dignitaries as an enormous, illuminated red button rose up from the pulpit and Mas pressed it, launching Valorum upwards and through the roof.

“Electoral process?” Queen Amidala lunged forward in her chair and clutched at Palpatine’s robes. “That won’t help me! That’s the exact opposite of helping me!”

“Au contraire,” he stated, “once a new Chancellor is elected I am sure he will make short work of the Trade Federation. Unless their candidate wins, then I’m certain we will be doubly fucked. Ah, there goes the siren.”

“Siren? I don’t hear anything.”

“It emits a wavelength that only reporters and pundits can hear. Oh, look; here they are now.”

A horde of humanoid figures were pouring into the Senate Chambers through the ceiling hole left by Valorum’s rapid departure. Many freefell to the bottom and their presumable deaths, but dozens more landed on pods and began asking excited questions.
One Pantoran female performed a perfect three-point landing in front of the queen. “Queen Amidala! Kookwee Plordio, Orto Plutonia News. What say you to the allegations of impropriety between you and ex-Chancellor Valorum?”

“What? There haven’t been any allegations.”

“Not yet, but give it time. Tell us who does your hair.”

Senator Taa’s sexy twin entourage had procured large placards bearing the phrase “NO COMMENT” with which they bludgeoned any and all would-be interviewers foolish enough to board his pod. Moe’s voice recorder was ripped from his hands by three Ugnaughts sharing a single microphone, and weakly squawked “The Senator... concurs with... Federation... I love you...” as it was torn to shreds. Mas Amedda had resumed his post as Vice Chair, and used the handy-staff that came with the position to lever a clump of reporters off the central podium. They tumbled over the side and collided with Senator Dod’s box as it zipped in a large figure-eight trying to find its way back to its dock.

“All queries...” huffed Dod, swatting microphones and cameras away with his hat in one hand and Amidala’s bangle in the other, “can be directed to the Trade Federation’s toll-free hotline, located at HoloNet channel 0-888-PAY-MORE...”

Queen Amidala turned back around, and Plordio’s mic nearly went into her mouth. “Your highness, the people are desperate for answers.”

The queen smoothed her dress a bit, and put on her queen face. “We express our utmost hopes and confidence that the Naboo Crisis will be resolved to everyone’s satisfaction with minimal loss of life.”

Plordio’s glassy smile never flickered. “Yes, but who does your hair?”

Amidala frowned and turned to Palpatine, who was waving politely at the congregating journalists, each of whom he seemed to know by name. None of them asked any questions, but rather he asked them questions. Questions like how was the baby doing, and did they ever get that organ transplant and what was the weather on Bothawui like these days.

“Senator,” she entreated, “can’t the Blue Guard do something? Round them up or lock them out?”

“Lock them out?” Palpatine looked aghast. “Your highness, that would be madness.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Madness? This is madness.”

With that, she braced her hips against her chair and one foot on Plordio’s chest, shoving the flailing correspondent out over open space. Two manicured fingers went into her mouth, which emitted a piercing whistle that cut through even the cacophony of loaded questions and roundabout answers permeating the chamber. Orange-hooded feminine faces began appearing around the periphery, in docks and doorways and observation galleries. The handmaidens had answered their queen’s call.

“Allright, ladies,” she shouted, “Delta Formation!” The handmaids sprang into action, leaping nimbly from pod to pod and linking arms to boost each other gymnastically across. It was a thrilling display, but surely the Queen did not plan to attempt something similar in that outfit... Did she?

No, she had something far more audacious in mind. Forming a human chain, they stabilized their stances on intervening pods wherever possible and hauled with their combined strength, swinging the Queen’s box in a wide arc towards safety. Its added momentum knocked several other pods
aside like bumper cars in its headlong rush to freedom. The queen touched down as daintily as if she was getting out of a sky-limo, while Palpatine actually took notice for once.

"Fascinating," he said. "I never considered using the pods as projectiles."

Anakin trudged down the well-lit hallways of 500 Republica, where all the rich Coruscant people apparently lived. Some self-aware part of his psyche told him he ought to rankle at the opulence with which they went about their lives, but he was just glad to not have sand in his clothes for the first time ever. He hated sand so much; but being around it for his entire life, he had not noticed his hatred for it until it was gone. It was like a fish suddenly realizing it hated water. He had been composing a small-speech in his head about how much he despised the stuff, but had gotten only as far as "I hate sand." Eh, it was a work in progress.

He was pretty keen on the prospect of staying with Padmé. It was so nice of the queen to let him stay in her temporary accommodations, especially after Qui-Gon prissily told him the Jedi Temple was for "Jedi only" and no outsiders allowed. Obi-Wan smiled apologetically, and Anakin found he was starting to like the guy a bit. He understood what it was like.

Finding the queen's apartment was easy—it was the only door guarded by an ambulatory pile of blasters. Nobody had asked Panaka for a permit, perhaps because when you amassed a certain number of blasters they began to count as your permit; and anyway he would have been very hard pressed to conceal them.

His muffled voice asked, "Who goes there?"

"Anakin."

"How do I know you're not a Trade Federation spy?"

Anakin rolled his eyes and walked past Panaka, who was completely hidden from view inside his man-shaped weapons stockpile, and into the apartment. As he shut the door, he could hear the man grilling empty air.

"If you're not a spy, then why are you pretending to be Anakin? Ah-ha! Nothing to say to that, eh? Don't try to wait me out, man, I've got all day."

Queen Amidala sat on the couch. From the collarbone up, she was every inch the aloof monarch: Hutt-sized hairdo, headdress that probably interfered with local air traffic; and enough mascara, foundation, and lipstick to supply the entire Mid Rim for a year. Below that, though, she wore nothing but a sports bra and running shorts. Huh. So this was what it looked like when a queen let her hair down—metaphorically speaking; if Queen Amidala let her hair down, it would probably bring the building down with it. Handmaidens were gathered around the room in various states of dress and undress, although there was no Padmé to be seen. One of them perched on the sofa beside her mistress, trying to offer various distractions.

"Do you want a drink?"

"No," the queen listlessly replied.

"Do you want to watch The Princess Bride again?"

"No."

"You... wanna make out?"
“No, Dormé.” She looked up and noticed Anakin. “What do you want?”

“I’m looking for Padmé. Is she here?”

Dormé and her queen gave each other a weird look. “No,” the latter slowly replied. “I sent her on an errand.”

“Aww.” His shoulders slumped, and the queen, perhaps out of pity, made space for him on a couch.

“Have a seat, kid. I’ll get Dormé to mix you a drink, although I’m afraid all we have is tequila, scotch and more tequila.”

He sat down beside her.

“This sucks,” he groused.

She scoffed. “Please. You have no idea what I am going through right now.”

“Dragged away from your home by an idiot and taken somewhere to see a bunch of morons with too much power and not enough accountability, for ultimately no purpose?”

“Damn. Maybe you do. Hey, tone it down over there,” she yelled at two handmaids energetically locking lips in the corner. “You look like two goldfish fighting over a gummi-worm.”

Anakin just stared. Maybe he should set his sights on marrying the queen; she was attractive, and then he would probably get the handmaidens as part of a package deal. He was just about to say something when Palpatine strode through the front door.

“Watch your step leaving, Senator,” Panaka said from the hallway. “There’s a Federation spy lurking somewhere out here.”

“Your highness,” he said, fairly glowing, “I have wonderful news!”

She blinked at him. “Nute Gunray suddenly decided to withdraw from Naboo and set himself on fire?”

“Better. I have been nominated as candidate for Supreme Chancellor!”

“You have a funny definition of good news.”

“If you’ll excuse me, I must prepare for my humble acceptance speech.” He put sunglasses on, and from somewhere rap music began to play.

“I make money, money is got,” the unseen rapper declared, as Palpatine strolled out of the apartment. “I make money, money is got!”
The Campaign

Chapter Summary

Worf moderates a debate between candidates for the office of Supreme Chancellor, and Queen Amidala makes an invaluable discovery.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Jar Jar wandered through Coruscant's lower levels. How rude of that air taxi driver to just dump him here like that. Nutsen! Now he was having no idea where he was. Everything was big buildings and dark alleys and stinkowiff, with no water in sight. None of the taxis would stop for him for some reason, either. He plunked his butt down on the curb and cradled his chin in his webbed hands. A large beetle, or maybe some kind of cockroach, trundled along the gutter. Its glossy blue-black carapace was the only thing in its environment that retained any sort of shine without tarnish. He lifted his mouth slightly, letting the insect get about a meter away before his tongue shot out and snatched it up. It crunched unpleasantly between his teeth, and tasted worse than that pile of bantha poodoo had smelled. He swallowed, and nearly puked it up again.

“I got something you can use that tongue on that tastes a lot better, honey.”

Jar Jar looked up at the source of the voice. She looked vaguely amphibious, like him, with ten or so green tentacles hanging from the back of her head instead of long ears and a flatter face to his duck bill. Her eyes were large and dark, almost like an insect’s but somehow still alluring. He smiled, until he realized there was probably a price tag attached.

“Uh, mesa haven no money,” he said.

“Well, then, baby, we might just have to do you one for free,” she winked.

That brightened his mood a bit, even if he was still hopelessly lost. Now he could be wandering aimlessly and have an exotic STD. There was no shortage of protection available. He could just pluck one from the gutter, provided he didn’t mind it coming… pre-owned. He was just weighing his options when a diminutive green figure with bulbous eyes came walking along.

“Hi ho,” it said, “Kermit thee pimp here. Are you looking or buying?”

“I was just sealing the deal,” squawked the woman, bending slightly at the waist to argue with him. Her tight leather miniskirt rode so high on her thighs, Jar Jar could see a lot more than green from where he was sitting.

“Now don’t, mhhmm, fuck with me, Peggy,” said the little frog dude in a weirdly conversational tone at complete odds with his words. “You and I both know that you owe me a significant quantity of money already.”

“Hey, I’ll get your kriffing money! You think it’s easy being green?”

For some reason, the little green guy just snapped at that. All pretense of friendliness abandoned, he began screaming and flailing his spindly arms while the woman flinched and squealed and
finally fell over, dead. Jar Jar could only stare in horror, goggle-eyed, at her lifeless body and it was not until Kermit had already beat feet that he looked up and saw the approaching sirens.

“Oie boie.”

“You alright over there?”

The queen was watching Anakin anxiously. He hiccupped and turned bleary, bloodshot eyes on her.

“I’m good.”

“You sure you don’t want any more?”

“Hey,” he answered, swirling his half-full tequila bottle, “I’m like, sixty pounds. A little goes a long way.”

“Suit yourself.” Wobbling a little, Amidala rose from the sofa in her luxurious rented apartment and walked to the bedroom to get more alcohol. When she opened the door, it revealed two naked handmaidens bouncing (bouncing being the operative word) on the queen-sized bed, swatting each other with pillows. She shook her head, grabbed a 40 of premium Corellian whiskey and shut the door. Plopping herself back down on the cushions, she asked Anakin again.

“You sure I can’t do something for you?”

“It’s okay,” he said, staring dreamily at the bedroom door, “you just did.”

“Oh, hey, the debates are starting.” She grabbed the remote and switched their HoloNet viewer on.

“Hello, and welcome to the 8,334th Galactic Republic Supreme Chancellery debate,” growled a dark-skinned, hugely built man with excessive ridges on his forehead. “I am your HoloNet host and moderator, Worf Blitzer, and today is a good day to debate! Live, in front of your very eyes, the seven electoral candidates for the office of Supreme Chancellor will face each other with a complete lack of honour or courage—otherwise known as ‘politics’. Let the verbal battle begin!”

The hologram widened to encompass an entire room, with spectators filling rows of seats. Seven pulpits occupied a broad stage over which hung the emblem of the Republic. Only Palpatine was present, standing unassumingly behind his lectern as if he belonged there. Its name placard read PALPATINE”, someone having taken great care to scratch the first name completely off.

“Here come the combatants now. Senators Bail Organa of Alderaan, Glove Wrongknee of Corellia, Edeel Bar Gane of Roona, Aïnlee Teem of Malastare, and Orn Free Taa of Ryloth.”

Two humans, a Roonan, a Gran, and five-and-a-half Twi’leks filed onto the stage. The other four assumed their assigned positions while Taa waddled behind his pulpit and surrounded it completely. Organa was handsome, with dark hair and a well trimmed beard. He looked far too young for politics, like he got lost on his way to a job interview, but his eyes were older. The Republic aged its senators. By contrast, Glove Wrongknee looked like an older man trying to be young. There were Wookiees who spent less time on their hair than he obviously did, and his suit probably cost more than the gross domestic product of Sullust. Teem was a Gran, with a three-
eyed goat face. What more was there to say? He was all businesslike, in stark contrast to Taa and to Bar Gane, who was as hairless as men who might use the anti-baldness product his name sounded like. He had about fifty index cards protruding from various pockets in his shiny black suit, and fidgeted with his greenish hands.

“Representing, respectively, the Reasonable Compromise Party, the Big Money Party, the Serious Business Party, the Good Cause Party, and…” Worf Blitzer’s Fu Manchu curved downwards as he scowled at his list. “Senator Taa, I do not see your representing party listed here.”

“We have parties?” Taa was incredulous. “Is there cake?”

“Senator Taa is an... independent candidate,” Blitzer growled. “He joins Senator— “

Palpatine cleared his throat explosively, causing shrill feedback tones from the mics.

“Palpatine of the little known Imperial Party,” Worf finished. Eyeballing the seventh (and vacant) podium, he paused and held a finger to his ear, apparently listening to an earpiece. “Ah. It seems that Senator Eeusu Estornii of Ord Zeuol will not be joining us. Tragically, she was fatally assaulted on her way from the spaceport by an unidentified assailant. Police have released this composite sketch of the suspect.” A projected image appeared beside him of a crudely rendered face with glaring eyes, outlandish facial stripes and enormous spikes growing from the crown. “If you have any information, please contact Coruscant Security Force.” Worf’s sombre expression flickered instantly to fierceness. “Now DEBATE!”

The house lights dimmed, putting all focus on the candidates as they prepared for their opening remarks. Wrongknee was first and, to judge by his expression, was usually the first in everything.

“The first question,” announced Blitzer, “is about health care. A true warrior meets his death with honour, but some quail at the prospect. What will you do for those weaklings who choose not to face death?”

“I’ll pass on this one, Worf,” grinned Wrongknee. “But I’d like to thank those who make less money than me, which is everybody, for coming out today.”

“Very well. Senator Wrongknee dodges the question, like a true coward. Senator Organa?”

“That’s a very good question. Currently over twelve billion citizens of the Galactic Republic are without proper healthcare. There are whole families who cannot even afford a bacta tank and have been making do with fish aquariums full of rubbing alcohol. Not to mention—“

“The audience grows bored with your rhetoric,” shouted Worf. “Next candidate!”

Palpatine blinked suddenly, as if he had been an unsuspecting passerby and not standing there the entire time waiting for his turn. “Yes? Can I help you?”

“My patience wears thin, Senator,” Worf snarled, spit flying from his fangs before he barked, “Your stance on healthcare!”

“Oh. Yes. Droids. Lots of droids.”

“You heard the senator,” Blitzer announced into the holocam. “He will place your loved ones in the care of machines, who can know neither honour nor compassion. Senator Teem!”

“Palpatine stole my answer,” the Gran pouted.

“You will receive no pity from me. Next candidate!”
“Ah, yes, I had something for this,” stammered Senator Bar Gane, fumbling with his cards. “Ah. I propose establishing a tier-based system, determined by species. See, certain races have physiological redundancies, which would render organ transplants, blood transfusions redundant, so it’s fair to—”

Worf cut him off, roaring, “That is racist!” He pushed some unseen button and the Roonan vanished from sight in a shower of cue cards, through a trapdoor beneath the platform.

| —O— |

“Gee, this is thrilling stuff,” sighed the queen. “Couldn’t we be watching something exciting? Like, fuck, I don’t know, I’ll even take podracing at this point.”

“It’s all been preempted for election coverage,” reported a handmaiden, who was massaging Amidala’s shoulders.

“There must be something else on,” muttered the queen, flipping channels.

“Bail Organa.” screamed some bloated, middle-aged man on the hologram projector. “Where did he even come from? Where’s the birth certificate??”

“Ugh, put the debate back on.”

| —O— |

“And by putting the homeless and infirm into enormous furnaces to be burned for warmth, we will solve the financial, healthcare and energy crises,” Senator Wrongknee was explaining. “It’s a win-win-win!”

“If I were not live on the HoloNet right now,” Worf Blitzer rumbled, “I would kill you where you stand.”

“Because you disagree with my ideas?!”

“No, because the question was about corruption in the Senate!”

“Well,” blustered Wrongknee, “of course I would deal with that.” Three Trade Federation™ granola bars fell out of his sleeve.

“The next question goes to Senator Palpatine. What will you—”

“Excuse me,” interrupted Organa, “but you skipped me.”

“Silence, petaQ!” Worf pounded the moderator’s table so hard it nearly split in half.

Palpatine began as if nobody had interrupted. “Obviously, what the Republic needs is change, and lots of it. Loads and loads of change.”

“Spare any?”

Palpatine glanced at the shabbily dressed man who had apparently materialized out of thin air beside him, and shoved him aside with one foot. Worf had one eyebrow raised, and appeared to be considering this.

“What sort of change did you have in mind, senator?”
“You know,” Palpatine began, but he never got to finish his thought because Bar Gane suddenly started yelling, one hand full of index cards desperately clutching the edge of the trapdoor.

“I have an idea for that!”

Worf’s nostrils flared. “Oh, for—Maintenance!”

A pair of droids wearing janitorial jumpsuits answered Worf’s call. One of them produced a plunger and began applying it to Gane’s head. During this commotion, the holocamera droids were distracted. When they returned to the other candidates, Ainlee Teem was slumped over with an enormous vibro-knife protruding from his back. Palpatine stared in shock as the crowd let out a collective gasp.

“I, uh, I think I hear my money calling,” stammered Wrongknee, and he ran from the stage.

“You see?” Senator Organa pointed at the dead Gran. “This is exactly the kind of thing we need to eradicate!”

The crowd began clapping wildly, except for a fully armoured Mandalorian sitting dead center. He stood up and fired a blaster at Organa.

—O—

The projection flickered out and simple letters appeared: WE ARE EXPERIENCING TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES. PLEASE STAND BY. Queen Amidala angrily threw her now-empty whiskey bottle at it; it whizzed harmlessly through the projection and shattered against the far wall.

Anakin asked, “What was the point of that? I mean, really.”

The comm line chirped and, since Anakin was the closest, he picked it up.

“Hello?”

“Annie? Mesa calling from lockup. Yousa gotta bail me outta here!”

Another voice came on the line, as deep as Jar Jar’s was shrill. “Gimme the fuckin’ comm, motherfucker! Yo, who the fuck is this?”

“Your mom,” said Anakin, and hung up.

The queen asked, “Who was that?”

“Wrong number.”

She shrugged and picked up a blaster.

“Is that one of Panaka’s?”

“Yep. Dormé! What’s your face! Get up there. It’s time for target practice.”

“Come on,” Dormé whined, “again?!”

“It’s on the stun setting, don’t be a baby.”

Anakin grabbed the comm again when it beeped a second time. “Yello?”
This time, the voice on the other end was a strangled baritone that cracked in places like a pubescent teenager. “Um, dissa Queens Gone Wild calling.”

He handed the handset to the queen. “It’s for you.”

Taking it from him, she wedged it between her ear and shoulder while she continued firing stun blasts at her handmaidens, who frolicked with a sort of madcap urgency like happy forest elves injected with PCP.

“Talk to me.”

“Yoursa highness! My have been stabbed eight times already—OIE!—maken dat nine. Yousa gotta be gettin’ mesa out of here!”

“What’s in it for me? Ha! Bullseye,” she gloated, after scoring a direct hit that dropped “what’s-her-name” like a sack of spice. “Take that weak mess off-world, yo.”

“Mesa be tellin’ yousa about Gungan army!”

“You freaks have an army? Thanks for not telling me sooner, asshole!”

With perfect precision, she pitched the communicator across the room and into a tumbler full of liquor. It shot a single spark weakly into the air and died in a stream of bubbles. Switching the blaster to full power, she shot a hole through the front door, which burst open milliseconds later to admit a small tidal wave of blasters upon which Panaka surfed.

“Your majesty! Are you all right?”

“I’m fine, Panaka, I—why aren’t you carrying any?”

She had noticed he was not actually holding any of his precious blasters. He wiggled his empty fingers in response. “I’m training them to hold each other.”

“Meta. Pack your shit! We’re going back to Naboo.”

“I can bring my blasters?”

“Bring all your goddamn blasters.”

“Thank you,” he whispered, a tear rolling down his cheek.

“Hey,” the queen shouted at what’s-her-face. “What are you doing lying around?”

—O—

“Master!”

Obi-Wan ran through the Jedi Temple, robes flying. Bemused younglings stared at him in his wake. Massive, ornate columns framed his pathway but he did not seem to notice them. It was almost as if they were not even there.

A quick elevator ride up the spire later and he located Qui Gon outside the High Council chamber, waiting anxiously to get in. The Jedi Knight was nearly pulling his beard out with restlessness.

“Ah, Obi-Wan. Late as usual. I was just trying to get young Atticus here——”
"Anakin!"

"—another consult with the Council. I thought he might impress them with his lightsaber skills."

"You’re going to let him handle a lightsaber? A real lightsaber?"

"Yes, naturally."

"That’s—you know what? It’s immaterial for the moment. I came to tell you about Queen Amidala. She’s going back to Naboo!"

That got Qui-Gon’s attention. "That sneaky little monarch minx! She’s trying to cut me out of the negotiations! Did she say anything?"

"Something about Gungans and expendability, but it was hard to hear her."

"Obi-Wan… this is perfect! Helping liberate Naboo from a foreign oppressor? Why, the lad Annabelle—"

"Anakin!"

"—is almost certainly bound to do something heroic and Chosen One-y. Then the Council will have no choice but to train him."

"Putting a pin in the insanity of taking a nine-year-old into a combat situation, you’d still have to get them to sign off on us going with her."

"I know that, oh my young Padawan of little faith, and I would ask them if they would just open this door!" He glared anxiously up at the council chamber’s impressive portal.

Obi-Wan looked at the chronometer: 16:29. "Master, something tells me they won’t be opening that door for a while."

He heard the door swish open, and turned to see Anakin standing in the doorway.

"It wasn’t locked," the kid said.

Ignoring Obi-Wan’s raised eyebrows, Qui-Gon strode through the gap saying, *sotto voce*, "Clearly I chose the right Chosen One."

Obi-Wan coughed a little as they entered the thicker-than-usual atmosphere of the chamber. The Masters were slumped in their beanbag chairs, heads lolling. Yoda turned bleary, red-rimmed eyes upon them.

"Look everyone, the Qui-Guy it is!"

They found this inexplicably amusing, and a round of hoarse chuckles made its way around the circle.

"Actually," Qui-Gon corrected him, wincing, "it’s ‘the Negotiator’ now, but thanks for remembering. I’ve come before you today to seek permission to return to Naboo."

"Yeah, whatever," Mace shrugged.

"Then I’m afraid I must go without your—wait, what?"

"Yeah, man," wheezed Ki Adi, "it’s cool. Unless you wanna stay, we’re going to watch Dude.
“Where’s My Speeder?”

“Hmm, no. I’ll pass.”

“Cool. Hey, you got any nachos?”

—O—

“Well, they seemed to agree to that rather easily,” sighed Obi-Wan.

“It’s a sign,” his master replied. “The Force is with us. There’ll be no one to stop us this time.”

“Um, pretty sure there’ll be exactly the same people to stop us this time as last time. Or have you forgotten about the droid army occupying Naboo?”

“One step at a time. Here and now, my young Padawan; here and now.”

Anakin butted in. “So do I even get a say in the matter?”

“I thought it was every young man’s dream to fight robots,” breezed Qui-Gon.

“Padmé will be there,” muttered Obi-Wan.

“What are we waiting for?” Young Anakin clapped his hands and ran ahead. “Yippee! Woohoo and all that juvenile bullshit!”

Chapter End Notes

I have never had as much fun writing anything as I did writing that debate. I hope everyone enjoyed reading it.
The Voyage Home

Chapter Summary

Our intrepid heroes return to Naboo and find things are falling together with surprising ease.

Obi-Wan Kenobi and Qui-Gon Jinn caught up with Queen Amidala just as she was approaching her starship. It looked right at home amongst the gleaming transparisteel towers of Coruscant. Handmaidens, Panaka’s college buddy, and that horrible little astro droid, R2-D2, were already trundling up the gangplank. The queen’s progress was, however… somewhat impeded.

“Don’t go, your highness,” Palpatine pleaded, his ordinarily smooth tones given an unusual cadence by the way Amidala dragged him along the duracrete with every step. He was clinging tenaciously to her ankle, scuffing his opulent senatorial robes and elegant (and tasteful) sash of candidacy. “I have every confidence I can resolve this issue.”

“I’m afraid my mind is made up, Senator Palpatine.”

“Isn’t there anything I can do to change your mind?”

Amidala sighed and looked at him. It was unusual for him to be this persistent about anything. He was so aggressively bland all the time.

“Come with me, then,” she said. “Naboo is your homeworld too. Help me reclaim it from the Federation.”

“Oh, your highness, I am flattered, but of what possible use could I be? You’re much better off with a couple of strapping, young Jedi at your sides. Speak of the devil…”

“So,” shouted Qui-Gon, “thought you could hold negotiations without the Negotiator, eh? That’s counterintuitive. I mean, the codename alone should make that obvious.”

She flapped her arms like some enormous, highly exasperated bird—and, indeed, with those sleeves it looked like she could take flight at any moment. “Seriously? You are worse than a yeast infection!”

“I don’t know what baked goods have to do with this, but as of right now I am hereby assuming seniority over this expedition on the grounds of I am a Jedi and therefore have all the authority.”

“I thought you might say that,” the queen replied calmly, “and that might be a problem if I hadn’t done a little shopping.”

“Did you get any fireworks?”

Suddenly Qui-Gon was convulsing on the ground. The queen raised her small, handheld device beside her head and clicked the trigger. The little black object crackled with electricity.

“Coruscant SkyMall, bitch.”

She turned on her heel, layered skirts whirling, and marched up the gangway. Obi-Wan stared
“Wow.”

“Obi-Wan, help me up. Queen Amygdala knows how to use Dark Side lightning.”

“Sure, master,” sighed Kenobi, dragging his master up the ramp by one ankle. “Maybe she’s a Sith.”

“Don’t be absurd.”

When Obi-Wan reached the cockpit, Panaka and his college buddy were preparing for takeoff.

“We should be better off this time around,” the latter said. “While everybody was doing their thing I took the Coruscant Pilot School’s express course, in case anyone wondered where I was.”

“I didn’t,” Obi-Wan replied, “but I’m certainly grateful you’ve learned how to fly this thing.”

“I’m rated for a different design, so there’ll be a few bumps.”

Something or someone stirred under the enormous pile of blasters filling the copilot’s chair and half the cockpit.

“Cool your jets, Panaka. There wasn’t enough time to mount blasters.”

Jar Jar appeared, and he was a vision: handkerchief wrapped around his ears, tattoos everywhere, and a dead look in his eyes.

“Jar Jar,” said Obi-Wan, “I thought you were in prison.”

“Mesa broke out. Dissa T-Dog,” he said, indicating a scarred, scowling rough-looking character beside him who wore an identical bandana. “Hesa not seen a lady in ten years.”

T-Dog was looking at the queen with more than a little predatory intent. Obi-Wan half expected her to pull the electric thingy out again, but she just motioned and said, “Dormé’s in the back.”

The ex-con vanished in a matter of seconds, loud crashing and screaming echoing in his wake. Obi-Wan stared at the monarch with equal parts admiration and revulsion.

“That was pretty coldblooded.”

“Yeah?” She took a long drag on her death stick. “And?”

Lights flickered on and the starship thrummed with power as pre-flight checks were ticked off and their pilot prepared the cruiser for departure.

Obi-Wan peered out the viewport and said, “Senator Palpatine certainly seems sorry to see you go.”

Outside, clinging to the starship’s landing gear, Palpatine bellowed as his puffy sleeves flapped in the jet stream. “Your highness, I really feel you ought to reconsider.”

The queen rolled her eyes. “He’ll fall off eventually.”
"Xenodocheionology! Triple word score!"

Nute Gunray crossed his arms. "That’s not a word."

His right-hand man, Rune Haako, grinned triumphantly and turned to the protocol droid. "Not-See-Threepio! Is it?"

The droid nodded her chromium head, and answered. "Xenodocheionology: a noun meaning love of hotels and/or inns."

Haako gloated silently while the viceroy fumed. His side of the board was filled with words like "ruminant" and "macerate" and "cunnilingus," whereas Gunray’s was a scattergun target of pitiful little prepositions like "at" and "the."

"Fine," grumbled Nute. "Never should have bought you that word-a-day calendar." Seowling at his assortment of letter tiles, he beetled his green brow in deep concentration. His slit pupils dilated in excitement. "Got it!" He began enthusiastically placing tiles on the board. "I’m out! And, with two triple word scores, I believe that makes the game mine."

Rune tilted his head and squinted. "I don’t even know how to pronounce that."

"It’s a Shyriiwook word," the viceroy responded primly.

"Not enough vowels. I call bullshit."

"Blast! It always works for the Wookiees!"

"That’s because they tend to rip people’s arms off when they don’t win."

——o——

"That was surprisingly easy," yawned Obi-Wan as he walked down the gangway stretching his arms. "I’d expected it to be much more difficult, with the blockade and all."

"Not even a montage," Qui-Gon sighed, looking on the verge of tears. "I don’t know what these negotiations have come to."

"I swear to every god," screeched the queen, "if you say the word ‘negotiations’ one more time…" The device appeared in her hand and cracked with electricity again.

Qui-Gon recoiled and made a low-pitched "Ugh-hoo-hoo" sound.

"Jar Jar," the queen barked. "Go find your damn people."

"Bitch, don’t you talk to my boy that way," snarled T-Dog, lurching down the gangplank like a mobile wall of muscle.

"Easy, boyo," soothed Jar Jar, patting the enormous man on the shoulder. "Go chase yousa some butterflies."

T-Dog ran off into the verdant fields of Naboo to dropkick happiness in the face by frolicking with a sort of violent, masculine glee. He jumped and swatted at a fluttering opalescent insect, but his scarred face was set in a hard scowl and his tattooed hands came together with a meaty clap that made Obi-Wan wince.

"Hesa haven control problems, but still hesa bein a good wife," Jar Jar said wistfully.
"Wife?" Qui-Gon scoffed. "He can’t, he’s a boy. Boys can’t be wives."

Dormé stumbled down the gangplank, looking disheveled, bruised and forlorn. The queen stared at her in horror.

"Dormé, what the fuck? What did he do to you?"

"Oh my god," the handmaiden sighed, practically weeping, "it was awful! He wrote me love poetry and read it to me for hours. He didn’t even stop when I started banging my head against the wall."

"That’s… not what I expected."

"Regardless, it was awful, and you owe me. I think it’s my turn to wear the C-R-O-W—"

"OKAY," the queen loudly interrupted, "me and Dormé are gonna go behind this tree for a minute…"

Qui-Gon scratched his beard as he watched them go. "Why would the queen or her coterie want to wear a bird?"

"Perhaps they’re remaking The Lone Ranger," Obi-Wan absentmindedly replied, lost in his own thoughts. "They certainly have enough makeup on hand."

Said makeup looked hastily applied to the queen’s face when she emerged from behind the tree; Obi-Wan figured it for a last-minute touch-up, which seemed the sort of thing a vain monarch might do. It seemed Dormé had gotten some on herself in the process as well, patches of foundation seemed to have been hastily wiped off of her face. He rolled his eyes at their sloppiness.

"Alright," the queen continued breezily, "as I was saying, I’m going to prepare for first contact with the Gungans—"

"We already made first contact with the Gungans centuries ago," interrupted the handmaiden, adding as an afterthought, "your highness."

"—while Padmé here cleans the toilets. All of them."

"Wait a minute," Obi-Wan questioned, "Padmé? What happened to Dormé?"

The queen looked momentarily flustered. "I… sent her on an errand?"

"In the jungle? To do what, find some nastier moss?"

Padmé was furiously elbowing her mistress in the ribs while the latter stammered for a reply but Obi-Wan’s attention was distracted by Jar Jar suddenly emerging from the nearby water he hadn’t noticed was so close to the ship.

"Gungans no dere," he reported, wringing out his do-rag. "Gunga City been taken ober by squatters."

As he said "squatters," some examples of same emerged from the water behind him. They were truly a sight to behold, even for eyes that had seen the multitude of life forms a galaxy far, far away offered. One wore his long, black hair in multiple ponytails, and had enormous fins jutting from his elbows; each fin was nearly as long, if not as long, as Obi-Wan’s lightsaber. The one next to him had six arms, covered in suckers like an octopus, and a big round mouth like an
enormous trumpet. His hair stuck out in all directions, despite having just emerged from the water, and he had some kind of sun symbol branded into his forehead. The leader of this little band was blue-skinned, with a prominent chin, teeth like an Opee sea killer and a six-inch serrated nose. All of them had gills on their lower necks.

"Next time you’ll think twice before messing with the Arlong Pirates," he growled. "Arlong out!" He and his henchmen dove back into the water, scooping up tasty handfuls of diatomaceous life-forms with their webbed hands along the way.

Jar Jar rolled his eyes. "Punk-ass bitches," he scoffed, shaking his head.

"This all seems remarkably convenient," mused Obi-Wan. "We couldn’t even get here the first time without braving battle droids, destroyer droids, and air freshener. Then we nearly got our heads blasted off trying to leave. We get here without a spot of trouble, even though they’ve had time to get entrenched, and we’ve hardly been here five minutes before we’re already on track to finding an army?"

Padmé raised an eyebrow. "You’re complaining?"

"If Gungans driven out of city," Jar Jar mused, "theysa go to sacred place."

"I’m sorry," said Obi-Wan, raising a finger, "but did you say ‘sacred place’ or ‘secret place’?"

"Little of column A, little of column B."

As it so happened, the sacred(secret)place was not so secret. They found it in minutes by having R2 scan for the highest concentration of airborne THC vapours in the area. Hundreds of Gungans were gathered around an impressive stone edifice. As the queen’s ragtag little band drew closer, they could see it was an enormous gravestone bearing the inscription: HERE LIES ROBERT NESTOR MARLEY.

"That explains the sacred part," muttered Obi-Wan.

The crowd of disenfranchised Gungans parted swiftly to reveal Boss Nass, who moved pretty spryly for a fat guy. Upon seeing the queen, his ponderous jowls flopped open in surprise, and Obi-Wan ducked behind Qui-Gon in anticipation of another spit shower; but the Gungan leader merely spoke instead:

"Cha! Wah mek yousa come yah, dawta? Yousa bring Babylon down upon wesa heads."

"I’ve come," Queen Amidala began uncertainly, "to beg for your assistance. I mean, humbly beseech you for your help. I mean demand—stop elbowing me!" This last directive was aimed at Padmé, for some reason.

"Ha! Yousa downpress we Gungans lang time."

"While it’s true that... Um..."

Padmé was scribbling furiously on some enormous note cards she had pulled from Force knew where, and rushed behind Boss Nass so the queen could read off of them. Obi-Wan wondered why she didn’t just invest in a Teleprompter.

"We come before you in... peace. We wish to from an alliance with... you. As the Queer of Madoo—what? Oh! As queen of Naboo, I come before you to convey a simple plea... Marry me,"
Padmé furiously crumpled the signboard and threw it to the ground.

"Wah dis yah bandulu bizness?" Nass had his arms folded, and the other Gungans were looking less than friendly.

"I don’t know what that means," Queen Amidala continued, whilst her handmaiden scribbled furiously, "but I assure you we mean no harm. Are we not one people? With one love, as the immortal bard Marley said?"

"Don’t go off-book," growled Padmé, whatever the hell that meant.

Nass’s eyes un-narrowed, but his attitude remained standoffish. "Wah yousa knowin’ bout de great Marley’s message?"

"Actually, I’ve never really liked reggae," blurted the queen, who then clapped a hand over her mouth in shock while Padmé shoved Qui-Gon, who had crept up next to her with a signboard of his own, roughly aside.

Nass shook his jowls with such rage that Obi-Wan thought they would fly off and take wing, but they stayed miraculously anchored to the Gungan’s fat face.

"Wah a gwan yah? Yousa be make fi say wah gwan, or wesa bun dung yousa!"

"Um..." The queen’s fidgeting went into overdrive, either from Nass’s incomprehensible speech or the five hundred electric spears now pointed at her. "You see, the thing is..."

"I wonder if we mightn’t use our lightsabers at this point," said Qui-Gon in an aside to Obi-Wan, grasping the metallic hilt. Things seemed about to fall apart in a very big way when Padmé suddenly shouted out.

"Enough!" Casting her signboards aside, she strode into the centre of the assemblage, her strong voice ringing out through the tension and cutting it far more efficiently than Qui-Gon’s lightsaber could. "I apologise for the deception, everyone, but it seemed the only way to assure my safety. I am the real Queen Amidala."


"No, it’s no lie, I assure you! I am the queen!"

"Cho! And fire de a Mus Mus tail, him tink a cool breeze. Wah mek wi listen to yousa, ya boasie boopsie?"

"I’m not sure what any of that means, but..."

"I think I can be of assistance," interjected Obi-Wan, meekly raising a hand.

Nass suddenly fixed his gaze on the young Jedi. "Wah yousa want, bouy?"

"I may not know what is going on, but I do know that the real queen—"

"Who is me," Padmé interrupted.

"... has a strawberry birthmark on her, um..."
He tilted his head slightly downwards, to indicate what he had left unsaid, and gave everyone his best shit-eating grin.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” moaned Padmé, slapping a hand over her face.

After a few minutes behind a tree with the woman wearing the monarchical robes, Obi-Wan waved the all clear and shouted that she was the real deal. A cheer went up from the assembled crowd.

The queen yelled, “‘Tie her to a tree!’”

“What? Hey! Hey!” Padmé protested and struggled, but she was no match for several hundred grasping Gungan hands, or Qui-Gon, who undertook his part of the task with enthusiasm unbefitting a Jedi, Obi-Wan felt.

The queen, meanwhile, was rallying the Gungans even further. “Get up, stand up! Stand up for your rights! Don’t give up the fight!”

“Ah sey one,” some Gungan yelled. Cheering and war whoops and of course puffs of smoke went up from the assembled amphibians and Obi-Wan noticed Boss Nass pulling Jar Jar aside.


“Oie boie,” chortled Jar Jar, “tenk you! My am mui grateful, my go and tellen mesa wife now.”

He ran off in T-Dog’s direction, ears trailing behind him, while Obi-wan sidled up to Nass.

“You know he’s going to die, right?”

Nass nodded. “Mhmm. All fruits ripe.”

Young Anakin wandered up to Padmé; Obi-Wan noticed and heightened his own aural senses to have a listen.

“I’m really sorry about this mix-up,” the boy said.

“Me too,” she replied.

“When I marry you, do I get the queen, too?”

“No.”

“I still love you.”

“Enough to untie me?”

“No. You kicked me in the face.”

This charming little exchange brought to mind another issue Obi-Wan realized he has overlooked. It seemed Qui-Gon was still intent on taking this child into battle. Perhaps because out of all their party he was the one who had interacted with Anakin the least, Kenobi was developing a soft spot for the boy and cared about what happened to him—or at the very least, did not actively wish him harm.

Who to talk some sense into? Qui-Gon repelled sense like repulsorlifts repelled the ground, but perhaps the queen might have some primordial maternal instincts rattling around in her hormonal glands.
“Begging your pardon, your highness, but... Mightn’t the boy be better off remaining here? Perhaps with one of your handmaids as supervision?”

Her royal highness shook her head dismissively. “I need my handmaids around me on the battlefield. They don’t have time to babysit. Let the Gungans look after him.”

Gungan women—who, for reasons Obi-Wan could not fathom, had breasts—gathered around the boy, cooing and making clucking noises. “Him a gud bwoy. Wesa roll up some herb, put hair on ‘im chest.”

Obi-Wan was not sure this was better, but noticed it was already time for the war council—such as it was. Queen Amidala had wasted no time in getting a large holographic projector set up. The thing was easily as big as the ones at the Jedi Temple, and Obi-Wan took a moment to ask where she obtained it.

“Some fat guy in a flannel shirt dropped it off. Come to think of it, where did he go?”

Obi-Wan rolled his eyes. He had a good idea who that was, and he was fairly certain she was not talking about Senator Palpatine.

“Right. Now,” she went on, gesturing to the colorful three-dimensional representation of Theed sitting before them, “stage one of our three-pronged, needlessly complicated plan—”

“Four prongs,” Qui-Gon interrupted, “counting the Chosen One.”

“Six if you count these ones,” she replied seamlessly, brandishing her taser. Qui-Gon subsided, and she went on. “Stage one involves sending the brave, fearless Gungans into battle against the Trade Federation’s massive droid army.”

Obi-Wan asked, “And how do they plan to do that?”

Standing over the projector with arms folded, Nass said, “Wesa gonna use di boomer.”

Two Gungans nodded at their leader and offered a demonstration of the “boomer,” which consisted of popping a glowing blue ball into a tiny scoop on the end of a long, flexible stick, which the one holding it swung in a quick, overhand arc, sending the ball soaring overhead until it collided with a tree trunk in a shower of sparks.

“Goodie,” the young Jedi mumbled. “Our primary strategy is weaponized lacrosse.”

“Step two: Panaka and his friends stage another diversion in the capital city.”

“What? I thought you people didn’t have the resources to mount a defense.”

This last line was directed at the captain himself, who responded, “What do you mean, ‘you people’?” He started forward, but his college buddy’s palm struck his chest.

“Easy there, big guy,” the latter reassured him. “We won’t need much in the way of troops to engage what forces will be left remaining in the capital city.”

“That’s assuming the Federation is foolish enough to dispatch their entire fighting force out into the middle of nowhere just to annihilate a bunch of...” Obi-Wan bit down on “hippies with sticks and spears” and amended his counterpoint to “…brave, valiant Gungan warriors. Or, you know, not simply obliterate them from orbit.”
“Please,” the queen replied, rolling her eyes. “Have you met the Viceroy? He has no idea how to run a military force.”

“Actually, I haven’t; but fair point.”

“I don’t like this plan,” Qui-Gon pouted, whilst staying deliberately out of taser range. “There’s no opportunity to do anything heroic. I suppose I have to settle for leading the Gungans into battle. I shall set about learning their primitive and storied ways, master their culture, and thus become the best of them.”

With no warning whatsoever, Jinn stripped to the waist and began smearing his face and chest with swamp mud. The queen and her impromptu war council stared with difficult-to-conceal amusement as the Jedi untied his ponytail and shook his brown tresses free, sprinkling tree bark on his scalp while muttering about being one with the land. Preliminary cultural immersion completed, he then approached a pair of Gungans who were loitering around after their boomer demo smoking a roach as thick as Obi-Wan’s thumb, and prostrated himself before them.

“O NOBLE SAVAGES,” he bellowed, voice muffled by the moss wherein he had buried his face, “TEACH ME YOUR WAYS THAT I MIGHT LEAD YOU TO VICTORY.”

They looked at each other; one raised an eyebrow (at least insofar as Gungans possessed eyebrows), and the other passed his roach to Qui-Gon.

“Actually,” the queen said, finally breaking the silence, “that won’t be necessary. I’ll need you for part three of the plan, which is sneaking into the Royal Palace via the sewer system and apprehending Nute Gunray for... negotiations.”

Qui-Gon began coughing like a drowning victim, whether from the queen’s news or the huge drag he had just taken, Obi-Wan was not sure.

“Neg—Negotiations, your highness?”

“Yes, negotiations.”

Obi-Wan liked this new, shrewder side of the queen. Promising negotiations was the one way to assure Qui-Gon (and by extension, Obi-Wan himself) would remain at her side throughout the no doubt highly dangerous confrontation; and who better to have by your side than two trained Jedi?

Qui-Gon, for his part, appeared about to float away; again, no consensus on whether that was due to the possibility of negotiations, or the Gungans’ herbal remedy.

“Dismissed,” the queen barked, and Nass waddled off to inspire his troops with speeches about whitey, Zion and the downpression.

“I hate to be the pessimist here,” Obi-Wan persisted, “but we still have no means of reaching Theed, nor any ground support once we arrive there.

Nodding at the Jedi, Panaka scratched his chin a bit before pulling his college buddy aside.

“Hey,” he asked, “do you still have the numbers for our old drum circle?”

“Yup,” the other man replied.

“Give them a call.”

“Which ones?”
“All of them.”

“Even Steve-o and that chick with the third nipple?”

“Especially Steve-o and that chick with the third nipple.”

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