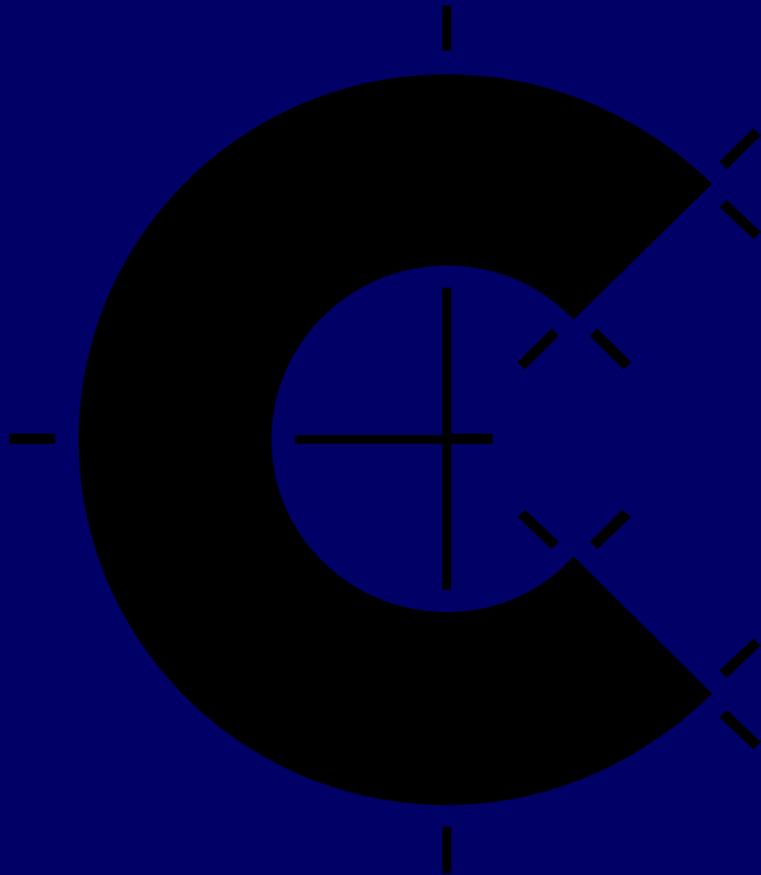


Pæan to Priapus VII a multi-media slash anthology



ircumference
by M. Fae Glasgow

THE LIE

Intended as a nice little romp, only Obi-Wan wouldn't go along with it: there was no way he was going to agree to be just...that, not without a damned good excuse. And Qui-Gon wasn't much help either!



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“YOU’RE LYING,”

Qui-Gon said bluntly, although his eyes had a shading of shock to them.

“No, Master, I’m not,” Obi-Wan muttered, shoving a tunic roughly into a travel bag. “Believe me, it’s not something I wanted to tell you and I wouldn’t lie about *that*.”

“But it’s patently ridiculous! You can’t expect me to believe anything that absurd. Anyway, your name was specified on the so-called invitation—summons, more like—right there beside mine,” Qui-Gon muttered in his turn, taking the tunic out of the bag and uncrumpling it before repacking it properly. “And being invited to what’s essentially a planet-wide bacchanal makes a pleasant change from wars and trade disputes. I honestly don’t see why you’re trying to get out of a mission—especially not this one.”

“I’m not trying to get out of the damned mission!”

Master and apprentice looked at each other while Obi-Wan’s shout echoed around the room.

Qui-Gon hesitated, licked his lips and then asked, carefully, “You’re telling the truth about this?”

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“Yes, Master,” came the reply, slightly muffled, Obi-Wan half-hiding in the cupboard under the guise of getting out his spare boots, before emerging again with head held determinedly high. “And no, this isn’t a repeat of that time when I was 14 and lied and then lied again by promising you it was the truth.”

“This really is the truth?”

Obi-Wan turned and faced him, face weary, voice eminently patient. “Can you think of a single reason why a 24-year-old man would lie to claim *this*?”

Well, no, Qui-Gon couldn’t. “But I’ve seen...”

“You’ve seen what, Master?” asked wearily. “I can tell you what you’ve seen. Me going out, and me, by myself, coming back late.”

“Well, yes.”

Obi-Wan was looking at him now, spare boots and clean clothes piled haphazardly on the bed. “So you’ve seen me going out and coming back late, which could be explained by any number of things, especially a padawan who spends all his time out on missions and has mountains of theoretics to make up, not to mention all the form filling and requisition requests that never get done when we’re traveling. And then there’s laundry, shopping,

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hair cuts, training with other masters, practices, language groups, cultural updates, political analyses and updates... So apart from a busy padawan,” and now there was a glint of Obi-Wan’s hell-bent sense of humor, “is there anything else, Master?”

“Well, no, not that I could speak of at the moment,” Qui-Gon said again, and wondered why he’d been reduced to repeating inanities when they weren’t even at a diplomatic function. “You expect me to believe that you’re...that you’re, well, *that*, just because I haven’t seen you? You haven’t seen me, but I’m certainly not—”

“What, Master,” said slyly, a knowing, terribly amused smile teasing wickedly, “makes you so sure I haven’t seen you?”

Qui-Gon stopped, and looked, and thought. “Oh no,” he said, playing along, seeing where Obi-Wan wanted to take this, choosing his examples with care. “That time I thought you’d be out all night, but you were there in the morning and Mace...”

Raised eyebrows, and a twitch of the lips. “No, not that time, Master.”

Qui-Gon frowned, rubbed his moustache. “On Alderaan, when the minister and I slipped into the antechamber—you brought me a glass of wine.”

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“By which time, you and your old friend were fully dressed and were doing your damndest to look diplomatically bored. The room reeked of sex and you both looked extremely pleased with yourselves, but I didn’t actually see you that particular time,” Obi-Wan’s voice was dry now, challenging, pushing far beyond the traditional limits set for padawans to address their masters, but a familiar, permitted, tone between them these days. “Try again. I’m sure you’ll get it eventually.”

And try Qui-Gon did, three more times. Until Obi-Wan was smug enough that Qui-Gon could pretend to realize exactly what Obi-Wan had manipulated him into doing: “You little—”

“Now, now, Master,” Obi-Wan laughed at him, with perhaps a touch more conspiracy than innocence would dictate, but then even that was gone too, and it was just Obi-Wan laughing and tossing an undertunic at his master’s head. “I didn’t say I’d seen you, I just asked how you knew I hadn’t. But that was certainly an...educational list.” A pause, perfectly timed, and no doubt Obi-Wan thought himself to be utterly sanguine. “In the Council Chamber, Master?”

“Oh that,” Qui-Gon said with great dignity. “I was just testing you.”

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“Absolutely, Master,” came the reply, dripping with conviction. “I really believe you.”

“One of these fine days,” Qui-Gon said, tugging his padawan’s braid hard enough to wipe that terribly sincere and innocent expression off Obi-Wan’s face, “you’re going to make a superb diplomat.”

“Which is a kinder title than ‘liar.’”

Which brought them back to *that*.

“So you really are...”

“Yes, Master,” embarrassment curling tightly around the amusement again. “I really am.”

“But...but...”

“I shall manfully refrain,” Obi-Wan said, doing a rather fine job of mimicking a certain master at his most pompous, “from making any bad puns.”

“For which I surely thank you,” Qui-Gon replied, dryly. “Still—you can hardly blame me for wondering...*how?*”

Rather sharper, the words finely edged. “Surely a man of your experience can work that out?”

“I can,” Qui-Gon said, giving his padawan a droll look, “but you obviously couldn’t.”

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Obi-Wan's lips pressed together tightly, just for a moment, an echo of old temper and newer control, his voice a masterpiece of disingenuousness and good humor. "You're talking in riddles again, oh venerable, inscrutable one."

Mildly, oh so warningly mild: "I just meant I obviously managed to work out how a person goes about it, but you didn't, which is why you're...*that*."

"Oh, I was hoping you weren't going to take that tack. Look, I do know how to go about it—in case you missed it, I've received rather a fine education, I know all about the birds and the bees and the banthas. I know the mechanics," Obi-Wan slowly reined his voice in, until he was almost whispering by the time he admitted: "I just...haven't."

Qui-Gon had kept his disbelief and shock hidden in a thousand meetings, but there it was, dripping from his voice for Obi-Wan to hear. "You're a fit, healthy, energetic man, but you just...haven't."

Perilously close to arrogant, Obi-Wan lifted his chin and met his master's eyes. "That's right."

Qui-Gon sat down on a cleared spot on the bed, a travel bag

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tipping over onto him. He straightened it, cleared his throat, and tried to be absolutely and utterly unflapped and unflappable.

“Why haven’t you ever...?”

Obi-Wan’s arrogance faded towards wistfulness. “When could I?”

Qui-Gon opened his mouth to answer, then realized that had been neither rhetorical nor facetious—despite Obi-Wan’s usually...quirky...sense of humor. “I’ve managed to find the time,” Qui-Gon said, careful not to provoke.

“With whom, Master?” his padawan asked him with a patent—and decidedly provocative—display of patience.

“Oh, I’m not giving you a list!”

Well, he already had, as Obi-Wan’s knowing look proved, but there was no need to repeat the list. A list that was... Oh, he should be ashamed of himself for not noticing. “People I’ve known for years.”

“Exactly. People with whom you were at Temple during your padawan years, people you worked with as you went from padawan to knight to master and they went from lowly official to planetary power. Translators, pilots, financial officers...”

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Qui-Gon shifted, dumped the travel bag onto the floor. While not all Jedi were exactly celibate aesthetes, Obi-Wan's recitation of his list was placing him uncomfortably close to the slut end of the spectrum. Especially in comparison to Obi-Wan's rather unfortunate condition.

"Come on, Master, I asked you something," Obi-Wan called over his shoulder as he went into the bathroom to gather toiletries. "When could I?"

If Obi-Wan had been a handspan younger, Qui-Gon might have been tempted to take his padawan to task for that, remind him just exactly where a padawan's place was. But Obi-Wan was a bit old for that, not to mention considerably too sure of himself—plus, Obi-Wan did have a point, and they did need to discuss this. There must have been opportunities for Obi-Wan: there were the times when Qui-Gon had had good cause to make certain assumptions, for starters. "There was that nice young Prince," Qui-Gon began.

"There've been a lot of nice young Princes, most of them very young and considerably more interested in my lightsaber than my—"

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Oh, small wonder Qui-Gon hadn't clicked about Obi-Wan's condition, when Obi-Wan could joke and twinkle and leer like this.

“—other personal weaponry.”

“On G'dota, the dark haired one,” Qui-Gon said repressively.

“Oh, yes, *him*,” Obi-Wan sneered, as unrepressed as he was unimpressed. “The nice young Prince who spent every second he could pumping me for information about my gorgeous master and were my master's other parts as large as his hands? Oh, yes, I could've done it with him.”

Ouch. “I didn't know he was...”

“Don't worry about it, Master,” Obi-Wan said easily, stuffing various bottles and brushes and ties into a watersafe bag. “He wasn't the only one; I got used to it.”

Which was, on balance, even worse, but Obi-Wan wouldn't thank even Yoda for pity, so his own master had best keep his mouth firmly closed on that topic. “Well, there was Senator Hewson's daughter. I know she was interested in you.”

“Half the planet knew she was interested in me,” Obi-Wan muttered, ears turning decidedly red at even the memory of what

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had happened when the society reporter had shoved a microphone up to her mouth during a live worldcast.

“So why not with her?”

Obi-Wan gave his master a very speaking look.

Unfortunately, his master seemed to be afflicted with temporary deafness, or blindness, or just the blinkers of habit and expectation, because Qui-Gon wasn't getting it at all.

“Because, Master,” Obi-Wan said with a great show of patience, “she's a *girl*.”

“Ah!” A knowing man-to-man sort of smile. “And you like them mature—a woman who really knows what she's doing.”

“No, Master,” said with an even greater show of patience, teeth beginning to clench, “because I like them male.”

“But that cuts down your chances!”

“By just over half, yes, I've noticed,” Obi-Wan replied, not even pretending patience any more, various items being shoved into various bags with rather more enthusiasm than was even vaguely necessary. “And then there are the ones I can't go near because it would be perceived as playing favorites or taking sides.”

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That reduced it by a good thirty to forty per cent, if Qui-Gon's experiences were anything to go by.

"And then there are the ones who only want me to get to you."

And perhaps Qui-Gon could be forgiven for not asking just what percentage that was.

"And then there are the ones who don't like males, or only like them dark, or non-human or their own species or on their knees." A sharp look at his master. "No, I meant on their knees in collar and chains, not..."

"I *do* know what you mean. After all, I'm the one who's actually *done*—" and maybe he really didn't want to finish that particular sentence.

"Coward," Obi-Wan sniped fondly, just quietly enough to get away with it. "Then there are the ones who only want me so they can 'bag' a Jedi, not to be confused with the ones who are too intimidated by my being a Jedi to actually do more than just gaze at me. Oh, and of course, there are always the ones who believe the Jedi legends and think we're mind-readers or soul-eaters or what-have-you. Not to mention the ones who believe all the hoopla about Jedi and don't want to expose their merely mundane

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little bodies to a great Jedi. Of course, that *does* leave the witless wonders who spend all their time in the gymnasium and are only interested in what *they* get out of the...event. Which seems to involve a great deal of posing and flexing muscles.”

Qui-Gon winced: he was beginning to see Obi-Wan’s point.

“So that leaves not very many,” Obi-Wan said, stuffing food bars into the side pocket of his pack. “And of those, how many have I ever had a chance to get close enough to?”

“There must be *some*?”

“Name one! We’re the special case, always on missions, which means leaping from one crisis into another, which isn’t, by the way,” Obi-Wan shot a glare right at Qui-Gon, “conducive to playing kissy-kissy with the locals. We’re almost never in Temple or at the Academy, and when we are, I’m so busy trying to make up for lost courses and cramming in lectures and debriefings and cultural updates, I don’t have *time* to make new friends.”

“Oh and now you’re just making excuses.”

“Am I?” thrown sharp as a knife. “When was the last time, *Master*, that you had to walk into a room of people who’ve known each other for years and have formed their cozy little

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friendships, and then tried to weasel your way in? Even though you—and they—know you’ll be gone in a few days or even just hours?” Obi-Wan wasn’t breathing hard, or raising his voice; his training held, of course, but the emotion was there, simmering under the veneer. “Especially,” Obi-Wan continued, voice dropping back to the usual serene register used by Jedi to mask everything, “when you’re already set aside as an active field member—an experienced one, with blood on his hands—and they’re all headed for the more...civilized disciplines?”

It all sounded so reasonable—but Obi-Wan was still just making excuses, since Obi-Wan was a trained diplomat—and a damned charming, superbly manipulative one, at that—and could easily finagle his way into someone’s bed. There was more going on here—a lot more. Qui-Gon rubbed his moustache again, and looked at his padawan, who was standing glowering down at him, hands on hips and that line between his eyebrows. “All right, so you haven’t had much opportunity, but I mean, I remember being your age, I can’t imagine *not* making the time to...”

“To do what?” Obi-Wan said, dumping his packed travel bag on the floor. He sat down heavily beside Qui-Gon and looked

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down at his hands. “Oh, I know, I could walk up to a group of my Academy—or better yet, Temple-based peers, whom I know’ve been trading partners for *years* and say anyone want to be my first? No, I know! I could walk up to some civilian and say, ‘hi, my name’s Obi-Wan. Can I interest you in a meaningless, casual sexual encounter?’”

The thing is, Qui-Gon could, indeed, imagine his padawan doing just that—and he could even see the bright-eyed, bushy-tailed expression that would go with it. “It’s a bit blunt, but the way people look at you, I should think it would work every now and then.”

“Especially,” Obi-Wan flopped back onto the bed, hands behind his head, “when I follow it with, ‘oh, and by the way, I’ve delayed this for years and now I’m at pretty much my full strength, but I’m still a Force-sensitive virgin, you won’t mind if I lose control at the big moment and accidentally whammy you into a wall, now will you?’”

Ah. Yes. That. Qui-Gon flopped onto his back himself, all the better to not actually have to look at his padawan. “You could practice control...” he began, lamely.

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“What d’you think I’ve been doing?” Obi-Wan, all wry humor and embarrassment. “Plus, if there was no difference between this—” Obi-Wan held up his right hand, shaking it into Qui-Gon’s field of vision, the movement making it clear that Obi-Wan certainly had plenty of experience at one thing anyway and definitely hadn’t chosen the rare path of celibacy, “and actual sexual intercourse, then why would anyone bother? Or are you telling me that it’s just as intense by yourself as with someone?”

“Well, I could always tell you exactly that, but...”

“But then,” laughter in Obi-Wan’s voice, “you’d be lying!”

Qui-Gon’s own smile faded into unease, as he thought about what Obi-Wan was saying, and not saying. It wasn’t so much that there were rules and guidelines about certain matters: the notion of Master Qui-Gon Jinn blindly adhering to rules was laughable. But there were other issues here, deeper, far more important than Obi-Wan’s usual obedience to the Code. Qui-Gon took his time, planning his course before he spoke again. “So there’s been no one?”

Obi-Wan just lay there, and actually sighed. “Not one.”

Qui-Gon took another moment, thinking about that. And about

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what it meant to their mission. “You know that there will be Force sensitives at this Ceremonial Union who’ll know that you’re...well, *that.*”

“Why d’you think I was trying to get you to take someone else with you?”

There was a long pause. “Because,” Qui-Gon said delicately, “you’ve been withdrawn of late, and I thought that perhaps a relationship had failed...”

“I wish it had,” Obi-Wan said lugubriously. “At least then there’d’ve *been* a relationship and I wouldn’t be...”

A sudden movement, Obi-Wan grabbing a pillow and covering his face with it. “Still a virgin! At *my* age! Oh Sith, when word gets out...”

“You think I’m going to tell people my padawan’s *that*? At your age?”

“Thank you, Master,” the sarcasm muffled but not blunted by the pillow, “for your kinds words of support and your gentle understanding.”

“Sorry,” Qui-Gon muttered. “But you must admit, it *is* just a bit funny.”

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“Oh, it’s downright hysterical. I’m laughing so hard my sides hurt.” Hardly a reassuring statement, or attitude. Qui-Gon pulled the pillow away, made his padawan look at him. “All right, so it’s miserable and embarrassing to be your age and still not have done it, but that can be remedied.”

“How? Oh, I know, you could put a message out on the masters’ loop, ‘specialized lessons required for one senior padawan. Experience a plus.’ I’d rather not.”

“I meant that there are professionals, respectable, trained—” And there it was, stark naked and bare, laid out between them: the real problem. Obi-Wan had grimaced at the mention of professionals, had reacted with genuine distaste at the thought of enlisting another master to teach him, which meant... “Padawan,” Qui-Gon said sternly, “are you a closet romantic?”

“No,” Obi-Wan said, looking almost too innocent. Then the truth coming out: “How many Jedi use professionals? I mean, how long would it take for everyone to know about the aged Jedi virgin who had to pay someone?” A sharp flick of the long padawan braid, the hair stinging Qui-Gon’s skin. “It’s not as if I can exactly hide this.”

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Except, of course, for the fact that Obi-Wan was very near the end of his training, with only a few specific disciplines to master and skills to refine, which meant that there was precious little risk that there would be any loss of control during sex. Well, any Force-related loss of control.

“Obi-Wan,” Qui-Gon began quietly, treading lightly and carefully, wary of making an unfounded accusation, “do you harbor feelings for a particular individual?”

“And what would it matter if I did?” Obi-Wan asked sharply. “Apart from this one mission, which I know we’re being allowed to take because the Council has chosen to *reward* us after that nightmare,” Obi-Wan winced in memory, shifted uncomfortably where broken bones were healed but ached still. “Anyway, when has my condition ever affected our missions or my training?”

“We are Jedi,” Qui-Gon said, all the weight of being a master Jedi lading his words and landing heavily upon his shoulders. “We are here to serve the Force, not pander to ourselves.”

“And why, Master,” a fine balance between genuine respect and young buck challenging, “should serving the Force require us to put aside all family and all personal bonds?”

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“It doesn’t—”

“Exactly. The *Force* doesn’t, but the Order does.”

“The Order doesn’t require us to put others aside,” Qui-Gon said, deliberately donning the mantle of traditionalism, all the better to uncover whatever truth Obi-Wan was hiding. “You know well enough we’re encouraged to form ties—”

“Friendships, to a degree. Affairs are perfectly all right,” Obi-Wan said with a dangerous edge of disapproval, “but not forming a bond. And certainly not creating a family, having children of our own.”

“You’re exaggerating to excuse your own tendencies,” Qui-Gon said flatly, nothing in his demeanor revealing an atom of surprise at Obi-Wan—of all people—arguing against the Code and tradition both. “You know Knight Devra, she had a child—”

“Whom she immediately handed over to the Creche—but I suppose that’s progress, considering the Order wouldn’t even admit women for the first six and a half centuries out of fear—yes, I do think it was fear—of the maternal bond.”

Where had Obi-Wan hidden all of this? Or had Qui-Gon himself just been so sure of his padawan, so smug in Obi-Wan’s

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talents and abilities and yes, superb response to his own training, that he had stopped looking, had stopped digging deeper than the surface glibness and bright smile? “I can hardly fault you for iconoclasm,” he began, talking right over Obi-Wan’s flawlessly dry ‘oh, I wonder why not’, “but how can we serve the Force if we can’t follow its will impartially?”

“How can we know we’re following the Force if we’re so cut off from feeling that we can’t see what’s right under your benighted—”

Obi-Wan bit the last of that off, and lay there, eyes closed.

So that’s where the wind blew. Qui-Gon was slow to speak, approaching this with rather more care than haste. “Obi-Wan, sometimes we confuse respect and hero-worship—”

“Oh, spare me, please! I don’t need you reciting How To Deal With Padawan Crushes at me—I sorted that out myself, a long time ago.”

“Then why,” a bit of steel in Qui-Gon’s voice now, “are you talking like a love-sick swain?”

Obi-Wan simply lay there for a few moments, eyes closed, arms crossed over his chest, tunic slightly askew, booted feet on

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the floor, strong thighs stretched, his breathing slow and steady. Gathering himself.

“We work so hard to stay impartial, to be scrupulously fair,” Obi-Wan said softly, “to follow the will of the Force to the smallest detail. I fear that cuts us off—don’t you think it’s odd, Master, that we go from children completely at one with the Force, living entirely in the moment and the will of the Force, to teens and adults who have to constantly train and strive to be aware of the Force? Don’t you think it says something about our training and our goals that we move farther away from that instinctive union with the Force?”

“I think it says more about us as people than the Force or what we learn to become Jedi.”

Obi-Wan smiled, eyes still closed, his face such a deceptive picture of serenity. A very familiar picture of serenity, and Qui-Gon wondered just how many years he had been fooled by it.

“We always say that, have you noticed? The Council and individual Jedi can be and are wrong, but the Force and following it are always right. But if the Force is right, are our actions also right, since we’re not pure Force beings, but mere

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mortals, interpreting the Force through our own weaknesses and failings?”

“You know the answer to that.”

“Do I? I know what I’ve been told: touch the Force and find the truth. But my point is, Master, that we do that as children, completely instinctively and with total honesty.”

Unlike most adults who grappled even more than Obi-Wan, Qui-Gon Jinn was very much the exception: unusual for his ease in being One with the Force, for his ability to truly live in the moment, to simply *be*, as the Force is.

“But Master—Qui-Gon—you know better than anyone else just how hard I’ve struggled to live in the Moment and be one with the Force.”

Oh, yes, that indeed Qui-Gon did know: hours and weeks and years of training, and sweating, mind-wearying effort.

“But it was different,” Obi-Wan went on, “when I was a boy...”

“A good enough theory,” Qui-Gon said, “but it’s sophistry, and you’re using this as pure deflection.”

A wry grin for that, but Obi-Wan’s eyes remained closed.

Which was all to the well and good, for it made it easier for

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Qui-Gon to do this. “We can’t allow ourselves to become overly attached to one person, and we can’t indulge ourselves—”

There was just the faintest stain of weary cynicism in Obi-Wan’s recitation. “Because one leads to bias and the other leads to the misuse of our powers.”

“If you know that so well, then why...”

“Have I saved myself for someone special?” the comment was delivered with dripping sarcasm and a biting self-deprecation that sat ill on the shoulders of any Jedi.

But under that, there was something more. For those who could listen well enough to hear it.

“I’ve sworn my life—willingly—to the service of the Force,” Obi-Wan continued, something pushing at his voice, a truth trying to escape chains of control. “If the Force requires it, I do it, without stinting and without question. But I do question some of what else is required of us.”

“You? Questioning the Code?”

Obi-Wan opened his eyes for that, to glare, brief but burning, then closed his eyes again. “Not the Code, Master, just some of our traditions.”

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“Oh, those,” said dismissively enough to make Obi-Wan smile again.

“Oh, yes, those.”

Qui-Gon settled himself a little more comfortably, stretching his legs out, squirming a little until his tunics were no longer bunched under his back, ready for however long this took. “And which particular traditions would those be, Obi-Wan?”

“Think about this. I’ve already sworn my life to the Force, and I follow the Code—” *unlike you*, his sharp little look said. “But tradition interprets the Code and expands on the bare details so that I’m required to wear certain clothes, cut my hair as required, leave other parts long, as required, remain clean-shaven unless ordained a master—”

“Which strikes you as being foolish and pointless—so you’re finally agreeing with me that parts of the Code are obsolete.”

“Not the Code, Master.” One eye opening, pinning Qui-Gon. “You’re not going to get me agreeing with you on *that*. No, it’s the traditions. Where in the Code does it say we shouldn’t form family units or exclusive emotional ties?”

“Yes, but there you go, proving my argument for me. The Code

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alone shouldn't be what binds and guides us—the Code doesn't prohibit such things, but you can't be a good Jedi if your heart and attention and loyalty belong to a family or a lover.”

And there was a dreadful, painful emptiness to Obi-Wan's quiet: “Can't I?”

Qui-Gon spoke quickly, although his gaze was slow and steady, watching Obi-Wan so very carefully. “So you think you can do better than millennia of Jedi?”

“Which isn't what I said. I'm questioning whether some of our traditions are truly rooted in the Force or merely in habit—or fear.”

That pulled Master Jinn up short. “That'll teach me,” he said in the general direction of the ceiling.

“What are you havoring on about now?”

“That'll teach me to assume that you're ever taking the path most trodden.”

“You thought—oh, give me *some* credit!”

“All right, so it's not a romantic entanglement and you're not questioning your calling—” a quick look, reading Obi-Wan's certainty, and perhaps a bit more relief in response than was

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warranted. “So it’s fear, then? Fear that we’ll succumb to the temptations of our power, that we’ll become corrupt?”

“And in trying to avoid those things, we’ve cut ourselves off—and how can we truly serve the Force if we don’t know love?”

“And how can we serve the Force,” Qui-Gon asked softly, as gently as he had time and time before, “if we love someone more?”

Obi-Wan propped himself up on his elbows and turned his head to look at his master. “Did you?”

Qui-Gon was too canny to give himself away by bolting or fidgeting. He simply lay there, neither more nor less serene than before, and looked calmly at Obi-Wan, letting some of his concern show. “What is it you’re hiding, Obi-Wan?”

“What makes you think I’m hiding something?”

“Well,” Qui-Gon sat up, straightening his tunics, pushing a hank of hair back behind his shoulder, “yesterday, I’d’ve said I know you. I’m not quite so sure of that today,” and he steeled himself to get that sadness out of his voice and back into the unseen recesses of his mind where it belonged, “but I still know people and human nature—and several alien ones—and you, my Padawan, are hiding something.”

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Obi-Wan drew himself up, dignity and disagreement, and sparks of temper flashing in bright eyes. “Am I to be allowed no secrets either? Is that part of the tradition you’d uphold?”

“If the secrets are detrimental to you or the Jedi,” Qui-Gon said unflinching, “then you’ll be allowed no secrets, no privacy, not so much as a thought left unexamined. Tell me, Padawan.”

And Obi-Wan sat there, and looked at him, this man who was Master and was, perhaps, friend, if there could be enough left-over past the needs and deprivations of Obi-Wan’s training. “I would give you my word,” Obi-Wan said, controlled and calm, unyielding as stone and hotter than a sun, “but I think my past conduct speaks better. Have I, at any time, failed your teaching, Master?”

“No.”

“Have I ever conducted myself in a manner unbefitting a Jedi?”

Eyes narrowing, mouth tightening. “No.”

“Then if I have any secrets, they can stay mine.”

Qui-Gon’s mouth twisted into a smile, of sorts. “You’ve grown, Obi-Wan.”

“You are a keen observer of human nature.”

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“And you’re...”

Behaving as Obi-Wan did, and had: making the best of things, turning problems into a mere froth upon a wave, to be dissolved by the natural motions of the tide. “Your secrets are your own, Padawan,” Master Jinn said formally, giving the smallest of bows, a mere inclination of his head. “But as...”

“Friends?” Obi-Wan suggested, subdued.

A sharp flare of Qui-Gon’s attention. “We could be,” Qui-Gon told him. “You need me less and less as a master.”

“And you’re not exactly the traditional—” distanced, cool, conservative, “—master to begin with.”

“And you’re hardly the traditional—” pliable, obedient, deferential, “padawan either.”

“So friends?”

“Yes—”

And before Qui-Gon could say anything else, Obi-Wan finished for him: “Unless it interferes with my training. It won’t.”

“You sound certain of that.”

“Experience,” Obi-Wan said easily. “It hasn’t thus far.”

Which made Qui-Gon contemplative, once again. “What’s

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been going on inside your head whilst I was too busy looking at your proper padawan's face?"

Obi-Wan lay back down, his own legs stretched out, not as long as Qui-Gon's, his own booted feet on the floor, his left thigh almost touching Qui-Gon's right.

"We give up everything," Obi-Wan said, a zephyr of sound. "We take nothing for ourselves, we own nothing—not even our own names. Do you remember your own name?"

Well of course he did. But Obi-Wan wasn't asking if Qui-Gon knew the name that appeared on his birth record. "I was an infant when I came to the Creche."

"I was four and a half," Obi-Wan said, not to inform, of course, but like a river, flowing slowly, slowly, to the horizon. "Too old, really, but an exception was made for me, because of my gifts. I remember my name. I remember my mother's voice calling me 'Ben', and my father singing to me at bedtime."

Qui-Gon rolled onto his side, and stared, as memories—not quite forbidden, but never discussed, never acknowledged, never, ever, ever spoken of amongst Jedi—were laid naked and quivering before him.

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“I had a pet,” Obi-Wan continued, eyes closing, a small smile curving his mouth, “and a favorite blanket. I had this... I was protected and coddled, and then—I was taken by strangers and brought to this huge stone place that was always cold.”

His eyes were clear, pellucid, when they snapped open and meshed with Qui-Gon’s stare, Obi-Wan’s body lithe and smooth as he rolled onto his side to face Qui-Gon.

“And I wasn’t afraid. It didn’t matter that I’d left my family and home behind, because I had the Force. It was—everywhere, and everything. I didn’t need anything or anyone else to make me feel safe and secure because the Force was there, and the Force told me it was right to come here.”

“And yet...”

“And yet now, I have to be reminded and taught to be One with the Force, to live in the Moment. Why is that?”

“As your Master—”

“No. As my friend.”

Qui-Gon smiled, and perhaps that was sadness in his eyes. “Do I have to be one or the other?”

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There was no smile from Obi-Wan, only the sadness. “You can’t be, can you? The man you are is Jedi.”

“So are you.”

“Yes,” sighed as Obi-Wan flopped onto his back. “And that’s why I question the tradition of staying aloof.”

“We’re not aloof—”

“Oh yes we are. You raised two padawans to knighthood before me, and there’s nothing closer than the master-padawan bond—yet when was the last time you heard from either of your former padawans?”

That was easy enough: it had been...it had been...

“And when was the last time it was anything more personal than friendly greetings and an update? When was the last time you sat around and just *talked* with either of them? Or with your own master?”

“I’m not the warm-fuzzy type.”

“But you *are* Jedi. So you meet up with old friends, people you’ve known for years, you catch up on the news of their lives, you tell them about the non-classified missions you’ve been on and places you’ve seen—feel free to correct me if I’m wrong—

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and then you either have some casual, friendly sex, or you move on to the next person you need to cultivate for the mission.”

“It’s not quite as cold as all that,” Qui-Gon retorted.

“But it is,” Obi-Wan said, very nearly gently. “I think it very much is that cold. But we’re Jedi, so for us, that’s warmth, that’s...connection. And this place—” a sweep of Obi-Wan’s arm, encompassing this room and suggesting the entire, multi-addition, hodgepodge conglomerate of the Coruscant headquarters, “is as close to home as we have.”

“And it’s enough,” Qui-Gon said. “It has to be enough, because if it’s not, then we seek for ourselves, instead of doing the Will of the Force.”

“Then why did a mere child completely One with the Force know love and family, and why did adopting the Jedi way slowly wither my connection to the Force until I had to learn to think about it and reach for it?”

“Children’s needs are different from those of adults—”

“Are they? Food, shelter, comfort. The needs are the same, it’s merely the form that changes.”

Careful questioning, and reluctant. “And what form do your needs take now, Obi-Wan?”

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“Is that my master’s voice or my friend’s interest?”

“It’s your master’s care, and his friendship.”

“So you’ll ignore the Code, and bend tradition—how far?”

He’d chosen a slippery slope, and Obi-Wan could so easily trip him. “Far enough to be a good Jedi. Not so far that it’s for my own benefit or my own comfort.”

“Really?” And that wasn’t an edge of disbelief, that was a freighter load of it. “So tell me, what makes you more comfortable? Those long-established, close friendships with people you see—how often would you say you see your old friends?”

“Not often enough.”

Again: “Really? And yet—you make no attempt to see specific friends more often.”

“When do I have the chance—” Qui-Gon conceded the point to Obi-Wan, his scant bow returned to him, with a rather smug smile tacked on. “But at least that brings us back to the crux of the matter. You follow the Code—unwisely, in my opinion—”

“Only because you’re a rebel,” Obi-Wan put in quickly.

“—and you say that it’s just *tradition* that keeps us from forming ...certain close ties. But it’s not tradition, it’s a guiding truth—”

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“Written by whom? By Jedi? By the very men who refused to accept women because they were so certain women would never bring themselves to abandon their children—”

“Abandon? You think that’s what Knight Devra did?”

“Yes,” said as harsh and honest as only Jedi could be, layers of meaning vibrating suddenly through the Force. “And I’m saying that the Founding Masters saw the light—or finally listened to the Light—and accepted women into our ranks. Which proves that tradition can be wrong—”

“You think I’m arguing that tradition is always right?”

“I think you’re trying to avoid thinking about it.”

“Don’t be stupid, Obi-Wan, I’m not afraid to think about changing tradition—I’ve tossed enough traditions out before, I’m hardly likely—”

“I think,” Obi-Wan interrupted, “you’re avoiding thinking about forming ties. About allowing ourselves to love.” A piercing look, threading Qui-Gon on a skewer of speculation. “And be loved.”

Qui-Gon was on his feet at the other side of the room faster than a human could blink, Obi-Wan’s hair stirred by the wave of warmed, displaced air.

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“See?” Obi-Wan said, as gentle as a master to a scared new apprentice. “Even thinking about it unnerves an iconoclast like you. But taste the Force, listen to it, look at it—feel the Moment. Is it wrong, truly wrong, for us to love?”

“It is wrong,” Qui-Gon finally said, “for us to love too well.”

“Because it would compromise us.”

“Yes,” Qui-Gon answered, strong and clear. And then, as Obi-Wan kept staring at him: “Because it would hurt,” Qui-Gon whispered. “And hurt enough that some of us might do anything—including disobey the Force—to avoid it.”

Persuading, coaxing—courting. “Our training teaches us to withstand pain—”

“Not our own hurt,” said very, very softly, Qui-Gon not looking at Obi-Wan but staring, instead, at the window-display of the ancient Temple on Dagobah. “But the hurt we’d have to inflict on those we love.”

Obi-Wan opened his mouth. Closed it, expression twisting as shock and comprehension vied for control.

“Qui-Gon?”

“Is it the loving that’s the root of the problem,” Qui-Gon asked, “or the being loved?”

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“Neither,” Obi-Wan replied with certitude. “The only problem is when we fail in our duties or disobey the Force—and we’re at risk of that every day anyway, love wouldn’t suddenly make us fall from a state of perfect grace.”

“You sound so very sure of that,” Qui-Gon said, sounding so very wryly amused. “So is that your secret, Obi-Wan? That you love and are loved, and haven’t fallen to the temptations of the Dark?”

“Is your secret,” Obi-Wan rising from the bed, walking silently across the room to stand just behind his master, his master’s long hair and tense back a mere breath away, “that you have loved and were loved, and fell?”

“Oh no, nothing so dire nor so romantic,” Qui-Gon said heartily, turning around to face Obi-Wan. “I simply see the risks clearly and recognize the common sense in discouraging such bonds—for Jedi.”

And a third time: “Really?”

Brooking no argument, an old, long dis-used authoritarian voice dusted off and pressed into use: “Don’t presume to see things that aren’t there, Padawan.”

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“I’m not,” Obi-Wan said, stepping forward, his master stepping back. “I’m simply...seeing you.”

“You’re deluding yourself,” Qui-Gon said tartly. “And not just with silly romantic notions about me, but about yourself. We’re not gods, Obi-Wan, we’re just people, all of our goodness jumbled in with faults and flaws and weaknesses. There’s good reason for keeping us married only to the Force and it’s sheer hubris of you to think you’d be immune to the dangers.”

“Dangers? Surely it’s the unknown that’s dangerous—”

“I don’t hear you saying that when we’re facing battle droids or terminators,” Qui-Gon said, using humor where heavy-handed authority hadn’t worked. “Does knowing your enemy make it any less dangerous, or does it just make you complacent?”

“It makes me,” Obi-Wan leant forward, stretched up a little, just far enough that his lips were almost brushing Qui-Gon’s ear, “what you wanted to make me.”

Qui-Gon stepped back, fast and clumsy, and a less kind man than Obi-Wan might even say he’d stumbled.

“I think for myself,” Obi-Wan continued, moving a little bit closer again, an odd light in his eyes, challenge and surrender

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mixed. “Or at least I’m trying to. The Code is right, and it’s the best guidance we have and our best chance of not falling to the Dark—or dying because our arrogance blinded us. But traditions are just traditions, and some of them are best served by being abandoned.”

“Like Knight Devra’s infant? And the Force?”

“The Force is best served by obeying it—but we need to listen to it first, listen to the *Force*, not ourselves, not what we want it to say or think we heard it say. You’re the one,” another small step forward, until the hems of his tunics nearly brushed his master’s clothes, “who’s always telling me to live in the moment.” Another half step forward, toe to toe now, his chest touching Qui-Gon’s as they each breathed in. “So what does the Force tell you, right now...Master?”

“It tells me—” Qui-Gon stopping to clear his throat, his gaze caught on Obi-Wan’s, unable to break free. “It tells me...”

“Tells you what?” Soughed so gently, so sweetly, Obi-Wan’s breath skittering softly across Qui-Gon’s lips. “Listen to the Force,” Obi-Wan sighed, and leant in closer, closer, lifting himself up, just enough, just enough—

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And stumbling, forward, as Qui-Gon sidestepped, back and away and gone.

Slowly, Obi-Wan turned around, to look at Qui-Gon, standing there beside the door.

“It tells me,” Qui-Gon’s voice strong and clear, his gaze level and meeting Obi-Wan’s head on with every show of honesty, “that when we love one person above all others, then we put that someone above the Force. And it tells me that when we love one person to distraction, we give hostages to fortune and a target to our enemies.”

“Even when that hostage—” greatly daring, anger trembling with courage, “is as capable of defending himself as the...lover is?”

Qui-Gon’s hand hovered over the door release, then lowered. He turned, in no rush, and finally faced Obi-Wan, a small frown between his brows. “Have you ever had to leave someone behind?” he asked. Answered himself, quick, sarcastic, as biting as salt water on an open wound. “I’m your master, I know you haven’t. Well, I have, Obi-Wan, I have, more than once. I know what it takes, I know what it costs me—” hand thumping to

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chest, just once, then coming up to stroke beard in a gesture few were ever allowed to see, “and can I be certain that I’d do the same again, if it were someone I loved? If the next time I had to leave someone behind, it was—”

The words snapped, a clean break, Qui-Gon taking a deep breath.

“The mission,” he said.

“The mission be hanged!”

And that was the sweetest of bitteresses, that smile, and the expression in his eyes was ice stifling fire. “You’ve done a fine job of proving my point,” Qui-Gon said. “You’re not even—we’re not—” A head shake, thick hair falling forward. Qui-Gon reached up, untied the long meditation cord and let his hair fall free, one hand scratching the scalp, the other twisting the cord—with a touch of the Force—around and through his fingers.

“I didn’t mean that the way you took it, and you know it,” Obi-Wan said, making his voice very calm, but giving no quarter. “You were the one hiding behind the mission like a coward—”

And of course, words, once said, can’t be un-spoken.

The silence lay between them.

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“I apologize,” Obi-Wan said, chin high. “I still think you were...evading the issue, but it was wrong of me to actually call you a coward to your face.”

“Well, that’s a pretty enough apology,” Qui-Gon said dryly. “Perhaps you should shift your focus from active intercession duty to the more contemplative arts.”

“Or perhaps,” not quite as dryly, “I should learn to keep my mouth shut.”

“That would help,” Qui-Gon replied evenly enough, distant and cool. “Nonetheless, we do have a mission, and a transport to catch. The budget hardly stretches to private transportation to suit every Jedi’s whim.”

Obi-Wan looked at him for a moment, and Qui-Gon stood there and allowed it, waiting with every appearance of patience.

“There’s still the initial difficulty,” Obi-Wan said, not giving in, not yet. “My...unfortunate condition.”

“I have a few solutions—”

Back braced, chin lifted, eyes just a little wild, and very, very, brave, Obi-Wan spoke over whatever Qui-Gon was proposing. “You’re my master, you prepare me for whatever our assigned missions require. Prepare me in this.”

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A scant breath of sound: “Why?”

“Because it’s practical. And sound reasoning, and it’s something that can be accomplished in transit, without loss of time, and won’t result in our hosts—and major force in the Senate—being insulted.”

“And because,” delivered in a shivery soft voice recognized, and feared, across the Galaxy, “it gives you what you want.”

Braver still, mouth firm, eyes steady. “Yes.”

Qui-Gon looked at him for a long moment.

“I’m not the only one,” Obi-Wan said, nudging a pulse of honesty at Qui-Gon, “and you know it. You know and I know—”

“You know nothing,” Qui-Gon snapped. “Sloppy thinking like that will get you killed.”

“Trusting my instinct,” Obi-Wan threw at him, “will keep me alive. Living in the Moment, isn’t that what you’ve taught me all these years? And yet here you stand, refusing—”

“Refusing what?” Qui-Gon snarled, striding across the room, thumping to a halt right in front of Obi-Wan, a towering outcrop, craggy and immutable. “You have no idea,” Qui-Gon’s voice dropped, down low, and quiet. “You think it’d be so easy—”

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“That’s not true, I know it’d be terribly difficult—”

“In your head, you know it. But you’ve never had to leave someone behind. You’ve never had to leave a fellow Jedi to die, and felt her courage and pain through the Force and felt her join the Force kicking and screaming because there were people who would die if she couldn’t fight off the invaders. You’ve never—” taking a deep breath, stepping back. “You’ve never been the one left behind,” soft as blood seeping across a floor. “You’ve never known that, and so you can talk, blithe as you like, my *Padawan*, about love and being loved. You’re willing to use my obligations to your training to get what you want—”

Fighting back, hanging onto the cliff by his fingernails. “No, I’m willing to let you hide behind those obligations—”

“You’re willing to use the Force to make me do what you want.”

“That’s a lie!”

“So I’m a liar as well as a coward? How highly you esteem your honored master,” Qui-Gon said plummily, mocking everything, “and that’s before you’ve had me on my back with my knees in the air.”

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And Obi-Wan flushed, two hectic spots of color reddening his cheeks, and his eyes darkened as his pupils expanded, the blackness devouring all but a thin ring of blue.

Qui-Gon reached out, and took hold of Obi-Wan's braid. Big hands, thick, heavy fingers, more the hands of a farmer than a diplomat, but very much the callused—and callused—hands of a warrior. The fingers stroked up and down, sliding over the beads marking the three handspans of years that Obi-Wan had been his apprentice. "I've fought the Dark my entire life," Qui-Gon said quietly. "And not all of those battles have been won, and not all of them were anything but my very own personal war. Don't tempt those who don't want to be tempted, Obi-Wan."

"I'm not tempting you," Obi-Wan said sharply. "Any temptation you feel is your own. All I'm doing is—"

"Is what?" Qui-Gon prompted.

Trying, still. Fighting, still. Reaching out, and offering his heart on a platter. "We have nothing for ourselves. We give up everything, and keep nothing. I want...I want this one thing to be for *me*. It has no bearing on my being Jedi, it's hardly something that

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would normally affect a mission. I just want one thing, one small thing, to be mine.”

Qui-Gon nearly smiled. “You call love a small thing?”

And then, at last, Obi-Wan lowered his eyes, and lowered his head, his shoulders slumping. “I’ve realized...” He cleared his throat, and began again, kept his voice steady even when Qui-Gon put a finger under his chin and raised his face to meet Qui-Gon’s penetrating gaze. “I’ve realized that the...love I want isn’t mine for the asking—” twisted little smile, eyes dark with something far from lust, “or for the wanting. But sex is—we’re permitted to indulge in sex, if we choose, with...friends.” An eloquent, elegant shrug that lied beautifully, if Qui-Gon would allow it. “You’re willing to bend tradition enough to be my friend as well as my master, so...”

Qui-Gon caressed his thumb across Obi-Wan’s lips, came in close enough that their breath mingled, and his beard brushed Obi-Wan’s chin.

Obi-Wan closed his eyes, and swayed forward, ready, more than ready, glad to take whatever he could get, for now, just until he could make Qui-Gon see the Light—

And—

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And—
Nothing.

Cold air where there had been a warm body. Chilled skin where there had been a hot hand.

Qui-Gon was standing at the door, his back—stooped, weighted down—to Obi-Wan. “You’ll come on the mission, lest we insult them. From the ship, we’ll send an announcement that you’ve come down with whatever minor contagion is running through travelers in that sector, and you can stay on the ship while I go dirtside and...”

Dry lips, dry throat, painfully, determinedly dry eyes: “Participate. You’ll participate.”

“Yes.”

The door opened on Qui-Gon’s command, and he was half-way through—half-way to safety, running away with measured pace and studied dignity—when Obi-Wan spoke again.

“Any temptation is yours alone,” Obi-Wan said. “Remember that. I haven’t *made* you feel anything.”

Cold as space, void as a black hole, Qui-Gon saying: “You’re right. You made me feel nothing.”

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And then the door closed, leaving Obi-Wan with the knowledge that his master was a liar, and a coward. And that loving, and being loved, could still leave a man utterly, profoundly, alone.

