Summary

Attainment: 1) the act of attaining, or the condition of being attained. 2) something, such as an accomplishment or achievement, that is attained.

Notes

I am so totally guessing at these original publication dates.

BetaBetaBeta Credit/Awesomeness: Norcumi and Merry Amelie

NEW NOTE:

So! This is the anniversary edit for Attainment I, which is technically a year and change early. Unlike the others, Attainment got one *hell* of a re-write, because it was terrible even compared to my earlier work. My eldest podling was six months old at the time, and I'd slept an average of one hour a night for that entire time. It definitely affected my writing.

The chapter also ends in a different spot now, and takes up the thread again in Attainment II—except that edit isn't finished yet. However, the gap from one chapter to the other is written, so I'll be posting the first quarter of the edit into part II with a note for when the original resumes. It's not a perfect solution, but I this edit has been done for months now
and I want it posted, dammit.

Oh, and there is now bonus porn, so hopefully that's worth it.

Republic Date 5199: 11/13th
Jedi Temple, Coruscant

He woke from a formless dream of smoke and ash to an irritating beeping that refused to cease. Obi-Wan cracked open one eye and winced at the spike of pain that accompanied it. Holding the crèche together after the bombing had left him more drained than he’d originally thought.

He rolled over and glared at the comm lying on the spare pillow, which was still trying to get his attention. His head buzzed; he was on the verge of psychic overextension. The Force was infinite, but human bodies were not.

*Please be important,* Obi-Wan thought at the device, before raising his hand and slapping it down on top of his comm. “Kenobi,” he said. His voice cracked midway through his own name.

“Hey, Obi-Wan. I’ve got some visitors here asking for you, and I was wondering what I should do with them.”

It took him almost a full minute to place the woman’s voice. Tascha Farrel, member of the Temple Guard. Obi-Wan thought that Farrel was a crèche-mate of his and Abella’s, as well, but he wasn’t certain. A lot of those early memories had blurred together from the passing decades.

Visitors didn’t often come calling for him at the Temple, either. He gave up on sleep and forced both eyes open. “Who are they?”

“Uh, that would be Padmé Naberrie and Eirtaé of Naboo. I tried to tell them that you and everyone else were too bashed in to give ’em the time of day right now, but Naberrie insisted. Said it was very important.”

“Huh.” Obi-Wan sat up and brushed his hair away from his eyes, glad he’d put himself through a shower before face-planting onto his own bed. It wasn’t quite nineteenth hour, which meant he’d slept for two hours and missed dinner in the process. “Can you tell me anything else?”

“Well, they seem to shop at the same store, and they’re really cute, too. Introduce me?” Farrel asked in a wheedling tone.

That made him smile. “Introduce yourself, Tascha—you’re capable of it. If I were you, I would try my charms on Eirtaé. My Padawan would have words with you if you attempted to attach yourself to Naberrie.”

“You have no idea,* Obi-Wan thought, rubbing his forehead. “Believe me, there is cause for avoidance in that direction.”

Farrel laughed. “I’ll keep that in mind.”
“Could you please escort them up to my rooms, Tascha? It is as important as Naberrie claims.”

“Gotcha. I’ll take them on the shortened version of the Temple tour, give you a chance to prepare. It’s a nice, long walk up the Grand Stair, after all,” Farrel said. “See you in a few.”

Obi-Wan shook his head. “No wonder Rozess kept you. Thanks, Tascha.”

He disconnected the signal and then held the comm in his hands. Some days he felt beyond weary, and certain that the noisy, metallic device was the source of all his troubles.

Obi-Wan keyed in Mace’s private code and waited. It might not work; Mace and everyone else who was still capable were sifting through the crèche, or checking for other dangers Jil-Hyra might have left behind. Still, Obi-Wan wanted the Head of the Order at this meeting.

“Windu.”

Obi-Wan refrained from blowing out a relieved breath when he felt the balance of the Force shift in a more positive direction. “Mace, I have two members of the Naboo contingent on their way up to my quarters.”

“This isn’t really the best time—” Mace began, but Obi-Wan cut him off.

“No, but it may be the only time.” He considered and discarded several possible arguments before finally deciding upon simplicity. “At the very least, I think you and a few others should hear what they have to say.”


“You and Master Yoda, definitely. Master Adi if you can, and Micah if you can pry him away from whatever he’s doing.”

“I can make certain of Yoda’s presence, but the other two might be problematic.” Mace sighed. “This day is about to get even more complicated, isn’t it?”

Obi-Wan thought about it. “Oh, possibly,” he said, but that was putting it mildly.

Mace wound up being the last to arrive, still damp from a shower. “Sorry,” he said with a grimace, when Obi-Wan waved him inside. “I refuse to greet our guests while looking like something that crawled out of a refuse pile.”

“It’s fine.” Obi-Wan closed the door behind him, a bit disappointed that Adi hadn’t joined them. “You weren’t the only one that needed to clean up.”

Mace looked around, his eyes resting on Padmé and Eirtaé. Both girls were seated together on Obi-Wan’s couch, cloaked and hooded in identical outfits. Anakin had not-so-subtly taken the seat next to Padmé.

Yoda had been content to sit on the floor, making a seat out of one of Obi-Wan’s bed pillows. He had spent the intervening time humming to himself, listening to the flow of the Force and looking even more careworn than usual.

To Obi-Wan’s surprise, Mace sat down next to Yoda and touched the other Master’s clawed hand, a gentle, loving expression on his face. Yoda nodded and looked up at Mace with a tired smile on his face, nodding in response to an unvoiced question.
Obi-Wan’s heart ached at the exchange. It struck some painful chord in his memories, but he couldn’t quite seem to recall why. It wasn’t even the first sort of emotional honesty he’d seen today. The crèche bombing could have torn the Jedi apart, but Obi-Wan suspected the act was going to bring the Order firmly together for the first time in years.

He glanced back to look at Qui-Gon, who had chosen to lean against the wall closest to the door. His partner was still tired and emotionally drained from a long afternoon and evening of physically and spiritually intense work, but the sight of him made Obi-Wan’s heart ache for a different reason entirely.

Obi-Wan brushed the side of Qui-Gon’s face with the Force in a comforting gesture. Qui-Gon turned his face into the touch with a grateful smile.

_I see the nap helped_, Qui-Gon sent.

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow at the teasing. _As compared to what?_

_As compared to you getting so run down that you kept forgetting to speak Basic. My Mando’a is not that great, especially when interspersed with random patches of Bocce and Huttese._

Put that way, the nap had indeed been helpful. _Micah is still helping the other volunteers sorting the Initiates?_

_He is. Micah told me to take notes for him_, Qui-Gon confirmed.

Obi-Wan nodded. The crèche would take months to rebuild, and it could take as long or longer to repair the incidental damage the rest of the Temple had suffered. It left a sour taste in his mouth; Jil-Hyra’s coercion rankled.

“All right, Your Highness,” Obi-Wan said, offering her a short bow before standing opposite the couch, between Mace and Qui-Gon. “Tell them what you’ve already told me. There is no one in this room that you cannot trust.”

Padmé reached up and pulled her hood back, her movements mirrored by Eirtaé in the same moment. There was a faint smile on her face as she spoke. “Masters Jedi, I am Queen Amidala. Beside me sits Handmaiden Eirtaé, a trusted advisor. Another friend and handmaiden, Sabé, is currently attending an emergency session of the senate regarding the Temple bombing. She acts as Queen Amidala in my place to offer you Naboo’s public condolences in this terrible time.” Padmé paused, her eyes reflecting her sympathy. “I am sorry for what has happened. I’m glad that none of your children were lost in the attack.”

Yoda inclined his head. “Kind your words are, Queen Amidala. Thank you for them, the Jedi do, for heartfelt they are.”

Padmé nodded in return. “Would that it were my only reason for being here tonight, Master Jedi, but my own crisis has not yet passed. I came here for two reasons. The first, I have already mentioned to Knight Kenobi, and he thinks my suspicions are correct. I believe that the Jedi Temple was attacked today in order to draw attention away from the blockade and invasion of Naboo.”

Padmé hesitated. “I know that, in light of current events, such a claim sounds arrogant to make, but the timing is too convenient for me to be convinced that the events are unrelated.”

“It’s worked, too,” Qui-Gon put in, before Obi-Wan could speak. “I’ve had Anakin keep track of the news feeds since this afternoon. The plight of the Naboo has been all but forgotten by Coruscant society, and no new motions have been made by the Senate to address the invasion.”
“It’s not all that surprising,” Anakin said, a pensive expression on his face. “The Naboo are far away, but the Jedi are right here in spitting distance of the Senate Dome, and an attack on us is the best gossip they’ve had all year.”

“Not only gossip, Padawan Skywalker.” Eirtaé’s voice was soft, but firm and unyielding. “There is also fear, Masters Jedi. The people of Coruscant worry that if someone can so easily harm their protectors, then they can also be harmed.”

Eirtaé smiled at Mace’s questioning look. “There are advantages to being the shadow behind a Queen, Master Windu. They see only her. The tongues of others tend to loosen a bit around her handmaidens.”

“What a useful source of information for a young ruler,” Mace commented, his curiosity at the proceedings beginning to mingle with respect.

Padmé smiled at him, a predatory gleam in her eyes that too many of Padmé’s enemies discounted. “Indeed it is, Master Windu.”

Yoda had followed the verbal play with his eyes. He tapped his gimer stick on the floor, a gentle rapping meant to gain everyone’s attention. “Forgotten the Naboo, the Jedi have not,” he insisted. “Closed, the matter of the invasion has not been. Assigned to you, two Jedi and their Padawan still are…but ask something else of us, you wish to.”

“Yes, Master Yoda.” Padmé took a breath, steeling herself. “I have decided to return to Naboo. Despite our earlier progress, I no longer believe that the Senate will help us. If they require more proof before they will act, I will simply have to procure it.” She frowned. “Senator Palpatine wishes me to stay, to remain safe, but I fear he has been away from Naboo for too long. He does not fear for our people the way that I do.”

Padmé’s eyes hardened. “I’m going to take back my planet. I even have a good idea of how I am going to accomplish this, though certain aspects of my plans hinge on a new friend of mine.” She clasped her hands together; if it was a sign of hesitation, it was well-masked. “The Senate is so mired in its bureaucracy that even if they had voted to assist the Naboo after my first speech, I now believe that it still would take months for any true action to occur.

“And so, that leaves me with one final option. I have come directly to the Jedi, and I ask: Will you help us?”

Obi-Wan watched as Mace and Yoda exchanged surprised glances. Despite the situation, they still had not expected Padmé’s question.

“We are a neutral body, Your Highness,” Mace said in a cautious voice. “This is a political matter.”

“It is your very neutrality that brought me to your halls,” Padmé returned in a sharp voice. “You are the guardians of peace and justice in our galaxy. Or do the Jedi no longer make such claims?”

Obi-Wan bit his lip against the wide smile that wanted to form, sensing that Qui-Gon was also fighting his own amusement. If there was one thing that Padmé Amidala had never tolerated, it was verbal evasion.

Padmé’s expression softened. “If you must split hairs, then consider that the Jedi have already been officially assigned to negotiate with the Trade Federation on Naboo’s behalf. Nowhere in the record declaring the decision public does it specify how many Jedi will be involved in those negotiations, or what the negotiations shall be limited to.”
Anakin grinned. “She’s got you there.” Qui-Gon started to laugh and didn’t stop, even though Mace was treating him to a truly magnificent glower.

Obi-Wan decided that now was the time to intervene, if only so that two overtired Jedi Masters didn’t come to blows over quibbles in wording. “Master Windu. You are right, and so is she. But, you must consider that the blockade of Naboo became a Jedi matter the moment a Sith became involved.”

To his grim delight, he now had everyone’s rapt attention. “There is a Sith Apprentice out there who is going to stop at nothing to see that Queen Amidala signs a treaty with the Trade Federation to legalise this invasion. The Sith, by our mandates and by the laws of the Republic, are a Jedi matter.” It made his shoulders scream with tension to think about meeting Maul again, but he had little choice. Given what he’d witnessed on Tatooine, he and Qui-Gon had the best chance to defeat the Sith…even though he hated the very idea of Qui-Gon Jinn anywhere in the vicinity of Darth Maul.

Master Yoda’s eyes narrowed, but he was giving Padmé a slow, decisive nod. “Right, you both are. Aid, the Naboo require, and found, this Sith must be.” His eyes widened as he looked up to give Padmé a tiny, impish smile. “To the Council we must take this matter, Your Highness, but certain, I am, that granted, your request will be. Return with you to Naboo, the Jedi will.”

Obi-Wan couldn’t hold back a smile of relief. If Yoda said it was going to happen, then it would. He would either bully everyone else into agreeing, or just pull together a team and do it anyway. There were certain benefits to being Grand Master of the Order.

“Be warned, we cannot fight a war for you,” Mace pointed out, resigned to the inevitable. “We will help when and where we can, but we are peacekeepers, not soldiers.”

Padmé smiled her acceptance of Mace’s words. “I understand. I and the Naboo will be grateful for your assistance, no matter the service provided. When will the Jedi be prepared to leave?”

To Obi-Wan’s surprise, Mace shrugged. “The Jedi are always prepared, Your Highness. Tell us when you plan to depart, and we will be ready to join you.”

Padmé quickly turned surprise into another smile of acknowledgement. “Very well, then. Tomorrow afternoon, after the first Senate hearing of the day. I will give these…interesting officiants one last chance to do the right thing. If a message is sent to my ship, I will ensure that our pilot coordinates with yours for the return flight.”

“That is acceptable. May the Force be with you, Your Highness,” Mace said.

Padmé and Eirtaé stood at the same time. Their bows were also precisely matched. “And with you, Masters Jedi.”

Obi-Wan saw the girls out, returning them to Tascha Farrel’s watchful guardianship for their trip out of the Temple. He went back inside, stretched stiff, angry muscles, and thought dire things about furniture. The lack of places to sit was a galling reminder that he really should have replaced the chair that Reeft and Garen had accidentally broken.

Anakin abandoned the couch to sit against Obi-Wan’s legs, a quiet signal for desired contact. Yoda slowly got to his feet, while Qui-Gon claimed the vacated couch and sat wearily upon it.

Yoda’s ears were lowered as he stood in place, tapping his gimer stick against the floor in an unrecognizable pattern. “Tired, we all are,” he muttered. “The Council I will call. Discuss the matter with them, we must, though change, the answer will not. Needed, the Jedi are.” He
narrowed his eyes. “Tired, I am. A plaything of the Senate, the Jedi are not.”

Mace, in the process of standing up, paused and gave Yoda a startled look. Qui-Gon was doing much the same. “Master, the Jedi are not…” Mace finished standing and trailed off, a look of displeased realization on his face.

Yoda glared first at Mace, then Qui-Gon. He turned his ire upon Obi-Wan, who only raised both eyebrows in silent, sardonic reply. He’d been pushing the Jedi towards this moment for a long damned time now.

Yoda offered him a grunt before looking away, shifting from one foot to the other in a fit of restlessness. “Believe so, I did not. Changing my mind, I am.” He lifted his head, staring out of the darkened windows of Obi-Wan’s quarters. The Senate Dome was visible in the distance, one of the most brightly lit buildings on the entire planet.

“Right was young Amidala. A Jedi matter, this is, and a Jedi matter, it has always been. Wait for the Senate to tell us when to help, who to help, when to go, we do.” Yoda’s nostrils flared in anger.

Obi-Wan sympathized with Yoda, but he said nothing. He could not make this decision for the Order, much as he’d often wished to shout this lesson in their faces. The price had once been too great, too dear.

“Too late, it could have been, as it was before. Already to the Naboo should our help have been given!” Yoda sighed, his shoulders lowering. When he looked up at Qui-Gon, there was a glimmer of humor in his eyes that had been missing that evening. “Right you are, Master Qui-Gon. Too few, our numbers are. If strong we truly were, then happening, this might not be.”

Mace began shaking his head. “Enough has happened today, Master Yoda. We will be asking enough of the Council tonight. Asking them for more change—”

“Changes there have already been!” Yoda shouted, shocking them all. “Changed four years, ago, they did!” He jabbed his gimer stick in Obi-Wan’s direction. “Complacent we were, despite all things!” Yoda shook his head. “Time, we thought we had. Time, we do not have. Do we?” he asked, challenging Obi-Wan with his sharp and demanding voice.

“Time, you still have,” Obi-Wan whispered back, feeling the weight of too much experience pressing down upon him. For a moment, it seemed to be equal to the terrible understanding in Yoda’s eyes. “But you do not have as much time as you might wish for.”

“All right.” Mace gave in, pressing his hands against his face in a show of exhaustion. “Let’s go rile them up, but once that’s done, I’m going with you three,” he said, gesturing in Obi-Wan, Anakin, and then Qui-Gon’s direction.

“Running away, you are?” Yoda asked, one ear rising.

Mace shook his head. “If you think I’m willingly going to remain in this Temple and listen to Yarael Poof bitch about how this just isn’t done, you’re crazier than any of us.” He sighed. “Gods, but if only you could have warned us about this, too, Obi-Wan.”

That was a statement that Obi-Wan hadn’t expected. “Warn you? How?” he asked, his voice sharper than he should have allowed it to be. “This has never happened before! No one ever bombed the Temple during my time—well, no. That isn’t entirely accurate, but that was decades from now.”

“That is the second-least reassuring thing I have heard today,” Mace said in a flat voice. “Why
now, then? Why this?”

Obi-Wan glanced down at Anakin, who was staring up at him with wide, haunted eyes. “Exactly as Queen Amidala said, Mace. The Naboo were getting attention—useful attention. For the Sith to get exactly what he wants, he needs for the Naboo plight to continue. The Republic must fail in its duties.”

Mace frowned. “What does the Sith get out of a successful invasion of Naboo?”

“An army,” Qui-Gon answered in a quiet voice.

Obi-Wan felt an unwelcome chill race down his spine. “Exactly.”

*          *          *          *

It was a vast relief to shut the door after Yoda and Mace’s departure. Obi-Wan rested his forehead against the cold metal for a few seconds afterwards. All this, and still he’d had no chance to speak to anyone else about that damned veil.

Qui-Gon left as well, after giving him a kiss and saying that he was going to put a clean set of sheets on the bed in his unused second bedroom. It was another moment that gave Obi-Wan a weird, crawly sensation that wasn’t quite discomfort. Seeing Anakin re-ensconced in that particular room was going to do a number on his perception of time and place.

Obi-Wan checked the chrono on his terminal and noted that they had less than an hour to clear out. One of the crèche Masters and several children were due to occupy his and Anakin’s quarters while they were gone.

“Let’s go pack,” he told Anakin, after noticing a yawn that his Padawan had tried to hide. Anakin had worked as hard as anyone else, first by shuffling younglings from Healers and rescuers down to the garden, then by exercising his telekinetic skills in sifting debris. If Anakin didn’t drop into bed like a bag of bricks, Obi-Wan would be very surprised.

Anakin finished packing before he did. Obi-Wan found himself staring at nothing several times during the process. He wasn’t sure if the Force was trying to get his attention, or if he was just tired, but whatever the matter, it certainly slowed down his progress.

“Don’t you think it’s kind of weird, everyone doubling up like this?” Anakin asked, leaning against Obi-Wan’s bedroom doorway.

Obi-Wan scrubbed at his face to try and give himself some modicum of awareness. He was packing for an overnight and a mission, dammit. He could do this in his sleep if he needed to. “Why’s that?”

“Well, we have so many empty rooms. It’s not like we don’t have places to put people,” Anakin said. “There’s all the guest quarters, the diplomatic suites, the empty Master-Padawan sets…”

“Ah.” Obi-Wan turned and gave him a weary smile. “If your home had just been obliterated by someone you trusted, which would be more comforting: to stay in an empty room with no imprints of the living, or to stay in someone else’s home, knowing that you were welcome?”

Anakin blinked a few times. “Huh. You’re right. Definitely that last option. I don’t even live in the
crèche anymore, and even I wouldn’t wanna go sleep in a room that no one had lived in for ten years.”

Obi-Wan was finally sealing his bag when someone pressed the door chime. The sound of it resonated in his ears and made Obi-Wan want to bury his head in his hands.

“I’ll get it,” Anakin said, grinning. Obi-Wan followed him out, snagging both of their packs while Anakin answered the door.

“Master Micah,” Anakin greeted in surprise as he waved the Combat Master inside. Obi-Wan felt much the same, especially when he caught sight of the Wookiee Initiate peering out from behind Micah. Raallandirr. Her black-and-white brindled fur was shorn off in patches, highlighted by the bandages covering her bare skin.

“What do you need, Micah?” Obi-Wan asked, though he suspected he already knew the answer. Despite her injuries and the events of the day, Rillian was alert, peering around the room with inquisitive green eyes.

“Obi-Wan, Anakin, you both know Rillian from the A.L.T. class.” Micah was leaning wearily against his staff, as if sheer stubbornness was the only thing keeping him upright. “We’ve finished all of our sorting, and Rillian is the only one left without a place to stay. She was going to room with Saini, but Ch’tall’ah snagged her first.”

Anakin’s expression brightened. “I told you she’d be Chosen today!”

Micah smiled. “I think a lot of us figured that out, kiddo. Anyway, I didn’t think you would mind bunking with another friend.”

Anakin grinned back. “I don’t mind if my Masters don’t mind. We’re staying with Master Qui-Gon tonight, anyway, so unless he has some weird allergy to Wookiee hair…”

Obi-Wan winced at the sound of his own cracked laugh. Micah was probably not the only person in the room ready to fall down. “No, he doesn’t. It’ll be fine, Micah, though she may need to be sorted again after tomorrow. The three of us will be returning to Naboo.”

Micah shrugged. “We can decide on that when it becomes necessary,” he said, catching his long braid of black hair and brushing white dust from it. “For tonight—Obi-Wan, I’m so damned tired. If it’s all right with you, I’m going to go sit on my couch and fall into a coma.”

“It’s fine, Micah. You have what you need?” Obi-Wan asked the Wookiee. Rillian held up a small bag in response, giving him a wide-eyed stare more reminiscent of the first day of A.L.T. He smiled at her in reassurance. “You’re not an inconvenience, Rillian. We’ll enjoy the company.”

Rillian finally smiled, appearing more comfortable with the idea of being foisted upon them. [Okay,] she said in a quiet howl, as they walked out into the hall. [Thank you.]

“Great! Good night, folks.” Micah turned and headed off down the hall, limping in obvious discomfort. Obi-Wan regarded his retreating figure with a fond sigh. Tahl was going to verbally flay him for letting his leg and hip seize up that badly.

“Well, let’s go. Maybe we’ll be asleep by midnight,” Obi-Wan said with forced cheer. The journey to Qui-Gon’s quarters seemed daunting, and they didn’t even live that far from each other.

“Come on, Rillian.” Anakin smiled at the Wookiee. The two were much of a height, though that wouldn’t last—adolescent Wookiees grew quickly. “You’ll like Master Qui-Gon. He tells great stories if you ask nicely.”
Rillian’s eyes widened at Anakin’s comment. [After today, all I require is a pillow, Skywalker.]

“Would you really need one?” Anakin countered as they walked. Obi-Wan let the children lead the way, while he brought up the rear.

Rillian tilted her head, as if considering it. [I don’t know if I sleep well in strange places. The only other place I’ve been is Kashyyyk, and that’s not really the same thing.]

“Guess we’re gonna find out,” Anakin said. “You take the bed. I am totally okay with sleeping on the floor.”

Rillian turned shy when they approached their destination, lagging back until she was at the rear of their small group. Obi-Wan frowned but said nothing; he thought he remembered Rillian hanging back when the other Initiates tried to flock around his partner, but he wasn’t certain.

Qui-Gon greeted Obi-Wan in the doorway with a kiss. They stood there for a moment, breath mingling, until Anakin started to snicker at them.

“No comment, you,” Obi-Wan said, after Qui-Gon stepped back one pace, a suspect glimmer of amusement in his eyes.

“Of course not, Master,” Anakin agreed with an unrepentant grin. “But he’s blocking the door.”

“That I am,” Qui-Gon admitted, and then caught sight of Rillian. “And who is this?”

Anakin turned serious to make the introductions. “Master Qui-Gon Jinn, this is Initiate Raallandirr, called Rillian. Rillian, this is Master Qui-Gon.”

Rillian kept her eyes glued to the floor as she bowed in greeting. [It’s a pleasure to meet you, Master Jinn. Padawan Skywalker speaks of you often.]

Qui-Gon exchanged glances with Obi-Wan before smiling at the Wookiee. “No one is allowed to stand on formality in my home, Raallandirr. You may address me the same way that Anakin does.”

[Then I’m Rillian, and I will call you Master Qui-Gon,] Rillian said, and looked up to meet Qui-Gon’s eyes.

To Obi-Wan, it was as if there was a brief moment of utter stillness before the Force stuttered in a way that made him want to jump out of his own damned skin. Obi-Wan stumbled back, catching himself on the doorframe. Qui-Gon and Rillian were staring at each other, both open-mouthed, as the Force wound its way around and through them, binding them together. Every hair on Obi-Wan’s body tried to stand at attention as he witnessed the formation of one of the few Force-created training bonds he’d ever seen.

“Holy crap!” Anakin yelped. His hands were brushing madly at both of his arms, as if trying to rid himself of the influx of energy. “What the hell was that?”

Qui-Gon was shaking his head, looking as if someone had just kicked him in the back of the skull. “Oh, my,” he murmured. He dropped to one knee before the stunned Wookiee girl. “Initiate Raallandirr, it would be my honor if you would become my Padawan.”

Rillian was blinking repeatedly, still dazed by what had happened. [I think I would be an idiot to refuse,] she rumbled. [Master Jinn, I would be honored to accept.] Then, dignity abandoned, she threw herself into Qui-Gon’s arms.
Anakin stared at the tableau with a baffled expression before he looked up at Obi-Wan. “I think… I think this means that when we really do move in with Master Qui-Gon, we’re going to need a bunk bed.”

Obi-Wan could only manage a slight, jerking nod in reply. This—this was definitely unexpected.

Qui-Gon led Rillian into his quarters. The difference between escorting a guest and introducing a new student to her home was clear in the way he moved, in the quiet explanations he gave while Rillian stared around in abject wonder. Anakin hung back to listen without trying to make it seem like he was eavesdropping.

Qui-Gon took the time to send Obi-Wan a private query. *You didn’t say a word about this.*

Obi-Wan opened his mouth and then shut it again, nonplussed. *I didn’t—I mean, you weren’t*—and in the midst of struggling to form an answer, he let out a massive yawn.

“You need to sleep,” Qui-Gon pointed out, unnecessarily.

“So do you,” Obi-Wan countered, trying to ignore his stinging, burning eyes.

Qui-Gon shook his head. “Oh, that isn’t likely to happen, at least not for an hour or two,” he said, which made Obi-Wan realize he was mistaking part of Rillian’s awe. The Wookiee was hyped from the sudden rush of bonding, and didn’t seem to know what to do with the extra energy.

Obi-Wan decided he had no idea what to make of any of this, but he could remember to be civil. “You win. Good night, Rillian, and you have my congratulations.”

Rillian smiled. [Thanks, Master Obi-Wan.]

“Anakin?”

Anakin shrugged. “Going to go make a nest on the floor, but I dunno about me sleeping right away, either. You should, though. You look like you’re gonna fall over.”

Obi-Wan narrowed his eyes. “Good night, bratling.”

*I’ll be in soon,* Qui-Gon promised.

Obi-Wan looked at him and Rillian, and there was such a sense of rightness to the pairing that he could only smile. *Take your time.*

*          *          *          *

He awoke some unknown time later when Qui-Gon climbed into bed. “Mm?”

“Go back to sleep,” Qui-Gon said, sounding amused.

“Too late,” Obi-Wan countered, and sighed in bliss when his partner’s warm body pressed up against his bare back. “How’s Rillian?”

Qui-Gon kissed Obi-Wan’s shoulder before wrapping his arm around Obi-Wan’s waist. “She’s all right. I was checking on her wounds, and they’re not that bad. I’m just not sure if I want her to go with us tomorrow.”
Obi-Wan smiled. He didn’t think Rillian would take no for an answer. He certainly hadn’t at that age. “I meant: How is she?”

“Sorry.” Qui-Gon gave a soft laugh. “Train of thought, love. Rillian is—she’s…Force! I haven’t felt anything like that since I met you.”

“Oh?” Obi-Wan opened his eyes, intrigued. This bedroom was never fully dark, which helped make him more alert than he might otherwise have managed. “Qui-Gon, I don’t remember the Force trying to have an orgasm on our heads when we first met.”

That surprised another laugh out of Qui-Gon. “Well, we’d met several times over several days, so there was no great, impending rush—the Force had already done its work. I was just obstinate, and foolish, and almost destroyed the entire thing.”

There was a hint of old guilt at that. Obi-Wan pressed himself back against Qui-Gon’s chest. “I think things worked out very well.”

“Really?” Qui-Gon’s voice was a rumbling purr.

Obi-Wan took a moment to review his physical condition. That was an unfortunate no, despite the fact that certain bits of his anatomy were very interested. “If I wasn’t feeling completely flattened after today, I would be proving it to you right at this moment.”

“At least it’s a figurative feeling, and not literal truth.”

The idea didn’t faze him much. Obi-Wan was used to close calls in his life as a Jedi, even though they’d been spaced out nicely over the past few years. He knew Qui-Gon preferred otherwise, though, and decided to shift the subject back to where it had started.

“When I taught the A.L.T. class, I did wonder why no one had taken Rillian as a Padawan,” Obi-Wan said. “She’s a great student, thinks things through, considers consequences, and tends to rely on the Force on an instinctive level more than most of our children at that age.”

“Like someone else I could mention,” Qui-Gon murmured. “She’s twelve, Obi-Wan. You and I both know that at that age, the window is very short. I could have walked out of this Temple tomorrow and never encountered her again.”

Obi-Wan tried not to feel unsettled by that statement, because once upon a time, things had gone exactly that way. “She wants to learn Jar’Kai. You’re going to have your hands full.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Qui-Gon said, but he sounded sad. “She would have been orphaned right at the start, had we met in your vision. I’m glad that didn’t happen, but I do wonder what became of her.”

Obi-Wan drifted along in the wake of his memories, trying to track down the black-and-silver brindled Wookiee girl. “I don’t recall ever seeing her. I suppose that without you there to train her, she was sent to one of the Corps.”

“That would have been a waste of natural talent. She’s even-tempered, capable, adaptable—she’s going to be a joy to teach.” Qui-Gon sounded more enthused at that. Then he pressed his face against Obi-Wan’s hair and sighed. “I’m not going to be able to convince her to stay behind tomorrow, am I?”

Obi-Wan grinned. “Nope. Mace is going to have the same problem with Tuuvino. You’re both doomed.” He hadn’t even bothered to contemplate asking Anakin to remain on Coruscant
tomorrow, despite his concerns about the Sith. Anakin would scowl, march straight to the Queen’s transport, and dare Obi-Wan to throw him off.

*And then there’s the droid control ship,* Obi-Wan thought. He felt a hell of a lot more confident about sending a Padawan out in a fighter; he had been far less sanguine about discovering that Anakin had blown up the fucking control ship. By himself.

Obi-Wan had learned that lesson immediately: When it came to Anakin Skywalker and issuing instructions, one should be far more specific:

“It’s still a shock,” Qui-Gon said, just as Obi-Wan started drifting off again. “I never expected to take another Padawan after you were Knighted.”

“Qui-Gon, your first Padawan is a part-time recluse who talks to crystals more than he remembers to speak to people. You watched your second Padawan Fall during his Trials. Then you got saddled with an absolute crazy person. I think you’re due for a normal apprenticeship,” Obi-Wan said dryly.

“I’d ask if the crazy came before or after Taro Tre, but I know the answer to that,” Qui-Gon replied.

Obi-Wan yawned and resolutely settled his head more comfortably against his pillow. “You have no room to talk.”

“No. Not really,” Qui-Gon agreed, but he seemed to be taking the hint about Obi-Wan’s desire to go back to sleep. “I love you anyway.”

The words warmed him to his very core. “I love you, too.”

Obi-Wan slipped out of bed before dawn had even touched the sky. He felt a hell of a lot better physically, but mentally, he was probably due for an extended bit of meditation.

He paused in the middle of dressing. Or drinking, he thought. Drinking sounded equally appealing.

“You wake up far too damned early,” Qui-Gon grumbled, when Obi-Wan gave him a gentle nudge.

“I didn’t want to disturb you,” Obi-Wan said, and took the time to run his hand through Qui-Gon’s long hair, eliciting a purr. He’d not bothered to bind it for sleep, and Obi-Wan had to admit, he liked the effect. “But I didn’t want you to wake and panic because I wasn’t here, either.”

Qui-Gon cracked his eyes open just enough to look up at him. “Quiet, dignified panicking.”


He checked on the Padawans and found them both still oblivious to the world. Rillian had shoved all of the bed’s covers off and onto the floor, burying Anakin, who was invisible except for the top of his head.
Obi-Wan stared at the set of Padawans, and felt a deep pang. *I hope we’re not about to orphan either of you.*

It was still a jolt to smell dust and smoke when he stepped out into the hall, even with all of the air filtration systems running at full capacity. He should have been more distraught by the crèche bombing, but most of his distress centered around the dead Jedi Master currently preserved in stasis.

The Initiates were bruised and unhappy, but they had lived through yesterday’s chaos. There had been a day in his past when they had not. He could still see them, could still see the security tapes just as clearly as—

Obi-Wan forced the images away, taking a deep, cleansing breath. *It hasn’t happened, and it’s not going to.*

He had to go to the opposite tower to find who he was looking for. By then, the sky was starting to lighten. He crossed his fingers, hoped he wasn’t going to give someone an unexpectedly early start to the day, and rang the door chime.

Even Piell opened the door after only a minute, glaring up at him through his one good eye. “By all the oaths I hold dear, you had better have brought a peace offering to make up for knocking on my door before dawn cracks the sky.”

In answer, Obi-Wan held out his hands, revealing a sachet that held at least three mugs’ worth of tea. “It’s a green,” he said, when Piell gave it a suspicious glower. “A really damned good one.”

“Acceptable,” the Lannik grunted, and waved him inside.

Piell completed the other part of the ritual he adhered to, sitting down to make the tea with patient, practiced movements. “Now, what do you want?” he asked Obi-Wan, after handing him tea in a dainty, handleless cup. “And don’t say ‘Nothing.’ I’ve watched you verbally dance circles around Mace for four damned years, and I know that look in your eyes.”

Obi-Wan sipped hot tea first, as was customary to avoid being seen as rude in the Master’s eyes. “The construct that Master Yarael and I discussed yesterday. I need to show it to someone before we leave for Naboo.”

“Huh.” Piell drank and then held his cup in both hands. “Why me?”

“You know how to keep secrets,” Obi-Wan said.

“So does the Head of the Order,” Piell countered. “You want a reticent bastard aside from me, he’s a good choice.”

“Mace has already declared his intention to go with us. Anyone who is going to Naboo…well.” Obi-Wan grimaced. “Just in case none of us come back, it should be someone here.”

“What about Yoda?”

Obi-Wan sighed. “Yoda would quietly slip away and go Sith-hunting.”

“And you think I wouldn’t?” Piell asked.

“No, I don’t. Not without a lot of careful planning and consideration,” Obi-Wan replied, and earned a smile from the other Master. “You think long-term, and in this case, that’s very important.”
“Fair.” The Lannik drank his tea, sitting in thoughtful silence for a few minutes. “We are going to be doing something about the Sith, yes?”

“Oh, absolutely,” Obi-Wan said. “I’m hoping it might be possible to unseat the Sith Lord at the conclusion of the Naboo mission. I have the beginnings of a plan, but it depends on how things play out.”

“Relying on events to go the same way, are you?” Piell gave him a curious stare.

Obi-Wan blew out an annoyed breath and finished his tea. “Everything except the crèche is happening the same damned way. I’m surrounded by people who sound like they’re quoting direct from my memories, Master Piell. At this point, it’s not exactly an unsafe assumption to make.”

Piell nodded. “Also fair. That quoting bit sounds like it’s a complete pain in the ass.” He drained his cup and turned it over, setting it upside down on the tray. Obi-Wan copied him; he’d forgotten that step.

“All right, then. Tell me about this construct of yours.”

* * * * *

Obi-Wan returned to his quarters just as eighth hour was signaled by his desk chrono. “Now I’m awake enough to ask what you were up to,” Qui-Gon said. He was contemplating rolling both Padawans out of bed, but yesterday’s events were tilting the balance towards letting them sleep.

Obi-Wan hung up his robe and took his boots off before coming to join him in the kitchen. “Just making contingency plans. Good morning.”

“Morning.” Qui-Gon held out a mug of red tea, still hot enough to create steam.

Obi-Wan smiled. “Thanks,” he said, but put it aside to walk right into Qui-Gon’s arms.

Qui-Gon held him, a touch awed by the easy affection he was being given. It had literally been just days ago that they were still dancing around each other. “Anything I should know?”

“Just making sure someone knew about the Veil who is not also going to Naboo.” Obi-Wan drew back and picked up the tea again. “I needed one less thing to worry about.”

[I’m going with you,] Rillian declared, after both Padawans finally awoke for the day. She was alert and bright-eyed. Anakin, meanwhile, looked as if he’d dragged himself across half the Temple.

“Are you, now?” Qui-Gon asked, noncommittal. Anakin stopped his trudging march to the shower to perform shameless eavesdropping.

[A Padawan’s place is at their Master’s side,] Rillian said. Her tone was of complete confidence, but he could sense the beginnings of trepidation.

Qui-Gon felt his heart swell with affection. He loved her already, and if that wasn’t a sign that it was a good pairing, he damned well couldn’t think of a better one.
“What in the all the worlds have you done to your hair, Padawan?” he asked instead of responding to her. At some point after seeing her off to bed, Rillian had expanded the shaved patches the Healers had left behind. The result was carefully crafted patterns that crossed her lower legs and wrapped her arms.

Rillian smiled, turning in a circle so that Qui-Gon could see the full extent of the patterns she’d made. [I didn’t think I should go on my first mission looking like I had mange.] She prodded at one of the bandages on her forearm. [These will be done healing by the time we arrive on Naboo, so all my bald spots will look intentional.] She tilted her head, giving him a softer howl. [You’re avoiding answering me.]

Qui-Gon studied the Wookiee intently enough that she ducked her head to stare at the floor. She’d pulled her mane back into a tail, highlighting the Padawan braid that Qui-Gon had helped her to make last night. It was level with her chin, capped by two emerald green beads that he’d gone through three boxes to find. She hadn’t bothered with even a basic robe, but wore a tan bandolier with her lightsaber tucked into a specially designed pocket that hid most of the hilt from view. Except for supplies, she was fully prepared to leave.

*Doomed, Obi-Wan sent.*

Qui-Gon resisted the urge to smile. *I’m aware.*

“Rillian.” He waited for the Wookiee to lift her head to look at him. “If I allow this, you must obey me at all times. You will find that I often allow a great deal of leeway in terms of what I instruct you to do, but this mission will not be one of those times. If I’m not available, you are to obey Obi-Wan’s instructions; if you don’t have that luxury, look to Anakin, as he’s been with us for months and knows what to expect.

“And,” Qui-Gon continued, before Rillian’s excitement could explode into expression, “if I tell you to stay on the ship when we land on Naboo, what will you say?”

Rillian’s eyes narrowed with a hint of adolescent defiance. [I will say, ‘Yes, Master,’ though I won’t like it. I will do as you say.]

“Honesty is a very good quality to have, Raallandirr,” he said, and smiled. “You may go with us.”

Rillian smiled back, radiating happiness. [Thank you, Master.] She bowed, as was proper, and then abandoned dignity to hug him.

*Utterly doomed, Obi-Wan repeated.*

Qui-Gon nodded in agreement. He consoled himself with the fact that Mace was probably having a similar conversation, with the same results.

* * * *

It didn’t surprise Obi-Wan much when the Senate once again refused to act on the Naboo blockade. Valorum barely managed to get it on the morning’s agenda in the first place, and it was abandoned in short order.

“Off we go,” Qui-Gon said in a soft voice, once the broadcast had concluded.
Obi-Wan made a face and didn’t respond. It would have been nice if the Senate had actually done its fucking job for once.

When they arrived in the Temple hangar where the Queen’s ship was to land to meet them, it was to see a larger transport than he’d expected, as well as a much larger group of Jedi. Mace was there, of course, with Tuuvino standing a pace behind him to his left—the proper place for a Padawan to stand with his Master in a formal setting. The small Zabrak boy looked ecstatic, despite the walking cast that encased his left leg from the knee down. He’d been injured badly when the crèche floor had shifted and split, Obi-Wan knew, and it looked as if the Healers were taking no chances.

With Mace and Tuuvino were Quinlan Vos and Aayla Secura, who was broadcasting excited nervousness. Yoda was close to her; Obi-Wan suspected he was trying to be reassuring without overwhelming the Twi’lek Padawan.

Jale Terza was present, as was Abella. Both were dressed for travel and bearing their own packs; Abella was chiding the droids who were packing supplies into the Temple ship.

Micah had joined them, as well, though he was still leaning on his staff almost as wearily as he had been the night before. Obi-Wan thought Micah had just come to see them off when he spied two packs on the ground next to him, and saw that Garen was standing to Micah’s left. He was wearing his favored leather coat, but he’d actually put on more traditional Jedi tunics underneath. He kept giving his Master shifty looks that said he was going to make Micah sit down soon, or he was going to physically sit upon him to make him do so.

Adi Gallia was speaking to Micah, her arms crossed over the formal tunics she wore if she was leaving the Temple to act in any sort of diplomatic capacity. Siri Tachi stood next to her, a sardonic smile gracing her face. Siri’s presence was a welcome surprise; Obi-Wan had spoken to her often, but he hadn’t seen her in person in almost three years.

“Wizard,” Anakin breathed. “There’s so many of us.”

Mace noticed their arrival and waved in greeting. Then he caught sight of Rillian, who was pacing a few steps behind Qui-Gon and trying to remain unobtrusive. Mace raised a brow in query; Qui-Gon nodded in response, which made Mace grin.

“It looks as if I’m not the only one who was adopted, people.”

Everyone turned to gaze at Rillian, who ducked her head, unused to being the focus of so many Masters at once. [Hi.]

Adi stepped forward and offered Rillian her hand. “Congratulations, Padawan,” she said. “Welcome to the fold.”

[Thank you, Master Gallia.] Rillian said, accepting the Corellian Master’s greeting. [It’s good to be here.]

“This is a much larger group than I’d expected to find,” Qui-Gon said, after glancing at Obi-Wan.

Micah pulled himself upright and shrugged, offering a lopsided grin. “We volunteered. You lot and Mace are the only ones officially assigned to the Naboo crusade. The rest of us…just sort of showed up.”

“The Naboo crusade, huh?” Siri laughed. “I like it. Maybe someone will even make up a song about it.”
“There’s Queen Amidala’s ship,” Garen said, pointing at a growing silver shape approaching the Temple hangar. “Man, she’s prompt.”

Mace clapped his hands sharply, regaining everyone’s attention. “I have one thing to say before we go. We’re leaving the Temple during a crisis within our ranks, and that is something that many people may criticize us for. Why should we leave, when we should be taking care of our own?” Mace shook his head, staring hard at each of them in turn. “You are going to tell them that we are taking care of our own. The Jedi are not separate from the rest of the galaxy. Those are our people out there, and right now, they need our help.”

Adi grinned at Mace, her blue eyes shining with anticipation. “Then what in the hell are we waiting for?”

The return to Naboo had been weighing heavily on Obi-Wan’s mind, but he felt hope stir within him at their words. He thought it possible that Lofla Jil-Hyra’s actions might prove themselves to be the greatest favor she could ever bestow.

*          *          *          *

It was a relief to Obi-Wan’s senses to be approaching Naboo in a different vessel entirely. Mace had procured a ship large enough for them all to inhabit without being in cramped quarters. It enabled them to take on a few of the Queen’s retinue of pilots, as well, easing the burden on her ship’s resources.

Adi took the berth that Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan, and Anakin had been sharing on the Queen’s ship. The swap would give Adi time to discuss politics and potential diplomatic consequences with Queen Amidala.

On the evening of the first day of the journey, the two ships dropped out of hyperspace. Padmé contacted them sans makeup to speak to them over holo-transmission. With Adi, Sabé, Panaka, and Eirtaé standing behind her, the Queen told the Jedi of her desire to meet with the Gungans and possibly enlist the help of their army.

“An army,” Qui-Gon repeated. From the look on his face, Obi-Wan could tell that his partner was thinking less of the Otah Gunga guards and far more of Jar Jar’s ability to fall on his face by tripping over dust specks.

“It’s a very good idea,” Obi-Wan said, which earned him a smile from Amidala. The Gungan army preferred underwater battles, but he’d seen the aftermath of their campaigns on land.

_Do I tell them?_ he wondered, after the comms were closed down and the ships jumped back into hyperspace. It was definitely a temptation to give his friends reassurance that the Queen’s idea had merit.

Ultimately, Obi-Wan decided not to. Instead, he sat with the others around a holographic map of Theed that Padmé had provided. Measures were discussed for helping the Queen dispatch the Trade Federation, plans that could be tailored to fit within the Queen’s own undertaking if it were necessary. While he was against feeding them specifics about what Padmé had in mind, Obi-Wan was _not_ against programming in fairly accurate counts of the Trade Federation’s droid army and its associated patrols.

Micah was resting his chin on his folded hands as he stared at the map. “That is a hell of a lot of
droids.”

“They’re meant to keep the entirety of the populace subdued,” Qui-Gon said.

“No kidding.” Quinlan’s eyes were flickering around the map, taking in details. “This an accurate count?” he asked Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan massaged his forehead with two fingers, trying to dispatch a headache that wanted to settle in and stay. No matter how different the circumstances were, it was still bothering him that this damned battle was going to happen all over again. “It’s approximate.”

“What do we do if the Gungans won’t help us?” It shouldn’t have surprised him that it was Aayla who voiced the question. General Secura and Commander Bly had been famous for their consummate victories.

“Well, the goal would still be the same,” Mace said, crossing his arms. “Find the Trade Federation’s leadership—”

“Hope they’re not smart enough to be hiding in orbit behind impenetrable shields,” Garen tossed in.

“—and make them call off the invasion.” Mace eyed Garen. “If you’ve just jinxed us, I’m taking it out of your hide.”

“We’d need to reduce the number of droids we would have to contend with,” Micah said.

“I’m certain that at least nine of us are capable of taking out entire patrols individually.” Obi-Wan leaned forward, using the controls to light up all of Theed’s main thoroughfares. “Appear, dismantle a patrol, melt back into the shadows.” He glanced at Micah. “I am not wrong in assuming you brought fireworks.”

Micah grinned. “Sure, we’ll call them that.”

“All right. Then we can vary the times and the types of attack. The Neimoidians would react by sending more patrols out to counter the assault, and they never vary the patterns of exodus. It would be easy to coordinate counters to that, both via confrontation and well-placed explosives. It wouldn’t take long to decimate their numbers, and the faster it happens, the less time they have to realize that they need to change how they’re responding.”


Obi-Wan rolled his eyes. “He never left. He just retired.”

He could see that the others were confused by the exchange, but no one asked questions. That was nice; he was in no mood to explain, regardless. It bothered him enough that Anakin remembered his rank.

“What about the blockade?” Qui-Gon asked. “That’s the first hurdle, and it was difficult enough to get through the first time.”

Obi-Wan smiled and shook his head. “That’s the ludicrously easy part. They want the Queen back on Naboo. She can’t sign that blasted treaty if they don’t let her land.”

“So it’s just us that might have the problem,” Quinlan said.

“Nah, not really. We just stick with her ship like glue on the way through the blockade, close
enough that they can’t chance shooting at us without hitting them,” Garen pointed out. “And if our pilot can’t pull that off, I can.”

Qui-Gon elected to spend much of the next day working with Rillian, exploring and strengthening the new bond. Obi-Wan spent an hour’s time with Anakin in the cargo hold, having a playful sparring match among the secured supplies. Maybe he could have given his Padawan a more serious lesson, but gods, he wasn’t in the mood for that, either. Things were going to feel dire enough on Naboo.

Mace and Tuuvino claimed the cargo hold from them, though Obi-Wan suspected Tuuvino was in for a far less vigorous lesson. He and Anakin separated to clean up, after which Anakin shoved his nose into a datapad loaded with specs on the newest astromechs in production.

“Hey, you done being serious?” Quinlan asked him, when Obi-Wan realized he was completely at a loss for what to do with the rest of the ship’s day cycle.

“Pretty much,” Obi-Wan said. “What is it?”

Quinlan grinned and held up a data chip. “Piracy,” he said, which was how Obi-Wan spent the afternoon in the ship’s lounge in Garen, Abella, Quinlan, Aayla, and Siri’s company. Obi-Wan and Siri sat on the floor together when the others claimed the seating. Quinlan had pulled a music sampling from Outer Rim stations that operated outside Republic bounds, and were thus were exempt from some of the Core World’s current tastes in sound…not to mention some of its censorship.

“Good gods, that’s awful,” Abella declared, after about fifteen seconds of the first song. Obi-Wan agreed—he didn’t think any of them preferred the sound of what sounded like frogs being tortured. “Please skip to the next one.”

Quinlan shrugged and did as instructed. The lyrics started immediately, and the moment the content became clear, Aayla blushed such a deep violet it was a wonder she didn’t pass out.

“Master!” she gasped, appalled.

Garen snorted out a surprised laugh. “Shit, they aren’t pulling any punches, are they?”

Abella buried her face in her hands. “Vos!”

“That is some very explicit talk about sexy times,” Siri commented between giggles. Obi-Wan nodded, biting his lip to keep from laughing.

“Tholme’s going to kill me,” Quinlan muttered. “Sorry, Padawan, pretty sure I just broke what was left of your innocence.”

Aayla was still blushing. “No, Master. You killed it, and it is dead.”

With that momentous exception, things carried on as normal, music interspersed by talking. Obi-Wan hadn’t had the chance to sit down with friends in a long time, aside from the recent and ill-fated morning in the commissary. It took his mind off of Sith, as well as memories of battles past, in a way that he hadn’t known he’d needed until that moment.

He didn’t realize he’d fallen asleep until Siri’s elbow jammed itself into his rib cage. Obi-Wan jerked upright, hit his head on the wall, and tried not to wheeze from the pain. She fought dirty, and that was one hell of a nerve cluster.

“Tachi!”
“You were snoring!” Siri retorted, unrepentant.

Obi-Wan glared at her. “Not anymore, I’m not!”

She smirked at him. “That was kind of the point, Kenobi.”

Qui-Gon came to find him before dinner hour. “Can I borrow you for a moment?”

“You can borrow me for a lot of moments as long as it gets me away from this pointy-elbowed fiend,” Obi-Wan said.

“If you really minded, you’d have moved two hours ago,” Siri replied, flashing her best serene smile.

“You’re a complete wench,” Obi-Wan retorted, getting to his feet. “What is it, Qui-Gon?”

“Rillian,” Qui-Gon said, looking concerned. “She’s not a natural sender at all, and I’d very much like it if you can both hear each other before we touch down tomorrow.”

“Probably a good idea.” Obi-Wan nudged Anakin via their training bond and discovered that his Padawan was already aware of the situation, and was waiting with Rillian.

Qui-Gon nodded. “I am not above constructive paranoia.” Obi-Wan thought nothing of sliding their hands together, fingers interlacing, as they left the room.

At least not until he heard Quinlan shout, “Gods damn it! I’m out a hundred credits!”

“What a strange outburst,” Qui-Gon said innocently, which made Obi-Wan snicker.

Rillian was nervous, at first. It was a reminder that, unshielded, he and Anakin were both solar flares shadowing other, fainter stars. It wasn’t a nice feeling.

It’s fine, Qui-Gon sent, amused. Bear in mind that most of us are used to it.

So you’re saying I wasn’t paying enough attention, Obi-Wan replied sourly.

Not without good reason, Qui-Gon said. Rillian?

It’s okay, the Wookiee added, after a moment of what looked like intense concentration. It’s… you’re both very warm. I like it.

It is kinda neat, Anakin said, thoughtful. I mean—this whole four-way Master-training bond setup. I’ve never had anything like this before.

Master Obi-Wan, I know what Master Qui-Gon has told me in regards to being his Padawan, but what should I do for you? Rillian asked.

Obi-Wan smiled. Don’t get killed, try not to stab me with your lightsaber, and try to keep your Master from doing anything foolish.

Hey! Qui-Gon retorted in complete indignance.

There is no try, Rillian blurted at the same moment.

What’s the big deal? Anakin grinned. That’s pretty much what you told me about Obi-Wan.
Qui-Gon sighed. *Yes, but I do believe I said ‘ill-advised,’ not foolish.*

Anakin shrugged. *Same thing.*

Obi-Wan met Qui-Gon’s eyes. *You realize this means that they are never going to let us do anything, ever.*

*That did backfire on us pretty quickly, didn’t it?* Qui-Gon looked chagrined. “We’ll have to re-word that particular rule.”

Dinner was held around what was ostensibly supposed to be a conference table, but packing all the Jedi and crew aboard into the galley was a laughable option. Obi-Wan didn’t eat much—he never had much of an appetite if there was a campaign on the horizon—but he could enjoy the company, and the tea.

Obi-Wan’s gaze drifted over to Qui-Gon, who was listening to Micah explain a joke with the air of the long-suffering. If he really took a moment to consider it, there were astounding differences between his partner and the man who had been his Master. He didn’t often do so; he had enough damn trouble focusing on the here and now.

He’d sometimes wondered, in years past, if his own doubts and fears had colored his memories of the final year of his apprenticeship. His Master had seemed colder, and far more aloof to his fellow Jedi. In private, Qui-Gon had still been kind, warm company for his apprentice, but in public? That had been another story entirely, one that to this day Obi-Wan still didn’t understand. It was as if, at that point in his life, his Master had decided that public displays of affection were reserved for only those outside of the Jedi Order. He’d tolerated the Council, but to Obi-Wan’s intense frustration, Qui-Gon’s roguish streak had been rising like floodwater.

Not that the frustration had kept him from loving the imbecile. If anything, that illicit affection had tempered Obi-Wan’s reactions to Qui-Gon’s acrimoniousness, and kept them from driving each other crazy—at least until Naboo.

Obi-Wan caught the balled-up projectile before it could bounce off his head. “What do you want?” he asked Garen, who had an unrepentant grin on his face.

“You looked like you were drifting somewhere out in Wild Space,” Micah said, “and I had a question.”

“Go for it.”

“General of what?” Micah asked, and just like that, they had everyone’s undivided attention.

Obi-Wan had no idea if he wanted to answer that question or not. He glanced at Anakin, who shrugged. “We’re supposed to be talking about everything we can remember when Naboo is done, right?”

“I suppose,” Obi-Wan said, though the idea filled him with dismay. He hadn’t forgotten that, exactly, but he wasn’t looking forward to it at all.

*Fuck it,* he thought. Qui-Gon had already recognized the Trade Federation’s army-building ruse for what it was, and Anakin was right. A few days were not going to make much difference at this point. At least everyone at this table was passingly familiar with his very odd history. Even the new Padawans had received a basic summary due to their involvement with the mission.

*High General of the Grand Army of the Republic, under the auspices of the Jedi Order.*
There was a long moment of tense, uncomfortable silence. “Of the what?” Terza bit out, looking incensed.

Siri’s response was much calmer. “Why the hell would the Republic need a military?”

“Well, if two massive but separate political entities are going to decide that they need to try and reduce the other to so much dust, a military sort of becomes a necessity,” Obi-Wan said in a dry voice. “Why else would the Republic need an army? Republic sovereignty needed to be restored in the face of massive rebellion.”

Qui-Gon was well familiar with the times when his intense sarcasm sounded anything but. “You’re quoting.”

Obi-Wan inclined his head. “Yes.”

[But we don’t have two different governments in our galaxy] Rillian howled in complete and utter confusion. Obi-Wan felt badly for her; the barebones summary on the speeder wreck that was his life was not the greatest preparation for being tossed off the deep end.

“No, we don’t,” Obi-Wan said. “Not yet.”

“Wait, can we back up and go to the military part?” Micah asked, furious. “Judicial doesn’t have the numbers to support what you’re talking about.”

“That’s because Judicial was only a minor subset of the actual army.” Obi-Wan sighed and massaged his temple with his fingertips. There was the damned headache again.

“And I don’t think you mean droids, because that’s who you would have been fighting against.” Qui-Gon was frowning. “Which leaves—”

“Clones, they must have been,” Yoda spoke, surprising the younger Padawans. Yoda looked grave, his ears lowered almost to his thin shoulders.

“Good guess,” Obi-Wan said. It was one hell of an intuitive leap, but Yoda often excelled at such things. The ancient Master had disliked dwelling on it, but the skill had made him a very good military leader, as well.

“Uh—cloning full body sentient is illegal in Republic space?” Aayla pointed out hesitantly. “But then, I guess you just…go outside the Republic.”

“Please tell me how an entire cloned army wound up under the Order’s jurisdiction.” Mace crossed his arms, looking thunderous.

“Sometime in the next six months, one of our Masters apparently has a series of disturbing visions regarding events about a decade in the future,” Obi-Wan said, leaning back in his chair. “He panics, finds the nearest non-Republic point to order a massive army under the Order’s banner, and then dies before he has the chance to tell anyone what he’s done. And no, I won’t yet tell you who,” Obi-Wan continued, giving Mace a quelling look. “I’d rather you not go into battle tomorrow thinking about how much you’d like to strangle a Jedi Master, especially as he hasn’t actually done anything.”

Micah rested his face in his hands and made a distressed sound. “So for…?”

“Ten years.”

“Fuck. For ten years, no one knew a damned thing about it. Not until someone found it, I guess,”
Micah said.

Obi-Wan stared at him.

Micah glanced up and saw the look on his face. “Oh, shit. Really?”

“I was just looking for whoever paid someone to try and assassinate a Senator.” Obi-Wan shook his head. “Oh, you’re glad to see me and you’re giving me an army? Well, that’s just great, and I am going to sit here and pretend I know exactly what you’re talking about for the next three fucking hours while you show off two hundred thousand people!”

“Massive flailing?” Siri asked.

“No, the flailing didn’t start until they said that there would be another million ready in a month, and two million more beyond that within the year.” It really did not make Obi-Wan feel better to see so many shocked expressions. Even Anakin seemed distressed, and he barely recalled any of it.

Quinlan whistled. “That is a fuck of a lot of clones.”

“Good people, too,” Obi-Wan said, but kindly. Anti-clone prejudice had stymied a lot of the war’s progress. At least until that damned public relations campaign began. “Three days later, war broke out. Good timing, right?”

“Why use an army that…well, was definitely obtained under suspicious circumstances?” Qui-Gon sounded curious, but Obi-Wan suspected that Qui-Gon had figured out the most logical answer.

“No much choice,” Obi-Wan said. “People were dying. It was either use the resources we had been presented with, or step back and allow far too many people to suffer.” He knew his smile was bitter. “And afterwards, we really didn’t have much time to give it any thought at all.”

Mace’s expression was of polite disbelief. “Why?”

“Because it never stopped.” Obi-Wan bit back what would have been a far more emotional rant. He settled for clenching his right hand into a fist. “From the moment it began until the war ended three years later, it was non-stop fighting on multiple fronts. Every minute of every single day. If you had a moment to yourself, it was because someone else, somewhere else, was bearing the brunt of a new battle. If you weren’t in the field, then you were trying to figure out how to counter an ongoing assault.”

Yoda seemed deeply disturbed. “Meant for that, the Jedi are not.”

“No,” Obi-Wan agreed. “I know that losing Xanatos was terrible, but he was the only one of us to Fall in two centuries. During the war, Jedi were falling to the Dark side at an average of about twenty per year.”

“Force,” Abella whispered, as distress levels in the Force ramped up so much that Qui-Gon started to wince. “That’s horrific.”

Obi-Wan hesitated. “Yes, and no. At the time, things were bad enough that, Fallen or not, as long as you could keep your head on straight, remember who you were fighting against, and not kill your allies? Being Fallen was tolerated until we could get the Jedi in question shoved in the direction of the Healers.”

“Son of a bitch,” Garen whispered. “That sounds like a bomb waiting to go off.”
“It sounds like a policy born of desperation,” Mace countered. He’d abandoned skepticism and settled on grim disquiet.

“Trust me, we had other things to worry about other than trying to execute someone who was still actively trying to assist us,” Obi-Wan said in a wry voice. “They were easier to deal with than the alternative. The real problem were Jedi who would be leading a charge, snap halfway across the battlefield, and then turn around and start slaughtering their own troops.”

Anakin tilted his head. “Bpfassh, right?”

Obi-Wan tried not to reveal his sudden alarm. “You remember that?”

“No really,” Anakin said, looking thoughtful. “I just had a dream once where I knew I was in a fight with other Jedi, and then all of a sudden half of them turned around and started trying to kill me.”

Obi-Wan sighed, relieved that a dream was all it had been. “That’s pretty close to what happened.”

“But the war ended, right?” Aayla asked. Her eyes were very wide, but she was holding onto her center and refusing to be shaken. “What happened then?”


“For fuck’s sake, how can things get worse than that?” Quinlan blurted.

“I’m not talking about that right now,” Obi-Wan said with a grimace, and then clenched his jaw. No, definitely not a good idea. “I am only going to discuss that once, and that’s not going to be until the official recounting I promised the Council. Also, I would really prefer not to be bloody sober for that.”

“If you get to drink for that, then so do I,” Micah said. It seemed to be a silent signal; everyone in the room relaxed or began to move, as if throwing off a shroud that had kept things hushed and still.

Obi-Wan was amused by the idea of liquor in the Council Chamber. “Maybe it should be an option for everyone.” He stood up from the table. “Excuse me. I really need to find a quiet corner, meditate, and pull myself back together.”

“How bad?” Qui-Gon asked in a quiet voice.

Obi-Wan unclenched his fist and opened his right hand, revealing four bleeding gouge marks where his fingernails had dug into his skin. “Not great. Not that bad, either.”

“If you haven’t fixed that by morning, let me know,” Abella said, correctly gauging his mood and tolerance levels. “No fighting wars with open wounds.”

Obi-Wan nodded. “Thanks.”

“Worse?” Yoda asked, before he could escape.

There was a wealth of meaning in that single word. Obi-Wan paused, his left hand resting on the wall’s edge. “I don’t know of anyone in the Order who didn’t face the decision about Falling, about giving in, at least once.” He smiled again. “Sometimes more than once.”

Obi-Wan slipped away before witnessing any responses to that statement. He could find out later
if anything of importance was said. At that moment, it was far more vital to get himself back on even mental footing.

It also made him happy that no one came hunting for him while he was meditating. He had a rough start, but the end result meant that his headache went away, his hand was healed, and he felt much less like screaming.

When Obi-Wan returned to the small berth he and Qui-Gon were sharing, Qui-Gon was already there, lying on the bunk sans boots and reading from a datapad. “Well, hello there,” Qui-Gon said, smiling at him. “Glad you found your way back before midnight.”

“That wouldn’t have been an issue.” Obi-Wan leaned against the doorway and smiled at his partner.

“Want to talk about it?” Qui-Gon asked, tossing the pad aside as he sat up.

“Maybe later,” Obi-Wan said, tilting his head to the side as if in curious repose. “I was wondering if you’d like to play a game.”

Qui-Gon’s eyebrows went up. “A game?”

“It’s called, ‘How quiet can you be?’”

Qui-Gon smiled, slow and warm. “Is that a challenge, Master Kenobi?”

“Oh, I certainly hope so,” Obi-Wan said, and palmed the door shut. Before Qui-Gon could say another word, he held his finger up to his lips. Quiet, please.

Qui-Gon watched, intrigued, as Obi-Wan slipped off his boots and placed his belt on the table in almost complete silence. No noise at all, hmm?

Obi-Wan shook his head. No, but the real challenge is not in that. It’s in redirecting the results in the Force so that every Jedi in the ship doesn’t smirk at us in the morning.

Never had to do that before, Qui-Gon said, and then drew in a sharp breath when Obi-Wan sat down in his lap, facing him. They have been smirking quite a lot, haven’t they?

Obi-Wan released a very quiet sigh when Qui-Gon’s hands touched his back and then trailed down to settle on his waist. Gods, but he needed this. He desperately wanted to forget the anger, the utter burn of dismissal that had churned in his thoughts when he’d first made this trip at twenty.

When there hasn’t been bitching about a loss of credits.

Indeed, Qui-Gon agreed. So, what does the winner get?

Obi-Wan kissed him, delighted with the fact that in this position, he was several centimeters taller than his lover. Very convenient. Oh, this is the sort of game that everyone wins.

And if someone loses? Qui-Gon asked, his mouth opening so that breath could mingle and tongues could meet. Obi-Wan rested his left hand on the back of Qui-Gon’s neck, letting his fingertips play over sensitive skin.

I’m sure we could negotiate terms, Obi-Wan replied, but later. He tugged Qui-Gon’s sash loose until clothing was less restrictive. If they were ship-bound for more than a day, Qui-Gon resorted to leggings instead of the thick-cloth trousers he preferred. That made game-play so much easier,
both in terms of ease of access and the ability to be sneaky.

Qui-Gon gasped into his mouth when Obi-Wan wrapped his fingers around his partner’s erect cock. *How the fuck did you—*

*Misdirection.* Obi-Wan squeezed what he held. Qui-Gon nearly lost the game right then and there, his head jerking back before he almost slammed his fist against the wall.

*Oh, dear gods your hands are amazing.* Qui-Gon arched up against him. Obi-Wan pressed his lips tight against the moan that wanted to emerge. He was throbbing pleasantly in time with his pulse, but this wasn’t about his own needs. This was about his desire to see his chosen mate taken apart in gentle, passionate bits.

He slid his hand loosely down Qui-Gon’s hot length, tip to root, and then turned his fist back into a tight grip as he brought his hand back up. Qui-Gon’s hips jerked; he was biting down hard on his lower lip.

*That’s lovely.* Obi-Wan repeated the motion until it became a rhythmic stroke.

*If I’d known that you were a cheat, I would have fucking well negotiated terms before we started,* Qui-Gon retorted. He gave up on lip-biting, panting for breath.

*Almost noise,* Obi-Wan teased. He’d just managed to make his partner swear more in one sitting than he had in at least a full year, if not longer.

Qui-Gon’s hands tightened on his hips. *I imagine I could cause you to make a fair bit of noise,* he said, his mental voice all but a growl.

*Oh, I don’t doubt that at all.* Obi-Wan swallowed. He was now achingly hard just from tone of voice alone. *If we had the space and necessary supplies, I would be begging you to fuck me.*

*Obi-Wan!* Qui-Gon said in a distressed whine. His eyes were wide, his pupils lust-blown.

*I’m really looking forward to it.* Obi-Wan nuzzled Qui-Gon’s cheek with his lips, miming a whisper at his ear that earned him a sharper gasp. *In fact, riding you in this position would be…* Obi-Wan closed his eyes. He didn’t have words for it, so he sent an impression of tight, curling desire through their pairbond.

The hands on his hips tightened to the point of pain. Qui-Gon was rocking forward into each stroke, his breath a harsh sound in the enclosed space.

Then Qui-Gon dropped most of his shielding against the pairbond. The flood of lust made Obi-Wan clamp down on Qui-Gon’s shoulder with his free hand. He managed to stifle the cry with nothing more than pure willpower, letting it out in a long, silent breath that left him shaking.

*I do believe that was almost a win,* Qui-Gon sent, smug.

*You must really be close if you’re willing to cheat,* Obi-Wan returned.

Qui-Gon gripped the back of Obi-Wan’s head, fingers tangled in his hair, and drew him into a fierce, bruising kiss. *You are hardly in the position to be calling someone else a cheat.*

The only potential problem Obi-Wan had ever faced in working with Qui-Gon was that his partner learned *fast.* The kiss was hot, messy, delightful—distracting. Obi-Wan drew in a sharp, surprised breath when there was suddenly a hand upon his cock, fingers wrapping around him in complete perfection.
“Oh, fuck—Qui!”

Qui-Gon came with a long, low groan that was almost a purr, spurting warmth over Obi-Wan’s fingers. Obi-Wan didn’t still his hand until Qui-Gon was done—a difficult task to concentrate on, because Qui-Gon’s hold was still so damned tight.

I win. Qui-Gon had a deeply pleased look on his face.

Oh, well. Obi-Wan swallowed hard when the friction on his cock became a slow burn. Lube was nice, but sometimes calluses and a firm grip were fucking delightful. I usually lose, anyway.

Usually?

Obi-Wan’s eyes fluttered closed when the pace increased. Watching someone else, it’s— He lost the rest of his words, the thread of conversation unraveling in the face of sensation, heat, and lust. He was breathing hard, sweat breaking out on his skin and the feel of liquid fire flooding his limbs.

Oh, yes. It really is. Obi-Wan felt Qui-Gon’s broad thumb caress his lips. Look at me. He opened his eyes to find Qui-Gon gazing at him, a faint smile on his face and a wealth of emotion shining in his eyes. Gods, but you’re beautiful.

Qui. He was so fucking close. Please.

Yes. Qui-Gon drew him down into an open-mouthed kiss. Obi-Wan grabbed fistfuls of Qui-Gon’s tunics as the friction on his cock sped up, Qui-Gon fisting him to the point of delicious oversensitivity that finally pushed him over the edge.

Qui-Gon swallowed his cry with his mouth, kissing him until he was spent. The moment this mission is over, I want to watch you do that again.

Obi-Wan buried his face against Qui-Gon’s shoulder, gasping for breath. That would be nice. He had no idea if he’d managed to camouflage the signs of what they’d done in the Force, and he quite honestly no longer cared. His friends could smirk all they liked, but he was the one who’d gotten an orgasm out of the deal.

“After all,” Obi-Wan said, lifting his head and enjoying a more leisurely, less frantic kiss. “The point of the game is to figure out how to make you lose.”

Qui-Gon’s laugh was a low rumble. “We’ll see.” He nipped at Obi-Wan’s lower lip. “Was this planned?”

“No, that was rather spur of the moment,” Obi-Wan admitted.

“I don’t mind.” Qui-Gon abandoned his lips and nuzzled against Obi-Wan’s cheek, cat-like. “Where did that particular game originate?”

“Battle cruisers aren’t the best vessels when it comes to privacy,” Obi-Wan said, closing his eyes and sighing at the sensation of coarse beard brushing over his cheek. “Even if you can get a room to yourself, the walls are a bit thin.”

They took turns visiting the nearest ’fresher for nightly cleanup, preparing to at least attempt to sleep through the ship’s night cycle. Obi-Wan met Garen in the hall after his turn in the cramped ’fresher, his hair still damp from the shower he’d badgered out of the system. He was going to be fighting a fucking Sith in less than a day, and he was going to go into battle limber, not sore and cursing every aching movement.
Garen grinned and swept him into an unexpected hug. “Congratulations!” he said, a sentiment that Obi-Wan was about to thank him for when Garen continued with, “I forgot to mention it earlier, but I totally brought lube you could have borrowed.”

Obi-Wan opened his mouth to protest and then closed it again, shaking his head. “I’ll keep that in mind for the flight back.”

Garen laughed and claimed the 'fresher while Obi-Wan returned to the cabin he was sharing with Qui-Gon. Their room still smelled like recent sex, which almost caused him to shudder in reaction. Force, but he was looking forward to the Naboo mess being done with.

Qui-Gon took the side of the bunk closest to the wall, which left Obi-Wan the open edge. It was habit long established by the nightmares that would sometimes catch Obi-Wan off-guard. Better to fall off the bunk and punch the floor than to try to break his partner’s limbs in a sleep-induced panic.

The room was dark except for the dim glow of amber running lights at the base of the doorway. Qui-Gon was curled up behind him, pressing his chest against Obi-Wan’s bare back and tangling their legs together. Obi-Wan was lulled by the heat and comfort, but his mind refused to let him rest.

“May I ask you something?” Qui-Gon’s breath stirred Obi-Wan’s hair. He’d thought about tying it back, as Qui-Gon had, but there had been a wistful look on his partner’s face that had him leaving the tie off for the night.

“Always,” Obi-Wan replied. “However, if you’re about to ask me to move, the answer is no.”

Qui-Gon’s laughter was soft; he nuzzled the back of Obi-Wan’s ear with his nose. “I’m curious. I’m glad that we’ve blundered our way into a relationship, but why didn’t you tell me how you felt before? I know I was oblivious for quite a while, and it might have saved us some time.”

Obi-Wan smiled. “And what would we be doing with that extra bit of time?”

Qui-Gon leaned in closer, his whisper a gust of warm air that tickled his skin. “You have no idea what I would give right now for an extra day on Coruscant before having to deal with this mess, just to hold you down and make you come.”

Obi-Wan shivered, his cock twitching with renewed interest in spite of what they’d just done. “Gods, Qui-Gon. Please hold that thought until we’re back home. I need to be able to think for the next twenty-six hours.”

“‘I will do exactly that,’” Qui-Gon promised. “But I’d still like to know.”

He’d suspected that the topic would come up sooner or later, but he still wasn’t quite prepared. “I—I loved you, for a very long time. When this happened, whatever it was to bring me back to this point in time after Taro Tre, I was—I was fucking delighted at the idea of being able to speak my heart to you. I was even willing to wait, to give us both the time we needed to adjust to the change in circumstances. And to wait until it was legal,” Obi-Wan added, with a flash of amusement.

“A good idea, yes,” Qui-Gon said, also entertained by the notion. They had both been Jedi, Knight and Master. The Order’s standards were the only ones they would have been bound by, but Obi-Wan had preferred to wait until all potential hurdles were cleared.

“When that time came…” Obi-Wan hesitated. “I couldn’t do it.”
Qui-Gon sounded surprised. “Why?”

“I was afraid of what the answer might be.”

Obi-Wan knew that it wasn’t the response Qui-Gon had expected. “Afraid? Why? We’ve been together as partners for over four years now. I would hope that you could feel free to tell me anything.”

“It’s not that—it had nothing to do with a lack of trust, I promise,” Obi-Wan said. “It’s…”

He bit his lip before sighing in resignation. If they were going to have this conversation, and have it now, then he could be no less than brutally honest. He just wasn’t capable of dancing around the truth, not for this. The ghosts of old hurts were rising up, reminding him of the ache he’d carried in his heart for longer than he’d ever thought possible.

“Some memories just refuse to fade with time.”

“Tell me,” Qui-Gon said, and then sounded uncertain. “I don’t wish for anything to stand between us, love. As much as I dislike this other Master Jinn that you used to spend time with, I’d rather deal with it now, if we can.”

“The other Master Jinn,” Obi-Wan repeated, a faint smile on his face. “That’s a good way to put it, yes. Very well, then: The relationship I had with this other Master Jinn was a bit chaotic. You and I both know it started that way, and then it grew calm, and for us, peaked with a visit to Taro Tre, a planet we should never have stepped foot on in the first place. For me, though, chaos wasn’t done. The Yinchorri Uprising remained a Yinchorri War, and Micah died. New Apsolon happened, Tahl died, and things went to complete shit for a while.”

Qui-Gon winced; Obi-Wan reached back and grabbed Qui-Gon’s hand from where it rested on his hip, pulling it forward so that Qui-Gon’s arm was settled more securely around Obi-Wan’s chest. “Don’t dwell,” he whispered. He very much regretted the fact that he’d given in and told Qui-Gon of these things before planetfall on Tatooine. “That’s not what this is for. You recovered, and so did I, and life went on.

“There were times that I…” Obi-Wan’s brows drew together in a perplexed frown. “There were moments when I suspected that maybe you felt the same way about me, but I wasn’t certain. Either way, I was such a damned stickler for the Code that I was not going to bring it up, no matter the results, until you cut my braid.

“I thought that if Master Jinn had turned me away, I could have gone gracefully and borne the disappointment, but I knew that would be it. I even lived long enough to know that it wasn’t vanity, it was truth. I never encountered anyone else who…”

“Who held that same waiting spark, that lifetime of potential?” Qui-Gon’s voice was soft.

Obi-Wan nodded. “Exactly that. I had a few good friends, but no. Never again was there that spark.”

“When this other Master Jinn discovered Anakin on Tatooine, things changed. There was this sudden distance—no, it was more like a complete emotional disconnect,” Obi-Wan said, and knew he still sounded bewildered by the memory. “I didn’t feel him withdraw from the training bond so much as I seemed to not really exist any longer.”

Qui-Gon’s arm tightened around him, able to sense the pain despite Obi-Wan’s best attempts to quash it. Obi-Wan had to take a few moments to breathe, to regain his center, before he could go on.
“This Master Jinn was certain that Anakin needed to be trained, even though he was only about a month away from being ten Standard…and he was right about that. A rogue Force user with Anakin’s potential would be frightening, to say the least.” Obi-Wan frowned. “That didn’t go over so well. When the Council decided that Anakin would not be trained—in any fashion—you decided that you would train Anakin, just to make certain that it was done.”

This part was harder to say, even now. “A Master cannot have two Padawans. I was recommended, rather brusquely, for my Trials.”

Qui-Gon let out an angry hiss. “I really don’t like this other Master Jinn. If you ever see him in evidence, please let me know, because I’m going to punch him in the face.”

Obi-Wan laughed, started by both the sentiment and the tetchy, protective emotions behind it. “I don’t think that’s going to be a problem, Qui.”

“Tell me the rest,” Qui-Gon coaxed, when Obi-Wan fell silent, wrapped up in unpleasant memories. “I know that there is more to this than just an interesting and very inappropriate way of announcing your readiness for the Trials.”

“Well, the Council attempted to give Master Jinn a verbal slap, but it didn’t take. I was dubbed unready for my Trials, but that was less me and more overall frustration; my Trials hadn’t been that far away, after all.”

“No, not at that point. I’m still very surprised that you were a Padawan that long,” Qui-Gon said.

“Mm,” Obi-Wan replied, noncommittal. He didn’t understand it, either. He’d discovered later that his Trials were, at the latest, two months away. The Council had been preparing to petition Qui-Gon on the matter, and his Master had never mentioned it.

“We went back to Naboo with Queen Amidala, assigned to protect her while she attempted a coup against the Trade Federation, just as we’re doing now. Anakin had no other place to go, so off he went with us. Before we left Coruscant—we argued, he and I.” Obi-Wan swallowed. “I was going through a really bad prescience cycle. You’ve only seen the one, but the first time I lived this, they were many more, and they were insistent.”

“Yoda?” Qui-Gon asked, curious.

“Helped, a bit,” Obi-Wan said, “but that didn’t keep me from being overwhelmed, sometimes. I kept seeing horrible things hanging just out of sight beyond Anakin. When the Council declared Anakin dangerous, I was certain I agreed with them, and I told Master Jinn so.” He sighed. “Stupid. I did realize later that it was not Anakin who was dangerous, himself, but something or someone who would affect him. Too little, too late; Master Jinn did not take my criticism lightly. Gods, but he was angry, and it was like—it was as if my very presence were the reason for…I don’t know what for. I don’t know what was going on in his head because he made certain that I wouldn’t know.”

Qui-Gon made a sound almost like a growl. “He blocked the training bond.”

“Yes.” Obi-Wan swallowed, his eyes burning. “I don’t know why.”

“Obi-Wan.” Qui-Gon took a breath, regaining control of his temper. “I don’t know why he acted as he did, but I would not have done that to you, even if your Trials were imminent—not until you walked into the Chamber itself.”

That drew him back from the memory, a little bit. “Qui-Gon, you’re supposed to do that the night
before, when the Vigil begins.”

Qui-Gon was unrepentant. “Just ask Kimal. He called me a nosy, clucking, overprotective mother hen.”

“Rogue,” Obi-Wan whispered, feeling a rush of glad warmth. It made it easier to resume this particular tale. “We went back to Naboo on the Queen’s ship, and I somehow managed to avoid him for the entire trip. I spent time with Anakin, and I also spent a lot of time on my knees. When we landed, I apologized to my Master.”

“Apoloized?” Qui-Gon was aghast. “Why?”

“Neither of us had been perfectly behaved,” Obi-Wan reminded him, his voice sharper than he intended. “We were about to be involved in a battle, one that might reveal a potential Sith. It seemed prudent at the time—if the worst happened, I did not want our last words to be spoken in anger.”

“You are far more forgiving than I am.” Qui-Gon rested his face against the back of Obi-Wan’s hair. “What then?”

“Darth Maul was waiting for the Queen, so we intercepted him. The fight was long, tiring—we were separated.” It was almost like feeling that kick to the face all over again. “I was begging him to wait for me, all but screaming it in the Force. He was—you were good, but the Sith was better. We were barely matching him when fighting in tandem.

“Maul struck you down, but it wasn’t a fatal blow. Not yet.”

Obi-Wan closed his eyes, feeling the burn of a grief so intense that it still refused to die. If there was one thing he could never forget, it was being trapped behind red ray shielding, feeling Qui-Gon’s life fade and unable to do a damned thing about it.

“Obi-Wan,” Qui-Gon whispered. His hand had come up to stroke Obi-Wan’s face, his fingertips a warm counterpart to the tears he simply had not been able to stop.

This time, Obi-Wan couldn’t keep himself distant from the memory at all. “I fought the Sith—Maul. He nearly succeeded in killing me, but at one point I took a bad hit and fell into a converted melting pit. He grew overconfident, certain that he had won. I’m sure he regretted that assumption when I killed him,” Obi-Wan said in a bitter voice. “Then I forgot all about him. All I was concerned about was you.”

He had to take a steadying breath, or the remainder of this recitation was going to break him apart. “I tried to—to help you. I couldn’t—you wouldn’t let me.” If there was anger in his words, so be it. “Almost eight years we had together, and your last words to me...” Obi-Wan’s jaw clenched. “You asked me to train Anakin. I would have promised you anything, anything that you asked. Training a boy who the Council believed was dangerous was simple in comparison.”

Qui-Gon had held himself perfectly still as he listened. “And?”

“And nothing.” Obi-Wan’s voice broke; he wiped his eyes on the pillow with a quick turn of his head. “Don’t you dare ask me to tell you about your pyre. I have forgotten as much of that day as my mind will let me.”

“Force, love,” Qui-Gon murmured. He tugged on Obi-Wan’s shoulder until Obi-Wan obeyed the silent instruction, rolling over and allowing Qui-Gon to wrap him in his arms. He rested his face against Qui-Gon’s chest, breathed in, and then was shocked when his exhalation came out as a choked sob.
This is ridiculous, Obi-Wan complained, while struggling to get ahold of his teetering emotions. You’re right here!

“That doesn’t mean that it didn’t hurt.” Qui-Gon’s voice was not quite steady, either. “I understand now why you would be hesitant to speak. That I could—I’m so very sorry.”

“It wasn’t you,” Obi-Wan muttered rebelliously.

“No, but as I said before, I’m the one who is here,” Qui-Gon replied, lowering his head to kiss Obi-Wan’s forehead.

“Maybe it was for the best,” Obi-Wan said, when he could breathe without his lungs trying to constrict. “Perhaps I needed time to adjust. I don’t think I could have spoken of this to you even a year ago.”

“I’m not certain that I could have listened to this a year ago,” Qui-Gon told him, which was surprising. “We’ve been through a lot together, and not all of it was easy. I am different from what you remember, but you have also changed quite a bit since Taro Tre, love.”

Obi-Wan ducked his head, a grin on his face. “I could say something really obvious about growth, but I will restrain myself. What do you mean?”

“When you first woke up,” Qui-Gon began, and then hesitated, as if searching for the right words. “Your manner of speaking, the way you carried yourself; it was so different that I often felt like I was talking to a complete stranger. The mannerisms faded after the first month, and I actually had to go back to the Council transcripts to see if I’d imagined it. Some of it has returned of late, though, particularly after you took Anakin as your Padawan.”

Sudden humor bubbled up from within him, a welcome balm to the wound he had just scoured. “You’re saying I no longer talked as if I’d a stick lodged in my ass.”

Qui-Gon sputtered, his arms tightening around Obi-Wan. “That’s very much not what I am saying! Who told you that?”

“That would be dear Padawan Muln.” Obi-Wan recalled the conversation vividly, given what it had led to. “We were talking a few weeks after our first mission set. After giving me numerous baffled looks, he finally declared that he couldn’t stand it any longer and wanted to know why there was a great big stick up my ass.”

Qui-Gon laughed. “What did you say?”

“At first, I was really confused,” Obi-Wan said. “It didn’t even occur to me that I sounded different at all. Garen and the rest noticed that I wasn’t even aware of it, so no one mentioned it at first. Then he said, and I quote, “You’re sixteen, Obi, and you sound like you’re sixty. Or is there some secret ceremony after your Trials, where everyone gets their own stick? That would certainly explain Master Windu.”

Obi-Wan waited until Qui-Gon’s laughter wound down. “I considered it, and did my best to shift my speech patterns back down to the level of my agemates. I thought I might otherwise draw too much attention to myself.”

“That was also when the sense I had of you in the Force became muted, too,” Qui-Gon said. “Some suspected that certain strengths were fading with the memory and intensity of the vision, but I knew the potential was not gone. Your shields were, and are, incredible.”
Obi-Wan nodded. “In self-defense they are, yes. Now you have a good idea of why.”

“The Sith,” Qui-Gon said.

“There is one more thing,” Obi-Wan began. “I know that you’re not fond of this other Master Jinn, love, but I would rather have discussed it now than have you face it later, unprepared.”

Qui-Gon propped himself up on his elbow to look down at him. “What do you mean?”

Obi-Wan gazed up at him, the running lights just bright enough to define the contours of Qui-Gon’s face. “I promised the Council that I would share my memories of that life—I meant that literally, and I meant everything. If I’m going to put up with people rooting around in my memories, then I’d prefer it if you were with me.”

“I am honored that you wish me to be there, my love.” Qui-Gon bent his head, brushing Obi-Wan’s lips with a soft kiss.

Obi-Wan sighed, enjoying the slow, gentle movements of their lips together. This was everything he could have ever wanted, and more.

“I would have waited for you forever,” he whispered.

Qui-Gon lay down and drew Obi-Wan back into the circle of his arms. “I am so very glad that you didn’t have to.”

Obi-Wan awoke sometime later. The room was still dark; the ship was quiet but for the hum and ever-present vibration of the hyperdrive. Fragments of dreams filtered in through his pairbond with Qui-Gon, the less-developed pairbond with Garen, the two training bonds—even his connection to Yoda revealed the ancient Master’s peaceful slumber.

Sleep eluded him for a time. He’d been dreaming also, but whatever it was remained just beyond his reach, teasing him with the possibility of its importance.

He stared up at the dark ceiling, and realized that his eyes were burning, that moisture was blurring his vision. I swear I will protect you all, he promised. None of you will suffer the fate the Force once decreed for you.

* * * *

“Micah.”

Micah looked up at him, doing his best to look innocent. “What?”

Qui-Gon sighed and shook his head, placing the cover back on the shipping crate. “These are illegal in Republic space,” he said of the explosives in question.

“Only if you use charges packed for a range of more than ten meters,” Micah said defensively. “These are packed to nine meters.”

“Hair-splitting,” Qui-Gon muttered.

“No, droid-splitting,” Micah countered, grinning. “I’d loved to have brought a case of electromagnetic pulse grenades, but they’re still in beta testing.”
“Droid poppers,” Obi-Wan said, a fond expression on his face. “Those would have come in handy.”

“Do they really work as advertised?” Micah asked, all critique of his barely legal munitions forgotten.

Obi-Wan smiled. “Roll it at just the right speed, and they circumvent droideka shielding.”

“I want dozens,” Micah proclaimed, lifting the box into the air with the Force as the rest of their contingent filed into the cargo bay.

“Obi-Wan, Queen Amidala has asked to speak to you,” Mace said, after glancing at Micah’s floating crate of “fireworks.”

“Then I’ll go now,” Obi-Wan said, and squeezed Qui-Gon’s hand once before striding for the open cargo bay door. As he walked, the dense shielding he’d been maintaining for years fell away, until his Mastery was all but a blazing light in the Force.

Padawan Tachi blew out a long breath. “Force, that was hot.”

*It rather was, yes,* Qui-Gon thought, fighting a smile.

“I’d forgotten how intense that was,” Micah said, leaning on his staff. “I haven’t seen him do that since that first Council meeting. You, Qui-Gon?”

“No,” Qui-Gon said, shaking off the desire to follow along in the wake of that much power flooding out into the Living Force. “Not since our first mission together after his Knighting.”

Yoda was regarding the open doorway with a thoughtful frown. “A difficult battle, this will be.”

“Been kind of getting that impression, yeah,” Quinlan said, resting his hand on his Padawan’s shoulder.

Mace just looked grim. “Let’s go, then.”

* * * *

Obi-Wan found Padmé in full battle dress, standing a few meters from the lake’s shoreline. Jar Jar Binks must have already gone into the water, given the pensive look on her face. It had also been a temptation to let the Gungan know that he was going to find an empty city, and perhaps save them some time, but Jar Jar needed the confidence boost.

“Your Highness,” Obi-Wan greeted her, dipping his head in a short bow.

Padmé finally turned away from the water. “I’m going to be blunt. What do you think of our chances, Master Jedi?” She gave him a quick smile, meant to take the potential sting of command from her words. “Will we be successful?”

_Cheating,* Obi-Wan thought, returning her smile. “I can’t say for certain. We Jedi say that the future is always in motion. However, if you’ve planned for every contingency, then I daresay you have every chance of being successful.”
Padmé nodded, as if she’d expected to hear nothing less. “How did Master Gallia discern the
difference between Sabé and myself so quickly?” she asked instead. “Was she warned?”

“No—at least, I know that Qui-Gon and myself said nothing to her about your identity.”

She nodded rueful acknowledgement. “I need to practice working around Jedi.”

“Anakin would recognize you anywhere, in any garb,” Obi-Wan said in a mild voice. “He’s quite
taken with you.”

“I know, he’s…” Padmé trailed off, eyes widening in realization. “You mean he is actually taken
with me.” She shook her head. “He’s only a child.”

“I thought you weren’t into casting aspersions about age?” Obi-Wan grinned at her discomfort
before he could remember not to. He was reacting to her as if they were long friends, not recent
acquaintances.

Padmé, fortunately, didn’t seem to mind his teasing, even though she was blushing. “I suppose I
shall have to eat those words and enjoy them. You’re right. If he is old enough to be taken as an
apprentice, he’s old enough to have other…thoughts. But nothing will ever come of it; we live
completely different lives.”

Obi-Wan nodded, as if agreeing. “That is true, but I often find that it’s a very small galaxy.”

Padmé gave him an odd look, but if she meant to say more, she had no chance. Jar Jar Binks
surfaced with a spray of water, startling Padmé as well as some of the local wildlife. “Theysa
gone!” he yelped.

Padmé frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Gungan city is deserted,” Jar Jar explained, sloshing his way out of the lake. Some of the
Handmaidens, along with Mace, Qui-Gon, and Captain Panaka, approached and nearly got
drenched when Jar Jar shook himself to dry off. “Some kinda fight, mesa thinks.”

“Would they have been taken to the internment camps?” Sabé asked, which made Qui-Gon
glance at her in surprise. The girl’s speech was far more melodious when she was not employing
the deeper tones of Queen Amidala.

“More likely they were wiped out,” Panaka said in a flat voice, still unimpressed by both Jar Jar
and the idea of a Gungan army.

Jar Jar was affronted. “Mesa no think so.”

“Do you know where they are, Jar Jar?” Qui-Gon asked. Obi-Wan gritted his teeth; the eye tic
was trying to come back.

“When in trouble, Gungans go to sacred place. Come on, mesa show you!” Jar Jar said, and
wasted no time in trotting straight into the woods, still babbling enthusiasm.

Qui-Gon glanced at Obi-Wan. More quoting, love?

Direct fucking quoting, Obi-Wan said, restraining the urge to growl in frustration.

The confrontation with Boss Nass did not help matters. Sabé’s opening lines, Padmé’s
impassioned plea for help, the Gungan leader’s acceptance—every single bit of it was word for
word, just as he’d experienced the first time. It was only long practice and significant effort that
kept a neutral expression on Obi-Wan’s face.

Getting the hell out of the swamp was a welcome reprieve, even if it meant seeing Boss Nass swat around his new favorite in every conceivable direction. Obi-Wan listened to the Naboo’s chatter behind him, noting their attempts at collecting resistance fighters while watching the proceedings. Thus, he was actually witness to Jar Jar’s shocked faint when Boss Nass declared him a general.

“That poor fuck,” Quinlan said, crossing his arms. They watched as Captain Tarpals went to pick Jar Jar up from the ground before Boss Nass could turn around and step on him by accident. “Binks is going to be dead by the end of the day at this rate.”

“Oh, probably not,” Obi-Wan replied. “He’s a bit more adept at survival than it seems.” As grating a presence as Jar Jar could sometimes be, he was also responsible for the current reconciliation between the Naboo and the Gungans. That alone made Jar Jar Binks tolerable company, though Obi-Wan would probably change his mind in short order if he had to live with the Gungan in close quarters for more than a week.

“Ah, drunkard’s luck,” Quinlan said, and went to join the others when Captain Panaka returned with his own batch of rescued members of the Naboo guard. Obi-Wan held back for a few moments; he already knew what Panaka was going to say.

Listening to Padmé’s plans for recapturing Theed and liberating Naboo was easier to bear, since the presence of so many other Jedi meant that tactics were altered accordingly. “Here’s what we’re going to do,” she said, none of her commanding presence faltering despite the presence of fifteen Jedi.

“Our initial distraction will be two-fold. The Gungan army will amass here.” She pointed to a wide open field on a scaled holo-map that R2-D2 provided. “The Gungans must draw the droid armies away from the cities. Once that happens, we can enter Theed via a secret passage beneath the waterfalls.”

“Secret tunnels, huh?” Micah asked, curious.

Padmé smiled. “This one was meant to be an escape route for the royal court if it wasn’t possible to retreat by ship. There are others, but this is the only one that receives enough maintenance to ensure our safe passage.”

“If all else fails, the other tunnels may provide the means for a second assault,” Panaka said.

Padmé nodded in agreement. “Once we clear the tunnel, Captain Panaka will provide a distraction within the city itself, giving us the opportunity to enter the hangar bay. Then we will send what pilots we have to knock out the droid control ship. If we succeed in destroying the control ship, the droid armies will fall. I will take a small group of my own to find the Viceroy, who we now know is hiding somewhere in the Palace. Without the Viceroy, the Federation will be lost and confused.” It was a much grander scheme than the one she had imparted during the trip, but to Obi-Wan it was haunting in its familiarity. “What do you think, Masters Jedi?”

“A well-conceived plan,” Qui-Gon said.

“One with a lot of risk,” Mace continued, which helped ease the discordance Obi-Wan was feeling. “You realize there may be casualties on both sides,” he said, looking at Boss Nass.

Boss Nass was unfazed. “We’sun ready to do ar’sun part.”

“And so are we,” Mace said. The others nodded in agreement. “Where do you want us, Your Highness?”
“I’m as concerned about the potential casualties as you are,” Padmé said, “which is why I’ve
decided upon a third diversion. The more we can split the Trade Federation’s focus, the greater
our chance of success. Master Giett, the other Jedi say that you are a Combat Master of brilliant
ability. I would like you to direct a secondary assault against the droid patrols at the city borders.
Captain Panaka can confer with you on how to best coordinate these paired diversions; otherwise,
my people are at your disposal.”

Micah glanced up from the holo-map long enough to nod. “Thank you, Your Highness. I will do
what I can.”

“I do not doubt your success at all,” Padmé replied, and then turned her attention to the next
cluster of Jedi. “Master Gallia, Master Quinlan, Padawan Secura: I would ask you to help us
search for the Viceroy. Master Yoda tells me that you are all good at finding those who don’t wish
to be found.”

Quinlan gave Yoda a glare that didn’t disguise the mischief lurking in his eyes. “Indeed we are.”

“Your Healers, I would ask to go here.” Padmé pointed out a squat building on the outskirts of
Theed. “The resistance has set up an infirmary in this location that the Federation does not yet
know about. Fortunately for us, it’s also in the best tactical position to receive wounded from both
the Gungans and the fighters in Theed.”

“What do our medical supplies look like?” Terza asked.

“The resistance has been raiding the hospital to secure medical equipment,” Panaka said. “It won’t
be the best facility, but it’s better than none at all.”

“Back to the Gungans—Master Yoda and Master Windu, Obi-Wan tells me that you are skilled at
directing large numbers in combat situations. If you accompany Boss Nass and the army, I hope
that your assistance will help to keep casualties to a minimum.”

“We are, huh?” Mace gave Obi-Wan a level stare.

Obi-Wan already had his best innocent expression plastered on his face. “I didn’t sleep through
the Stark War, did I?”

Yoda intervened, thankfully. “A good idea, this is. Acceptable to you, this also is?” he asked,
looking up at Boss Nass.

Boss Nass’s answering grin could have swallowed a starship. “A good t’ing this is, havin’ tese
Jedi wit’ us. You’san all welcome! Goin’ to have a bombad time!”

Padmé brightened at the other ruler’s blatant enthusiasm, but she sobered quickly. “I understand
that Siri Tachi and Garen Muln are excellent pilots. If it is all right with their Masters, I’d like for
them to join the pilots for the attack on the control ship.”

“And me,” Anakin piped up. “I’m going with them, since I can get through the control ship’s
shields.”

If Obi-Wan had thought this mission would hold few surprises for him, he had just been proven
wrong. He licked his lips, feeling like his mouth had just gone bone dry. Asking Anakin was one
thing; hearing his Padawan volunteer, with full knowledge of what needed to be done, was
another matter entirely.

“Are you certain?” he asked, hoping he was keeping his sudden panic from his eyes.
Anakin nodded in response, suitably grave. “There’s a gap in the shielding, remember? It’s really tiny, so they don’t bother defending it or altering their shields to compensate. Scanners won’t find it, but I can.”

Padmé’s concern for Anakin’s welfare was obvious when she met Obi-Wan’s eyes. He knew she was recalling the very thing that they had just discussed—Anakin’s age meant little, especially in the eyes of the Jedi. “Can you fly a Naboo starfighter, Ani?”

“Wait a minute!” Panaka frowned, radiating complete disbelief. “We are not seriously considering sending a child up in a starfighter,” he said, an opinion mirrored on several other faces, Jedi and Naboo alike.

Anakin set his shoulders, sticking out his chin. His expression was composed, but his eyes had always betrayed Anakin’s emotions. This was his Padawan in full-blown stubborn mode. It would be easier to redirect rivers than sway him. “I am a Jedi. I will do my duty.”

Qui-Gon rested his hand on Anakin’s shoulder, looking down to meet Obi-Wan’s eyes. Should we do this? Panaka is right; it will be dangerous. Anakin is still young even by our standards.

Obi-Wan was torn. He wanted to tell Anakin no, and knew he could not. He couldn’t place his desire to keep his Padawan safe above the well-being of the Naboo. Panaka’s concerns were valid, but Anakin was the key to winning this battle. Finding the gap in the shielding was damned difficult; Obi-Wan had once almost died trying.

Why not? Obi-Wan finally conceded, with the equivalent of a mental shrug. He did it before. Qui-Gon raised an eyebrow but didn’t otherwise respond, a clear sign that Obi-Wan was going to be all but stripped for details over that admission later.

Obi-Wan gave Anakin a look of fond exasperation. “Anakin may be young, but he is skilled enough to do as he says. Your fighters will need his help.”

And it keeps him the hell away from the Sith.

Padmé looked to Boss Nass, but the Gungan was staying out of the discussion. Obi-Wan knew the ruler would side with Anakin—he was fond of children, despite his earlier ire with Jar Jar, and fully confident in their abilities.

Panaka, meanwhile, was still shaking his head. “He’s still just a child.”

“I’m almost ten, and your Queen is fourteen,” Anakin said, crossing his arms. “That’s not exactly a huge age gap.”

“I seem to recall you were just as doubtful about my skill set not so long ago,” Obi-Wan added, his grin tight and merciless.

Panaka scowled. “That was different,” he said, though in this case, “different” meant, “You took my Queen to a planet run by Hutts.”

Qui-Gon held up one hand. “Has it occurred to any of you that Anakin will be safer in the air?”

Almost everyone turned to regard Qui-Gon in surprise. Obi-Wan just felt a vast sense of relief. If they weren’t going to listen to him, at least Qui-Gon’s assumed seniority might help convince them.

“How so, Master Jedi?” Padmé asked.
Our attack on Theed will be expected, given the small rebellion your people have already been waging,” Qui-Gon said, “but the attack on the control ship will not be so easily foreseen by the Federation. Given Anakin’s formidable skill as a pilot, his odds are better in space than they are on the ground.”

Padmé was shaking her head. “While a valid point, this entire argument is pointless. This decision rests with Padawan Skywalker alone.” She knelt in front of Anakin, her body language turning it into a gesture of respect rather than condescension.

“You’re taking a great risk on behalf of the Naboo. I know if I were to ask it you, you would join the attack without a moment’s hesitation,” she said. “I cannot ask it, but if you wish it, if you feel that it is the best way to help us, then I will be forever grateful.”

Anakin gazed at her, and there was no mistaking the love and adoration in his eyes. Now you’ve done it, Obi-Wan thought, with an amused sort of wistfulness. My Padawan is going to love you from this moment onward because you let him fly.

Anakin gave the kneeling Queen a regal half-bow. “Even if it were not my duty as a Jedi, I would still help you. Besides, no one else is going to be able to find that gap in the shielding.”

“Not even me?” Garen teased, ruffling Anakin’s hair when Padmé stood up.

“You’re too big,” Anakin retorted, grinning. Siri snickered at that, immediately jumping onto innuendo in a way that had Obi-Wan restraining a sigh.

“Thank you, Padawan Skywalker.” Padmé returned Anakin’s bow with an elegant curtsey of her own.

“Does this mean I have to fly, too?” Tuuvino asked, his hand half-raised. “I’m kind of bad at it.”

“No, Padawan,” Mace said, smiling. “You are going to stay on our ship, as it will be your duty to inform the Temple of our fate if this goes badly.”

Tuuvino’s eyes widened in dismay. “That is a terrible task, Master.”

Obi-Wan looked at his own Padawan. “If you get yourself blown up, I will be very cross with you.”

“Not gonna happen,” Anakin said in complete confidence. It echoed so much, in so many memories, that Obi-Wan had a moment where he simply could not breathe.

[Master, if Skywalker is safer in the air, and Tuuvino will wait in our ship, what am I going to be doing?] Rillian asked. She sounded confident enough, but her gray eyes were tinged green in reflected worry and concern. [Should I stay with the Healers?]

“Once the battle is over, it might be a very good idea to join the Healers,” Qui-Gon replied. “They may need all the extra help that can be found. But in the meantime, you’re coming with us, provided that you remember your promise. You have your own part in this to play, Padawan.”

Rillian’s answering howls were self-deprecating, if honest. [I will do my best not to trip over my own feet, Master.]

Siri grinned at the Wookiee. “Yeah, I remember those days. Don’t worry, kiddo. We’ll all help keep an eye on you. Pretty soon this will all be old hat, and you’ll be the one saving our asses, instead.”
“Padawan,” Adi reproved in a mild voice, but Siri was unfazed. Rillian had perked up at Tachi’s words, and seemed much more confident than before.

Adi gave in, recognizing the tactic’s worth, and then turned back to face Padmé, resting her hands on her hips. “I also think that this plan has merit, but you have yet to mention what Master Jinn and his partner are going to be up to.”

Obi-Wan felt Qui-Gon’s hand brush against his. He accepted the silent offer, weaving their fingers together. He had no idea who was trying to comfort whom.

“The Sith, Adi. He’s ours.”

Adi and Micah gave Obi-Wan near-identical startled looks. “He’s really here?” Micah asked.

Obi-Wan turned his head to the left. Through wood and swamp and across that vast field lay Theed, and within it, the presence of Darkness resounded. “Oh, he’s here, all right. I’ve been able to sense him from the moment we landed, as has Master Yoda.”

Yoda blinked once, taking on a deceptive, sleepy expression that often fooled many into believing that they faced the unwary, not a battle-ready Jedi Master. “Also distracted, the Sith must be. The best suited to this task, they are. Assist in this endeavor, Padawan Raallandirr will.”

“You know, I suddenly like my job a hell of a lot better,” Quinlan said, his eagerness to hunt the Viceroy disappearing at the reminder of the Sith’s existence. “This attack sounds like a cakewalk compared to that.”

“Trade you,” Obi-Wan offered. His smile was half-hearted; he wasn’t serious, and yet it would be a nice option. He would happily pass the task on to someone else if it were possible. Fighting this battle once in a lifetime had been quite enough.

Quinlan shook his head. “No thanks. You’re the crazy person, Obi-Wan.”

Padmé’s expression hardened into grim resolve. “All right, then. Let’s get to work.”

* * * *

Mace soothed his mount with the Force when it tried to ditch its passenger and bolt. “These are called what, again?”

“Dey’sn be kaadu,” Boss Nass said, from his place on his taller, larger mount. Yoda was perched behind the massive Gungan, and seemed unconcerned with the quadruped’s jarring gait. “Dis’n be falumpaset.”

Mace gave his two-legged beast another reassuring pat. “Kaadu seem to be a bit skittish.”

Boss Nass was not concerned. “Yousan’s kaadu be young, and yousa be a strange one. Yousan’s kaadu be gettin’ t know yousa.”

“Fair enough,” Mace acknowledged. Both animals walked over the last rise, revealing the whole of the assembled Gungan Grand Army.

All right. I’m impressed, Mace thought. The Gungans were well-organized, their equipment an
unfamiliar technology even to his jaded eye. He hoped the Trade Federation droids would have
the same lack of experience. They needed every advantage they could find.

It didn’t take long for the droid army to come and meet them, approaching in an array of low-flying transports that made the ground tremble. Mace let out a low whistle, watching as row after row of battle droids were disgorged and placed in the grass.

“Well, they’re certainly taking us seriously.”

“Good,” Boss Nass huffed, his eyes narrowed as they all watched the assembled droids activate. “Dese mechaneeks goin’ to regret troublin’ us!”

Yoda lifted his gimer stick and pointed it at the droids standing in the front row. “The red-banded ones, our first targets should be.”

Boss Nass laughed. “Told yousa that wesa gon’ta have a bombad time! Hey, yousan!” he yelled, catching the attention of the many generals under his command. “Shoot’en de ugly red meechaneeks!”

The Gungan foot soldiers opened fire by flinging their blue balls of contained plasma at the droids before the last rows had even finished activating. The results were commendable; a large number of the red-banded droids were struck by the energy balls, which split apart in a splash of blue liquid and crackling electricity.

Jar Jar Binks, the army’s newest and youngest general, managed to fling one of the energy balls directly into a droid transport instead. The vehicle listed to one side before tearing up a wide swath of earth when it crashed.

Mace and Yoda exchanged a look as Binks fell off of his mount with a loud shriek. _He’s either going to wind up saving us, or he’s going to get us all killed._

* * * * *

Micah timed his assault to begin the moment Panaka’s fighters shot their first battle droid. With fighting on two different fronts, the droids couldn’t process quickly enough to make a decision, which made them easy to dispatch.

They didn’t run into any serious trouble until they entered the hangar bay and wound up directly in the line of fire. Qui-Gon lifted his lightsaber and intercepted three blasts in rapid succession, including one that would have struck the Queen. The doors closed automatically behind them; there would be no immediate threat from that direction.

Obi-Wan shook his head and waved his hand in a show of complete impatience, sending an entire line of the assembled droids crashing into the wall. _Didn’t we just do this?_ 

Qui-Gon managed a grim smile. The smoke from so many blasters discharging was making his eyes burn. _We did, yes. They should have been considerate enough to respect your handiwork._

_Deer gods, was that a euphemism?_ Obi-Wan asked, a fierce grin on his face. Rillian was just behind Obi-Wan, and the Wookiee took great pleasure in slicing one of the remaining droids in half. Between the four of them, along with Adi, Quinlan, Aayla, Siri, and Garen, they managed to clear the hangar bay of battle droids in short order.
“Get to your ships!” Padmé yelled over the roar of battle. Anakin was covering her from the left as a few droid stragglers presented themselves, a frown of intense concentration on his face. Qui-Gon and Panaka exchanged a look of complete understanding and took up guard positions around the Queen, leaving Anakin free to join the others.

Anakin shed his cloak, abandoning it on the ground behind him as he ran for the fighters parked alongside the walls. He was followed by R2-D2, who acted as if he was trying to adopt the Padawan. The first fighters were already lifting into the air when Anakin dropped into the cockpit of his chosen ship.

Obi-Wan halted long enough to exchange a long, wordless look with his Padawan. Anakin stared back; in that moment he seemed very adult, in much the same way that Obi-Wan’s true age often revealed itself in his eyes.

Be careful, Qui-Gon sent, in addition to whatever silent message Obi-Wan had given the boy. Anakin nodded acknowledgment but didn’t reply, busying himself with adjusting the piloting harness so that it would fit.

With all the surviving pilots either in the air or about to be, Padmé turned around, blaster raised in ready position. “This way,” she said, leading the group back to the hangar entry that connected with the palace. Rillian swapped places so that she was shadowing Qui-Gon instead, effectively boxing Padmé in without interfering with her ability to fight.

Qui-Gon was about to shut down his lightsaber, conserving power for the fight ahead, when he noticed that Obi-Wan had not. There was still fierce determination shining in his eyes, but there was an angry, hard set to his mouth. That was all the warning Qui-Gon needed, and it was an effort to keep his heart from beating faster in recognition of what was about to happen.

The doors parted before anyone could reactivate the controls, revealing a lone figure cloaked in black. The Sith raised his head, the light shining on his red-and-black patterned skin.

The Sith’s eyes burned amber with imbued Darkness. Even more disconcerting was the red ring edging the baleful yellow, making it appear as if his eyes were outlined in blood.

So it begins, Qui-Gon thought, this single moment shining like a clear path before him. “We’ll handle this,” he said, shedding his cloak. Obi-Wan was doing the same, but his eyes were locked on the Sith.

Padmé didn’t hesitate, taking Qui-Gon at his word. “We’ll take the long way,” she said, turning to do exactly that. Quinlan made sure he was standing between the Queen and the Sith. Aayla was just behind them, her shoulders hunched as if warding off a chill. Adi swung her violet-bladed lightsaber in a restrained arc, saluting and wishing them well in the same movement before she rushed after the Naboo.

The Sith dropped his cloak, revealing himself in full. All of his clothing was black, and his tunics were worn in a profane mimicry of a Jedi’s traditional garb. He had done away with his hair, revealing a full crown of vestigial horns. As Obi-Wan had said, he was a Zabrak—perhaps a Nighthbrother of Dathomir, or perhaps an Iridonian with a fondness for complex tattoos. Qui-Gon couldn’t tell, and he didn’t think the Sith was going to waste time explaining his origins.

Maul raised his lightsaber’s long hilt in a slow, deliberate motion, igniting the blades individually to reveal the red staff. Until the Sith had used one against them on Tatooine, it was a weapon that had not been used in battle for centuries.
“Is that a new staff, or do you keep spares handy, just in case?” Obi-Wan asked with a pleasant smile.

Maul hissed before replying. “You will not fool me the same way twice, Jedi.” His voice was softer than Qui-Gon expected, and would have been considered gentle in other, kinder circumstances.

“Then we’ll have to fool you in an entirely new way,” Qui-Gon said, and then glanced behind him. Rillian, he said, concerned by her wide-eyed, horrified stare. I want you to stay in the hangar and ensure that the remaining fighters launch safely. Stay as far away from this man as you can get.

Rillian gave him an unhappy nod. [Yes, Master. Be careful!]

Qui-Gon caught the Sith’s first strike, but it was a feint meant to keep Obi-Wan distracted and unprepared for the follow through—but Obi-Wan’s blade was in place and waiting, deep blue and blood red clashing together. Then there was no more time to think as the dance began.

* * * *

Anakin had the boards powered up, the engines ready to fire, when he noticed that Padmé, the Naboo, and her accompanying Jedi were pinned down by a group of Destroyer droids. He grabbed the controls, fingers sliding over the firing button, and took grim satisfaction in obliterating the entire set of droids.

R2-D2’s translated message popped up, letting him know that all destroyers in the hangar were accounted for, but next time, he wanted to be the one firing. Anakin grinned; he’d missed his droid, even if R2 wasn’t technically his anymore.

Before heading out, Anakin took a quick moment to ensure that his new sister Padawan was all right. Rillian was mowing her way through a new group of battle droids that were trying to enter the hangar, showing a surprising amount of skill for a brand-new Padawan. Between Rillian and Anakin, Padmé’s group was clear—they were already escaping through the palace entrance.

“Let’s go, Artoo,” Anakin said, getting them off the ground before pulling back on the stick. He accelerated and rolled the moment he was clear of the hangar, avoiding ground fire that had already taken out at least two of their pilots. He made for open space, letting out a sigh of relief that at least that had gone well. Not having to fight the auto-pilot made things much easier.

Of course, before, all of this had been an accident—a good accident, but it had still resulted in almost getting himself blown up. It had absolutely terrified Obi-Wan when he’d found out about it.

Anakin tightened the crash restraints around him until they were as snug as possible. The webbing was made for someone much larger, and the helmet didn’t fit right, either, but he wasn’t worried about that. It had made no difference before.

Before, before, before. Anakin rolled his eyes at himself. He was getting heartily sick of that word. You volunteered, Anakin reminded himself. They’re counting on you. Do not screw this up because you’re too busy worrying about what you did last time.
Anakin had worked hard to earn the friendship of all the Naboo pilots. They respected his status as a Jedi Padawan, but their faith in his ability to help them destroy the droid control ship was dubious at best.

“Bravo Leader to Bravo Twelve, are you with us?”

Anakin toggled the comm, something else that he hadn't found on his first panicked flight. It helped counter some of the intense *déjà vu*. “Bravo Leader, Bravo Twelve is with you.” He sounded serious, but he also sounded like he was about five years old.

Some days he really missed being an adult.

“Good to hear it,” Ric Olié said, welcoming him into formation with a looping roll that brought him alongside Anakin’s fighter. Anakin waved; he and Ric had spent a lot of travel time comparing notes and generally being ship-crazy together.

“You’re the star of this show, Kid. How do you want to play it?”

“Same as we talked about,” Anakin said, glancing at the readouts. The Federation fighters were about a minute out. “There’s going to be too many of them to stay in formation once we get close. Everyone should stay with their wingman and cover each other’s backs, fronts, and everything else.”

“No argument there,” Bravo Three replied.

“I’m right on your six, Kid,” Bravo Five added. Ellberger had volunteered to cover his wing until he separated from the group. It was a motherly gesture on her part, but Anakin didn't mind. His own mother would have tied him to a stake in the yard during a Tusken Raid before allowing him to do something like this.

“Garen?”

“That’s Bravo Sixteen to you, sprat,” Garen said. He and Siri were flying tandem behind the rest of Bravo Flight, making sure nothing tried to sneak up on them from Naboo’s surface. “What’s up?”

“You and Siri can strafe the bridge on the control ship. It won’t penetrate the shields, but it’ll scare the pants off of the Federation crew so badly they won’t be able to think.”

Siri sounded delighted by the idea. “Sounds good to me.”

“Here we go!” Bravo Six yelled. Anakin clenched his jaw and refused to flinch as he suddenly found himself in a damn hailstorm of vulture droids. Bravo Five stayed right on his wing, getting through the swarm without taking a single hit. Bravo Nine was not so lucky, and went up in flames with only a single squawk over the comm to mark his passing.

Then they were through the cloud of vulture droids, a bare moment’s reprieve. The station was just ahead, launching another wave of fighters. “There you are, folks: a Lucrehulk-class droid control ship,” Anakin said.

“Look at the size of that thing,” Bravo Two yelped.

“Lose the chatter and come back around,” Ric snapped. “Bravo Twelve, try to make your first run before the second wave hits!”

“Got it,” Anakin replied, and took a breath.
“[I do not wish to explode,] R2-D2 said.

“Yeah, same here,” Anakin muttered, and dropped them into a long fall to evade the incoming volley of laser fire.

* * * * *

Quinlan scowled, keeping one eye on Aayla as they fought to free the Naboo group from two different sets of droids pinning them down. Getting caught in the hall by one group had been bad enough, but to be boxed in? That really pissed him off.

“We don’t have time for this, Captain!” Amidala yelled over the din. Quinlan agreed wholeheartedly. There was a timed element to this mess, and they were getting way too close to not being in position.

Quinlan half-turned, ignoring the blaster bolts that started knocking out chunks of the stone pillar he was sheltering behind. “Adi!”

The Corellian woman was dealing with the battle droids and droidekas that were coming from the other side of the hall, and answered him without turning around. “Quin?”

“We need to split up!”

“Astute observation!” Adi yelled back. “Options?”

Quinlan glanced over at the young Queen, who held up her blaster…one with an attached monofilament line and a grapple option. He raised his eyebrow, tilting his head in the direction of the windows, and she grinned. Quinlan grinned back, nodding approval.

“Aayla! Switch with Adi!” Quinlan ordered, lightsaber already raised to take on the brunt of the blasts coming in their direction. “Adi?”

“I’m with the Queen,” Adi said. “Get this lot dealt with as soon as you can!”

“Sabé, Eirtaé, stay with them!” Amidala ordered, and then shot out the window.

The moment the Queen, Panaka, Adi, and their small group were clear, Quinlan pulled out one of Master Micah’s converted detonators. “You lot ready for some property damage?”

Sabé’s eyes lit up. “Roll it right down the center. The tile will explode upwards and do extra damage to the droideka’s unprotected undersides!”

“Master, blow them up quickly, I could use some help in this direction!” Aayla shouted. She didn’t sound frantic, so it was genuine need, not panic.

“I’ve got her,” Eirtaé said, shoving a new power pack into her blaster before turning to help Quinlan’s Padawan.

Quinlan rolled the detonator right down the center strip of tile. Just as Sabé had predicted, the tile blew upwards in a cloud of sharp-edge destruction. The battle droids squawked in electronic dismay, while two of the droidekas lost their shields. The Queen’s decoy wasted no time in nailing the unshielded droids with several blaster bolts.
The smoking, sparking ruin of droidekas were just falling over when Quinlan landed in the midst of the remaining droids, spinning, blade carving through the air in a wide arc. He sliced most of the rest of the droids in half, though one unfortunate battle droid escaped the lightsaber only to lose his head due to Quin’s fist.

“You guys need some upgrades. Your heads come off way too easily,” Quinlan said to the headless battle droid, which was beginning to walk around in mindless circles.

“Clear!” Aayla and Eirtaé called, after a long moment of silence that made Quin’s ears ring. The din of battle had vanished, leaving behind only sizzling droid parts and the sound of their own breath.

“Awesome,” Quinlan said, grinning. “Are we still following the plan, ladies?”

Sabé looked down at her outfit. “I didn’t fight in this ridiculous getup for nothing, Master Jedi.”

“The lift is this way,” Eirtaé added. She led the way, but not before giving Sabé a sour look. “Ridiculous outfit?”

Sabé shook her head, tugging the red and black lines of her gear into place. “The dress isn’t bad, but this damn thing on my head is going to wind up getting shot. I suggest we retire it immediately after we shoot the Viceroy.”

“Are we going to shoot the Viceroy?” Aayla asked, pursing her lips. It was a fair question, considering her Master had a bad habit of stabbing assholes first and worrying about questions later.

“Well, I’d really like to,” Sabé said, palming open the lift. “But if anyone gets to shoot him first, it’s Padmé.”

* * *

Qui-Gon hit the platform full body and lost most of the air from his lungs. Then he was falling through empty air again. He struck the second catwalk hard on his shoulder, rolled, and grabbed the platform edge just as he went over, muscles straining to prevent yet another fall.

His focus was scattered, and he could taste blood. His jaw was ringing from what he belatedly recognized had been a kick to the face.

Force. He considered himself lucky to still have his teeth.

_Qui!_

_Still here_, Qui-Gon replied, heaving a breath before he pulled himself back up onto the walkway. Obi-Wan and the Sith were fighting on the one above him, almost ten meters distant, red blades swirling and crashing against that single line of blue. Qui-Gon, seeing the fight from this sudden outside perspective, could suddenly understand why he felt so weary. Obi-Wan and Maul were dueling so fast that Qui-Gon could see little but a blur of motion.

_How the hell did you get down to that platform?_ Qui-Gon asked, when there was a brief lull in the exchange.
I fucking punched him back. Not my fault he has a glass jaw.

Qui-Gon frowned at the acid-laced response. He’d known right from the start that Obi-Wan hadn’t wanted to follow the Sith out of the hangar bay, but Maul had retreated from the fight, all but daring them to come after him. Obi-Wan had sworn aloud before they had given in to the inevitable, taking the fight into Theed’s generator complex. The Queen had to remain safe. The Jedi had to be defended from this imminent threat.

*He’s leading us,* Qui-Gon thought, and that was enough to get him moving. He was tired and aching from the fall, but he dammed well wasn’t going to leave Obi-Wan to fight that bastard alone. Even together, it seemed like his and Obi-Wan’s skill were just matching the Sith.

He made it to the upper catwalk in a single leap, but misjudged the landing and came down hard on one knee. Qui-Gon stood up, grimacing against the pain of what he suspected was cracked bone, and reignited his lightsaber as he ran to join Obi-Wan.

The Sith was retreating again, backing into a long corridor. Qui-Gon had no idea how the hell either of them were still fighting at that speed in the confined space. To his dismay, ray shields were snapping into place, breaking the corridor off into sections.

Qui-Gon stopped short when one of the shields slammed up in his face. *Melting pit at the end of the corridor,* he guessed, struggling to gain control of his breathing. He just didn’t understand why the shields would be cycling today, of all days. The only free Naboo were actively fighting against the Federation, not disposing of toxic substances.

Obi-Wan was trapped several sections ahead of him, and the Sith was enclosed in shields in the next section. The Zabrak paced back and forth, striking his lightstaff against the shield while regarding Obi-Wan with a snide, mocking smile.

Obi-Wan was ignoring the Sith, bent over with his hands on his knees. His unlit lightsaber was loosely gripped in his left hand.

*Obi-Wan, are you all right?*

Obi-Wan lifted his head. High spots of color were burning in his cheeks, and his hair was sweat-soaked, clinging to his face. *I’m all right. You’re the one who fell.*

Qui-Gon bit back a retort when he nearly mistook concern for blame. Neither of them were all right; Obi-Wan looked as exhausted as he felt. *I’m fine, just suffering from injured pride and several new bruises.*

*That’s good.* Obi-Wan wiped away sweat and pushed his hair back from his face.

Qui-Gon didn’t miss the worry coloring Obi-Wan’s mental voice. *What is it?*

Obi-Wan finally stood up from his half-crouch, giving the Sith a glare before looking back at Qui-Gon. *He’s good, Qui—better than he was before. He never should have lasted this long, not after we worked so hard at getting this damned proficient.*

*No, I worked at it,* Qui-Gon replied, trying for humor. He hadn’t been imagining the Sith’s ability, after all. *You, however, were already this good.*

*Stay put when the shields fall,* Qui-Gon said. *I’ll catch up.*

Obi-Wan surprised him by shaking his head. *No.*
Qui-Gon frowned. *Obi-Wan, you can’t—don’t try to do this alone.* Their pairbond was a flux of protectiveness, love, and a startling splash of panic. *Our chances are better if we do this together.*

*I don’t want anything to happen to you.* Obi-Wan met his eyes, a surfeit of pain and regret in his gaze. *I can’t do this twice.*

*Nor do I want to see anything happen to you.* Qui-Gon raised his hand in a beseeching gesture, scarcely aware he was doing it. *Please. We can do this.*

Obi-Wan bit his lip, glancing back and forth as if torn. Qui-Gon held his breath, afraid that Obi-Wan was going to do what he himself had once so foolishly done—maybe even for the same reason.

Their eyes locked, and time slowed, the moment stretching out between them. Qui-Gon let the peace of it flow over him, a bit awed that he was, for once, sharing this experience with another. The chaotic drive of Obi-Wan’s thoughts slowed, letting them share intent and reassurance through the pairbond.

When Obi-Wan nodded, Qui-Gon sighed in relief.

The fields cycled open. Obi-Wan ignited his lightsaber and faced Maul, waiting with a confident set to his shoulders that had been missing a moment ago. Maul attacked and tried to lead Obi-Wan down the corridor, but he held his position. The corridor hampered Obi-Wan’s defense, but his refusal to follow Maul revealed the Sith’s crippled offense. Qui-Gon rushed forward the moment the shield in front of him went down, trying to catch up before the damned things could cycle again.

He skidded into position next to Obi-Wan as the shield snapped closed behind him. Obi-Wan shut down his lightsaber just before Qui-Gon embraced him.

“Don’t ever do that again.”

Obi-Wan nodded, his head resting against Qui-Gon’s tunics. “No. Sorry.”

*It’s all right.* Qui-Gon refused to flinch when the Sith hammered at the ray shielding. Maul was sneering at them both, his anger an invisible cloud of miasma that flooded the corridor.

*Why are these damned shields in the way? Where are the controls?* Obi-Wan took a breath and then let it out in a muttered string of obscenities. *They’re active because he wanted them to be. Dammit! I told myself I wasn’t going to let him lead me right back to this point, and then I fucking well did it anyway.*

*It’s exactly the same?* Qui-Gon asked in surprise. Obi-Wan had said that he and his counterpart were separated, but he’d never suspected that the fight would progress in the exact same fashion!

*Yes. Obi-Wan squeezed his hand, tighter than was comfortable.*

*Force, no wonder you were panicking.*

*I was not—* Obi-Wan sighed. *All right, I was panicking.*

Qui-Gon smiled. *Try not to fall into the pit this time.*

Obi-Wan’s eyes narrowed, but his mouth twitched as he suppressed his own smile. *I won’t fall in
as long as you don’t get stabbed.

Deal, Qui-Gon replied, and started counting down the seconds until the shields cycled.

You said you wanted to fool him in an entirely new way. Obi-Wan ignited his lightsaber in the same moment as Qui-Gon did. Well, I have a terrible idea.

* * * *

This is not going well, Mace thought. The Trade Federation had doubled their numbers in the last ten minutes. The Gungan Army hadn’t broken and fled, but it was starting to become obvious that they were running low on munitions. Two Jedi could only do so much to assist in the face of overwhelming odds.

Mace grabbed a fleeing Gungan by the back of his armor and slung him across the back of his kaadu. The warrior squawked at the indignance, but it saved him from being flattened by an incoming transport.

“Mesa can run!” the Gungan protested angrily.

“Not as fast as that fucking thing can fly!” Mace yelled back.

The Gungan lifted his head and swore in a language that bore little resemblance to Basic. “Didn’t be knowin’ the front line had fallen!”

“Take the other kaadu!” Mace yelled at him, grabbing the reins of the empty-saddled biped before it could flee. “We need to get everyone clear and reform the line about a half-klik back!”

The Gungan made a scrambling leap from the back of Mace’s kaadu and onto the saddle of the new one, seating himself quickly before snagging the reins. Mace finally got a good look at his face—Captain Tarpals.

“You’san go dat way,” Tarpals said, pointing down the west flank. “Me’sun go—oh, no. Me’sun goin’ ta save the new General!”

Mace swung his head around to look. Was that—was that foolish Gungan riding a tank?

* * * *

Anakin’s first run on the droid Control Ship hadn’t gone so well. Neither had the second. At this point, the third run was going to work or he was going to…to…well, try it again.

It was going to work, though. It would, because it had to.

“Hang on, Artoo!” Anakin yelled, dumping the Naboo fighter into a controlled, downward spiral spin that made it look like he was going to crash into the control ship’s surface. Bravo Three picked off the vulture droid that tried to tail him—the resulting fireball blossomed out and temporarily saturated his rear displays.
“Where’s Bravo Five?” Anakin asked, nudging the stick to get the spiraling curve closer to the shielding gap.

“She got swarmed off your six by these damn vultures, Kid,” Bravo Three said. “Tell me you’ve got this run!”

Anakin could see the empty space in his mind’s eye, that tiny window in the shields that buttoned up the hangar bay between flights of vulture droids. R2-D2’s vigilant scanning tagged onto the unguarded space a moment later, though the astromech sent a message across Anakin’s screen about their craft possibly not fitting through the tiny gap.

“We’ll make it,” Anakin said confidently. “Bravo Three, this is my run! Get clear the moment you see me slide through those shields!”

The stupid shielding gap was considered tactically negligible, given that any weapons piercing it would do little more than surface damage to the control ship’s hull. Of course, the Nemoidians had never considered the fact that someone might be crazy enough to shoot through the hole and land in the hangar bay.

Or crash into it! Anakin kept his hands tight on the controls as he corkscrewed the starfighter right through the gap. R2 sounded a warning about the tip of his aft wing getting sliced off, but it was superficial damage—they’d be fine.

Then they were through, and he was sailing directly into the hangar bay. Anakin gritted his teeth, said a quick prayer to the Force, cut thrusters, and activated the repulsors.

The repulsors didn’t fire. The Naboo fighter dropped to the hangar bay floor and skidded along in a shower of golden sparks. Anakin bumped his helmet-protected head against the boards when they came to a jolted halt against a wall.

“Well, that wasn’t so bad,” Anakin said, breathing a sigh of relief. “You still in one piece, Artoo?”

R2 whistled compliance.

“Gotcha. Let’s blow this thing and go home.” Anakin put his hands on the controls and watched in dismay as all of the boards blinked offline. He hit the engine fire switch, the master override. Nothing responded.

“Oh, no.” He couldn’t hear R2, not with the canopy engaged, but he knew what the droid would have been saying. “Everything’s overheated.”

Anakin slumped back in his seat and muttered a string of curses under his breath. The vocabulary would have made a smuggler proud, but that was still amateur hour compared to his Master. He managed to kick the translation circuit back to life by beating on it with his fist. The screen filled with a lot of binary swearing, along with details about the location of the control ship’s power plant.

Perfect position, but it wouldn’t do either of them any good unless the ship fired up. “Artoo, see if you can get the power going.”

R2 trilled affirmative.

Anakin dropped his head back against the seat, just in time to notice that the droids in the hangar were getting awfully curious about him. “Great. Just great.”
Adi almost protested the Naboo’s easy capitulation to the battle droids, and then she saw the look on Amidala’s face. The girl had a plan. Adi wasn’t quite sure what it was going to be, but she hid her lightsaber away before the droids could think to demand it. If something went wrong, at least one of them would still be armed.

Then again…Adi observed Panaka’s gait, the fall of Amidala’s cloak, and the too-heavy step of one of the far guards. This group was not unarmed, after all.

The droids led them right to the throne room, and directly to Nute Gunray. Adi shared a look with Panaka, both of them thinking similar thoughts about the Trade Federation’s overconfidence.

The Nemoidian blustered about Amidala signing the treaty. Amidala refused, and looked to be on the verge of rolling her eyes at Gunray’s insistence.

There was a blast that struck the stone frame of the throne room doorway. A resplendent vision of Queen Amidala stood at the end of the hallway, blaster raised. She was flanked by Quinlan and Aayla, the latter of whom had a shy, pleased smile on her face.

“Viceroy! Your reign of terror has ended!” the Queen cried.

“Get her!” Gunray yelled, pointing at the red-and-black garbed girl who was already ducking around a corner to escape the droids that went running to fetch her. Gunray gave Amidala a disgusted look. “This one is a decoy!”

Padmé and Panaka wasted no time at all. When the Viceroy’s attention wandered back to the hallway chase, Amidala dropped onto the throne and slammed her hand down on the console. A panel in the arm of the chair slid aside, revealing two of the Naboo-crafted silver blasters. The Queen kept one for herself while tossing the other to Panaka. His shot took out the first battle droid, Padmé nailed the second, and Adi hit the third with a vicious, flat-palmed strike that separated the droid’s head from its body. That was it for the Viceroy’s body guards, and the Nemoidian himself was unarmed.

“Oh, my,” Adi said, a broad grin on her face. “I like you, Your Highness.” The placement of Sabé and her Jedi companions had been a masterful stroke of genius.

Amidala offered Adi a quick, amused nod, before she turned and pointed her blaster squarely at the stunned Viceroy. She hit another button on the throne with her free hand. The two doors leading into the chamber sealed with quiet thuds, creating a lockdown situation inside the throne room.

“Now, Viceroy,” Amidala said, her voice like flaming steel, “We will discuss a new treaty.”

This is either the best or the worst day of my life, Rillian thought. She stood with her back against a wall, moving her lightsaber in a blur of copper light to defend herself against the droids who had her pinned. The Advanced Lightsaber Techniques class had been beneficial to her skills, but it
hadn’t prepared her for anything like this!

See what happens when you don’t listen to your Master? her inner voice taunted. You left the hangar bay when Master Qui-Gon told you to stay. You’re going to have the embarrassment of having been killed by inferior-quality droids!

[Help!] Rillian roared, when her antics gained her the attention of another droid patrol. [I’m an idiot and I’m not ashamed to admit it!]

There was a flash of dark green blade and the closest droids toppled over. Rillian, panting, lowered her lightsaber as the green blade turned in midair and went back to the hand that had tossed it. Master Micah ran to her, his gait wildly unbalanced as he compensated for the old damage of his body.

“You all right, Padawan?” he asked, wiping sweat from his dark gold skin with the sleeve of his tunic.

[Yes, Combat Master,] Rillian said. [Thank you for saving my furry bacon.]

She had been warned by the crèche Masters that her tendency to joke under pressure probably would not be appreciated, but she couldn’t help herself. On the Jedi transport to Naboo, she had discovered that maybe those crèche Masters didn’t know everything about the Jedi who took field missions.

Master Micah grinned at her words. “You’re welcome, Rillian. Next time, you can save my bald bacon.”

Rillian blinked. [Baldness ruins the flavor.]

He laughed. “Qui-Gon deserves you completely, and you can tell him I said that.” He raised his lightsaber when they both heard the clatter of more droid patrols. Rillian knew he and his team had blown up tons of the battle droids, and yet they still seemed to be everywhere.

“Let’s go see if we can find those Masters of yours. They could probably use a hand.”

Rillian nodded. Master Qui-Gon had told her to stay as far away from the Sith as possible, but he had also told her to obey the instructions of other Masters. She wondered if he would be as amused by the contradiction as she was.

“And I bet there will be plenty of droids to blow up along the way,” Master Micah added.

Rillian brightened. That sounded much more in-line with her appointed task. [Okay. Let’s go.]

*          *          *          *

Damned, stupid, ridiculous—

Obi-Wan bit off the diatribe before it could dominate his thoughts. A forced step, parry, a turn, and he was again immersed in the rhythm of the fight. Sweat ran down his face, making his eyes burn and his vision blur.

Every time, before he could blink his eyes clear, it was like he was viewing things as they had
been before, not as they were now.

The three of them were together, skirting the gaping pit. The Sith had two opponents, not one. Qui-Gon was not trapped in this room alone with Maul.

Obi-Wan was not a helpless witness trapped behind red energy shields.

He watched Qui-Gon take the brunt of Maul’s latest series of feints, innocuous sweeps that became several slamming blows. Qui-Gon turned the last set against the Sith, spinning him around. Then Obi-Wan was engaging again, but just long enough to shove the Sith back with lightsaber and with the Force. They were now standing equidistant from each other, a triangle bracketing a seemingly endless chasm.

_Idiot, Obi-Wan thought again. If you’d saved that little trick and destroyed Maul’s lightsaber here instead of on Tatooine, this damned battle would be over and done with._

The Sith learned quickly, and protected his weapon well. There had been no such opportunity here, when he most needed it. He and Qui-Gon were both wrung out by this fight, dripping sweat and feeling the burn of fatigue. Qui-Gon probably had about three more minutes before his control was going to start slipping; Obi-Wan estimated five minutes for himself. When this damn fight was over with, he reserved the right to sprawl down on the cold deck plating and let the metal leech heat from his body.

If he had been forced to fight Maul on his own? Obi-Wan wasn’t certain if he would have succeeded before now, or if he would have been dead twice over from the disorientation of repeating this unwanted experience.

_Are you ready?

Qui-Gon didn’t look at him. _I am displeased with the number of times that you end up being bait._

Obi-Wan resisted the urge to smile. _But it’s always so effective._ He still looked so damn young, and he wasn’t above using another’s misconceptions to his own advantage. His skin was naturally pale, and with his long hair already drenched in sweat, it would not be hard to fake physical distress.

_Do not let him kill you_, Qui-Gon replied, steadying himself. _Do it._

Obi-Wan somersaulted across the pit, landing next to Maul and then pretended to lose his balance, falling to one knee. He caught a flash of Maul eyeing him in complete contempt, heard Qui-Gon shout his name in what sounded like genuine desperation.

There was triumph shining in Maul’s corrupted eyes as he brought the lightstaff up to complete a killing stroke. Obi-Wan held his position until the last possible moment and then spun in place to avoid the fall of the staff. He felt the heat of it pass down his back. Maul snarled when Qui-Gon knocked the Sith off-balance with the Force.

Obi-Wan gained his feet as he completed the spin, raising his lightsaber and burying it in Maul’s gut before the Zabrak could recover. Qui-Gon mirrored the move, his green blade sprouting forth from Maul’s chest.

The Sith gasped out one last fetid breath. Then the body fell through their blades to rest on the floor next to the melting pit.

Maul’s eyes were wide with surprise, but the amber glow was fading. Beneath the unnatural shine was nothing but a dull, jaundiced yellow. Even the blood-red ring turned the color of old rust.
Get back up from that, Obi-Wan mentally snarled, shutting down his lightsaber. He heard Qui-Gon do the same; in the next instant Qui-Gon was lifting Obi-Wan from the floor, arms wrapped around him in a bone-creaking embrace.

Obi-Wan gasped out a laugh and buried his face against Qui-Gon’s sweat-soaked tunics. “Oh, fuck.”

“Indeed,” Qui-Gon murmured, but didn’t release his hold. They stood that way for long minutes, trembling from exertion. They were both so close to an adrenal crash it was an honest wonder they didn’t just collapse and stay that way.

It took a brief, shared meditation to soothe trembling limbs, and for Obi-Wan to feel like he was steady on his feet. He wasn’t in the best shape, and neither was Qui-Gon, but as long as they didn’t have to fight Maul again in the next five minutes, they would be fine.

“Well.” Qui-Gon placed a gentle kiss on Obi-Wan’s forehead and stepped back. “That wasn’t so bad.”

Obi-Wan slung his hair back from his face again. “Of course not,” he said, snorting his opinion of that idea. Then he glanced down at Maul’s body before staring back up at Qui-Gon. The Sith was dead, and they were both alive. Qui-Gon was still alive.

Obi-Wan was grinning like a fool, and he knew it. “You’re right, that wasn’t bad at all.” He took a step forward, stood on his toes, and attempted to kiss his partner senseless.

Qui-Gon allowed them another moment, and then he sighed. “Regrettfully, there is still a battle going on. We should go and see if the others need assistance.”

Obi-Wan nodded. “Later, then.” He clipped his lightsaber to his belt as Qui-Gon walked a few paces away to collect Maul’s lightstaff. Duty first; he could always collapse in an exhausted heap later. If anything, he needed to check on Anakin…

He heard something hit the decking behind him. He turned, hand already reaching for his lightsaber.

What is—

There was unexpected light, an explosion of fire—and then he was consumed by blinding pain.

* * * *

[Power restored,] R2-D2 informed Anakin. The scrolled text still managed to radiate smugness.

“Wizard,” Anakin said, grinning. He put his hands back on the controls and swung about, using the tail of the fighter to side-sweep the battle droids that had gathered around the ship. “Here’s to me blowing the power core up on purpose!”

[Do you often blow things up by accident?]

Anakin glanced at the readouts for the power core and then took aim, switching from laser blasts to the craft’s set of mounted torpedoes. “Sometimes it really seems that way.”

[Direct hit,] R2 said, including an estimation of the blast range. [I suggest that we leave now.]
“That’s the idea.” Anakin drew back on the stick and shot forward, putting on more speed than he’d bothered with last time. Of course, before, he hadn’t realized he’d done serious damage until the hangar bay had gutted fire when he’d exited the droid control ship. Whoops.

[The doors are closing!] R2 warbled in alarm.

“Oh, screw that,” Anakin muttered, using one hand to dump power from weapons to the sublights, gaining them a few more kilometers per second. He didn’t think it was his imagination that the doors had been activated earlier than last time.

No, not his imagination at all, oh shit. Anakin didn’t breathe again until he dropped the fighter on its side and shot through the narrow gap in the blast doors, riding out on a jet of flame.

“Holy gods, kid!” Bravo Five shouted.

“Cutting it a bit close, aren’t you?” Bravo Three asked, dropping down from above to sit at Anakin’s portside wing. “Punch it, Bravo Twelve!”

“Way ahead of you,” Anakin replied. He and Bravo Three shot out into open space, while R2 reported that a string of explosions were tearing the control ship apart. The comm was full of the frenzied yells of the other surviving pilots, raw disbelief mixed with elation and triumph. Anakin couldn’t resist a shout of his own. R2 chirped and trilled, adding his own joy and relief to the mix.

_I did it!_ Anakin told himself, repeating it over and over again in his head. _And better, this time I meant to do it!_

“You did it!” Ric was yelling—the first time Anakin had ever heard the lead pilot’s voice rise above stoic determination.

“Of course he did it!” Bravo Five yelled back, smug.

“I don’t fucking believe it,” Garen joined in, laughing.

“It’s blowing up, isn’t it?” Anakin retorted, grinning wide. His hands were starting to shake from the rush of what he’d just done. “Believe it!”

He didn’t get a warning. One moment, everything was fine, his heart pounding from exhilaration. The next moment, Anakin was screaming as pain tore through him, so intense that at first he didn’t realize it wasn’t his own. R2-D2 saved him when Anakin jerked at the controls in reflex, an act that would have destroyed both them and the fighter on his wing.

“Obi-Wan!” Anakin gasped for breath. The comm was reverberating with curious shouts, but Garen’s stood out the most: “Oh, gods, no, no no no, you are not allowed to do this to us, you fucking bastard—”

Anakin slammed his hand down onto the manual override, taking back control from R2, who squawked in outrage. “Siri, make Garen stay up here with you and finish this cleanup!” he ordered, his words falling into a shocked lull in the comm chatter. “I’m going down! He’s alive—just make sure there’s no other surprises waiting for them!”

“Kid—”

“Shut up, Garen,” Siri interrupted. “Padawan Skywalker, we’ve got this. Please go make sure your skinny-butt Master is all right.”

“Thanks,” Anakin said. He ripped off the flight helmet and its built-in comm, sending the fighter
into a steep, near vertical dive that would take him right back into the atmosphere. He hadn’t lied—Obi-Wan was alive. He just…Anakin just wasn’t sure if he was going to stay that way.

He knew that kind of pain. He knew what it meant.

[Correct .02 degrees to avoid atmospheric burn] R2-D2 said. [Correct .03 to gain .15 k/ps increase in flight speed.]

“And that is why you were always my favorite.”

*          *          *          *

It was a relief to see the battle droids deactivate, falling to pieces where they stood. Mace lowered his lightsaber, hesitant, wanting to make sure that all of the droids were down. He needn’t have worried. Even the droidekas had shut down in place, though they didn’t dramatically fall to bits as the others had.

Boss Nass rode up next to him. The Gungan leader had retained his immense calm amidst the chaos, though he had a big grin on his face as his people celebrated the defeat of the Trade Federation army.

Yoda had joined in the battle when the front line had crumbled, taking down his share of droids, but now he was resting on the falumpaset behind Boss Nass again. The ancient Master radiated serenity, as if he’d spent the entire battle in a state of intense relaxation.

“Worthless mechaneeks,” Boss Nass said in a pleased rumble. “Wesa be havin’ many trophies, mesa thinkin.’”

Before he could think of a response, Mace flinched at the sudden intrusion of pain that flooded the Force. Yoda’s clawed hand clutched at his chest. The pain shifted, increased in intensity, became shockpain-ragedesperation-horrordenial. Mace grimaced and tightened his shields, uncertain who was broadcasting what.

“Take me back to the city, you must,” Yoda whispered. “Needed, I am!”

Mace nodded in silent acknowledgement. He knew which of them was the better healer, and the Gungans still needed assistance. “Go.”

Boss Nass gave a grim nod. He plucked Yoda from the rear of the falumpaset and settled the ancient Jedi into his massive lap. “Hangin’ on, yousa should be doin’,” the Gungan told Yoda, and then yelled, “Hey, yousa dere!” He subjected his mount to a tremendous kick. “Got t’be movin’ now!”

*          *          *          *

When they returned to the hangar bay, Rillian and Master Micah found—unsurprisingly—more droids. She stood back-to-back with the Combat Master, working well with him after months spent in his A.L.T. class. The number of droids in Theed seemed infinite, and they stank when
charred by their own returned blaster fire.

The last of the droids fell in smoking, molten-edged heaps. Rillian was about to sigh in relief when another patrol ran into the hangar at speed, weapons already raised.

“They just do not let up, do they,” Master Micah grumbled. Rillian felt awful for the older Master; he looked and sounded really tired.

Before the droids could take aim and fire, they froze mid-motion. Rillian let out a curious growl, and barked in surprise when the droids dropped their weapons. Then their limbs and heads fell off.

Rillian stared at the mess, ears hurting from the din of so many droid parts striking a metal floor. Theed suddenly seemed very, very quiet.

Micah lowered his lightsaber and turned to face her, mouth open as if to speak. Then Rillian howled in agonized surprise, clutching her head as white light exploded behind her eyes. She dropped her lightsaber and fell to her knees, keening out a mournful howl. The fledgling bond she had with Master Obi-Wan told her that something terrible and painful had happened.

She heard Master Micah’s shocked whisper of denial, but then Rillian’s senses were overwhelmed again. Rillian! Anakin shouted. I’m on my way, wait for me!

Rillian was still half-blind with shock. Skywalker? she sent tentatively.

I’m about a minute out. Clear the hangar bay so I don’t run anyone over!

*          *          *          *

Their only warning was the whisper of cloth, the thump of a heavy body hitting the floor. What happened occurred in the space of seconds, but would always stand out in stark, slow clarity in his memory.

Qui-Gon whirled, Maul’s lightstaff forgotten. Obi-Wan had half-turned to face the threat, a dark-garbed figure that had landed less than an arm’s length away from him. The lightsaber must have been ignited already, but Qui-Gon didn’t see it until the figure thrust the red blade into Obi-Wan’s body.

Qui-Gon screamed, his heart torn to shreds in an instant. The pairbond flooded his awareness with shock and horrific, burning agony.

The lightsaber had no sooner emerged from Obi-Wan’s back when the cloaked figure yanked it free. There was a terrible, resounding silence as Obi-Wan collapsed to the floor in a boneless sprawl.

Time stopped. There was nothing, no sound, no movement, no life. Qui-Gon felt his veins flood with ice. He stared at the tableau of his fallen partner, of the waiting, malevolent creature that had just—

Time resumed with a lurch as Qui-Gon realized that Obi-Wan still lived, that the pairbond between them held strong. He was alive, if unconscious. Given the wound he’d just suffered, Qui-Gon considered that a small mercy.
The soft beige tunics Obi-Wan wore were a stark contrast to the black worn by the dead Sith he’d fallen near. Dark and Light above, Dark and Light below, a balanced equation.

No. That was not balance, but a mockery.

“Who are you?” Qui-Gon asked, lifting the lightsaber he did not even recall igniting.

The figure stepped forward, so that he stood next to Obi-Wan, and lowered his hood. He was an ordinary human in appearance, possibly in his third decade, but just out of the shadow of adolescence. He had greasy black hair and sickly yellow eyes, like the Sith, but his eyes did not burn with their own glow.

“I am a Hand of my Lord Sidious, Jedi.”

“Thank you.” Qui-Gon had never heard of any such thing, but then, there was so much about the Sith the Jedi no longer knew. “I’m going to kill you now.”

“Such rage.” The man laughed, kicking Obi-Wan in the ribs before giving Qui-Gon a disdainful stare. “I doubt you will succeed. You Jedi are so much alike. All it takes is harm to a loved one and you fall apart, become easy prey. I assure you, I will send you to join this one soon enough.”

Qui-Gon growled, feeling the faint reflection of that kick in the pairbond. Not quite conscious, but not entirely aware, then. “I would not do that, were I you.”

The Hand answered him with a mocking grin. Then he lowered his blade and ran the edge of his lightsaber down Obi-Wan’s right arm, scorching cloth and leaving a long, stark red burn behind on his skin. The spreading scent of burnt flesh and charred cloth grew stronger.

“If you do that again, dying is going to be the least of your problems,” Qui-Gon bit out. He was trembling, but exhaustion was no longer his difficulty. It was taking every ounce of control he had not to fly at the Hand in a rage.

Focus. Obi-Wan was still alive. Qui-Gon was not going to be able to help his partner if he Fell, or got himself killed. Attempt to gain information. Attempt to distract. Search for weaknesses. Implement them when you can kill the bastard without swallowing Darkness whole to do it.

“What do you want?”

The Hand pretended to consider the question, but the desire to brag won out. First weakness: Arrogance. “Lord Sidious sent me to ensure that his apprentice was successful. This moment was to be the Sith equivalent of your Jedi Trials. If he failed…as he has failed,” the Hand gestured at the Sith’s corpse, “it is up to me to finish the job.”

Keep him talking.

Qui-Gon did not outwardly react, for all that he wanted to cry out in relief. Obi-Wan?

Arrogant fucking prick, if he was any sort of Sith he wouldn’t have needed to be so damned sneaky how the fuck did he manage that—

Obi-Wan, Qui-Gon repeated, clenching his jaw to avoid smiling. Are you all right?

No? The reply was more honest than Qui-Gon had expected. Hurts bloody awful. Prefer to just be sliced in half and have done with it.

Qui-Gon’s hands tightened on his lightsaber. Don’t even think that.
“Sith or no, this Lord Sidious might be upset that you allowed his apprentice to die,” Qui-Gon said.

The man shrugged, unconcerned by the idea. “Perhaps, but once I bring him the news that I killed the two of you, I think Lord Sidious will be inclined to think well of me. Perhaps I will become Darth Maul’s replacement,” he mused, taking another step forward.

*Oh, this is going to hurt,* Obi-Wan grumbled, and Qui-Gon held his breath.

“I would be more suited to it, being a Sith Apprentice. After all, the vaunted Master Jedi did not sense my presence—”

The Hand took one more step, and Obi-Wan struck, lashing out with his left foot. The strike hit the Hand in the side of his knee, hard enough that Qui-Gon saw the joint bend sideways. Not even the man’s shriek was enough to mask the sound of splintering bone.

Qui-Gon wasted no time, gave no thought to finesse. He flung his lightsaber overhand, a Force-enhanced, guided throw. The emerald blade sliced through the Hand’s neck at a diagonal, almost severing the man’s head from his shoulders.

The Hand’s nerve-shocked body stepped back and then fell, striking the edge of the melting pit. There was a lull before gravity took over, pulling the new corpse down into the shaft.

Shock held Qui-Gon in place. One heartbeat, two, three…and then the sound of his lightsaber striking the floor broke his paralysis. He bolted forward and dropped to his knees at Obi-Wan’s side.

Qui-Gon had to use his hands and the Force to turn Obi-Wan over, to gently pull his partner into his lap and off of the floor. Obi-Wan’s eyes were closed, his skin gray-tinged, his lips bloodless. Qui-Gon touched Obi-Wan’s cheek with his fingertips, finding shock-cold skin. In the Force, Obi-Wan felt distant—but still here, not gone, *not gone.*

“Obi-Wan,” Qui-Gon whispered, and finally glanced down at the lightsaber wound. Black-charred cloth surrounded the raw, reddened mess of the plasma burn. He wasn’t bleeding; the blade had cauterized even as it had destroyed.

Obi-Wan had lived through the initial strike. Now it was the shock that could kill him.

“Obi-Wan,” Qui-Gon said again, resting his hand on his partner’s chilled face. “Wake up, please. I need you here. Come on!”

There was a flicker of awareness in the Force before Obi-Wan’s eyes fluttered open, revealing irises that were not blue, or green, but a soft, washed-out gray. *Qui?*

“There you are,” Qui-Gon said, managing a smile. He didn’t need the Force to tell him how dire this was. He could feel Obi-Wan’s life fading with every second that passed.

“‘s…over?”

“Yes, love. Twice over now, thanks to you.” *Let me in,* Qui-Gon requested. This was too important, too critical, to leave anything to chance.

Obi-Wan didn’t fight him, to his relief, but Qui-Gon was still stunned by what he found. The lightsaber wound had eviscerated Obi-Wan’s core. His shocked, overstressed body was spiraling down into twilight. There was nothing left to shore up that faltering strength, not unless it was done by Qui-Gon himself.
That he could do, but he needed to make sure someone knew where they were. Obi-Wan was going to need Healers soon, no matter what measures Qui-Gon took.

“Hold on, love, I’ll get help—” Qui-Gon reached for his commlink and was stopped by Obi-Wan’s cold fingertips grasping at his hand. “Obi-Wan?”

Obi-Wan drew in a shuddering breath. When he spoke, his words were faint but clear. “I need….need you to…take care of Ani.”

Qui-Gon stared at him, and for a moment could not comprehend what he was being told. “Obi-Wan, no, that isn’t necessary. You’re going to be all right.”

“No!” Obi-Wan grimaced in pain, his speech becoming more stressed. “Anakin…targeted by Sidious. The Sith. Please! Please don’t…don’t let him…”

“Anakin is going to be just fine,” Qui-Gon whispered, clasping Obi-Wan’s hand in desperation. Not gone, not yet, but fading. “Everything’s going to be all right. Stop being so damned defeatist!”

Obi-Wan smiled. His eyes were full of light and regret. “S’all right, Qui. You don’t have to…to pretend.” His words were getting quieter still, a destroyed rasp of his elegant voice. “I know that I…I’m dying.”

The words burned though Qui-Gon as certainly, as painfully, as any lightsaber blade, tearing his heart open. Tears gathered in his eyes and fell. “That is not true, that is not happening.” Qui-Gon’s voice broke, grief and fright trying to steal away his all-important calm. “Obi-Wan! Oh, gods, please don’t go!”

“’m so sorry.” Obi-Wan’s words were barely audible.

Qui-Gon pulled himself together, and refused to let go—not to Obi-Wan’s hand, not to the pairbond, not to that drifting sense of Obi-Wan’s presence in the Force. If he lost his calm, his focus, then there would be nothing, and that was unacceptable.

“Obi-Wan? Oh, love.” Qui-Gon all but keened the words, his throat closing and trying to choke off his air when Obi-Wan’s eyes drifted closed. “Stay with me!”

Desperation was driving his thoughts and he let it, feeling the speedy shuffle of idea-to-discard, riffling through thoughts and words and old events, searching for something, anything that would stop this from happening.

What he found was shocking in its simplicity.

“Lifebond with me,” Qui-Gon said. If this was not the bonding he’d hoped for, so be it. He would rather desperation color everything than death.

Obi-Wan sighed. I die, you die. The words were soft, a mental breeze that was on the verge of breaking apart. Can’t…can’t do that to…to you…

Qui-Gon shook his head, feeling something like hope blossom in his heart. He had it, now, a memory to match intent. “No. I live, you live,” he said fervently. “I will live, and so will you.” Qui-Gon let his other hand trace the contours of his lover’s face. “You once told me that you could bear anything, so long as I loved you. Did you lie to me?”

“No…” But that…that was a dream. Wasn’t…it wasn’t you.
“No, Obi-Wan,” Qui-Gon whispered, smiling through his tears. He had the man’s attention now. “It was me, though I don’t know how such a thing would have been possible. I spoke to you in a room in this very Palace. Do you remember?”

“Yes…” Obi-Wan exhaled on the word, a lassitude coming over his limbs. Qui-Gon stilled, terrified that it was too late, after all.

Then Obi-Wan opened his eyes again, and they were a fever-bright, vivid blue. “You told me…told me you loved me.”

“Yes, I did.” Qui-Gon brushed Obi-Wan’s hair back from his face. “I loved you then, and I love you now…and if you leave me, I will follow. I asked you to bond with me, and I meant it, though I’d planned to ask when it was not a life-or-death matter.”

*Planned to ask?* Obi-Wan’s smile was faint, but stronger than before.


*Would’ve said yes,* Obi-Wan said. His skin was still cold, but true warmth was coming back into his eyes. “I’m…I’m saying yes, now.”

Qui-Gon grasped both of Obi-Wan’s hands, their fingers threading together as he called upon the Force. He let it fill him, a white light that drove out doubt and despair and pain. The warmth centered in their joined hands, which emitted a gentle, silvery-blue glow.

*I didn’t expect…*

*Nor did I,* Qui-Gon replied, and then spoke aloud. “Where you go, I will follow.”

Obi-Wan shuddered in his arms as the first of the threads formed in the Force, wrapping around their existing pairbond. *Th’on swi et alla, A…A del de orrette.* His answering vow was spoken in the oldest Jedi dialect still known to the Order.

“My life is yours, and yours is mine.” Qui-Gon swallowed as the pairbond’s structure shifted, starting to become something else entirely.

*Ye’ete pon far, y far ete…* Obi-Wan gasped, tightening his grip on Qui-Gon’s hand. The Force was coalescing around them, visible hints and whispers of intense energy.

Qui-Gon felt some long-sleeping part of his soul awaken and reach out for it. “We stand together, and the Force binds us.” The bond shone with the same silvery blue as the warm glow in their hands.

The energy sang in his veins, and further revealed itself as bright blue luminescence in Obi-Wan’s eyes. *Con swalla e’achu, y tana kio domtian eyua.*

“It’s beautiful,” Obi-Wan whispered, looking both pained and amazed.

*It is.* Qui-Gon rested their joined hands on Obi-Wan’s chest. He could feel Obi-Wan’s heart beating, too faint and too fast, but it was the sound of a body intent upon life. “Heart to heart, mind to mind, and soul to soul.”

Obi-Wan drew in an uneven breath. *Faschu t’faschu, cova t’cova, y lirnau t’lirnau.* The link was a sudden warmth in Qui-Gon’s heart, and that warmth was Obi-Wan’s presence.

The energy faded, no longer visible in their eyes or in the air, but it still revealed itself in their
joined hands. “And now you’re stuck with me,” Qui-Gon murmured, bending over to kiss his mate’s parted lips. When he drew back, Obi-Wan’s eyes were closed, unconsciousness drawing him down again, but his presence in the Force was stronger. He was more willing—no, more capable—of fighting for his life.

Qui-Gon lifted their still-joined hands and pressed his lips against Obi-Wan’s icy fingers. “I’m not letting you go.”

* * * *

Anakin almost blew the fighter’s landing, but that was because of the damn wing tip he’d lost during the battle. It messed with his ability to keep the fighter on an even course, and the flight through atmosphere had been rough. At least when he landed in the hangar bay, the repulsors didn’t fail to fire.

He leapt from the ship the moment R2 was able to pop the canopy. The exterior was blackened, the yellow paint job damaged by the not-quite burn of re-entry.

“Rillian!”

[Here!] Rillian howled back. Anakin darted over to meet her and found Rillian standing with Master Micah. The Combat Master had a grim, intense look on his face.

“Master Jedi!”

Anakin turned to see that Captain Panaka was running over to greet them. He held a blaster, but it was raised, not aiming at anything. “The Queen sent me to find out what has happened to the rest of our forces. Are you all—”

“We’re all right, but we’ve got wounded, somewhere in that direction,” Micah waved a hand, frustrated.

“Then follow me,” Anakin said, gaining everyone’s attention. “I know exactly where they are.”

“Padawan,” Panaka tried to say, but Micah shook his head, cutting off the Captain’s protest.


Panaka swore when Anakin led them into the generator complex. “Sabotage?”

“No,” Anakin said, running over to the third walkway. He knew there was a lift at the end of it, and they needed to drop at least two levels, if not more. The others followed behind him, though Panaka muttered something foul about the walkway’s lack of safety rails.

Anakin crammed himself into a corner of the lift, right in front of the controls. Rillian was just behind him, then Panaka, and finally Micah, who was sweating freely, pain etching his features. Anakin let his hand hover over the control systems, and…it was three levels, definitely.

The drop was short, but when he found the right passageway, there was a series of red shields blocking the way. Anakin paused, biting his lip. He’d…seen this before? Maybe? Or perhaps he just remembered it being described. Except then the shields would be cycling, not jammed in place like this.
Master Micah and Captain Panaka found a control panel built into the wall a few meters away, and tried to figure out if it controlled the shields. Anakin paced in front of the red shields, annoyed and frustrated because he couldn’t see anything.

Panaka pulled out a comm. “Team Thirty-two, do you copy?”

“Yes, sir,” a woman’s static-laced voice replied. “What do you need?”

“The ray shields over melting pit three—where the hell are the controls that shut them down?”

“Why the hell would you—” The woman broke off mid-sentence. “Geoff knows. He’s on his way now. He says it’ll be ten minutes.”

“No, tell him that it will be three minutes!” Anakin said, loud enough to be overheard on Panaka’s comm. “Ten minutes chances dead Jedi!”

Rillian uttered a soft howl and grabbed Anakin’s hand. [Don’t say that, Skywalker!]

“Dead Jedi? Geoff, move your lazy ass and do it in two minutes!”

“I’m sorry, Rill,” Anakin said, and waited with her in stillness. Neither of them was fooling the other about their patience levels, but at least Rillian had gotten him to stop pacing.

The other Jedi were dealing with the Nemoidians, battle clean up, and triage of the wounded, but Anakin knew that Master Yoda was coming to join them. He could feel the tiny Master’s intense focus as he mentally prepared to do whatever might be needed.

Panaka’s comm signaled for his attention. “Yes?”

“Geoff’s in the control room, says he’s got everything powered down. Are you clear?”

Anakin stared in disbelief at the shields, which hadn’t moved at all. “No!”

[Oh, the hell with this,] Rillian snarled. She stomped over to the still-open panel, ignited her copper-colored lightsaber and shoved it into the controls. The control panel emitted the horrified squeal of fried electronics, and the red shields dropped.

Sparks flew out from the panel, some landing on Rillian’s black-and-silver pelt. The Wookiee growled and brushed off the tiny molten globules before they could do serious damage to her hair.

“Well, that works,” Micah said, patting Rillian’s shoulder. “When in doubt, break something.”

Anakin bit his lip, waiting just long enough to take Rillian’s hand before they raced down the long, enclosed passageway. Panaka was just behind them; Master Micah was limping and cursing with every step, in too much pain to manage more than a shambling jog.

Rillian skidded to a halt in surprise as they hit the open room. Anakin just managed to keep from bumping into her.

[Oh, Force,] Rillian moaned, taking in the body of the Sith on the floor. Anakin looked down and then glanced away. Maul was still in one piece, but it was a messy piece.

“Come on,” Anakin said, tugging on Rillian’s hand. He guided her past the dead Sith and over to Qui-Gon.

Obi-Wan was cradled in Master Qui-Gon’s arms, his head resting against Qui-Gon’s chest. His
eyes were closed, his skin way too pale. Anakin’s eyes darted down, catching sight of the lightsaber wound. Below the waist, right side—Anakin felt tears roll down his face as he tried to remember enough about anatomy to figure out just how badly his Master was hurt.

Qui-Gon stirred at their arrival, opening his eyes to regard first Rillian, then Anakin. “Padawans,” he whispered. Exhaustion radiated from him in near-palpable waves. It was almost enough to cover up a new bond that Anakin could sense, a tiny, brilliant thread of shifting color that wrapped both Master Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan, binding them within the Force.

*That’s really pretty, *Anakin thought, too distracted to truly recognize what it was he’d just seen.

Anakin knelt down next to Master Qui-Gon, taking one of Obi-Wan’s cold, lax hands in both of his own. It gave him a better opportunity to see that new bond. Master Qui-Gon had woven the Force around them, a link that kept Obi-Wan here, and kept him from dying.

Keeping death at bay was all that Qui-Gon had the strength left to do. Anakin looked at Rillian, who was clenching her hands into fists because she wanted to help but didn’t know what to do.

“Feel what I do,” Anakin told her in a soft voice. “We can help him—we can help them. Just watch.”

Rillian sat down on the floor next to him, gently taking Obi-Wan’s other hand. [Show me,] she said, her eyes alight with determined fire.

Anakin used the available line of his training bond to send gentle pulses of energy to his Master. He could do it all day, if need be; there was a huge amount of power inside of him, a vast nest of ruby threads, and it always came easily to him when Anakin called for it. Rillian began to help him, sharing her own coppery-green energy with Anakin and letting him direct it.

Anakin couldn’t do much for outright repairs. He wasn’t trained for it. Instead, he fed physical reserves that had been destroyed by both the long duel and the sudden, life-threatening injury. That would help keep Obi-Wan alive until the Healers could get to him.

As he finished doing what he could, Anakin sensed Qui-Gon pulling back. Without the desperate need to keep Obi-Wan stable until others could take on the job, Master Qui-Gon was swiftly succumbing to shock and his own exhaustion.

Anakin still wasn’t sure what kind of bond he was seeing, but he could sense Qui-Gon’s part in it, and knew that it was the only reason Obi-Wan was alive. “Thank you,” he whispered, tears streaming down his face.

Qui-Gon nodded, managing to give Anakin a tiny, grateful smile as Micah finally joined them, red in the face and gasping for breath. “What,” the Combat Master huffed, “the fuck did you guys break?”

Master Qui-Gon looked up at him. “Everything.”

“Thought so,” Micah said, and then turned his head. “Captain!”

“We need a medical team to the power station immediately,” Panaka ordered in a terse voice. “Trace my commlink signal for precise location. Bring down the second freight elevator for patient transport, and fetch the Jedi Healer. She’s urgently needed.”

Rillian let out a startled *woof* as Qui-Gon slumped to the side in a dead faint. The Wookiee caught her Master and let his body rest across her legs, wrapping her arms around his chest.
Anakin did the same for Obi-Wan, moving his Master as little as possible but doing his best to keep him off of the cold floor. Things still weren’t all right, and Anakin was going to be keeping a close eye on his Master until he was certain that no one was dying.

Anakin and Rillian looked at each other, a mirror of two Padawans holding their Masters close. “Hey,” Anakin said. His voice cracked. “Welcome to life as a Jedi Padawan, Rillian.”

The Wookiee snorted, her arms tightening around Master Qui-Gon protectively. [Some welcome, Skywalker.]

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