Pæan to Priapus VII  a multi-media slash anthology

Circumference
by M. Fae Glasgow
This began life as an email to cheer someone up. I’d also been thinking about what it would take, to move from a loving, but non-sexual relationship, into a taking-it-to-the-next-stage, full-blown (pardon the pun) relationship—and wondered what would happen if, for once, someone said no.
Master Qui-Gon Jinn glanced up from his data-set and looked at the man across the room from him.

“Fuck!”

Obi-Wan caught his master looking at him, and hoped that Qui-Gon had no idea in which cesspool in which space port on which planet nor in which language Obi-Wan had picked up the obscure word. But unfortunately, his master knew swearing when he heard it.

“Padawan?”

A quick glance from under furrowed brows, a slight shrug, wry apology replacing temper, a process now accomplished in seconds, rather than in hours or days, as it once had been. “Sorry, Master. I didn’t think you’d know that one.”

“Even if I didn’t recognize the word, I’d recognize the tone. And it’s not the word, Padawan—”

“—it’s the intent and the emotion, yes, Master,” a smile bordering on cheeky, “I do know.”

“So what has you exercising your linguistics tonight?”
Obi-Wan gestured at the screen, a rare invitation for his master to see his private files. Qui-Gon dumped his own reading without a second thought, shrugging sanguinely as Obi-Wan’s smile turned into a knowing grin.

“In a hurry, Master?”

“It’s the novelty of it all,” Qui-Gon said dryly, his bare feet silent as he crossed the room to take this glimpse into Obi-Wan’s private life.

It wasn’t that Obi-Wan was exactly secretive—well, not entirely secretive and not quite all of the time—but for the past couple of years, Obi-Wan very much lived his own life outside of training and missions. His choice, very definitely, and a wise one, but Obi-Wan knew his master well, and was coming to know the man as well: Qui-Gon was mere mortal enough to miss the warm closeness of his padawan’s younger years and the kinship of the later years—years Obi-Wan missed far more than he ought. And it had all been going so well, until his master had overstepped the bounds and made such a royal mess of everything. Allowing Qui-Gon to see even this was…not a test, not even a senior padawan would have the hubris to test his own master. But it was, perhaps,
a chance to see if the master had to be shut out because of the man.

“I’m supposed to be running an assignment help-list for the junior padawans in astrophysics, and I thought—” a quick smile up at Qui-Gon and a warming expression in Obi-Wan’s eyes as his master moved in close and looked intently at the screen. “You see this message? And this, and this?” finger tapping sharply on the screen, punctuating Qui-Gon’s nods. “Well, he had wanted to run the help list, but well, I was asked first. So I thought I’d make sure no one’s feelings were hurt and asked him to co-chair the assistance forum with me—”

“Oh dear,” Qui-Gon said, looking at the name. “I do wish you’d asked me first, Obi-Wan.”

The look Obi-Wan gave his master spoke volumes. In fact, in spoke an entire library. “Would you care to explain, Master?”

“it’s just that... well, he has a bit of a history.”

“Which you didn’t see fit to tell me.”

There was a pause, Obi-Wan looking at Qui-Gon’s profile, watching as his master’s forehead creased and his master darted a single glance at him. And then:
A deep breath, Qui-Gon still not actually looking directly at Obi-Wan, his voice very gentle, carefully modulated, as he said, “You didn’t ask me, Padawan.”

Obi-Wan leaned back, movements and voice sharp. “Am I to ask you permission for everything as if I’m a child again?”

“No—” Another sigh, and this time Qui-Gon looked straight at him. Actually crouched down to be on eye-level with his seated padawan, and looked him in the eye. “I didn’t mean you should ask me permission. Just that…” a wry smile, self-mocking and more than a little sad. “Once upon a time, I was part of your life. Outside of lessons and training and missions. I knew who your friends were—”

Both of them remembering the times Obi-Wan had brought friends here, his master the only one, it seemed, willing to put up with rooms full of teenagers with their endless discussions and noise, and then seniors with their parties and noise, all of it crammed into the few brief pauses they had between missions. “I knew what you were doing, not because I’m required to answer for my padawan’s behavior and needed to know where you are, but because…” Qui-Gon looked away, finding interest in
the plying of his fingers. “But because you wanted to let me know. Before you’d shut me out. You know how I’d rather it was, between us.”

Obi-Wan’s turn to look away, to find something that simply demanded he look at it rather than the man at his side.

“Master…”

For a long moment, Qui-Gon crouched there, looking at his padawan’s averted face, waiting out the silence.

Found the silence out-waited him.

“Well,” he said, a touch too heartily, far too heartily to fool the trained Jedi watching, “I should get back to what I was doing.”

“Yes, Master.” Not mumbled, those years long past; said clearly, but soft, low.

More quiet, as Qui-Gon reseated himself and picked up his data-set.

After a few moments: “Obi-Wan?”

“Yes, Master?”

“You needn’t worry. My promise stands.”

No response.

Obi-Wan stared as Qui-Gon frowned at the data displayed in
front of him: Obi-Wan watched that superbly impassive expression as Qui-Gon began speaking.

Qui-Gon’s voice was gruff and bluff and brisk, as if they were discussing mining rights and trade tariffs. “I apologize again for approaching you. And I promise, I’ll make no further advances on you.”

“No?”

A twist of mouth behind beard, a narrowing of eyes, an expression that could have been read as concentration by someone less versed in recognizing hurt on Qui-Gon Jinn’s face.

“This time, I’ve finally learned my lesson, Obi-Wan,” said very softly, “and I’ve learned exactly what my place is in your life, Padawan, and for how long I’ll have it. I give you my word that no matter how much time passes between us, I won’t overstep the boundaries again.”

A rustle of clothes, the sound of traffic in the night sky, footsteps and laughter passing the closed door.

And, unexpectedly, after the silence had outwaited them both: “I wasn’t ready.”

Obi-Wan’s words hung in the air, lingering, while Qui-Gon Jinn
went utterly still, as if even his breath had been stilled in his lungs. Not a blink, not a movement, just…waiting. Like a victim under the ax.

“And I was scared, that if I accepted you—you rule every part of my life, as my master, less so every year, but…enough. If we were having sex, too…”

Obi-Wan held himself very still, waiting for the reaction. It was there, subtle, but there: Qui-Gon breathed in, breathed out, big deep breaths; lint was flicked off leggings; attention was fixed firmly on the data-set, and Qui-Gon didn’t meet Obi-Wan’s gaze. There was only the briefest glance aimed at Obi-Wan, Qui-Gon looking away quickly again, voice and face very steady, as if he was trying to avoid embarrassing either of them with an unseemly display of emotion. “I didn’t mean to threaten you. I was just…"

Prodding, a tinge of Force to the question, urging Qui-Gon to finish. “You were just…?”

A finger run down the side of the data-set, a tongue dampening lips, a sound that just might have been a Jedi master sighing. “I was just foolish.”

“That’s not what you were going to say.”
“No,” blandly, “it wasn’t.”
“Qui-Gon—you were just…?”
No answer.
None.
Another silence that outwaited them both.
Eventually, Obi-Wan turned back to his help-list, and soothed the upset Junior and told another that she really wasn’t stupid, answered a couple of questions in a way that would hopefully bring back those already scared off. Even more eventually, tea was made and brought to him, left at his elbow along with bread, supper as they always shared, when they were back on Coruscant.

A quiet “Good night, Padawan. Sleep well,” no different from usual, his own “And you, Master,” just the same as always. The familiar sounds, then, of Qui-Gon’s bedroom door closing, of muffled movements, of quiet as his master read in bed.

The same. Unchanged. As if they hadn’t dredged up that subject for the first time in nearly two years.

Later still, Obi-Wan shut down the large data-unit, put the small data-set in the drawer, expression darkening as he admitted
to himself that Qui-Gon had left it lying out rather than have to slide in beside Obi-Wan to put it away.

Damn.

So much for everything just being the same old thing.

He went through his own night-time routine, crawling gratefully into a bed that was clean and warm and his, closing his eyes, drifting off to sleep and—

He sat bolt upright.

‘I was just,’ Qui-Gon had said.

With that expression on his face. With that tone in his voice.

Obi-Wan had a sudden sinking sensation that he knew what Qui-Gon hadn’t said. Called himself ten kinds of fool for not realizing it long ago.

“Fuck,” he said, quiet but far more intense than before. “Fuck!”

He barely brushed his knuckles against Qui-Gon’s door, half-hoping that his master would be asleep and he could postpone this till morning—or forever. But there was a curiosity-tinged, “Come in,” and he was opening the door. Qui-Gon had a small globe lamp hovering over his shoulder, a small circle of light in the windowless room. “What is it, Padawan?”
Obi-Wan edged in, feeling half his age and twice as embarrassed as he’d ever been even back then. “Something you said earlier this evening…”

Qui-Gon’s expression changing, going distant and cold, the disapproving negotiator about to reject an unfair settlement. “Rather,” Obi-Wan said quickly, forestalling Qui-Gon barely in time, “it was something you didn’t say.”

Closed that expression surely was, but Obi-Wan had no trouble seeing the dismay in Qui-Gon’s eyes. “You said ‘I was just…’ and then you stopped.” “Which I think should indicate fairly clearly I don’t want to further this discussion. Good night, Padawan.”

Five years ago—even two—and he’d have obeyed the commanding snap of that voice. But tonight, it took no effort at all to dismiss it entirely, a far cry from when they were on missions, when the command voice would be obeyed instantly, no matter how much Obi-Wan was prone to argue in the aftermath. He took three more steps closer to the bed, closer to his master propped up there, blankets around his waist, bare chest bathed in lamplight, hair braided back out of the way, the neck completely revealed. Vulnerable.
Hard to think of his master so completely vulnerable, to him. Hard to remember when Qui-Gon had begun braiding his hair at night, but easy to remember the last time Qui-Gon had been this bare in front of him, when they weren’t both fully committed to a mission, and under full Jedi rules and discipline.

Vulnerable. A deliberate choice, Obi-Wan decided, another one of the small things that were permitted now, that were given to him, as unmentioned as secrets, his master allowing them to leave aside the strictures and strata of the master/padawan formality. No master, no padawan, just two men, and one of them bound by a promise.

“I wanted to tell you that I had no idea you were just... I thought—” two more steps, within touching distance of the bed now, “it was just lust. I thought you just wanted to get me on my knees—” seeing the anger in Qui-Gon’s face, “because I didn’t believe you could see me as more than just your padawan and someone with a good body. One you’d shaped.”

A raised eyebrow, the voice not raised at all, and twice as furious for all that. “You think that’s why I molded you? You think that of me? You—”
“No!” Dammit, this wasn’t how his speech was supposed to be greeted and damned if he’d be ready for his trials this year if he couldn’t negotiate better than this. “I’m not saying this properly or you’re not hearing me but—”

Close enough now to sit on the edge of the bed, to feel the dip as it took his weight, to see the slight movement of Qui-Gon’s body, to see the sudden rise of Qui-Gon’s chest taking so deep a breath.

Fuck, Obi-Wan thought—he’s wanted me this much for this long and he’s been keeping that much hidden from me? It certainly put the occasional snappish reply and bad temper into a completely different perspective and made the promise all the more real.

“Then why don’t you tell me how I’m supposed to be hearing you, Padawan?”

His head snapped up at that, a glimpse of his own temper and his own, as yet leashed, power. “Obi-Wan,” he said, deep and low and strong. “In this, I am not your padawan.”

“You think I don’t know that?” Another wry smile, dark eyes mocking, the gaze turned inwards. “Allow me a little distance.”
As Qui-Gon had allowed him as much distance as he’d needed, to define himself. No matter what it had cost.

“I thought it was just…” fumbling for the right word, something without baggage, without the power to hurt, realizing there was no such word. “I thought it was about sex. Because we’re together all the time, and where else are you going to… indulge without risking the perception of impartiality? I thought…”

Looked up in time to see the flare of anger die down and Qui-Gon start to look at it from Obi-Wan’s point of view, the wry smile growing bitter and brittle around the edges.

“I suppose…” Qui-Gon said slowly, rubbing his thumb along the underside of his beard, “if you thought I was just looking for a convenient hole,” continuing, blatantly ignoring Obi-Wan’s reaction to such crudity coming from Qui-Gon Jinn, “then the way I approached you…”

“You didn’t say anything about—you know,” Obi-Wan said softly. “You just told me that I’d grown to be an attractive man and you very much wanted to be more to me than just my master.”

The smile was fading, tinged with embarrassment. “Believe it or not, I thought I’d been quite clear.”
“You mean, as clear as tonight when you said ‘I was just…’?” Qui-Gon looking away again, impossible to tell if Qui-Gon were hiding his feelings or hiding from Obi-Wan’s reaction—or lack thereof.

“I thought you knew,” Qui-Gon said. “This whole time, I thought you knew I…”

“You thought I knew you ‘just…’? No,” said so gently as to be almost tender. “I had no idea, until tonight.” Silence, again.

“So…” Qui-Gon said, squaring his shoulders and meeting Obi-Wan’s gaze straight on, looking braver doing that than facing assassination droids. “Now you know.” Another pause, as Qui-Gon ran his gaze over Obi-Wan.

And Obi-Wan couldn’t help but follow that gaze drawing attention to Obi-Wan’s thick sleep shirt and heavy sleep pants; to Obi-Wan’s polite distance, perched as he was right on the edge of the bed; to Obi-Wan’s hands, clasped in his own lap, far from touching Qui-Gon; to the door left open and the hall light left on. Obi-Wan looked at himself through Qui-Gon’s eyes, and saw his own silent message writ large.
“My promise still stands,” Qui-Gon said, calmly, distantly, safely behind his shuttered gaze. “Good night again, Obi-Wan.” Obi-Wan rose to his feet, went back to the door. Looked back at Qui-Gon, sitting up alone in bed, his reader open in front of him, his expression such a perfect, trained mask of serene indifference.

Couldn’t leave, not without saying something, without yielding a few morsels of his own truths.

“I told you I wasn’t ready then.” Watched the words hit home, Qui-Gon’s hands tightening, knuckles whitening, and that unbreathing stillness, waiting.

“And I only just realized tonight what you really meant. I need time. To think. To—” Qui-Gon looking at him, hope dawning in his eyes, wariness overtaking it and a small, silent warning.

“I need to be absolutely certain.” Qui-Gon looking at him, still waiting, thawing.

“To know if I can still stay separate if we… just… you know.” “My promise,” husky, breathless, intense, “stands as long as you want it to.”
“Thank you.” Turning away again, pulling the door closed. Standing there for a few moments, thinking, about Qui-Gon’s ‘I was just…’ and what lay behind his own smoke-screen of annoyed self-esteem.

Coming to a conclusion, living in the moment as he ought, opening the door again suddenly, the words spilling out of him before he could think better of his confession: “Because I think I feel the same ‘just…’ as you and— Oh!”

Staring openly, as his master pulled his hand out from under the covers—and outright blushed.

Qui-Gon spoke gruffly, as if that could possibly hide embarrassment. “I thought you’d gone.”

“So you thought you’d come?”

“You’re supposed to knock.”

“I already had.”

Inane conversation to cover what Obi-Wan had seen and what Qui-Gon had been doing, while some venal part of Obi-Wan’s brain wondered just how many times Qui-Gon had done exactly what Qui-Gon had just been caught doing. And an even more venal part of his brain wondered just exactly
what Qui-Gon had been thinking about the two of them doing together.

Then he shoved venal thoughts aside, and considered how many times he himself had done exactly what Qui-Gon had been doing, but with himself thinking of the two of them together whilst cursing Qui-Gon for wanting him for nothing more than convenient, casual, just-friends sex.

Qui-Gon was staring at him, as if he had a sign flashing on and off over his head.

“Would I be abusing my position as your master,” delivered with droll, self-deprecating amusement, “if I were to remind you to live in the moment?”

Helpless to stop the smile, Obi-Wan grinned, and gave name to what he was finally being allowed to see in Qui-Gon’s eyes. Or what he was finally seeing clearly.

“I’m going to think about this first,” he said, backing out the doorway. “Because if I tell you to break your promise—”

Gently, urging him so very gently: “Yes?”

“If I tell you to break your promise,” stalling for time and knowing it, feeling the truth loom within, “I don’t think I’ll ever let go.”
“Then leave now,” nearly whispered, “before I can’t keep that promise for either of us, my Obi-Wan.”

Leave he did, but only as far as the other side of the door, and then his own bedroom and his own bed, where he lay in the dark, and thought about what Qui-Gon was surely doing right now, and how it was more than just sex, it was just…

He let go the shackles inside himself. Let the feeling free. Felt it creep slowly out, tentative, as if waiting to be savaged once more by the knowledge that Qui-Gon wanted only sex and casual camaraderie.

Felt the warmth pulse and grow as different knowledge greeted the feeling inside him. New knowledge. Wonderful knowledge. Felt the warmth spread through him like the Force itself.

Gave it, at last, the same name he’d given to the expression in Qui-Gon’s eyes.

Lay there in the dark, with the warmth within, and his hand without, touching himself and knowledge and the promise of a very new future. Thought more about promises, and the past gift of time; measured that generosity against the swift passage of present time and how uncertain the future is for Jedi, outside of
prophecy, and within the boundaries of their duty to serve, no matter the personal danger.
  
  Touched, once more, the emotion unfurling inside, and thought about Qui-Gon’s touch, and Qui-Gon’s unspoken emotion.
  
  Listened, in his mind, to Qui-Gon confessing, saw again the brief glimpse of what had been hidden: ‘I was just...’
  
  Threw back the covers on his bed, and went, once more, to Qui-Gon’s bedroom, to have a promise broken and a new one made.