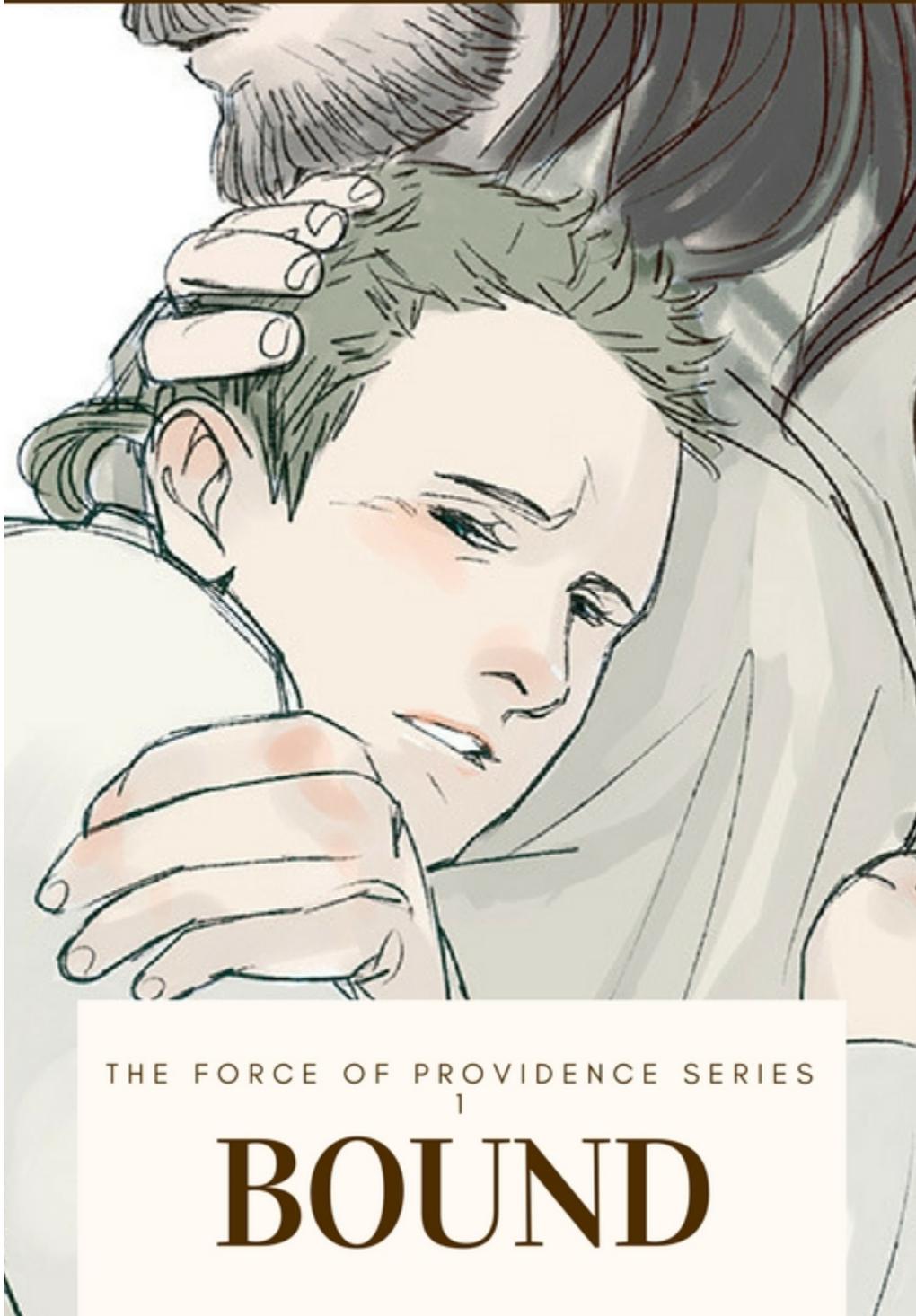


By Qwae29



THE FORCE OF PROVIDENCE SERIES

1

BOUND

I neither own these characters or the literary universe in which they live, though there are a few new faces and places that are of my own design. I neither make nor intend to make any profit off of this writing, but indeed I expect die poor, clutching a legal pad and pen to my chest, a half-written chapter scribbled on the fading yellow page.

Author's Note: This is the first book of my series The Force of Providence. This series will follow Obi-Wan Kenobi's apprenticeship with Master Qui-Gon Jinn and is projected to end somewhere approaching the Phantom Menace timeframe, but of course that can and probably will change. Though this will have some similarities, and thus some spoilers, with the Jedi Apprentice book series by Judith Watson, this is still most definitely AU. Please enjoy what I anticipate will be my newest obsession.

Italics indicate emphasis, visions, personal thoughts, and flashbacks. Context should illustrate which device is being used. // indicates mindspeak.

Chapter 1: Blinded by Vision

1 year ago...

The Grand Hall was packed. Knight, masters, padawans, and initiates of all ages and species had converged on Coruscant to witness the Temple's Annual Initiate Exhibition. Though conducted as a tournament, the true competition was not to win first place, but instead to impress a master who might take a promising competitor as his, her, or its padawan. That was the true motivation behind each young participant and Obi-Wan Kenobi was no exception. At eleven standard years of age, it was not unusual for Obi-Wan to not yet have been selected as a padawan, but time was running out. His birthday was only a few days after the exhibition meaning he had only one year to catch the eye of someone, some knight or master who would take him on as an apprentice, but Obi-Wan had faith. He was a more than fair student academically and was tremendously talented with a practice saber. The young boy was certain that he would be chosen in time. In fact, perhaps today was going to be the day...

Obi-Wan entered the hall, scanning the room for a set of familiar faces. A quick glance to his right showed him his target. On a bench near the far arena sat his best friends and agetates, all smiles and waving arms. He walked over to join them, a large smile plastered across his face as the excitement of today's events began to grow inside him.

"Obi! Are you ready? Are you nervous? Don't be nervous! You're so good with a saber!" Bant babbled enthusiastically answering her own questions as she drew Obi-Wan into a tight hug.

"Thanks, Bant," Obi-Wan said once he was released from his friend's grasp. "And no, I'm not nervous."

"What's he got to be nervous about?" Garen joined as he also greeted his friend with a hug. "Our Obi's the best in our division. This is your year, Obi. I just know it!"

Obi-Wan looked happily upon the faces of his dearest friends. Garen Muln and Bant Eerin, along with Reeft who was unfortunately away on an academic field trip, had been Obi-Wan's constant companions since his first memories in the crèche. The four initiates had been inseparable over the years, but as excited as each of them was to be taken as a padawan, they also knew that that change would mean their eventual separation, a separation that would only grow over the long years to their knighthoods. Obi-Wan pushed those thoughts aside and chose instead to focus on the task before him.

"I don't know about that, Garen," Obi-Wan replied with a blush. "Do you know who's here?" he asked. Garen did not need to ask him exactly which who he meant. Every initiate was keeping tabs on the available knights and masters that were currently on planet and free to take a padawan should they find one to their liking.

“Well, I heard that Master Apopka and Master Tourin are both here specifically looking for a new padawan,” Garen answered with a mischievous smile as if he were delivering some delicate intel. Bant leaned in and nodded seriously.

“And I heard that Master Yoda has been badgering some of the younger knights into taking padawans too. I heard Knights Rasiili and Cib-Tan even got thwacked on the shins before they agreed to come to watch the exhibition.”

“What about... you know,” Obi-Wan asked hesitantly. Bant and Garen exchanged knowing looks. A particular master had already stopped by the crèche asking questions about Obi-Wan, his skills, his academics, his medical records. Though he had never spoken to the boy directly, all four initiates had noticed the master’s interest.

“Don’t worry. He’s here,” Bant whispered then she directed her large eyes to the far left corner of the room. “Third row towards the middle.”

The two boys casually glanced over their shoulders to lay eyes on the stoic visage of Bothan Master Jedi Nahar Goor Pama. Master Goor Pama had a long muzzle and sharp expressive ears that stuck out at odd angles from his chestnut brown mane of fur. It was known that the master had already raised two padawans successfully to knighthood and was now on the hunt for a third. Obi-Wan felt his chest swell with hope as he gazed upon the serene master sitting quietly in the stands. He turned back to his friends, a smile on his face.

“I think you’re right, Garen. This is my year. I can just feel it. Something big is about to happen.”

* * * * *

The tournament was running smoothly. Obi-Wan had advanced to the semi-finals with ease and all that stood between him and the final round was one last fight. Obi-Wan wiped the sweat from his brow as he gathered his calm and prepared himself for his next bout. Bant and Garen had already been eliminated and now took their seats behind him among the first row of spectators. Obi-Wan closed his eyes and swallowed the heady rush of anticipation. Just as he brought his breathing down to a slow and steady rate his light meditation was interrupted by an all too familiar voice.

“I hope you’re ready to be embarrassed again, Oafy-Wan.”

Obi-Wan opened his eyes and looked up to see the chubby face smirk of one Bruck Chun staring down at him.

“That is not my name,” he replied dismissively. Ever since his earliest days in the crèche, Bruck had always seemed to have it out for him. The other boy would poke and

prod him, taut and tease him mercilessly and yet never once had the other child ever faced real punishment. Somehow Bruck would always steer the blame away from himself and back to his victim, usually Obi-Wan. Bruck Chun was a bully, a talented bully with a saber, but a bully nonetheless.

“Once I win this round, all the masters will be looking to choose me and nobody will give a second thought to a clumsy kid like you, Oafy,” Bruck sneered as he moved a wisp of his shaggy white hair from his eyes. Obi-Wan took a deep breath. Too many times he had allowed Bruck’s jibes to pierce his calm, but not this time. This tournament was far too important. Obi-Wan looked steadily into the other boy’s eyes.

“No matter who wins we will both do our best. The other Jedi will see that,” he answered serenely. Bruck threw his head back in raucous laughter.

“What the other Jedi will see is that your best isn’t good enough. See you in the ring, Oafy-Wan,” he said as he walked away still laughing at his own wit. Obi-Wan stared at Bruck’s retreating figure shaking his head when he felt a hand on his knee. He looked over and was met with the gimlet eyes of the Order’s smallest master. Immediately, Obi-Wan jumped off the bench and knelt before the smaller Jedi.

“Master Yoda,” he greeted. The ancient master regarded the boy for a few quiet seconds. He placed his hands atop his gimer stick; his large ears twitching slightly.

“How feel you, young one?”

“Master?” Obi-Wan spoke in surprise and not a little confusion. Why was Master Yoda worried about him? “I... I am well, Master.”

“Hmm...” the older Jedi hummed as he closed his eyes. “Many battles you have fought to get here. Another battle now you will face.”

Obi-Wan’s brow knitted at the master’s words. Of course he had fought battles to get here. This was the semi-final round, but surely Yoda had meant more than that. Before he could ask the Grand Master what he meant, Obi-Wan heard the announcer call him and Bruck to the floor. Yoda opened his eyes as Obi-Wan rose to his feet.

“Strong you must be for what lies ahead and strong you are,” the ancient master suddenly offered, his gravely voice emphasizing the last of his words. Not knowing quite what to say, Obi-Wan simply bowed and thanked the elder Jedi then he crossed onto the main floor and entered the central ring.

Bruck was already there waiting on him, his face still baring an insufferable smugness. The knight officiating the tournament reminded both boys of the rules before asking them to bow to him and then to each other. Both boys then lit their sabers and the duel was on. The pale white light of the two practice sabers whirled and swished in the air around them. Each combatant moving and maneuvering for better position as the two

engaged in brief and frenzied collisions with their blades only to retreat and reengage. Obi-Wan could feel Bruck's frustration increase as the battle continued as he gave the other child no hole in his defense of which to take any advantage. All Obi-Wan had to do was fend Bruck off, knowing that the boy's own emotions would cloud his judgment and off balance his actions. Obi-Wan needed only to remain calm and wait. Then suddenly it happened. Bruck made a clumsy thrust leaving a perfect opening for Obi-Wan to sweep in for a finishing move. He darted inside Bruck's over extended arm and prepared to make what would be the round's final blow when, unexpectedly, the world dissolved around him.

The entire Grand Hall faded into nothingness and Obi-Wan found himself in a place of total darkness. The air around him was thick and dusty causing him to choke and cough. He felt the hard ground beneath his feet and when he reached out his arms he only met solid, unforgiving rock. He was trapped here. Wherever here was. Trapped by rock and stone. Lost in the dark. Panic began to swell in his chest and as Obi-Wan tried desperately to catch his breath he heard a voice call out. The voice was soft, so soft it was barely heard and completely unrecognizable, but somehow Obi-Wan understood the words that sang quietly through the dark.

"Obi-Wan!" the voice called desperately. "Obi-Wan! You must try! I need you! Obi-Wan!"

"Who... Where are you?" Obi-Wan called back, but no one stepped forward. The darkness remained unbroken. Then the voice called out again, but this time it was different... louder... closer.

"Obi-Wan!" someone shouted as he felt a gentle shake on his shoulder and a hand resting on his forehead.

"He's coming out of it," another voice said. Obi-Wan slowly opened his eyes, blinking against the bright lights of the Grand Hall's illumination. The world began to focus around him once again and he discovered that he was lying on his back on the arena floor with several masters and knights clustered around him. Confused beyond all reason, Obi-Wan's eyes settled on a familiar face. Master Yoda gazed down at the pale boy before him.

"All right things are. Sleep now, you will," he said and Obi-Wan drifted quickly into a deep slumber.

* * * * *

The Present...

Master Qui-Gon Jinn stepped onto the ramp of his transport bone weary and sore. It had been a long string of missions that kept him away from Coruscant, the latest few of

which were particularly harrowing, and now all the tall master wanted was to go to his quarters and enjoy a long hot shower and a good night's rest, but as he descended the ramp and his gaze fell upon the tiny green figure awaiting him he knew that it would be awhile still before his wish was granted.

Qui-Gon stepped before the much smaller master and bowed deeply.

"Master Yoda," he intoned. The ancient master gazed up at the taller, long-haired Jedi and frowned.

"Tired, you look. Finally weary of running are you?" the Grand Master greeted gruffly. Qui-Gon felt his own hackles rise at the master's insinuation. He was far too exhausted for a round with this diminutive adversary.

"I am not running. I am simply doing my duty," he replied. Yoda struck his gimer stick against the bay floor.

"To teach, a duty you have as well. Forgotten this you have."

"I have forgotten nothing. You know quite well why I choose not to take another padawan. I have only asked you to respect my decision. You need not agree with it," he rejoined. Yoda grumped loudly.

"Agree with it I do not," the elder master spoke punctuating his dissent with another strike of his stick. The two masters stared at each other for a long time, both of their wills exceedingly stubborn, their positions intractable. Finally, Yoda let loose a long sigh breaking their eye contact and ending the stalemate.

"Report to the Council now, you will. Expect you they do."

"As you wish, Master," Qui-Gon answered once again bowing low before his elder. Yoda grumped once more before turning and making his slow way through the Temple, Master Jinn followed mutely behind.

* * * * *

"I thought you would be holed up in your quarters by now."

"Despite the Council's earlier haranguing, a hot shower and a short meditation has infused me with enough fortitude to seek out sustenance," Qui-Gon retorted as he sat down his tray and took a seat across from his friend. Mace greeted him with a quick smirk before returning his attention to his meal. The two older Jedi had been friends for a very long time and though Mace's appointment to the Council had often strained their relationship, both masters had vowed never to let it break it.

Mace took a long and leisurely sip of his soup as he stared at his friend.

"I heard you had an interesting... arrival today."

"If by interesting you mean I was once again ambushed by a meddling troll then yes," Qui-Gon answered as he steeped his tea. "It seems Yoda is more insistent than ever that I take another padawan. Sith hells take him, I really wish he would let this matter rest."

"I'm sure he will," Mace responded casually as Qui-Gon looked to him with suspicion. "He will... after he gets his way," Mace finished. Qui-Gon shook his head.

"Then I am doomed to be forever tormented," he sighed as he began to work on his meal.

"Worrisome as he is, the troll does have a point."

"Not you too?" Qui-Gon replied a bit more harshly than he intended. Mace quickly raised his hands in mock surrender.

"I'm just saying that it's been eight years, Qui-Gon. Force, even Vresh has taken a padawan and he also swore never to do so. Perhaps Yoda is right and it's time to move on."

"I will move on as you so eloquently put it when I am ready and not at anyone else's command," he growled. Mace nodded his head in concession.

"Fair enough, friend. Fair enough."

* * * * *

"That's him! I'm sure of it!"

"No, you're wrong. He never comes back for the tournaments."

"I'm telling you guys, that is Qui-Gon Jinn. Hey, maybe he will choose you at this year's tournament Obi," Garen said as he turned to his friend. Obi-Wan hadn't looked up the entire time his table mates were arguing over the arrival of the mysterious master sitting with Council Member Windu. Instead he continued to poke at the food on his plate even as he answered his friend.

"You know he won't, Gar," he mumbled. Bant slid in a little closer to her friend's side.

"Just because you haven't been chosen so far doesn't mean you won't be, Obi."

Obi-Wan finally looked up and saw the caring gazes of his friends. Even Reeft had stopped the rapid consumption of his dinner in his concern. Despite their well wishes and optimism, Obi-Wan held no illusions about his future. He turned and glanced over at the serene looking, long-haired master across the room and sighed.

“He won’t want me either, not once he finds out...”

Chapter 2: For the Asking

“What is a lightsaber?”

“Master?”

“What is a lightsaber?”

“A lightsaber is the main defensive tool of a Jedi. It is the focus point for our Force sense.”

“Nothing more?”

“It... um... it...,” the young Felinoid stammered. Her master finally took pity on her and knelt before her, resting a hand on her slender shoulder.

“A lightsaber,” he began as he placed his own unlit saber in her small paw. “Is more than a weapon. It is more than a tool. It is even more than a focus point. It is an extension of ourselves in everyway. It is an extension of our Force abilities. It is an extension of our will and...” he said as he stretched out the short arm that cradled his saber hilt. “It is an extension of our bodies. Your arm is merely extended by the blade, it is no less a part of you.”

“A really cool part of you that can cut through almost anything,” she said with a toothy grin. Her master answered with a half smile of his own.

“Indeed, you little scamp,” he replied as he brushed against her whiskers; an obvious sign of affection among her species. “This hilt,” he began again, “is an extension of me. When I wield it, it becomes a part of myself as integral as a hand or a foot. When you build your own saber you will learn to think of it the same way.”

“So it is true?” a baritone voice rang out from within the training salle. Both master and apprentice glanced up to see the tall form of a Jedi Master approach. The young girl’s master smiled and rose to his feet. He reached out and eagerly embraced the new arrival.

“Qui-Gon, you old scoundrel! When did you get back?”

“Just yesterday,” Qui-Gon replied as the two old friends separated, each giving the other a once over. The other master was as tall as Qui-Gon, but with short white hair and golden skin. He had startling silver eyes and a deep scar that gave all of his expressions a rakish quality. Indeed, this was the man Qui-Gon remembered, a little older, a little more worn around the edges, but still the same soul he had known from the crèche. Qui-Gon finally let his eyes drift to the small child quietly holding a hilt much too large for her.

“So, it is true?” he repeated. The other master’s smile grew wider as he placed an arm around the girl’s shoulders.

“It is. Qui, allow me to introduce you to my padawan, Lantis Mir. Lani,” he said turning to the girl, “this is Master Qui-Gon Jinn, one of my oldest friends.”

“Master Jinn,” the Felinoid purred with a deep bow. Qui-Gon returned the gesture with a small smile.

“Padawan Mir, it is a pleasure,” the long-haired master spoke in his most melodic tones.

“Now you stop that right now, Qui. No charming of my padawan. Get your own,” the other master laughed, but immediately he saw the slight stiffening in his friend at his words. “Ah, so he’s after you again.”

“Vresh, you have no idea.”

“Well, actually I have some,” the shorter haired master answered, but before Qui-Gon could comment, Vresh turned to his small charge. “Lani, would you mind if I interrupted your lesson to spar with Master Qui-Gon?” he asked then he turned to Qui-Gon. “That is if you’re feeling up to it?”

“If your student has no objections to seeing her master get thoroughly trounced, I am amenable,” Qui-Gon retorted. Lantis watched the byplay between the two masters with a grin and barely suppressed giggle.

“What say you, Padawan?”

“Go get him, Master!” Lantis exclaimed as she handed Vresh back his lightsaber which he took with a bow and flourish. He watched Lantis take a seat on a bench as Qui-Gon removed his cloak, robe, and outer tunic.

“Now, remember, no embarrassing me in front of my padawan,” Vresh said as he and Qui-Gon took opposing positions on the mat. Qui-Gon unclipped his saber and dialed down the intensity to training level.

“Perhaps you should have considered that before you chose to challenge me in front of your apprentice,” he smirked. Vresh’s eyes grew wide.

“You wouldn’t...,” he said, but Qui-Gon’s smirk only deepened. “Sith hells, I should have practiced more,” he mumbled then he lit his saber and the two began their dance.

Though Qui-Gon was technically the better swordsman, Vresh was no slouch. The two masters were well acquainted with each other’s style and could anticipate one another’s maneuvers with precision creating a bout that to most appearances was fairly

evenly matched, but that was only the appearance. Vresh was more than aware that Qui-Gon was enjoying the match and was therefore endeavoring to make it last as long as possible, but when both masters began to tire, the long-haired master went in for the kill. Qui-Gon, though trained in Ataru, often did not employ the more acrobatic of the form's moves in his sparring, so when the rangy master somersaulted handily over his opponent's head, Vresh was quite expectedly surprised. Qui-Gon landed lightly behind the master, preformed a front sweep taking Vresh off his feet and placing his glowing green saber at the man's throat.

"So much for not embarrassing me in front of the kid," Vresh smirked as he looked up at his friend from the floor. Qui-Gon chuckled and disengaged his saber before offering him a hand up. As Vresh got to his feet the two masters suddenly heard applause erupt around them. Belatedly the two Jedi realized that an entire class of initiates had witnessed the duel and were now staring at the masters with open expressions of awe and amazement. With a touch of both humor and humility, the masters gave a shallow nod to their unexpected audience. Soon the children were being gently herded into their lessons by the training masters, but not before Qui-Gon noticed a small huddle still staring in his direction. A young Mon Calamari girl elbowed an auburn haired boy ushering him forward. The boy moved ahead reluctantly crossing the empty floor between his class and the two masters. Vresh looked up from where his padawan was handing him two towels. He passed one to Qui-Gon before addressing their guest.

"Obi-Wan!" he greeted enthusiastically. "How are you?"

"I am well, Master Vresh," the boy answered with a brilliant smile that suddenly turned shy as he glanced at Qui-Gon. Vresh looked to the boy to his friend and back again, a sly grin passing over his thin lips.

"Ah, Qui-Gon, allow me to introduce you to my friend Obi-Wan Kenobi. Obi-Wan, this is,"

"Master Qui-Gon Jinn," Obi-Wan interrupted then he suddenly blushed. "Everyone knows who you are, sir."

"I hadn't realized I was so popular," Qui-Gon answered dryly.

"You're one of the best swordsmen in the Order and now everyone knows why!" the child answered his excitement from watching the match beginning to overtake his initial shyness.

"Hey, Master Vresh did pretty good too!" Lantis suddenly interjected.

"Thank you, Padawan," he said with the air of the slightly wounded. "I hope your old master hasn't fallen too far off his pedestal."

"Never, Master," Lantis smiled up at him, her bright eyes shining.

“Well, I did say he was one of the best swordsmen, Lantis and Master Vresh is pretty amazing,” Obi-Wan replied. Vresh turned his attention back to the young boy, his expression more serious.

“How have you been, Obi-Wan?”

“The same,” was the boy’s only response, but his tone inferred that there was much more hidden behind those words, things that Qui-Gon could only guess at. Obi-Wan then turned his attention back to Qui-Gon.

“Master Jinn, my... um... friends and I were wondering if perhaps you and Master Vresh would be willing to do another demonstration for us sometime... I mean... if you wouldn’t mind,” he asked hesitantly. Qui-Gon frowned, but Vresh beat him to the punch.

“We would be honored, Obi-Wan,” the short haired master answered warmly. All eyes were suddenly on Qui-Gon whose frown only deepened.

“I thank you for the invitation, Initiate Kenobi, however, I must decline. Perhaps some other knight or master would be available,” he intoned. Lantis seemed surprised, Vresh was disappointed, but it was Obi-Wan’s crestfallen expression that held the four Jedi in a tense moment of silence. Obi-Wan then slipped on the typical Jedi mask of serenity before bowing to both masters.

“I understand, Master Jinn. Thank you both for considering my request,” he spoke formally. Vresh stepped forward and placed a hand on the boy’s shoulder.

“Obi-Wan,” he started, but was interrupted.

“I should get back to my class. It was nice to see you again, Master Vresh. You too, Lantis,” he said then he turned and walked back to join the initiate saber class already underway. Vresh turned to his friend and sighed.

“That was unnecessary.”

“The boy seemed to take it well enough,” Qui-Gon answered. Vresh turned his attention back to Obi-Wan who was moving through the steps of a Shii-Cho form with his classmates and shook his head.

“He’s fine,” Qui-Gon said as he crossed over to the bench to retrieve his things. Vresh stood there a moment longer looking at Obi-Wan.

“No. He’s not.”

* * * * *

Master Yoda made his way slowly down the stoned lined path through one of the many gardens in the Room of a Thousand Fountains. Before he even entered the sacred space he had felt the small disturbance in the Force emanating from a lone figure sitting by a reflecting pool. The ancient master wandered over to the huddled form and took a seat beside him with a grunt. He placed his gimer stick across his lap and closed his eyes, taking in the great presence of the Living Force around him. However, even the tranquility of the space could not hide the pain swirling around the one beside him.

“Alone you think you are, but alone you are not,” the master intoned as he looked deep into the reflecting pool. The figure beside him lifted his head slightly from where he had buried it in the protective embrace of his knees and arms, but he did not look at the master, only straight ahead focused on some distant point to nowhere.

“Perhaps not, but I will be soon,” a small voice answered. Yoda then turned to the child seated beside him.

“Why say that you?”

“Because I’ll be thirteen in less than a tenday, Master Yoda, and then I’ll be sent away. Alone.”

“So certain of this you are,” Yoda grumped. “Perhaps so certain you should not be.”

Obi-Wan finally turned his attention to the wizened master, his eyes red from recently shed tears.

“How can you say that?” he shouted, forgetting for a moment to whom he was speaking. “No one wants me. I’m broken. I’m defective. I’m a freak and I will never be a Jedi!” he yelled as he jumped to his feet and ran out of the garden. Master Yoda did not attempt to stop the child or pursue him. He knew the reason for the child’s pain and the reason for the boy’s fear. What the master didn’t know was what he could do to fix it, but he had an idea where to start.

* * * * *

“You summoned me, Master?”

“Yes, yes. Come in. Sit down you will and tea I will bring,” called a gravelly voice from somewhere in the kitchen. Qui-Gon stepped into the balmy quarters of the Order’s Grand Master and took a seat on one of the many cushions strewn about the floor. After a few moments, an adroitly levitated tray of tea and cookies floated past him and then settled on the low table nearby. Master Yoda followed slowly behind the tray, taking a seat across from the tall master and pouring them both steaming cups before speaking.

"A request of you I have," the diminutive master spoke after a sip of his tea. Qui-Gon held his cup, but did not drink.

"A mission?"

"A favor," Yoda replied simply. Suspicious, but intrigued, Qui-Gon took a sip from his tea cup. When the elder master offered nothing more he quirked an eyebrow, but still said nothing, merely sipped his tea quietly. His patience finally rewarded him with more words.

"The Annual Initiate Exhibition in two days is."

"It is," Qui-Gon answered simply taking another long sip of tea.

"For you to attend I would like," Yoda added. Qui-Gon sat down his cup.

"We have already spoken of this, Master," he said gruffly. Yoda too placed his cup down.

"Asking you to take a padawan I am not. Only to attend."

"Why?" Qui-Gon asked his eyes narrowing. Yoda's ears dipped down slightly as he answered.

"Concerned I am for one of the initiates. For your help I am asking."

"And that is all?" Qui-Gon pressed still mistrustful of the elder master's motives. Yoda sighed deeply, his large ears drooping even further.

"No more of you will I ask if help him you will," the master intoned softly. Taken aback slightly by the uncharacteristically despondent posture of his mentor, Qui-Gon was compelled to agree to help this unknown child... and if it meant that he would no longer be pressured to take another padawan all the better. Qui-Gon nodded to his former mentor.

"I will attend."

Chapter 3: Small Favors

Qui-Gon Jinn returned to his quarters in a pensive manner. His conversation with Yoda had unsettled him. He had never seen the Grand Master in such a state. What could possibly be wrong with some initiate to worry the ancient Jedi so and what could he possibly do to help if Yoda himself felt inadequate? Qui-Gon shook his head in frustration as he poured himself a steaming cup of tea. He was just contemplating what he should make himself for latemeal when the door to his quarters chimed. He walked to the main room and opened the door.

"I hope I am not disturbing you?"

"Not at all," Qui-Gon answered truthfully as he stepped aside and ushered his friend in. "I was just preparing latemeal. Would you care to join me?"

"You? Cooking? Are you sure you are preparing latemeal or perhaps could it be lastmeal?" the other Jedi said as he entered the room carrying a data reader. Qui-Gon allowed the doors to slide close behind him.

"Very funny, Mace," he replied dryly as he returned to the kitchen and prepared a second cup of tea. Mace hovered in the entryway to the small kitchenette as he watched his friend move about the kitchen.

"Is everything alright, Qui-Gon? You seem... distracted."

"I just came from a very interesting meeting with Master Yoda," he replied as placed a cup in Mace's hand. Mace gave a nod of thanks and quietly sipped his tea as he waited for Qui-Gon to continue. "He called me to his quarters ostensibly for tea, but of course he had something else in mind."

"I would assume more padawan pressuring?" Mace offered with a smile. Qui-Gon continued his work in the kitchen even as he answered.

"That was my assumption as well. I was quite prepared for another round of verbal sparring when he surprised me by instead asking me for a favor."

"A favor?"

"Yes."

"What did he ask of you?"

“He wants me attend to the Initiate Exhibition,” Qui-Gon started, but just before Mace could interject he held up a silencing hand and continued. “I know, I thought the same thing the moment he said it, but he assures me that not only he is not after me to get a padawan, that if I help him he will drop the subject all together.”

“Alright,” Mace answered as he mulled that last bit of information over with obvious skepticism. “What does he want then?”

“He wants me to help him help some initiate who is having difficulty,” Qui-Gon said as he turned around and approached the entryway with a tray of small finger foods, pastries, and sandwiches. Mace stepped aside to let him pass and joined him at the small dining table on the outer edge of the common space.

“By the way, this does not count as cooking, Qui-Gon.”

“It’s food. I prepared it and you will eat it,” the long-haired master said as he placed the platter on the table. Mace took his seat.

“Did Yoda say who?”

“No, but Mace I tell you that in all my years I have never seen Yoda so...”

“Concerned?” Mace supplied, but Qui-Gon shook his head.

“No. Despondent,” he finished. Mace rested his chin on his clasped hands, his brow furrowing deeply.

“I... I don’t know what to make of this. What did you say?”

“I said yes of course,” the long-haired master answered in mild surprise. “I would have done just about anything to get him off my back about taking a padawan, but to get my wish all I have to do is help a youngling... How could I refuse?” he finished as he placed an entire sliver of sandwich into his mouth. Mace thought in silence for a few moments more before shrugging his shoulders and reaching for a small pastry.

“Speaking of padawans, did you see Vresh?”

“I did,” Qui-Gon replied as he wiped his fingers on a napkin. “I must say I was surprised to see that it was true, that he had taken another padawan. After... well let’s just say I didn’t expect it.”

“No one did to be honest with you.”

“What made him change his mind?” Qui-Gon asked. Mace smiled mischievously.

“Why? Afraid it may happen to you?” he smirked. Qui-Gon put on his most serious face though a twinkle of mirth could still be seen within the depths of his dark, blue eyes.

“Know thy enemy, Mace. Know thy enemy.”

“You are truly incorrigible, old friend,” Mace retorted with a laugh. “But truthfully, I have no idea what changed his mind. He hasn’t offered and I haven’t asked. I’m just glad he did. He seems... much happier now.”

Despite his own reluctance to take on another apprentice, Qui-Gon was forced to concede that point.

“Yes, he does and if this is what he wants, what will keep him happy, then I wish him all the blessings the Force can offer. He deserves it,” Qui-Gon said as he finished his last bite. Mace tilted his head as he looked at his friend closely.

“And you don’t?”

“I don’t what?”

“Don’t deserve to be happy?”

“Mace.”

“It’s a simple question, Qui-Gon.”

“What’s on the reader, Mace?” he replied as he gestured to the forgotten data reader sitting on a nearby end table.

“You’re changing the subject, Qui.”

“I am indeed. Now, what’s on the reader?” Qui-Gon repeated. Mace pursed his lips and sighed at his obstinate friend, but he did pick up the reader and hand it over the table.

“I came across some interesting information in this morning’s Council session. I thought you would be interested,” he replied as he went to the kitchen to refresh both of their tea cups. Qui-Gon quietly scanned the contents of the documents he had been presented. By the time Mace returned to the table, the reader was down and his eyes were wide in surprise and disbelief.

“Tomorrow?”

“Indeed,” Mace said as he handed Qui-Gon a fresh cup. “Tahl’s transport will arrive late morning.”

“How long has it been since all four of us were on planet at the same time?”

“Probably not since Severin,” Mace answered quietly. Qui-Gon looked up from his reverie for a moment and caught the glimpse of regret in his friend’s dark brown eyes.

“Yes, I think you’re right,” he answered as he turned his tea cup between his fingers. “We should change that.”

“What do you suggest?”

“A dinner, here, after the exhibition, just the four of us.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Mace began then he leaned forward in his chair, a serious expression on his dark face. “That is on one condition,” he added. Qui-Gon didn’t respond, only quirked an eyebrow at the Councilor. Mace’s frown suddenly split into a smile as he stood up to leave the apartment. He paused at the door and looked over his shoulder at his host.

“Cater the dinner, Qui-Gon. Don’t you dare cook.”

* * * * *

Obi-Wan watched absently as his class filed out of the training room and headed to the communal showers. He did not follow. Instead, he sat down on one of the rooms many benches and wiped the sweat from his face. It had not been a good class for him. He was distracted by thoughts of his future, a future that seemed more hopeless with each passing day. As a result of his dark ponderings he had been off balanced in class, missing blocks and misstepping in his stances in even the most basic of katas. No, today had not been a good day and as Obi-Wan watched Bruck Chun approach him, he knew that the day was only about to get worse.

“Nice display in class today, Oafy. Way to really live up to your potential.”

“Leave me alone, Bruck,” Obi-Wan answered as he rose off his bench and turned to head to the door. Bruck blocked his path.

“Where do you think you’re going? We aren’t done here.”

“Yes, Bruck. We are. Now let me pass,” Obi-Wan said as he stared straight into the boy’s hazel eyes. Bruck leaned forward until he was nearly nose to nose with the other boy.

“Or what? Whatcha going to do, Oafy-Wan?” he sneered and something in Obi-Wan snapped. He was frustrated, depressed, and angry and here before him stood the perfect place to exorcise some of those feelings. With a vicious shove, he threw Bruck back and away from him, but instead of retreating his bully seemed only more enthused.

“Oh, Oafy’s getting angry. What are you so mad about? Are you mad because no one wants a clumsy, defective, freak like you?”

“Shut up!” Obi-Wan yelled as he drew his practice saber. Bruck drew his as well and the two boys stared at each other nearly snarling, both totally unaware of the presence of a third party.

“Am I interrupting something?” a sophisticated baritone called out. Bruck and Obi-Wan immediately disengaged their sabers and hastily bowed to the newcomer.

“Master Tivi,” “Master Vresh,” the boys said simultaneously. Vresh stood silently before the two youths taking in the harsh breathing he could see with his eyes and the dark eddies he could feel with the Force. The short haired master turned to Bruck.

“What is going on here, Initiate Chun?”

“I... was just helping Obi-Wan here with some of his katas,” the boy lied. The tremors in the Force far too obvious to denote anything else. Vresh turned to Obi-Wan.

“Is that true?” he asked, but Obi-Wan did not answer. The boy only stared at his feet, shame rolling of his aura in droves. Vresh turned his attention back to the other child.

“I’m sure if Obi-Wan is in need of assistance he will ask for it. I suggest you go clean up now, Initiate Chun,” he said he emphasis clearly on the penultimate word a reminder of the boy’s status. Bruck shot a quick glare at Obi-Wan before bowing to Vresh and trotting to the showers. Once they were alone, Vresh put a hand on Obi-Wan’s slumped shoulders and herded him over to a bench.

“You want to tell me what that was really about?” he asked, but the boy seated beside him just shrugged without giving response. Vresh sighed internally. “Obi-Wan,” he began as he dipped his head down slightly trying to catch a glimpse of the boy’s face. “You know you can talk to me about anything. We’re friends are we not?”

“For now,” the boy whispered. Vresh frowned his concern growing by leaps and bounds.

“Why would you say that?” he asked and finally the boy looked at him, his blue-gray eyes misted with unshed tears.

“Because when I leave you’ll forget about me.”

“Obi-Wan, I would never,” he started, but the child cut him off.

“It doesn’t matter. I don’t matter,” the boy finished. Vresh placed his hands on the child’s shoulders and turned him so he was facing the master more directly.

“Now, you listen to me, Obi-Wan Kenobi. You matter. Whatever else happens, whatever else you might be feeling, you matter, to me and to a great many others.”

“I wish that were true, Master Vresh. I truly do, but...”

“But what?” the master pressed. Obi-Wan shrugged, dropping his gaze to the floor.

“But if I matter so much, why doesn’t someone want me as a padawan? I mean,” he stopped and swallowed hesitantly. “You’re my friend and even you didn’t want me.”

Vresh sighed audibly as he gently placed a finger under the boy’s chin bringing his gaze back to his face.

“Obi-Wan, I would be proud to have you as my padawan, but I am not meant for you. I wasn’t meant to be your master. You are destined for another.”

“You sound like Master Yoda.”

“And what did he tell you?”

“That I shouldn’t be so certain that I will be sent away,” Obi-Wan answered then he paused. “I yelled at him and told him he was wrong.”

Vresh reached down and pulled up the boy’s trouser legs exposing his shins.

“And yet you seemed to have escaped unscathed,” the short haired master smiled. The effort rewarded him with a slight smile from the boy, but it was all too short lived.

“Master Vresh,” he began, “you know what’s wrong with me. You know why no one will ever choose me.”

“How long has it been?”

“Twice since... the tournament. You and Master Yoda have been really helpful and I... appreciate all that you’ve done for me, but my naming day is in three days. Three days and then I will be sent away from the only home I know, forbidden to pursue the only thing I’ve ever wanted. I’m trying not to... I’m trying to accept that, but... it’s hard, you know?”

“I know,” Vresh said releasing the boy’s pants leg. “But you must remember that, first of all, there IS nothing wrong with you, Obi-Wan. There isn’t,” he continued quickly when the boy opened his mouth to object. “And a lot can happen in three days. All you need is for one person to see you as you truly are and you will have your master. Of that I am quite certain.”

“How? How can you be?” Obi-Wan asked his ocean colored eyes pleading for an answer he could hold on to, some desperate hope on which he could cling and keep himself

from drowning in the despair that grew inside him daily. Vresh pursed his lips as he debated his next words.

“I should not tell you this, but... perhaps, it would be better for you to know,” he began. He once again took the child by his shoulders and looked at him earnestly. “Obi-Wan, you will become a Jedi Knight, a great one. That is an absolute certainty.”

“How?” Obi-Wan asked then his eyes grew wide as he stared into the resolute silver eyes before him. “Did you have a vision?”

“I did and I am not the only one.”

“Master Yoda,” Obi-Wan supplied and Vresh nodded.

“We have faith because we have seen glimpses of the knight you are to become. We tell you to persist because the Force has a plan for you, Obi-Wan. You must believe in it,” the master finished. Vresh studied the uncertainty in the boy’s eyes, but within those blue-gray depths he also saw a glimmer of hope born of the trust he placed in him and Master Yoda and the trust he had in the Force.

“Can you do that for me, Obi-Wan? Can you trust in the Force for just a little while longer?”

“I will try,” the boy began, but the single eyebrow raised on the face of the master made him giggle and rethink his words. “I mean I will, Master Vresh. I’ll hold on a little longer.”

Chapter 4: Ways to Serve

Qui-Gon watched as the small transport made its final descent towards the Temple. It was a tiny craft, the type of one to two person shuttle many Jedi used for short field missions. The ship was piloted expertly on to the landing platform; the powering down of its main thrusters triggering a hive of activity among the dock personnel. Slowly the landing ramp descended and out stepped a cloaked figure. The figure moved down the ramp with an easy, dancer-like grace that was all too familiar to the long-haired master. Half-way down the ramp the figure spotted him, smiling as she removed her hood and walked over to him.

“Now this is a nice surprise,” she said in melodic tones.

“It’s been too long, Tahl. I’ve missed you,” Qui-Gon replied uncharacteristically forthright with his feelings. The honey skinned master always seemed to have that effect on him. Under the scrutiny of her green and gold striped eyes he always felt a bit... disarmed as if she could somehow see through him, to the heart of him, but then again perhaps she could.

“And I you, Qui,” she said as she placed a cupped hand on his cheek. “How have you been?”

“Well,” he responded and when she narrowed her gaze at him he added, “truly.” Apparently satisfied with his response she removed her hand, but still held for him a warm smile. He reached for her small travel bag taking it off of her shoulder and placing it on his own.

“Oh, how chivalrous,” she laughed. Qui-Gon gave her a flourishing bow.

“Always,” he grinned back as he took her arm and walked with her into the Temple proper. Tahl leaned into his arm resting her head on his shoulder as they walked.

“How long will you be on planet?”

“Awhile yet,” Qui-Gon answered as the two strolled casually to her quarters. “In fact, we all will be here just long enough to,”

“All?” Tahl interrupted as she looked into the familiar blue eyes of her friend.

“All,” he repeated as they stopped before the door to her quarters. Tahl palmed it opened and the two masters stepped inside. Qui-Gon set her pack down by the couch as Tahl turned to him, astonishment still reading clearly in her expression.

“All,” she whispered. “That hasn’t happened since Severin,” she said and he nodded. “So, what are we going to do?”

“Do?” Qui-Gon asked innocently. Tahl rolled her eyes as she turned away and began stripping off clothes as she headed to her room and the ‘fresher.

“Yes, do Qui-Gon. I don’t believe for a second that the three of you haven’t conspired to get into some bit of trouble,” she called back from her room. Then Qui-Gon heard the sound of water running as Tahl began her shower. The long-haired master went into the small kitchenette and began to prepare tea for the both of them; easily finding what he needed through long familiarity. By the time Tahl returned to the common room she was dressed in a fresh robe and a slightly damp, but newly twisted braid hanging down her back. Qui-Gon handed her a steaming cup and sat down on the couch. She joined him and took a sip of the offered beverage before pinning him down with a stare.

“Well?”

“Well?” he repeated and received a punch in the arm for the repetition.

“Spill, Qui,” she smiled over her cup. Instantly, the master found himself returning her smile, unable to tease her any longer.

“Dinner in my quarters tonight.”

“Who’s cooking?” she asked her expressive eyes filled with worry. Qui-Gon frowned.

“I am not that bad, Tahl.”

“Qui, I love you, but your cooking should only be used as a weapon in biological warfare,” she responded. The long-haired master didn’t respond, only mumbled something that sounded a lot like tolerating ungrateful crèchemates. Tahl laughed. “How about this, I cook and you bring the spirits. In that, you have exquisite taste.”

“I find your terms acceptable, however your negotiating tactics...”

“Are probably the reason why the Council sends me out mostly on research and intelligence gathering missions,” she retorted.

“Indeed,” he laughed. He finished his cup of tea and then turned to look at his friend with a slightly sad expression. “I would like to stay longer, but I have to attend the Initiate Exhibition.”

“Stars above, Yoda finally got to you!” Tahl started excitedly. The long-haired master frowned again.

“Hardly. He has asked for my help with one of the initiates. In return he will leave me alone about taking a padawan,” he corrected. Immediately, something flashed across his friend’s face, but it was gone too quickly for him to process exactly what the emotion was.

“Well,” Tahl said standing up and patting his hand. “We better get going, that is, if you don’t mind a bit of company.”

Qui-Gon rose from the couch taking her smaller hand in his.

“On the contrary, I would very much like the company. Shall we?”

* * * * *

“Late you are.”

“My apologies, Master. I had an appointment in the landing bay,” Qui-Gon answered smoothly. Master Yoda moved his gimlet gaze from the tall master to his shorter companion, his eyes filled with undisguised warmth, his expressive ears raised slightly in amusement.

“Yes, found Master Tahl I see. Perhaps remain at the Temple awhile now you may, hmm?” the ancient master asked as the two Jedi moved to take their seats beside him on the narrow bench.

“I think between Mace, Vresh, and I we can persuade him not to run away to the outer rim again. At least not immediately,” Tahl winked at the diminutive master. Qui-Gon snorted.

“I have never run away from anything,” the long-haired master grumped, then he paused in thought and added, “well perhaps from the occasional blaster bolt.”

“Or Mace’s singing,” Tahl grinned and for the briefest moment Qui-Gon found himself grinning too. The smile, however, disappeared as his gaze quested over the arena floor. The initiates were beginning to assemble. Some small groups were talking, others gathered for shared warm-up routines, a few sat, stood, or paced quietly collecting their thoughts and centering themselves for the competitions to come. Qui-Gon’s eyes drifted across the crowd and settled on the familiar tanned form of his best friend. He watched as Vresh knelt before his padawan saying something to her that caused her to nod seriously one moment and giggle the next. The master allowed himself to feel a small pang at that scene before ruthlessly banishing such sentiment to the darker recesses of his mind. The master/apprentice relationship was special, but he was done with that, forever. No thing and no one would force him to enter into that relationship again, not after what happened last time...

No. Not again. Not ever.

Qui-Gon studied his friend some more as he watched another somewhat familiar face approach the short haired master. It was the boy he met earlier... Obi-Wan. Vresh was talking to him as well gesturing first to the ring and then tapping the boy on the chest. The child's expression was earnest, but even from the great distance between them Qui-Gon could see a bit of fear in the child's eyes. Vresh must have seen it too as he spoke some more to the boy before pulling him into a hug. Qui-Gon found himself wondering for a moment what kind of connection Vresh had with the boy before shrugging off the concern as he turned his attention to the tiny master seated beside him.

"So, which of these initiates would you have me assist?" he asked. Yoda did not look at him, but instead gestured back to Vresh and Obi-Wan.

"Met him you have already."

"Obi-Wan?" he questioned unnecessarily. He turned his attention back to the boy who was now warming up beside one of the smaller rings. He turned back to Yoda. "What concerns you about him?"

"Discover for yourself you must. Bias you, I will not," the ancient master responded cryptically still keeping his focus on the main floor. Qui-Gon sighed, well used to, but still not fond of, the older Jedi's less than helpful answers. He turned to his other companion.

"What do you know of that initiate stretching by the third ring? The one with the reddish hair."

"Obi-Wan?" Tahl asked, her voice lilting up in surprise.

"You know him?"

"Yes," she nodded, then she paused a moment. "Well, not really. I rather know of him. He spends a lot of time with Vresh."

"Do you know why?" Qui-Gon asked his eyes falling back on the youth.

"Not for certain no, but..." Tahl answered her voice trailing off. It was the hesitation he heard that made Qui-Gon bring his gaze back to her.

"But?"

"You know how Jedi like to gossip, Qui. I don't actually know anything, but I've heard things," she said, one hand waving in the air in a vague gesture, but Qui-Gon wasn't giving up.

"Things like what?"

“Something happened last year. I wasn’t here for it and before you ask no I don’t know what happened only that whatever it was... well now no knight or master seems to want to touch him. In fact, until then I think many believed Master Goor Pama was going to take him as his padawan and then... well, he didn’t. It looks like no one will.”

“And you don’t know why?” he pressed, but Tahl just shook her head.

“Look you asked and I told you what I know. If you want more either ask Goor Pama, Vresh, Obi-Wan or...” she paused dropping her voice into a whisper “the troll.”

Qui-Gon joined her in her conspiratorial mutterings.

“The troll already told me no.”

“Well, then,” Tahl smiled. “It seems you have some investigating to do. Enjoy your time in my wheelhouse, but don’t get too comfortable, Ser Diplomat.”

“You’re not going to help me?” he answered, his eyebrows raising slightly in surprise.

“Not at all. This is your mission. Besides,” she continued, bringing her voice back up to a normal volume. “If I interfere I might catch the troll’s attention and he’ll try to stick a padawan to me.”

“Heard that I did,” the tiny master grumped without looking at the pair. The two masters shared a look, but otherwise managed not to laugh outright. After a moment more, all three masters, along with the rest of the crowd brought their attention to the center ring as Weapons Master Drallig officially opened the exhibition. Initiate after initiate took to the rings for kata performances and rounds of sparring. Qui-Gon watched them all with a distracted interest noting the good with the bad and the promising, but not really invested in anyone of them... that is when Obi-Wan was not the one he was watching. That child had his entire focus. The master watched the boy perform the first level katas with an ease and grace not easily matched by his agemates and the boy’s sparring was just as proficient. When Obi-Wan sparred the master could feel the boy’s connection with the Force around him and, despite his efforts to the contrary, he found himself impressed with the boy’s control and finesse. Which all proved to unsettle the master more. Why was this child not yet a padawan? What was he not seeing? Qui-Gon knew when he found the answer to that he would know why Yoda had asked for his help.

* * * * *

The preliminaries were over and it was nearly time for the semi-finals. Once again, Obi-Wan had easily bested his opponents advancing quickly to the semis. He sat resting quietly on the sidelines as another semi-finalist approached him.

“Go away, Bruck.”

“That’s not very Jedi of you, Oafy-Wan. Oh, but I forgot, you’re not very Jedi either,” the slightly younger boy sneered as he stood in front of Obi-Wan.

“What do you want, Bruck?”

“Nothing from you.”

“How convenient for both of us then,” Obi-Wan answered as he stood up to walk away from his would-be tormentor. Bruck suddenly blocked his path, not actually touching him, but invading his personal space as he leaned in close to whisper to him.

“This is the end, you know. You fail here and they will ship you off to be a farmer. But I’m sure you’ll do fine,” Bruck added with a false smile. “I mean it’s not like you’re a freak or something... oh wait, you are. Good luck, Oafy-Wan,” he finished then he walked away leaving Obi-Wan standing alone struggling to swallow down the panic trying to gain a foothold in his chest. Suddenly, he felt the weight of a hand on his shoulder. He looked up to meet the silver eyes of Master Vresh who was staring at him worriedly.

“Obi-Wan?”

“I’m fine, Master Vresh,” Obi-Wan answered as he shifted his gaze down to his boots. Vresh turned his attention to the arena floor though his words were still addressed to the boy at his side.

“What did he say?”

“Does it matter? Everything he said was true.”

Vresh frowned slightly.

“That I sincerely doubt,” he answered finally. Under his hand he felt the boy shrug lightly. Vresh took a moment and focused his attention to the boy’s fluctuating Force aura. “We have a little time before the next round starts. Would you like to meditate briefly with me?”

Obi-Wan looked back up at the master by his side. It wasn’t his master, but it was his friend and a source of calm comfort that he found himself desperately wanting. He didn’t like feeling so needy, but needy was exactly what he was at the moment.

“Yes, please,” he answered softly. Vresh gave the shoulder under his hand a gentle squeeze.

“Come, let us find a quiet place then.”

* * * * *

The brief interaction Qui-Gon watched, first with the other initiate then with his friend Vresh, perplexed him. The boy's Force aura had danced brightly with fear, anger, and then finally despair until Vresh spoke with him and then it shifted once more toward calm though it never completely settled until the two returned to the ring some several minutes later. Qui-Gon suspected the two had gone to meditate which was even more unusual considering the boy was not Vresh's padawan. Then came the actual matches which left him even more confounded. Obi-Wan had won and been declared champion. His skills with a saber had earned him that quite fairly as Qui-Gon saw it and yet there was something wrong with this child. His friends had surrounded him, cheering and smiling, hugging and dancing in place at their agemate's victory. Perhaps Tahl was right, if Qui-Gon wanted answers he needed to ask one of the people involved.

The master stood, nodding his goodbye to Masters Yoda and Tahl before seeking out his prey. He found him in the crowd already moving toward the main exit, but before he could reach him he heard a soft voice call to him from the crowd.

"Master Jinn?"

Qui-Gon turned to the voice and found a pair of blue-gray eyes awaiting his. The master bowed slightly to the child.

"Congratulations, Initiate. You performed well today," he greeted formally.

"Thank you, Master Jinn," Obi-Wan replied with a bow of his own. He opened his mouth to speak again, but was distracted from his purpose as the crowd around them suddenly shifted causing him to lose his balance and fall towards the tall master. Qui-Gon instinctively reached out to catch and stabilize the boy, but as soon as he touched him he felt an electric shock travel up his arms and through his body. The boy must have felt it too as his eyes grew wide in confusion. Qui-Gon set the boy to rights and tried to banish the peculiar feeling from his mind.

"Congratulations again, Initiate," he mumbled then he made a hasty exit leaving a slightly dazed child amongst the crowd of spectators. The master continued with his original plan and eventually found who he was after. Schooling his features easily back to his usual stoic mask, he approached the fellow master.

"Master Goor Pama?"

"Ah, Master Jinn," the Bothan greeted stopping his stride to address Qui-Gon properly. "How can I assist you?"

"I would like to speak with you, if you have a moment?"

“Certainly. What about?”

“Kenobi.”

“Ah,” was all the Bothan said as he gestured to a small alcove off the main thoroughfare. “You are interested in the boy,” he said. It was a statement not a question.

“I am, but not for the reasons you suspect. I have no interest in taking another padawan, but I am curious as to why the boy has not been chosen by another,” Qui-Gon replied. “I was told you nearly chose him, but then you changed your mind?”

“Yes, I did.”

“May I ask why?” the long-haired master pressed.

“Obi-Wan is a very talented young boy. Smart, studious, respectful... perhaps a tad mischievous,” the master added with what passed for a smile among his people, though to Qui-Gon it looked more like an ominous baring of teeth.

“But,” Qui-Gon prompted.

“But,” Goor Pama continued with a sigh, his smile fading. “He has a strong connection with the Unifying Force. Too strong I fear.”

Qui-Gon considered the other master’s words for a moment before speaking. A student strong in the Force, either aspect, was not something masters avoided, but rather what they sought, which ultimately led him to one conclusion.

“He has visions,” he said and unsurprisingly Goor Pama nodded. “I admit I am not... the most comfortable with that particular Force gift myself, but I don’t see why that should preclude the boy from apprenticeship.”

“True, most times it would not. However, Obi-Wan’s visions have proven to be... overwhelming. When he experiences one he is totally incapacitated and may remain that way for several seconds or several minutes. Such debilitation is too dangerous in the field,” Goor Pama answered. Qui-Gon nodded. Yes, that he understood. There were too many times, too many circumstances where Obi-Wan’s gift could quickly turn into a liability with devastating consequences. Add to that the fear and anger he saw in the boy earlier... Yes, it was clear why the boy had not been chosen and why he would most likely remain so.

“Thank you, Master. Your insight has been most helpful.”

“It is unfortunate, Master Jinn. Were it not for that... Obi-Wan would have made an excellent padawan.”

“There are always other ways to serve,” Qui-Gon stated. Goor Pama bowed his head in both agreement and farewell as he left the alcove and resumed his walk toward wherever he was headed. Qui-Gon took in a deep breath confident he now understood why Yoda had requested his assistance. Someone needed to explain to Obi-Wan why knighthood was not for him. The master had no doubt that others had tried; most likely Vresh and Yoda himself, but both of those masters were close to the boy, their counsel tempered by their affection. What Obi-Wan needed was an objective viewpoint. He needed an outsider to make him understand there were things that simply were not meant to be. Clear in his task, Qui-Gon made his way to one of the lower, lesser used gardens to meditate before seeking the boy out and fulfilling his promise to Master Yoda.

Chapter 5: Will of the Forced

“Master Jinn?” a soft voice called across the small garden’s expanse. The tall, long-haired master opened his eyes as he surfaced from his meditations. The small figure of the voice’s owner stepped in a little closer, but still kept a respectful distance from the master.

“I’m sorry if I’ve disturbed you.”

“You haven’t. I was actually going to come look for you,” Qui-Gon answered as he rose to his feet. Obi-Wan looked up at the master with wide eyes.

“You were?”

“Yes. We need to discuss something,” Qui-Gon replied, his expression serious.

“Yes, Master Jinn,” Obi-Wan answered just as seriously. The master took a moment to compose his thoughts as he placed his hands within the sleeves of his cloak.

“I am told you have been having some... difficulty with finding a master and I was asked by a mutual friend of ours to perhaps help you in that regard.”

“Really?” Obi-Wan replied and Qui-Gon could easily see the hope shining in the boy’s blue-gray eyes.

“Yes.”

“Are you going to be my master?” the boy asked and instantly Qui-Gon realized his miscalculation. Of course the boy would assume that that was the nature of this conversation. It was a common preoccupation with those his age and given this child’s particular circumstances... It would have been the height of cruelty not to correct this error as quickly, yet as gently, as possible. Still, for a moment, the master felt himself falter.

“Um... no, Obi-Wan,” the master stammered slightly. A wrinkled brow on the otherwise smooth skin of the boy’s face indicated his confusion.

“But... I thought... I mean, you said...”

“Forgive me. I did not mean to give you that impression, but I am here to help you.”

“Help me how?” Obi-Wan asked and the master could not help but notice the slight suspicion in the child’s voice.

“I believe there are some difficult realizations you need to face. Every Jedi, every being, must understand his or her own limitations and though those limitations may be contrary to our desire, a Jedi must face them just the same.”

“You mean the visions,” Obi-Wan replied softly. “I’ve been working very hard with Master Yoda and Master Tivi, I swear,” he finished his cultured voice tinged with desperation. The long-haired master allowed the child a small and what he hoped was a warm smile.

“I do not doubt your hard work or your commitment, Obi-Wan, but there must come a time when you must accept what cannot be,” the master stated and for several moments he was met with silence as the boy processed his words. Then very quietly the boy spoke again.

“You’re saying I can’t be a knight, aren’t you?” Obi-Wan asked, his gaze fixed on the short grass by his boots.

“I know it is not what you want to hear,”

“Of course it’s not what I want to hear!” Obi-Wan shot back as his gaze shot up towards the tall master. “Being a knight, a Jedi is all I’ve ever wanted!”

“Serving in the Agri Corps doesn’t make you any less of a Jedi. It is just a different way to serve.”

“Would you be happy in the Agri Corps instead of being in the field?” the child retorted accusingly. Qui-Gon sighed.

“I admit I would not, but we must go where our talents lie and where the Force guides us.”

“But the Force isn’t guiding me to be a farmer! I am meant to be a padawan. I’m meant to be your padawan! Didn’t you feel it in the Grand Hall?”

“I’m sorry, Obi-Wan, but I am not to become your master,” Qui-Gon responded, quickly side stepping the boy’s question. However, as swiftly as he had maneuvered verbally, so did the boy physically. Obi-Wan reached out and grabbed the master’s right hand. The moment of contact was just like it had been in the arena only much, much stronger. Qui-Gon’s skin felt like it was being touched with a thousand needles and there was a warm itch in the back of his mind; all of which disappeared the moment he snatched his hand out of the boy’s grasp.

“Obi-Wan!” he yelled, but determined eyes still held him in place in the garden.

“You felt that. I know you did and yet...,” Obi-Wan began, but as he studied the master’s darkening countenance his resolve waned. “You still don’t want me, do you?”

Qui-Gon sighed deeply, both in frustration for himself and the boy.

“I’m sorry, Obi-Wan. I truly am, but the path you want is just not for you,” he intoned. For a moment, Obi-Wan looked like Qui-Gon had physically struck him. He took a step back from the master.

“Just like that? It’s... it’s over?”

“Not over, just... different. The Agri Corps helps many people on many different worlds. They,”

“Of course,” Obi-Wan interrupted. The master let the breach in etiquette pass without rebuke. Instead, he offered his next words gently.

“We must go where the Force guides us, young one.”

“Yes, that is what we are taught,” Obi-Wan answered. A deep breath in and he drew himself up, blanketing his frame and expression with a preternatural calm. “Thank you, Master Jinn for your candor. If you will excuse me,” he said, but he did not wait for the master’s dismissal. Instead, Obi-Wan turned and left the garden leaving the master standing alone. He never looked back.

* * * * *

Vresh had left the hall with his padawan following the end of the day’s exhibition. He had hoped to get a word of congratulations in with Obi-Wan, but was unable to find the boy in the crowd. He gave up his search and he and Lantis returned to their quarters. Eventually, however, his padawan was whisked away by some of her agemates for a lively and loud celebration in the initiate dorms and the master allowed himself to resume his original search. He checked the refectory, the salles, even the archives, but there was no trace of Obi-Wan. A quick check with Lantis through the training bond also confirmed that he was not at the initiate party. Out of ideas, Vresh headed to Obi-Wan’s private room. Before he even could press the chime he felt the Force disturbance that hid just behind the door. Now, he didn’t bother with the chime, simply palming the door open using his master’s override. What he found inside the small cell broke his heart. Obi-Wan was sitting on the floor in the corner, his knees pulled tightly into his chest. His face was down, hidden from view, but the hitch in his shoulders and breathing said that he had been crying recently.

“Obi-Wan? What’s wrong? What has happened?” he asked as he immediately knelt in front of the boy. “Obi-Wan?”

“Master Jinn... he said... he...” came the mumbled reply as the boy held his head still tucked protectively on his chest.

“Look at me, Obi-Wan,” the master ordered gently. When watery, bloodshot eyes rose to meet his he added, “What did Master Jinn say?”

“That he didn’t want me as a padawan... that I wasn’t meant to be a Jedi... that with my problems I would be better off as a farmer...” Obi-Wan answered between sobs. For a second, Vresh was speechless in surprise, but he quickly reigned in his own concerns and returned his focus to the boy before him.

“He... I’m sure he didn’t mean it that way.”

“He believes sending me to Bandomeer is the Force’s will. Maybe,” Obi-Wan sighed. “Maybe he’s right... Maybe I...”

“No, he is not, Obi-Wan,” Vresh interrupted, his tone brooking no disagreement on the matter. “Master Jinn just needs to understand that. Someone needs to explain to him how hard,”

“No,” Obi-Wan interrupted his own voice flat and free of the cracking sounds of his tears. He took a deep breath and visibly composed himself, before rising to his feet. Vresh followed him, his watchful gaze still rife with concern. Obi-Wan took another deep breath before speaking though his eyes were staring at the floor and not the other Jedi.

“No, I’m done, Master Vresh. It’s over and... I’m tired. My transport leaves early the day after tomorrow. I should say goodbye to my friends and prepare,” he said then he looked into the silver eyes of the Jedi Master. “Thank you for all your help. It has been an honor to learn from you.”

“Obi-Wan...” Vresh began, his tone almost pleading, but Obi-Wan just shook his head.

“You should go...,” he answered. Then he whispered, “please.”

With an obviously reluctant nod, Vresh turned and left the boy alone in his quarters.

* * * * *

“So, what did you do?”

“What else could I do? I just said, in my best learned Councilor voice, that cookies were in fact not from the darkside and that Master Yaddle’s cookies were perfectly safe to eat. I’m still not sure that particular crèche group believed me,” Mace answered with a grin. Qui-Gon nodded his head sagely.

“Well, Master Yoda takes his cookie talks with the initiates quite seriously... leaves more for himself that way,” Qui-Gon replied with a wink. Tahl laughed melodically as she lounged back in her chair at the small table.

“This is nice. We should do this more often.”

“Indeed, however we still have one missing,” Mace noted just as the door to Qui-Gon’s quarters slid open. All eyes turned to the new arrival. “Speak of the Sith.”

“It’s about time, Vresh. I was beginning to think you,” Tahl started with a smile, one that quickly faded as she took in the short haired master’s dark expression. “Vresh?”

“What did you do?”

“Vresh?” Mace repeated taking in the look of the late coming master as well. What he saw in the man’s face and what he felt in the Force did nothing to lessen his growing concern. The master himself seemed to take no notice of his or Tahl’s subtle question. Instead, the master continued with his laser like focus on Qui-Gon.

“What did you do?” Vresh repeated. Qui-Gon carefully placed down his mug of ale and looked upon his friend with a perfectly neutral expression.

“I’m afraid you will have to be more specific,” he answered mildly.

“What did you do to Obi-Wan?” Vresh clarified, but he still hadn’t moved from his spot only just inside the room.

“Ah, that.”

“Yes, that.”

“I merely spoke to him,” Qui-Gon replied spreading his hands placatingly while he spoke. “I explained to him his circumstances and how all initiates are not destined to be knights. He took it rather well considering,” he finished. That got the other master moving. Vresh took two quick strides to the table where the group was seated; the angry master looming over his friends.

“He took it rather well? Rather well! You broke him, Qui-Gon!”

“I did nothing of the sort,” the long-haired master replied calmly.

“How can you...,” Vresh started then he closed his eyes as he seemed to gather some degree of calm for himself. When he opened them his voice was more level, but the fire in his eyes remained. “You have no idea what that child has been through, the struggles he has faced, the distrust, the shunning,”

"I am aware of his difficulties with his visions."

"And yet you still did what you did?"

"Someone had to tell the boy. You and Master Yoda have done him a disservice by not being honest with him," Qui-Gon retorted as he rose from his seat. Both masters were leaning over the table now, oblivious to the silent masters observing the scene worriedly beneath them.

"His gift was coming under control. In time,"

"Time he did not have. He is of age," Qui-Gon interrupted.

"Of age to have a master guide him to his knighthood," Vresh interrupted right back.

"Then perhaps you should have taken him as an apprentice. You have experience with such gifts personally and have guided such an apprentice before," he snapped.

"I would have if I could," Vresh replied, "but Obi-Wan was not to be my apprentice."

"No," Qui-Gon said softly, his voice suddenly dropping several degrees in temperature. "If that is what you and Yoda were after then any fallout is strictly on your shoulders. I will not take another."

"A true master does not give in to his fears."

"Are you going to lecture me on being a good master? Last time I checked your record in that area was no better than mine," Qui-Gon growled and immediately both Mace and Tahl winced, but neither had time to stop the storm Qui-Gon's words had summoned.

"How dare you! How dare you compare Severin to Xanatos!" Vresh hissed.

"I think we all need a moment to calm," Mace tried as he rose from his seat, but the two arguing masters would not be distracted.

"My padawan was taken from me, Qui-Gon. Yours left. You don't deserve to speak his name!"

"Vresh," Tahl said softly as she stood and placed a gentle, but restraining hand on Vresh's forearm.

"I will not be lectured to and certainly not by you."

"Fine, Master Jinn," Vresh retorted, his emphasis on Qui-Gon's title coming out as a sneer. "I will not lecture you, but hear this and hear it well. You have crossed the will of the

Force today and in doing so you have destroyed a little boy, an innocent child, only you are too Sith damn arrogant to see it.”

“I am not the one blinded here. The boy is simply not fit to be a knight. If Obi-Wan,”

“Say one more thing!” Vresh yelled as he slammed his hands on the table. “Say one more Gods damned thing and I swear I’ll put my lightsaber straight through you right now!”

“Enough!” Mace called in the voice he usually reserved for disputes within the Council chambers. Qui-Gon’s next words were as icy as his glare.

“I think you should leave, Vresh.”

“Vresh, please…” Tahl pled quietly as she tugged the master by the arm towards the door. Once they reached the door she palmed it open, but Vresh paused for one moment. When he spoke he did not look back.

“We are done, Jinn.”

* * * * *

After the debacle that was dinner, Mace excused himself from Qui-Gon’s quarters leaving the long-haired master alone with his thoughts. Unable to find any sense of calm in the now claustrophobically tight rooms, he had ventured into the quiet of the Temple; his feet automatically guiding him to the Room of a Thousand Fountains. The moment he entered Qui-Gon felt some of the night’s earlier tension leave his body, but before he could find a spot to settle into for meditation he noticed a familiar presence sitting deeper within the gardens. He walked the well-worn stone path until he reached a small clearing near one of the room’s many streams.

“Master Yoda,” he greeted his tone subtly asking the question brought to his mind as he took in the tiny figure seated on a rock, gimer stick resting across short, folded legs. Diminutive as the master was, to Qui-Gon’s eyes the ancient Jedi seemed even smaller; as if he had somehow collapsed in on himself.

“Too old for this I am. A grave error I have made. Fix it, I cannot.”

“All Jedi, even you, are fallible, Master,” Qui-Gon responded as he took a seat next to the Grand Master.

“Indeed,” Yoda intoned, but what his voice did not carry in emotion, his ears did as they sagged downward heavily.

“Master Yoda?”

“Disappointed I am with you, so very much,” Yoda answered after several moments of silence. Qui-Gon found himself surprised at the older master’s words.

“With me? Why?”

“Trusted you, I did, to help Obi-Wan,” Yoda replied as he turned to face his company for the first time since he entered the gardens.

“I did help him. I helped him to understand,”

“Understand he did. Understand you do not. Your padawan he was to be,” Yoda interrupted. Immediately, Qui-Gon’s anger and frustration flashed and he was unable to keep the ire out of his voice.

“I told you from the start that I would not take a padawan. It is your machinations that have failed you, not me.”

“My grand-padawan a fool is not. Know you do that a bond was meant between you. Felt it you did.”

“I felt no such thing,” he answered flatly. Yoda studied him for a moment and, even angry, Qui-Gon had to resist the urge to squirm under the master’s scrutiny. Finally, Yoda turned away bringing his gaze back absently to the stream before him.

“Then wrong about you too, I am,” the ancient Jedi said with a weary sigh. “Go, Qui-Gon. Go and do what you will. I will ask no more of you.”

Though still upset, Qui-Gon recognized the words for what they were. A dismissal. The master rose gracefully to his feet and bowed slightly to the other master. Turning on his heels and leaving the gardens he tried to ignore how much Yoda’s words hurt him.

Chapter 6: Conversive

“The Council will see you know, Master Jinn,” the gruff voice stated. Qui-Gon nodded in polite acknowledgement to the Bothan padawan manning the reception desk outside the Council chambers. Taking a moment to pull himself to his full height and place his hands within the sleeves of his cloak, the long-haired master stepped forward, the doors before him sliding open automatically. He walked silently to the center of the floor and bowed formally before the assembled Jedi.

“Masters,” he intoned. As per custom, it was Master Windu who spoke first.

“Master Jinn, you requested an audience.”

“Yes, Master Windu. I am here to request a mission from the Council,” Qui-Gon replied. A small murmur stirred within the room, but quieted as abruptly as it had started. Master Mundi leaned forward in his seat.

“If we had a mission for you, Master Jinn, the Council would have called you.”

“Am I to believe that the galaxy is now without sufficient strife and dissonance that a Master Jedi can be of no use?” Qui-Gon retorted. Though his voice was calm his disdain for Mundi’s rebuke was clear.

“Of course not,” Master Gallia interjected before Mundi could make his response. “But there is also a time for a Jedi to rest. Your last several missions have kept you away from Coruscant for some time. This tenday was granted you as a chance to rest and rejuvenate before returning to the rigors of a galaxy of strife and dissonance,” she added, purposefully using the master’s own words. Qui-Gon gave a slight nod acquiescing to the point.

“I can assure the Council that I am ready to return to my duties,” he answered. With a glance and a few moments of silent communication with his fellow Councilors, Mundi picked up a datapad from beside his chair. He spoke as he began to quickly sift through its contents.

“There are a few unassigned missions and a few that require reassignment that would be suited to your strengths,” Mundi stated then he extended his hand holding out the datapad for Qui-Gon’s perusal. The long-haired master stepped to Mundi’s seat and accepted the offered material. After a few quiet moments scanning the list he returned the pad to the master’s hand. With a curt nod he reassumed his position in the center of the floor.

“I will take the mission to Arquin Naht,” he informed the group. The list of missions he had been presented was short and contained nothing of the usual level of difficulty

characteristic of most of his assignments. Many listed were simple meet-and-greet or observational formalities. Arquin, too, only entailed the supervision of their deci-annual elections, but it at least ensured that the knight or master assigned would be off planet for several tendays as Arquinon elections were rather lengthy and ritualized. However, Qui-Gon soon discovered that the reasons for his quick choice were not unknown to the Council as Master Windu's next question illustrated.

"That would take you off planet for quite awhile, Master Jinn."

"True, but such missions are far from uncommon, Master Windu."

"Are you certain in your decision?" the Korun Councilor asked.

"Quite certain," Qui-Gon answered. Mace glanced briefly at Master Yoda who had yet to voice an opinion. The ancient Jedi continued to stare at a fixed point near the bottom tip of his gimer stick. Mace turned back to his friend.

"Then you will go to Arquin Nat to supervise the elections. May the Force be with you."

* * * * *

Qui-Gon had just emerged from an unproductive meditation when his door chimed. He rose gracefully from his kneeling position by the balcony and went to the door to meet his guest. The door slid open revealing a frowning Korun High Councilor. Qui-Gon stepped to the side to allow the master in. Mace crossed over to the couch, but he did not sit. Instead he turned to face Qui-Gon.

"I don't think this is wise, but you already know that."

"Hello to you too, Mace," the long master remarked dryly as he palmed the door close. He gestured for his friend to take a seat as he sat down in his oversized armchair.

"You're running again, Qui-Gon," Mace stated bluntly. Qui-Gon sighed mentally, but otherwise his mein did not change.

"I am merely doing my duty as a Jedi."

"Perhaps, but you don't have to leave so quickly. Originally Master Yoda had planned for you to,"

"I find myself uninterested in Master Yoda's plans," Qui-Gon said cutting the Councilor off abruptly.

“He as well, if today’s session is any indication,” Mace pressed, however the other master failed to take the bait. Qui-Gon just leaned back regally in his chair.

“I wouldn’t know.”

“Fair enough,” Mace graciously acquiesced. “But if you don’t want to discuss that don’t you think we should at least discuss what happened last night?”

* * * * *

“What happened last night was between Jinn and myself,” Vresh snapped angrily as he paced the small patch of floor in front of his couch. Lantis was thankfully in class when Tahl decided to stop by to “talk” to him about his behavior the night before. It was an ambush he should have anticipated. The fact that he hadn’t only added to his frustration. Tahl, on the other hand, was the epitome of Jedi calm as she watched him pace with a serenity that only served to further irritate him.

“And Obi-Wan apparently,” she intoned.

“Yes, and Obi-Wan,” he amended, still pacing.

“What is it with that initiate? Temple gossip aside.”

“He has a powerful connection to the Force; one that he has trouble controlling, but he was learning, Tahl,” he paused standing before her. “He doesn’t deserve...” he stopped, shaking his head unable to finish.

“Talk to me,” she requested gently as she took his hand in hers. He allowed himself to be pulled down beside her on the couch.

“Tahl, what he did... what he said was... it was cruel.”

“Perhaps, but was it untrue?”

* * * * *

“Nothing he said was untrue, Master Yoda. We both know that,” Obi-Wan said as he began to place his meager belongings in a small duffle. The ancient master had sought the child out as soon as the morning Council session had concluded. What the master saw disturbed him greatly and his conversation with the boy thus far had done little to assuage the deep sense of wrongness.

“Know this, I do not. A great Jedi you would be. A great Jedi you may still become,” the old master said from his perch on the boy’s bed. Obi-Wan sighed and turned dull eyes to the tiny figure seated on his sleep couch.

“I know what you’re trying to do, Master, but... I can’t. It... hurts too much to... Master Jinn was right. I have to accept this. I need to accept this.”

* * * * *

“Master Yoda and the others need to accept that my decisions are my own. I will not be bullied into going against my conscience.”

“Is it your conscience or your fear?”

“You presume too much.”

“Do I? I thought we were friends, Qui-Gon.”

* * * * *

“We are friends, Tahl, but this... Qui-Gon has always been somewhat... short sighted.”

“And arrogant.”

“And stubborn.”

“And a righteous son of a bantha sometimes.”

“Yes, and it’s only gotten worse since him.”

“He’s still hurting, Vresh.”

“He’s had eight years to deal with it.”

“And you’ve had many more, yet you’re still hurting too.”

* * * * *

“Ease your hurt I would if I could.”

"I know that, Master," Obi-Wan replied sadly. His gaze drifted up to the tiny craft hanging above his bed. He had spent many a happy hour building the miniatures, but he would have little use for them in his new life. "I don't know what to do with my models."

"Keep them I will until return you do," the master answered, but Obi-Wan shook his head and returned to his packing.

"You should give them to the crèche. You know I'm not coming back."

* * * * *

"It's just a mission, Mace. You act as if I'm not coming back," Qui-Gon said as he stood and retreated to the kitchen to make tea. Mace followed him, standing in the small archway as Qui-Gon began sorting the loose leaves into two small cups.

"You've been gone for eight years already."

"My missions may have kept me away longer than most, but I still come home to Coruscant often enough. The Council seems to insist upon it," he replied with a knowing glance over his shoulder. Mace ignored the accusation implicit in his words.

"You come back, yes, but you haven't been home for a while, Qui-Gon. Last night you were here for a moment before..."

* * * * *

"Vresh, last night there was a moment,"

"I know. I... lost my temper," he replied then at the look Tahl shot him he amended, "Alright, I really lost my temper."

"And now?"

"Firmly leashed. Proper Jedi and all that," he answered with a dismissive wave of his hand.

"If that's the case, you really should talk to him, Vresh, before this gets out of hand," she stated and suddenly the master's tentative calm was shattered and he was back on his feet again; only her steady grip on his hand kept him from resuming his frenetic pacing.

"Out of hand?! It's already out of hand!"

“Temper,” Tahl admonished. Vresh halted. The anger bled quickly from his eyes as his expression became more abashed.

“Sorry, but...,” he began as he retook his seat. After a deep breath he turned to face her green and gold eyes directly. “Tahl have you ever looked at someone, someone you care about and seen them broken? To look into their eyes and see all traces of hope and happiness stripped from their soul?”

“Yes, I have. Twice now.”

“Have you ever seen it in the eyes of child?”

“No,” she answered quietly.

“Well, I have, Tahl and the wound I saw... that was at Jinn’s hand.”

* * * * *

“Master Jinn says that... being in the Agri Corps is just a different way to serve.”

“Needed the Corps is. Saves many lives it does,” the ancient master answered as he watched the careful movements of the young Jedi. Obi-Wan paused his packing and stared off into the distance for several quiet moments.

“Do you think I will like it there?”

“A born servant of the Force you are, Obi-Wan. No more, no less. Trust in the Force you must.”

“What if I can’t anymore?” the boy replied as he turned to meet the master’s gaze.

“Then truly failed you we have.”

* * * * *

“It is no failure to seek out help when you need it. You have friends here, Qui-Gon, people who care about you.”

“Yes, one of those caring people threatened to skewer me last night as I recall.”

“He was upset.”

“Even as a Councilor you have an amazing talent for understatement.”

“We all have our gifts. Even you.”

“Yes, for diplomacy; a gift which is best utilized off planet.”

“I was referring to your gift for teaching.”

“Ah yes, because that worked so well before.”

“You are letting too much of your past dictate your future.”

* * * * *

“He had a future, Tahl.”

“Obi-Wan will still have a future even if it’s not here at the Temple.”

“No, you don’t understand. I’ve seen his future. This... it’s simply not the way it’s supposed to be.”

* * * * *

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this.”

“Always in motion the future is. What may seem certain in one moment, very different it can be in the next.”

“You want me to have hope when there is none, Master.”

“Hope there always is. Hope I still have.”

* * * * *

“I don’t suppose there is any hope of you two resolving this before you leave?” Mace sighed as he headed towards the door.

“I did not create this situation. It is not my place to resolve it,” Qui-Gon answered plainly. Mace palmed the door open.

“So, I guess there is nothing left to say.”

* * * * *

“There is nothing he can say, Tahl,” Vresh said sadly. “I will never forgive him for this.”

“So, that’s it? You just say goodbye to a lifetime of friendship?”

* * * * *

“Goodbye this is not. See you again, I will,” Yoda spoke softly as he gently patted the young boy’s knee. Obi-Wan kept his gaze off in the distance as he answered absently.

“As you say, Master.”

* * * * *

Qui-Gon stepped into the large hanger bay, his single duffle held over one shoulder. He surveyed his surroundings with a deep breath of satisfaction. He was getting off planet and back to his work and the sooner he left the sooner he knew he could put the past few days behind him. As the master waited for his craft to be prepared he allowed himself a small smile; a smile that immediately disappeared when his gaze was captured by a smaller figure across the bay. The boy, Obi-Wan Kenobi, was standing a few meters away from him, a duffle on his shoulder as well. The boy looked at the master, worrying his bottom lip slightly then he began to head the master’s way. Qui-Gon steeled himself for what would undoubtedly be a confrontation. When the boy stopped his advance he was slightly further than an arm’s distance. From there, the child offered him a formal bow.

“Master Jinn,” he intoned quietly.

“Initiate Kenobi,” the master replied. The boy grimaced.

“No longer an initiate, Master Jinn. I’m just... I’m just Kenobi, now.”

“Ah,” Qui-Gon replied, uncharacteristically at a loss for words. Thankfully, the boy spoke again.

“Are you going on a mission?” Obi-Wan asked politely. Happy with the neutral change of subject, Qui-Gon nodded.

“Yes, I have been assigned to Arquin Nat.”

“You’re going alone?”

“Is it an observational mission. Another knight is not required,” the master replied mildly. Obi-Wan nodded absently and then his gaze dropped to the floor. Qui-Gon took in the boy’s diffident manner and sighed mentally.

“Obi-Wan,” he began choosing his words carefully, “for what it is worth I regret your situation and if my words to you earlier caused you any undue stress it was not my intention.” There, he had said it. Whether or not the boy accepted his apology was not his concern. He merely had to offer it the rest was in the child’s hands. Obi-Wan’s gaze remained firmly fixed on his boots.

“Do you really?” the boy said softly. “Regret it, I mean.”

“I do,” Qui-Gon replied in an equally soft voice. Large blue-gray eyes rose to meet his.

“You could change it, you know... my situation,” the boy enjoined and the master could clearly read the plea held in those words and eyes, but he would not be moved.

“No, Obi-Wan. I cannot.”

“You mean you will not,” the boy countered. Qui-Gon’s eyes narrowed slightly at the child’s boldness.

“You forget yourself, Kenobi,” he admonished coolly.

“I wish that I could, Master,” Obi-Wan replied ruefully then he looked over his shoulder to see Master Vresh enter the hanger bay. “If you will excuse me, Master. May the Force be with you.”

“And with you,” the master responded. He watched as Obi-Wan walked back across the bay and joined the short haired master who was glaring daggers in his direction. Qui-Gon ignored the glare and soon Vresh’s full attention was on the young boy in front of him. Vresh knelt before the child, engaged in some conversation beyond Qui-Gon’s hearing. So intent on watching the tableau before him, Qui-Gon did not notice Tahl’s arrival at his side until she brushed against his arm.

“You could talk to him, you know.”

“And he could just as easily talk to me,” Qui-Gon answered as he turned his attention back to his readying transport. Tahl sighed as she held his arm and leaned her head on his shoulder.

“Force forbid I should be saddled with two of the most stubborn Jedi in the Order.”

“The boy is going to join the Agri Corps?” he asked blatantly ignoring her jibe. He felt rather than saw her nod.

“Yes. He’s going to Bandomeer I believe.”

“That’s a long journey for someone so young to travel alone,” Qui-Gon stated his gaze shifting unconsciously back to Vresh and Obi-Wan. If Tahl noted the touch of concern in his voice she did not mention it.

“A Master-Padawan pair is escorting him on their way to another mission,” she replied. Tahl looked up at her friend who met her gaze. “I wish you were not leaving so soon.”

“I go where I am needed.”

“You are needed here too, Qui,” she said as she took her hand in his and squeezed gently. “Come back soon, please.”

“I...,” he paused not wanting to lie to his friend, but not eager to return quickly to Coruscant. “I will try,” he said finally. Seemingly content, Tahl gave his hand one more squeeze farewell and then left the bay. A moment later, one of the engineers informed the master that his craft was ready. He asked if he would need a pilot, but the master told him he would not. Qui-Gon then boarded the small shuttle and settled in to begin his pre-flight checks.

Across the bay the long-haired master’s departure was noted with a heated glare that quickly softened in response to very quietly spoken words.

“Please, don’t be mad at him, Master Vresh. I know he’s your friend. I don’t want to come between you,” Obi-Wan said, but Vresh could hear the unspoken feelings of guilt the child felt through a mild tremble in the Force around them. The master pushed back his own feelings of guilt and anger and forced himself into some measure of calm.

“Obi-Wan, I wish...,” Vresh began, but he quickly found he lacked the words to convey his feelings. He shook his head and began again. “You have my comm. channel. If you need anything, anything you call me, you hear? Anytime, anywhere, for any reason, you call me.”

“Yes, Master,” Obi-Wan answered meekly and immediately Vresh swept him into a hard hug.

“We are going to fix this, Obi-Wan. I don’t know how, but somehow we will,” Vresh whispered in the boy’s ear. Obi-Wan didn’t responded, so Vresh just held him a bit tighter. “Oh,” the master said pulling away from Obi-Wan so he could see his face. “I almost forgot. This is for you,” he said reaching into his cloak. He pulled out a short rectangular box and placed it into Obi-Wan’s small hands.

“What is it?”

“This,” Vresh said warmly, “is a little something from me and Lani. Happy Naming day, Obi-Wan.”

Obi-Wan held the box tightly in his hands for a moment before tucking it into a pocket in his cloak. He fell back into the master’s arms, sinking deeply into one last embrace.

“Thank you,” he muttered sincerely, but even as he did so Obi-Wan could not forget the fact that there was nothing happy about this naming day at all.

Chapter 7: In Vestments

Obi-Wan was in total darkness. Hard stone pushed against his back, sharp rocks pierced his skin causing a myriad of tiny, stinging cuts, a heavy weight rested suffocatingly on his chest. The air was thick and dusty around him taxing his already straining lungs. He knew this place though he did not know it at all. He was trapped here. Wherever here was. Trapped by rock and stone. Lost in the dark. Alone... always alone...

“Obi-Wan!” the voice called desperately. The voice, always the same, always too far away. “Obi-Wan! You must try! I need you! Obi-Wan!”

But Obi-Wan could not try. He was too tired, too weak, too... Obi-Wan. Death would follow. He knew that, knew that he had failed the voice that called to him for help. Oh, how he longed to help, but the air was too thick, the stone too heavy...

Obi-Wan awoke with a sharp gasp. Another nightmare. No, not another nightmare. It was the same nightmare as always. The same one that had plagued his dreams off and on for over a year and had now disturbed his sleep two nights in a row. Obi-Wan rose tiredly from his sleep couch and drifted distractedly to the refresher for his morning ablutions. He had just emerged and dressed in his undertunics and trousers when the door to his small cabin chimed. Opening the door revealed a tall rangy frame dressed in the robes of a master. Obi-Wan bowed mechanically.

“Master Apopka.”

“Kenobi,” the middle aged Zabrak greeted. “We have been aboard ship two days now and you have yet to emerge from your quarters. I feared you may be ill.”

“No Master, I am not ill,” Obi-Wan replied. Apopka frowned slightly as he took in the boy’s short response and haggard appearance. The dark circles under the youth’s eyes also did not go unnoticed.

“I am glad to hear it. Since you are well I can expect you to join us for firstmeal in the ship’s mess,” the master intoned. Obi-Wan opened his mouth to object, but before he could respond Apopka held up a silencing finger. “And before you protest know that on this I must insist.”

Recognizing a pointless endeavor when he saw one, Obi-Wan assented to the master’s gently delivered command.

“As you wish, Master Apopka,” he answered simply. Apopka nodded and left Obi-Wan to finish dressing. The master made his way down the narrow corridors of the tiny

transport, nodding occasionally at the crew he passed. He entered the dining area and was greeted by a smiling Twi'lek youth preparing two plates.

“Good morning, Master.”

“Good morning, Padawan,” Apopka said as he took a seat at an empty table. Much of the crew had already broken their fast for the day so the small eating space was empty save the two Jedi.

“I have asked young Kenobi to join us for firstmeal,” the master stated. The padawan halted briefly in his task of preparing tea, but returned to his work in short order procuring another mug from a nearby cabinet.

“Shall I prepare another plate of yours or mine?” the padawan asked. Though the Master-Padawan pair shared many like tastes and interests meal preferences were not among them; the master favored vegetarian fare while the sharp tooth padawan required something once living to adorn his plate.

“Perhaps a little of both. I don't know Kenobi's preference in the matter.”

The padawan nodded though his back was still to his master. He prepared a plate of fruit, bread, and cheese for his master while loading his own plate with a variety of cooked meats. A third plate held a combination of all the foods available.

“I think I'll add one of those little pastries the Captain is fond of,” the padawan said turning to his master with a wide grin. “I have yet to meet a human who didn't have a sweet tooth.”

With a graceful ease characteristic of all Jedi, the padawan carried the three plates and steaming mugs to the small table at which his master sat before taking a seat of his own.

“I take it Kenobi was not sick then?”

“No Cala, well at least not physically,” the master answered. Cala tilted his head causing the master to elaborate. “I've seen it before in those who are assigned to the various corps. It takes a while for the young ones to... adjust to their circumstance.”

Cala's lekku twitched a moment before settling down again.

“I don't think I would ever adjust,” he replied after a moment's thought. Apopka smiled ruefully.

“I imagine he is feeling the same way, but with time he will as they all eventually do.”

The next few moments passed in silence until a third presence entered the small room. Obi-Wan was dressed in a non-descript set of tunics, dark trousers, and short boots having been required to leave his initiate robes at the Temple. He walked hesitantly up to the two Jedi at the table and bowed lightly.

“Master Apopka.”

“Kenobi, this is my Padawan Ocala Ocoee. Padawan, this is Obi-Wan Kenobi,” the master said as an introduction. The padawan immediately extended a hand to the youth who shook it somewhat unenthusiastically.

“Call me Cala,” he smiled. Obi-Wan tried to return the smile, but only managed a mild grimace.

“Obi-Wan,” he replied softly. Cala gestured to the empty seat and full plate at the table. Taking the hint, Obi-Wan sat down, but ignored the plate of food opting instead to pick up the mug of tea.

“I didn’t know what you like so I gave you a bit of everything,” Cala offered warmly.

“Thank you,” Obi-Wan muttered over the lip of his cup. With a quick glance at his master both of the Jedi began to work on their meals. After a pointed look from Apopka, Obi-Wan continued to absently pick at his plate, but did bring a few items to his mouth for consumption.

“So, Obi-Wan,” Cala began brightly as he finished his meal. “Are you interested in piloting or maybe engines? I’m sure the Captain would be happy to give you a tour of the ship.”

“No. No thank you,” Obi-Wan replied as he pushed a block of cheese around his plate with his forefinger. Cala looked to his master for help. Apopka looked at the boy appraisingly for several silent moments before speaking.

“Obi-Wan.”

“Yes, Master Apopka,” he answered without looking up. Apopka waited before speaking and sure enough the child finally lifted his gaze.

“Obi-Wan, how have you been sleeping?”

“I’ve been sleeping, Master,” the boy replied. It did not take a Force sensitive to notice the boy’s discomfort and obvious side-step of the question.

“And the quality of that sleep?” the master pressed. Obi-Wan sighed and returned his gaze to the generously filled plate before him.

“I have nightmares,” he responded quietly. Apopka nodded as if that were precisely the answer he expected.

“It is natural to feel apprehension or even fear when the circumstances of our lives change significantly from what we find to be comfortable and familiar. Of course these emotions must be felt, searched, and then ultimately released into the Force,” Apopka paused as he queried his padawan through their bond. Cala gave a mental affirmative as well as subtle head nod. Apopka turned back to the young boy before him.

“You may join Cala and me in meditation if you wish.”

Obi-Wan sat unresponsive for several heartbeats before rising to his feet and bowing deeply.

“I appreciate your offer, Master Apopka, however I think I will try meditating alone for now.”

“As you wish,” the master intoned. With another bow, Obi-Wan turned and left the mess leaving the two Jedi alone. Cala frowned at his master.

“Master Rava, is it wise to leave him alone? He seems so... sad.”

“He is indeed, Padawan, but Obi-Wan may be right in this. This may be something he must come to terms with on his own.”

* * * * *

The next four days passed in a similar manner. Obi-Wan only left his quarters when specifically compelled to do so by Master Apopka or by extension, Padawan Cala. Otherwise, he stayed sequestered from the life of the ship, staring at length at the barren walls of his quarters when his attempts at meditation failed him. The nightmares persisted, returning each night and the effects of his disturbed sleep began to wear on him, but there was nothing for it. The small transport had dropped out of hyperspace and was already descending towards the red planet of Bandomeer.

The representative from the Agri Corps that greeted the boy and his Jedi escort seemed friendly enough. The short, teal skinned woman had a wild crop of cyan hair and big, bright eyes of verdant green. She introduced herself as Ilia Voluk, Chief Administrator of the Agri Corps project on Bandomeer. Master Apopka handled the greetings and the introductions on their side before politely handing over Obi-Wan to her care. Voluk greeted him warmly, but Obi-Wan’s response was merely mannerly at best. Once the formalities were taken care of, Master and Padawan quickly departed as they needed to proceed to their mission destination elsewhere. All too soon, Obi-Wan found himself following the Chief Administrator through the unfamiliar halls of what was to be his new home. She

pointed out the different rooms and limited amenities as they walked inserting mild tidbits of insight and gossip hoping to draw him into conversation, but Obi-Wan only answered her comments with silent nods. With an internal sigh, Voluk eventually surrendered to the silence and led the boy to his quarters to stow his small pack. The two then exited the room and began to make their way to the facility's dining area, but before they reached their destination they ran into another pair coming down the halls. Obi-Wan absently felt the slight tension present in his guide as the strangers approached.

"Administrator Voluk," the foremost man greeted. He was joined by another, a Codruji, who towered over him and was more broadly built; a personal guard more than likely, but it was not the guard that pulled at Obi-Wan's waning attention. The man that spoke was obviously the one in charge. An air of confidence and authority fairly radiated from the man. His voice was cultured, his manner refined and elegant.

"Is there something you want?" Voluk replied. The administrator's hostile response to what seemed to be an innocuous greeting surprised and confused Obi-Wan, but he said nothing content to watch the interaction without involving himself. The stranger smiled lightly and shook his head.

"No, Administrator. Gyter and I were just on our way to see the conditions of the southern mines," he replied smoothly. His eyes drifted over to Obi-Wan and for some reason the man's attention made Obi-Wan feel distinctly uncomfortable. Voluk immediately wrapped an arm protectively around the boy's shoulders as she pushed past the pair and continued down the hall.

"I will leave you to it then," she answered stiffly. They continued on towards the dining area, but Obi-Wan could feel the man's eyes upon him for several seconds before they too continued towards their destination. Once he was certain they were out of ear shot he looked to his guide.

"Who was that?" he inquired. Voluk shook her head and sighed; her mouth a grim line. It was clear that whomever that man was she did not like him.

"One of the many corporate representatives here to poach the resources of this planet," she growled. She looked down at the young boy beside her and her expression softened. "Don't worry about him. I doubt you will see him again. I, on the other hand, will not be so lucky."

"Yes, Administrator," Obi-Wan answered dutifully. Without any more talk of the strange business man, the two entered the dining hall. Voluk left him there and returned to her various duties overseeing the large facility. Obi-Wan moved silently through the line, allowing his tray to be filled with an assortment of foods though none inspired any hunger within him. He made his way to an empty table in one of the more shadowed corners. He sat down, staring at the contents of his tray without partaking of anything for several minutes until his quiet contemplation was interrupted by the arrival of three Agri Corps members.

“Care if we sit?” one of the three asked. Obi-Wan did not look up, nor did he speak. He only absently gestured to the empty seats; a clear yet unenthusiastic invitation. The others did not seem put off by the youth’s silence and joined him at the table.

“My name is Xinnix,” the first voice spoke. Finally, Obi-Wan looked up and away from his tray taking in his guests. The speaker was a young man, human with fiery red hair that hung far past his shoulders. He gestured to the Sephi female to his right. “This is Surjik,” he said then he pointed to his left. “And this is her twin brother Sair.”

The Sephi twins smiled at him, their brilliantly white teeth flashing against the pale purple hue of their lips and skin. Both had long braided hair the color of fading sunlight that framed their angular faces and distinctly pointed ears.

“Obi-Wan,” he answered politely. The trio of young adults nodded and began tucking in to their meals.

“Nice to meet you, Obi-Wan,” Xinnix replied as he bit off a piece of crusty bread. “You’re new here, aren’t you?”

Not trusting himself to answer verbally, Obi-Wan merely nodded. Surjik cut her meat as she spoke, her long delicate fingers gracefully handling the utensils.

“I am a xeno-botanist here. Sair is a xeno-biologist. We work with Xin in the yndeloi fields. Do you know where you are assigned?” she asked sweetly. Obi-Wan shook his head.

“I’ve only just arrived. I... I don’t know where I will be or what I am to do.”

“Hmmm,” Sair started as he swallowed a piece of meat. “What’s your background? What are your skills?”

“I... um... I used to be a Jedi,” Obi-Wan answered softly. His guests all froze mid bite for a few seconds. Xinnix recovered first.

“Oh, well that means you’re probably qualified to do almost everything,” he said casually. He took a sip of his beverage before continuing. “I’ve known a few Corps Jedi. All good people and exceptionally talented. I’m sure Ilia will take care of your placement, you know, put you somewhere you’ll like.”

“What do you like, Obi-Wan? I mean I love working in the lab while my sister seems to revel in playing in the dirt,” Sair offered, his expression one of amused disgust. Surjik responded by hurling a small wedge of a tuber at him.

“I do not play in the dirt, lab rat,” she retorted in equal jest. The two bantered back and forth for several minutes with Obi-Wan observing distractedly until a large group of dirt covered, burly individuals entered the hall and began to make their way through the

serving line. Xinnix, noticing his attention shifting, glanced over his shoulder and then back to Obi-Wan.

“Those are the miners. They work the tunnels and caves and refine the lokkatricite ore indigenous to the planet.”

“Caves?” Obi-Wan repeated, his stomach tightening unconsciously. Sair tossed him an indulgent smile.

“Oh, don’t worry, Obi-Wan. You won’t be assigned there.”

“Good, I... I don’t care for caves,” Obi-Wan muttered. Surjik continued where her brother left off.

“Mining is not part of our project here, but we do have to work with them sometimes... unfortunately.”

“Just ignore the whole brutish lot, I say,” Xinnix added after a swig of his drink. “Those miners, nothing but trouble,” he finished. Obi-Wan nodded then stood up with his still full tray.

“Thank you for your company, but I should get back to my quarters,” he said politely. When the others nodded and gave their goodbyes he took his tray to the waste receptacle. He all but fled the dining hall seeking the solitude of his quarters in the hopes of easing his sudden burst of discomfort. As soon as he entered his small room he saw a package sitting on his bed. He opened the small box and found a data pad outlining his assignment. It turned out he would be placed in the fields with his new companions. Below the pad, Obi-Wan also found two sets of Agri Corps uniforms: dark green tunic, brown trousers, simple black belt, and black short boots. Obi-Wan held the rough fabric of one of the tunics in his hands noting how the garment seemed to be vibrating. No, not the garment. His hands were shaking. This was his new uniform. No longer would he wear the familiar Jedi togs that he had dressed in his entire life. The grief of it hit him hard and he was forced to drop the offending garment back into the box. He backed away from the bed settling himself on the floor. He had hoped that a few minutes of meditation would ease the pain in his heart, but the comforting presence of the Force eluded him. He could still feel the Force, but it was only around him not within him. He opened his eyes and reached out a hand towards his cloak that still hung by the door. He called it to him through the Force, but the dark vestment did not move. Obi-Wan lowered his hand and his head.

Now, more than ever, he felt truly alone.

Chapter 8: A Ghost of a Chance

Qui-Gon Jinn carefully maneuvered his ailing craft on to the small landing platform. His mission to Arquin Nat had gone as expected though his journey had been anything but. Though a capable pilot, as all Jedi were, Qui-Gon found himself at his wit's end trying to hold his malfunctioning ship together. Something had gone wrong within in the engine, but the master's lack of expertise in mechanical engineering prevented him from firmly determining what. His cursory examinations had eliminated some of the more minor, easily corrected problems, but finally his ability to troubleshoot was at its end and the Jedi was forced to seek outside help if he ever intended to reach Coruscant. As it happened, his path home brought him close to a number of Republic allied planets so he had his choice of repair stops. His final decision on which planet to ask for aide from was based heavily on the fact that one of the nearby planets was specifically associated with a Jedi presence.

Bandomeer.

His decision made, the master contacted the main Agri Corps facility on the planet where he was told that of course they would be happy to assist him in any way they could. Now that he was here and had successfully landed, Qui-Gon let out a contented sigh of relief. He began the powering down procedures for the craft then gathered his belongings and headed out the main ramp. Once outside the ship he was immediately greeted by a small, squat figure of a species he didn't recognize, but the Force aura, though small -a non-sensitive it would seem- was pleasant and unthreatening.

"Master Jinn," the being welcomed bowing deeply. Qui-Gon returned the bow automatically as years of training dictated. The being's paired antennae bobbed and his four eyes blinked rapidly. "I am Ba'ar, assistant to the Chief Administrator. Administrator Voluk sends her apologies that she could not greet you in person, but she is detained by other matters."

"I understand, Ser Ba'ar," Qui-Gon replied neutrally. "I'm certain that a facility this size commands much attention."

"Yes, yes, Master Jinn," Ba'ar answered bobbing and blinking again. "I will take you to her now if that is your want."

Qui-Gon did not respond verbally instead he merely nodded his head and gestured for the assistant to lead the way. The two men traveled the quiet halls of the main building with the assistant prattling away about different rooms and corridors they passed describing their functions in unnecessary detail. Through it all, Qui-Gon nodded when appropriate, but offered little else. Sufficiently stymied, Ba'ar finally desisted in his tour and lead them quietly the rest of the way. He paused before a closed door, bowed then silently took his leave. Qui-Gon waited until the man was gone before stepping forward, the portal

sliding open at his approach. The master entered into a small office lined with boxes and data slates. A desk sat in the room's center covered with so many pads and papers its surface could no longer be seen. Behind it stood a woman, middle-aged and attractive if somewhat comely looking. Her short crop of cyan hair sat wildly on her head as her large green eyes scanned over the document she was holding. She glanced up from her readings with a start as the master's quiet entrance had gone unnoticed. She quickly came around her desk and extended a hand to the Jedi.

"Sorry about that, Master Jinn. I sometimes have a tendency to over focus," the woman smiled. Qui-Gon took the lady's hand shaking it mildly.

"There's nothing to apologize for Administrator Voluk. I only hope I am not distracting you from other important business," the master said gesturing to the overlarge stack of materials on her desk. Voluk turned to her desk and chuckled.

"That is normal, but if it ever gets head high I may need you to come and rescue me," she laughed. Qui-Gon graced the woman with a half smile.

"It would be my pleasure, Administrator."

"Ilia, please."

"Then you must call me Qui-Gon."

"Pleasure to meet you, Qui-Gon," Ilia replied. "I hear you had some trouble with your ship?" she asked as she sat down in one of the chairs in front of her desk. Qui-Gon tucked his cloak beneath him as he took the seat across from her.

"A bit of engine trouble. I am hoping it is something your engineers can repair quickly."

"I assure you we will do our best to get you going again, but... I will enjoy your company while you wait. In fact," Ilia paused and Qui-Gon could feel a degree of uncertainty emanating through the Force. The administrator's next words did little to ease the tension he now felt.

"Actually, Master Jinn, I have a favor to ask you."

"Ah," the master replied. It was not uncommon for others who aided the Jedi to ask for favors and privileges in return, but it was against the tenets of the Order to grant them. Any behavior along those lines could quickly develop into a quid pro quo that would destroy the Order's position of impartiality. Though not a Jedi, as Chief Administrator to the Order's Agri Corps here on Bandomeer, Ilia Voluk should have known better than to ask such of any Jedi. Qui-Gon opened his mouth to offer a polite refusal, but Ilia spoke first.

“Oh, I know what you’re thinking and it’s not that kind of favor, I assure you. I’ve worked with Jedi too long to make such a rookie mistake,” she grinned. When the master nodded she continued. “I was hoping that while you are here you would be willing to assist in the negotiations the Corps is having with the different mining organizations.”

“Mining? I thought the Corps was vegetation and ecologically focused.”

“It is,” Ilia answered, “but the mines are here and so are the miners and though we try to give each other space their actions affect our work here. And on the other side, the miners do not have permanent facilities for more than barracks or warehouses, therefore we share our mess and medical with them,” she sighed. “It makes for a less than amicable situation, but lately it’s become a lot worse.”

“How so?”

“The mining has become more dangerous, the mines themselves more volatile. The workers all leave the mines angry, ill, or injured. I tell you, Qui-Gon, I spend most of my day putting out fires and lately that’s been very literal.”

Qui-Gon leaned a bit forward in his chair.

“Have you spoken with the appropriate mining representatives?”

“Yes, though our talks have been less than fruitful,” she replied though her tone remained pleasant, Qui-Gon could feel the frustration in her words. “I know that you can’t do anything officially, I was hoping that your presence may aide in some way, that is, if you would be willing.”

“You are correct in that I can do little without being officially sanctioned by the Senate or the Order to participate,” the master paused as he watched the administrator’s hopeful expression fall into a frown. “However, unofficially, I suppose that I could lend you my presence during a meeting or two,” he smiled. Ilia returned the grin easily.

“Thank the stars,” she exclaimed as she stood and walked behind her desk. “I actually have a meeting with one of the major organization reps scheduled for tomorrow afternoon. In the meantime, you of course have free use of our facilities. I will have our engineers provide you regular updates on your repairs and I have already assigned you temporary quarters. Meal times in the mess are,” she paused as the door to her office once again slid open. This time a worker in a dark green tunic and black trousers entered carrying a datapad.

“Sorry to interrupt, Ilia, but I have some assignments I need approved,” the young woman spoke. Ilia gestured for the woman to come inside and took the pad from her. She studied it quickly for a few silent moments.

“Alright, put Cil and Turk in field four and pull Surjik from five. She’s needed back in the lab.”

“Who do you want in five? It’s still undermanned.”

“Take the ghost. He won’t mind working alone, in fact,” the administrator paused again, but this time her focus was on the Master Jedi. She turned her attention back to her employee and handed her the pad. “Yes, put the ghost in five. Thanks, Hal.”

“I’ll see to it,” Hal nodded and then left the room closing the door behind her. Ilia turned back to the Jedi sitting patiently in his seat.

“Okay, so I have another favor to ask you.”

* * * * *

It had been three months he had been on Bandomeer and in that time, Obi-Wan Kenobi, former Jedi Initiate now Agri Corps farmer, had learned many things. He had learned that to embrace hope was agony. That to dream brought only renewed pain. Caring and feeling were only forms of torture so Obi-Wan had given them up. He had given them all up. He did his job, of course. He wouldn’t, he couldn’t do otherwise, but there was never any joy in the work and he knew there never would be. Even peace and serenity were too distant, too difficult for him to grasp. All there was, all that remained was the cold, numbing emptiness of his heart’s perpetual desolation, so he learned to live in that quiet void. Live... perhaps that was an exaggeration.

For Obi-Wan, living was purely mechanical now. Breathe in. Breathe out. Consume. Dispose. Burn. Sleep. All just the necessary actions to keep a living body functioning. Efforts to maintain the shell left after a soul has fled.

In truth he was a golem. A hollow child. Broken, bereft, and bleeding from a wound that would never heal only fester; its necrotic fingers further tainting the surrounding flesh slowly killing that which, in all other ways, was already dead.

That’s how he got his nickname. At some unknown time during his three months he had come to be known as Obi-Wan Kenobi, the Little Ghost of Bandomeer.

He knew the name should have bothered him, but it didn’t. Nothing bothered him anymore, not the blazing sun, not the oppressive humidity, not the stinging wind or rain, not the omnipresent dirt and mud. Nothing. Nothing could reach him anymore and Obi-Wan was quite certain nothing would ever again.

* * * * *

Obi-Wan Kenobi. Just hearing that name had filled the master with mixed and chaotic feelings. He had never felt guilt exactly regarding his decision about Obi-Wan, but he had felt... something. A lingering sense of... incompleteness in their interactions. During his time on Arquin Nat, Qui-Gon had thought of the boy constantly and each time it took more and more conscious effort to remind himself that the child was not his concern and yet hearing what Ilia had to say about the child made the master wonder if that was entirely so. The Little Ghost she had called him. The picture she painted was of a half being, not truly alive, but not truly dead either. A specter amongst living men gliding across the fields barely of any matter or substance. Qui-Gon snorted. The administrator apparently had a penchant for hyperbole. Though as the tall master crossed the fertile ground toward his destination he began to wonder if perhaps her words were true.

Before him sat a tiny figure working diligently, his hands tucked into the rich earth. The figure's movements were stiff, rote showing none of the grace he had observed in the boy that day in the Grand Hall. Even the Force around him seemed diffused, quiescent. With a deep breath the master approached the smaller figure and knelt beside him.

"Obi-Wan?" he called softly. The boy looked up from his work briefly then returned to the plants he was tending. When the child didn't answer Qui-Gon moved a little closer and settled himself onto the ground within an arm's reach of the boy.

"You know who I am?" the master asked. Obi-Wan nodded, but again he did not speak. Qui-Gon took a moment to look at the boy, really look at him. He was thin, dangerously so to the master's mind, and his eyes held none of the luminosity he remembered. The master sent out a gentle probe to the boy's mind, but instead of finding a sea of calm what he encountered was more like a stagnant pool; still, unresisting, and lacking.

"There are people here who are concerned about you," Qui-Gon said, but again he received no response. Slowly, gently the master placed a curled finger under the boy's chin guiding his face up so that the boy would look at him. "I among them."

At last the child spoke.

"I'm fine, Master Jinn."

"No, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon replied with a sigh. "You are not."

Obi-Wan shrugged and pulled his chin out of the master's light hold. He returned to his work.

"No. I am not."

Qui-Gon watched as the boy silently packed in the dirt around a particularly scraggly looking plant. He watched thin, bony fingers move clumsily from planter to earth and back again. Competent work, but not passionate, not joyful. Qui-Gon removed his cloak and rolled up the sleeves of his robe. He reached into Obi-Wan's planter and removed a seedling of his own carefully settling it into a pre-dug hole.

"These are yndeloi tubers, are they not?" the master asked casually as he began to replant another seedling.

"Yes," Obi-Wan answered. "They are very fragile and susceptible to damage with even minute changes in their environment. It is hoped that these modified seedlings will be more resilient," he replied. Qui-Gon was somewhat pleased that the boy was at least truly speaking now, but the dry, monotone of the child's voice was nearly as disquieting as the child's silence. The master tried for another approach.

"Every living thing responds differently to change," the master began as he reached for another tuber. "Even something as small as these seedlings must be given a chance to adapt and thrive, otherwise,"

"They die, Master Jinn," Obi-Wan interrupted. "They die."

* * * * *

"We were expecting you to return to Coruscant by tomorrow."

"I encountered an unexpected delay. My ship was having engine trouble. I was forced to stop on Bandomeer for repairs," Qui-Gon answered. He watched as the dark brow of Mace's holo-image wrinkled into a frown. His report on the Arguinon elections had proceeded with few questions, just as the master had expected, but he was surprised at the frustration he saw in the eyes of his friend and Councilor. The other images of the Council members betrayed nothing of their inner thoughts or moods, save one. Yoda sat quietly, his eyes and ears uncharacteristically downcast.

"Are the Agri Corps engineers confident they can make the necessary repairs?" Mace asked. Qui-Gon nodded.

"Yes, Administrator Voluk has assured me that the work will only take a few days. In the meantime, I have offered my services to her and the Corps in whatever capacity I can provide during my time here." There. Not quite a lie, but enough room for him to maneuver should his off-book negotiations be the subject of any scrutiny later. The answer seemed to satisfy the Councilors.

"Very well, keep us updated," Mace began as he prepared to close the session, but Qui-Gon held up a hand.

"Masters, if you would there is one more thing to discuss," he said and with Mace's slight nod, the master continued. "There is the matter of Obi-Wan Kenobi."

At this, the ancient master finally glanced up to meet the eyes of his grand-padawan, but it was Master Mundi who spoke first.

"The former initiate?"

"The same. I have spoken with Administrator Voluk and she has expressed some... concerns about him. Concerns which I now share."

"Is he causing a disturbance?" Master Gallia inquired, though disbelief could be heard clearly in her regal and melodic tones. Qui-Gon shook his head.

"No, not a disturbance, but I believe he is unwell."

"The Agri Corps facility has a full medical ward," Mace replied. "Is his illness beyond their capability?"

"I do not believe this to be an illness of his body," the tall master replied as he searched for the right words. "Voluk has reported that Kenobi is not eating or sleeping enough, that he has become withdrawn from his fellows, going even so far as to refrain from speaking unless directly prompted."

"That is all?" Master Piell snorted. "Such behavior is common for recent transfers as you well know, Master Jinn."

"His transfer is hardly recent."

"Still," Mundi interjected, "the reaction you describe is hardly aberrant under the circumstances."

"Masters," Qui-Gon began again as he consciously choked back his mounting frustration. "The child is dangerously underweight, malnourished, and exhausted. As the Agri Corps falls under the auspices of the Order, it is our duty to attend to his well being whether he is a knight or no."

"Suggest what do you?" Yoda finally spoke breaking his silence. Qui-Gon paused a moment in thought. What was his suggestion? The child needed help of that he was certain, but how to help him was at best unclear. Then a solution came to mind.

"A soul healer."

There was a moment of silence over the holo-channel as the Councilors quietly conversed with one another then Mace tapped a few commands into his chair's arm console and studied the results.

“Master Ja’Prinn specializes in youth trauma. He will be sent to Bandomeer to assess the condition of young Kenobi and determine what if any action should be taken,” the Korun Councilor replied. Qui-Gon allowed himself a small sigh of relief. Then Mace continued.

“He will arrive in a tenday.”

“A tenday!” Qui-Gon shouted, surprising even himself at the outburst. Mace, however, only raised a questioning eyebrow.

“Yes, a tenday.”

“Kenobi needs help now,” the master all but growled. Mace sighed nearly inaudibly.

“Ja’Prinn will be there in a tenday. The boy is not fatally wounded. He can wait. May the Force be with you,” he finished and with a curt nod he closed the connection. After the transmission ended, Qui-Gon found himself unaccountably angry at the Council’s begrudging response.

“A tenday,” he growled to himself. As he pulled on his cloak he heard Mace’s words repeat in his mind.

The boy is not fatally wounded. He can wait.

Something deep within Qui-Gon seemed to whisper that he was not so certain that was the truth.

Chapter 9: Working on the Edge

Qui-Gon pulled his cloak close around his body as he moved silently through the mostly empty corridors of the main Agri Corps building. Remembering the tour given at his arrival, the master easily made his way to the facility's cafeteria. He entered and paused just inside the doorway, his eyes searching the many tables for Obi-Wan. To his consternation, the boy was nowhere to be seen, nor was the master able to sense the child's Force aura nearby. The master was still contemplating what to do next when an unfamiliar voice interrupted his thoughts.

"Jedi, right?"

Qui-Gon turned to the being that had spoken; a human male fairly young and with shockingly red hair.

"I am," the master replied evenly. The young man smiled and stuck out his hand.

"Xinnix Ero," the young man said. Qui-Gon took the proffered hand and gave it a solid shake.

"Qui-Gon Jinn," he replied. "I was looking for someone, perhaps you know of him?" Qui-Gon began. At Xinnix's questioning expression the master continued. "His name is Obi-Wan Kenobi."

"You're looking for Obi? Are you here to take him back to the Jedi?" Xinnix asked. There was no way for the master to mistake the hope he heard in the young man's voice. Reluctantly, Qui-Gon shook his head.

"Not exactly, but I had hoped to speak with him, to help him if I can," he answered. The young man was clearly disappointed with the master's response, but he perked up a bit at the last words. Xinnix looked over his shoulder to a pair of Agri Corps members sitting at a nearby table.

"Care to join us?" he said jerking his head in that direction. As he watched the Jedi consider the invitation he added, "We're the closest thing Obi has to friends here. Maybe we can help you help him."

As expected, that settled the question for the master and, with a nod, he followed Xinnix to the table. The pair already seated looked up with barely disguised awe as the master sat down at their table. Xinnix, on the other hand, had a sparkling grin plastered across his youthful features.

“Sair, Surjik, this is Master Jinn. Master Jinn, this is Sair and Surjik Zilae,” he said gesturing to each in turn. Qui-Gon gave a polite bow of his head to each twin. Eagerly, Xinnix continued. “He’s here to help Obi.”

“Well, it’s about time,” Surjik said her momentary wonderment disappearing and irritation taking its place. Sair quickly placed a calming hand on his sister’s shoulder.

“What my sister means, Master Jinn, is that we are glad the Jedi finally sent someone over.”

“Actually, I’m here because my ship was in need of repairs. I was only made aware of,”

“Wait!” Surjik interrupted. “You’re here by accident? The Jedi didn’t send you? Of all the stupid, hard-headed, Sith spawned, son of a,” Surjik continued launching into a full-blown tirade before Xinnix cut in to stop her ever more colorful flow of words.

“Doesn’t matter why he’s here, Sur. Only that he’s here now,” he told her glaring at her violet eyes until she calmed herself. When she finally sighed and flopped back in her chair, he turned his gaze to the master Jedi. “Do you think you can help him?” he asked. Qui-Gon took a deep breath and placed his hands in the sleeves of his cloak.

“Perhaps, but it would help to know more about how he reached his current condition.”

“Not much to tell,” Sair started. “Obi was kind of quiet when we first met him, but every day he got a little quieter. At first, we thought he was shy. Then we thought he was sad, but now we wonder if perhaps he’s... I don’t know, sick.”

“After his first month here he stopped eating in the caf with us,” Xinnix said picking up the narrative. “He takes his meals in his room, but by the looks of him, I really don’t think he’s eating much there either.”

“Or sleeping much,” Surjik added sourly.

“And now,” Xinnix continued, “he barely even talks. The docs here checked him out a couple of times, but they could find nothing wrong. Is this some Jedi thing? Like a Jedi illness or something?”

Qui-Gon pondered the young man’s words. Jedi illness indeed. It was likely, the master knew, that all of Obi-Wan’s troubles were simple depression. The symptoms matched, but... there was something else, something elusive. He could feel the Force hinting at another cause, a deeper one, but every time the master tried to pin it down the answer would slip through his fingers as if he were trying to catch moonlight.

“No, it is not a Jedi illness, but we will discover what it is and get him the help he needs. I’ve spoken to the Jedi Council and they have agreed to send one of our healers here. In the meantime, I will do what I can,” Qui-Gon said as he rose from his seat. “Do you know where I can find Kenobi?”

“Yeah, he’s in his room,” Xinnix answered.

“Always his room or the field. He never goes anywhere else,” Sair added.

“His room is in the main dormitory complex, assignment Aruek 7 Esk. I can show you if you want,” Xinnix offered, but the master waved his hand politely dismissing the need for aid.

“I’m sure I can find it on my own. Thank you for your assistance,” he said with a shallow bow to the three then he turned and left the cafeteria on his way to the dormitories. Qui-Gon walked the corridors replaying much of the previous conversation in his head. Nothing the trio had said contradicted his own observations or expectations, neither had their statements described anything more than a case of severe depression and yet Qui-Gon was certain that there was more to it than that. It was almost as if the Force was whispering to him, but its voice was too soft and spoken at too great a distance to be heard. Qui-Gon sighed and rubbed absently at his temples. He was tired. His mission on Arquin Nat was not particularly taxing and yet during most of his stay he was hampered by an undeniable sense of malaise and lethargy. He too had barely left his rooms unless the situation and his sense of duty demanded it; choosing instead to remain in the quiet solitude of his guest quarters. Perhaps the elusive sense of unease he felt about Obi-Wan was merely his own lingering exhaustion.

Qui-Gon pulled himself out of his thoughts as he approached the appropriate door. He hesitated only a moment to collect himself then pressed the chime. After several moments the door finally slid open. Qui-Gon stepped inside to find himself within a small, dimly lit space. The cell was austere at best containing only a set of drawers and a sleep couch. Even padawan and initiate rooms had desks and closets. This room was designed for sleeping and not much more, then again, what more would be needed? On the sleep couch sat the person he was looking for, his back against the wall, his knees pulled closely to his chest. The boy looked up as the master entered, but to Qui-Gon the light in the boy’s eyes seemed as dim as the lights in the room.

“Hello Obi-Wan, I was hoping I could speak with you some more, if you don’t mind?” the master said in what he hoped was a warm tone. Obi-Wan, however, gave no response so Qui-Gon decided to interpret that as an invitation, though certainly a lukewarm one at best. Since the tiny room boasted no seating, the master took a seat on the sleep couch near Obi-Wan, but not too near as to possibly crowd the boy.

“I didn’t see you in the dining hall tonight,” the master ventured, but again there was no response so he tried again. “Why are you sitting alone in your room?”

At this, the boy shrugged, but he also finally spoke though his words did nothing to palliate the master's growing concern.

"Doesn't matter where I am. I'm always alone."

"You are never alone, young one. The Force is always with you."

"Not with me. Not anymore," the boy whispered as he pulled his eyes away from the master to stare emptily at the blank wall to his left. Despite his training, Qui-Gon could not prevent the gasp from escaping his lips at the boy's flat pronouncement. Closing his eyes for a moment, Qui-Gon collected himself, slowly unraveling the thrill of panic that had sparked inside his chest and constricted his lungs. A deep breath later the master opened his eyes to find the boy still staring into nothing. Qui-Gon decided to risk moving a little closer.

"Obi-Wan," he called, but the boy did not move. "Obi-Wan, look at me," he commanded gently. Slowly the child turned his gaze back to the master. Qui-Gon looked into the boy's dull blue-gray eyes and spoke very softly, choosing his words with extreme care.

"Obi-Wan, why do you say the Force is not with you?"

"Because I can't feel it anymore."

"How long have you not been able to feel it?" the master asked and again the boy shrugged apathetically.

"Since I came here," he answered. Qui-Gon was stunned to say the least. He had dismissed Xinnix's suggestion that Obi-Wan could be suffering from some illness, but now... now he wasn't so sure. Depression had many symptoms, yes, but Qui-Gon was certain Force blindness was not one of them. It was also possible that the boy's melancholy was not depression at all, but the symptoms of his lost connection to the Force. For a Force sensitive as strong as a Jedi, even a Jedi child, to be cut off from the Force for even a short period of time would be... traumatic and Obi-Wan had been on Bandomeer for months. Qui-Gon barely suppressed a shudder. Whatever was plaguing Obi-Wan was far worse than he had first imagined.

"Have you tried meditation?"

"Can't," was the boy's short reply. Qui-Gon nodded sadly before instantly coming to a decision. He adjusted himself on the boy's sleep couch, crossing his long legs in front of him and settling into a beginner's meditation pose. Obi-Wan's eyes widened minutely as the master reached out to him with his palms up.

"Let me help you," Qui-Gon said. Obi-Wan stared at the master's large, open hands for what seemed to Qui-Gon as an eternity, but slowly the boy arranged himself in a copy of the

master's pose. Qui-Gon waited patiently and in perfect stillness as if he were trying not to frighten a wounded animal. Perhaps that was more accurate than he cared to think. Eventually, and after several halting movements, Obi-Wan placed his hands atop the master's. The moment skin met skin the master felt a jolt shoot through his body, so acute, so intense it was very nearly painful, but instead of pulling back as instinct instructed him to do the master grabbed onto the smaller hands holding them together. In the back of his mind he heard Obi-Wan's gasp and felt the boy's weak tugs as he tried to free himself from Qui-Gon's hold, but the master held firm. After the space of several heartbeats the intense, electric feeling disappeared, vanishing as abruptly as it had appeared.

"What..." Obi-Wan whispered. Qui-Gon shook his head.

"I do not know," he admitted, whether it was to himself or to Obi-Wan he couldn't be sure. What he did know was that he needed to find out and to know if it was connected to the boy's condition. "I think meditation is still called for," he paused and then added, "if you are still willing."

At Obi-Wan's somewhat reluctant nod, Qui-Gon closed his eyes and began to sink deeply into the Force. However, instead of pulling away from the outside world as he normally would, Qui-Gon reached out for the presence that was Obi-Wan. He wrapped his own awareness around that light, noticing that it appeared to be fluctuating with dim flashes. His concern ratcheted up several notches, but he continued on his course pulling Obi-Wan with him into the warm currents of the Living Force. Qui-Gon could feel the Force within the boy, but he could also tell it was blocked somehow. It was almost as if his connection was... damaged in some way, but how or why exactly the master could not tell.

Qui-Gon sensed more than heard the slight sigh from Obi-Wan as the two sank deeper into meditation. The master too felt the urge to sigh as he felt his ever-present malaise slide away as if he were shrugging off a heavy cloak. He had meditated daily since he left Coruscant, but in none of his previous meditations had he been able to shed the constant weariness until now. The master pondered briefly at that, but let the thought slip away to be considered later, privately.

It was quite some time later when the two resurfaced and came, once again, to awareness of the outside world. Just as he had begun, Qui-Gon carefully guided Obi-Wan back into his body and into the solid, groundedness of his corporeal form. When he was certain Obi-Wan had left the trance, the master slowly brought himself out as well. When he opened his eyes the master found that Obi-Wan's were still closed, but closer inspection revealed the boy was not lost in meditation but sleeping. Qui-Gon allowed himself a small smile at that. It was obvious to anyone that the boy needed rest and Qui-Gon hoped that at least this night he would get some. Carefully and with a long-practiced skill, Qui-Gon lifted the small, too light frame and placed it under the warm bedclothes, tucking him securely before quietly slipping out of the room. With a brief glance back at the sleeping figure Qui-Gon palmed the door closed and began the walk to his own assigned quarters.

He had much to meditate on.

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Neither meditation nor sleep offered Qui-Gon any insights into what he now thought of as the Kenobi Puzzle. Instead, all his musings left him with was a disturbing sense of unease and a nigglish tingle in the back of his mind. Qui-Gon took a moment to stretch, moving each muscle group in turn physically while pushing his internal discomfort away mentally. The Administrator had said that the meeting with the mining representative would be this afternoon. That would give him time to speak again with Obi-Wan. His course set, the master showered and dressed quickly, still adjusting his cloak as he left the room.

He checked Obi-Wan's dorm first. Finding him not there, he then checked the cafeteria though he did not expect to find the boy there either. A few inquiries to some Agri Corps members yielded a destination. Obi-Wan was in the same field he was in yesterday. Qui-Gon lengthened his already long stride, eating up the distance quickly. When he arrived the scene appeared to him just as it had the day previous: a small huddled figure intently digging into the earth. Qui-Gon began his slow approach trying to think of exactly what he wanted to say to the boy when Obi-Wan surprised him.

"Good morning, Master Jinn," he greeted. His voice was still that same emotionless monotone that lightly chilled Qui-Gon's spine, but at least Obi-Wan had chosen to speak first and that was an improvement over yesterday... or at least Qui-Gon decided to think so.

"Good morning, Obi-Wan. Did you sleep well?" the master asked as he settled next to the child and began to help him plant the tiny tubers as he had before.

"No nightmare."

"Do you have nightmares often?"

"Just one. The same one. Always," Obi-Wan intoned his small hands never stopping in their work. Qui-Gon, on the other hand, had paused in his planting to look at the child, his glance sweeping over him with a considerate and critical eye.

"Do you want to talk about it?" the master asked keeping his tone light. Obi-Wan shook his head.

"I have talked about it... to Master Yoda, Master Vresh," he sighed heavily his hands finally stilling. "That's why I'm here," he said softly then he resumed his work. Qui-Gon carefully tucked the tiny seedling into the prepared pocket of earth as he mulled over Obi-Wan's words. Then it struck him.

"Your nightmare is about a vision," Qui-Gon said. It wasn't a question, but Obi-Wan nodded anyway. Qui-Gon added this information to the collection in his head, but it seemed with each new piece the Kenobi Puzzle only grew more complicated. Perhaps it was time to treat it like the puzzle it was; time to work from the edges inward.

"I met a few of your friends yesterday, Xinnix, Sair, and Surjik," Qui-Gon began, recalling the names with ease. "Do they work in the fields with you often?"

"Sometimes, but Sair and Surjik spend a lot of time in the lab too," Obi-Wan answered then both fell into a less than companionable silence as Qui-Gon marshaled his thoughts to make another conversational approach.

/No one wants to work with me./

Qui-Gon's head snapped up from his work and he turned to Obi-Wan.

"I'm sorry, Obi-Wan, did you say something?"

"No, Master Jinn," the boy answered as he reached for another tuber. Qui-Gon sat still for a moment then noticed the time on his chrono. Wiping his hands on his trousers he rose to his feet.

"I apologize, Obi-Wan, but I have another matter I must attend to. Perhaps we can continue our discussion later?" the master asked. Obi-Wan nodded, but didn't look up. Qui-Gon barely repressed a sigh. With only one parting glance over his shoulder, the master left the yndeloi fields to clean up before his meeting with the administrator.

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"Master Jinn, I'm so glad you agreed to do this," Ilia said by way of greeting as she watched the tall Jedi gracefully enter the conference room. He took a moment to give her a shallow bow before joining her near the head of the long table.

"I only hope I can be of service," the master answered his tone and mien phlegmatic as usual. Ilia envied the man's serenity as her encounters with the particular representative they were meeting this morning always seemed to throw her into a fit of rage and exasperation.

"Well, if nothing else perhaps those Jedi reflexes of yours can help me keep from choking the bastard," she said with a smile. Qui-Gon graced her with a crooked grin of his own.

"That would make this meeting... less productive I would imagine."

"But oh so satisfying, Master Jinn."

"And who is this man that inspires such longings of homicide in such a gentle being as yourself?" Qui-Gon posed to the administrator in a teasing tone that most people found

charming. Ilia looked as if she were about to give some witty retort when her gaze shifted to the opening of the far doors.

“You can see for yourself,” she said gesturing to the two men that were now entering the room. Qui-Gon followed her gaze and gesture to the new parties.

“Master Jinn, this is the Chief Executive Officer of Offworld Mining Corporation, Xa,”

“Xanatos,” the master whispered. One of the two men stepped forward with an elegant bow.

“Master.”

Chapter 10: An Imperfect Process

“Master Jinn, this is the Chief Executive Officer of Offworld Mining Corporation, Xa,”

“Xanatos,” the master whispered. One of the two men stepped forward with an elegant bow.

“Master.”

Ilia glanced quickly between the two men, her eyes wide in unguarded shock.

“You know each other?” she asked somewhat hesitantly. Instantly her own burgeoning irritation regarding the Offworld representative evaporated with the appearance of the unexpected tension between the Jedi and the business man. Ilia looked to the man at her side. The expressionless mask the administrator had grown accustomed to seeing on the master’s face wavered for a moment displaying an emotion she was unable to label and then it was gone all together. The flicker was so quick, Ilia wondered if she hadn’t imagined it. All four had remained uneasily silent after the brief exchange, but when it became clear the Jedi was not going to answer the administrator’s question Xanatos spoke instead.

“Yes, Administrator Voluk,” Xanatos began as he relaxed into a comfortable stance, his arms crossed casually over his chest. “Master Jinn and I go way back, don’t we, Master Jinn?” he questioned with a smirk and a mocking tilt of his head. Qui-Gon folded his hands into the sleeves of his cloak.

“What is your purpose here, Xanatos?” he intoned. The younger man’s smirking grin dimmed a little, but he refrained from showing any further reaction to the Jedi’s cool tones.

“I am engaging in free and legitimate business. I think the better question is what you are doing here? Surely the Order hasn’t put you out to pasture already.”

“I would not be overly concerned about my days of future leisure, Xanatos. It is your days that are numbered,” the master replied. The business man grinned widely, his eyes bright with amusement.

“If I didn’t know better I would think you were threatening me, Qui-Gon,” Xanatos canted, a hand resting absently on one hip. The Jedi master surged forward until only the short width of the table separated the two men. Gyter, who had remained both silent and still as stone, suddenly moved forward in response to the perceived challenge to his employer, but Xanatos raised an elegant, yet clearly restraining hand before the Codru-ji’s broad chest. Ilia found herself taking a step back at the sudden escalation, but if the master

was intimidated by the Codru-ji's movements he made no outward show of it. If anything, his voice was lower and more coldly measured than before.

"When I choose to threaten you, Xanatos you will not need to question," Qui-Gon growled. "As for your business here, you will explain yourself."

Mostly certain that no one was going to come to blows, Ilia cleared her throat and took a step forward. All eyes turned to her as she smoothed out non-existent wrinkles in her tunic.

"Ser Du Crion, Master Jinn, since introductions are out of the way," she began with a sardonic smile, "I'm guessing we can begin?" Ilia gestured to seats on opposite sides of the table. Xanatos slid into his seat with a well-rehearsed indolence while Qui-Gon took the seat across from him with the graceful stoicism that made the Jedi a people both admired and feared. Gyter chose not to sit, but instead stood slightly behind and to the left of his employer; the look on his face one of professional malevolence. Ilia glanced at Xanatos who sat completely relaxed, idly tapping the fingers of one hand on the table. She then glanced at Qui-Gon, a plea in her eyes. With a mental sigh, Qui-Gon forced himself into a calm that until that moment he was only projecting to the others.

"Administrator Voluk has some concerns about the labor practices occurring in your mines. She has asked me to assist you in reaching some sort of equitable understanding," the master spoke keeping his voice as carefully neutral as he would with any delicate negotiation. Xanatos stopped his idle drumming.

"She asked you? Not the Jedi?" he asked and mentally Qui-Gon cursed the man's attention to his choice of words. Of course Xanatos would pick up on what was not said. He always had, but two could play at that game.

"Do you object to the presence of a Jedi in your discussions with the Agri Corps?" Qui-Gon asked mildly. He watched with a small degree of satisfaction as Xanatos considered his answer carefully.

"Not at all, Master Jinn. Perhaps we can begin with the Administrator's concerns?"

"You know damn well what my concerns are!" Ilia hissed, but the Jedi master laid a light hand on her forearm pulling her attention away from Xanatos for a moment.

"Then perhaps you will share them with me," he offered in quiet, soothing tones. Ilia immediately took a moment to compose herself, though when she spoke again none of the fire had left her eyes.

"Ser Du Crion has been informed many times that the methods Offworld uses to extract the lokattricite ore are severely damaging to the work the Agri Corps does here on Bandomeer. It pollutes the soil on a molecular level, destroying any chance of viability for

our many plant and crop projects,” she said. Qui-Gon turned his attention back to the smug man across the table.

“Is this assessment accurate?” he asked. Xanatos leaned forward in his chair, resting his well manicured hands on the table top. It seemed to Qui-Gon the man’s entire being was well manicured, from his impeccably tailored and expensive dark tunic, trousers, boots, and cloak to his equally lustrous, dark hair. Any trace of his familiar boyish features were gone replaced with the hard and handsome lines of male aristocratic beauty. Indeed, the only thing that marred his perfect visage was the incomplete circle scar adorning his cheek.

“I am not familiar with the details of any soil analyses, but,” Xanatos nodded, “I am aware that the... process used to mine lokattractive has some secondary effects on the environment.”

“Secondary effects?” Ilia shouted. “You are killing the soil you heartless bastard!”

Xanatos lifted his hands in an innocent placating gesture, though his smug expression did not change.

“The process is imperfect I must admit.”

“Surely there is another method of extracting the mineral that would have less damaging effects on the environment,” Qui-Gon offered neutrally as he rested a hand again on Ilia’s forearm; a subtle instruction to be calm. The master watched his opponent carefully as he waited for the man to respond to his gentle inquiry.

“There are,” Xanatos said. At Qui-Gon’s quirked eyebrow he added casually, “they are not... cost effective.”

“At what of the lives in that equation?” Ilia barked heedless of Qui-Gon’s imploring glance. “Do you know how many people will die if we can’t complete our work here? People need the crops we are designing here. And what of your own people?” Ilia continued when her previous statements earned nothing but an amused glare from the Offworld representative. “You’re using municra gas in the extraction. What about the fires, the explosions, the deaths it causes?”

“Like I said, the process is imperfect,” Xanatos replied with a slight bow of his head. “And may I point out it is the same method the other mining consortiums use.”

“Offworld is the dominant presence in the mining industry. They do what Offworld does,” the administrator hissed.

“I’m afraid you overestimate our influence.”

“Then perhaps what we need is a more accurate assessment,” Qui-Gon interjected. Xanatos turned his attention to the Jedi with a look of mild curiosity. Qui-Gon’s expression, however, betrayed nothing of what he felt.

“What do you propose, Master Jinn?”

“I would like to see the extraction process myself,” the master answered. Xanatos looked up briefly at his companion who nodded. Qui-Gon noted the interaction mentally concluding that Gyter must be more than just a bodyguard. Xanatos turned back to the Jedi and Administrator.

“I think that can be arranged,” he said as he rose to his feet. “I will send the pertinent information to you immediately. A pleasure as always, Administrator Voluk,” he said with a bow then he turned his bright blue eyes to the Jedi. “It is good to see you again, Qui-Gon. I hope we will have more opportunities to... catch up,” he said then without another word, Xanatos left the room.

“You should have let me strangle him.”

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“We did not expect to hear from you so soon. Is your ship repaired?” the small, blue holographic image of the Korun Councilor asked, and for a moment, Qui-Gon was caught off guard. He had totally forgotten about the repairs being done on his craft. So preoccupied he had been in his concern and confusion over Obi-Wan and now his worry and anger regarding Xanatos, the original purpose of his presence on Bandomeer had been completely disregarded. However, it only took the span of a heartbeat for the long-haired master to resettle himself.

“I have not been informed that the repairs are complete,” Qui-Gon carefully hedged. The holographic Mace leaned back in his Council chair, his fingers steepled.

“Then the reason for this call is?”

“Xanatos,” Qui-Gon answered. At the simple, one word utterance Mace’s demeanor changed minutely, so minutely in fact that most would have been hard pressed to notice it, but Qui-Gon did. After all, both men had known each other since their early days in the crèche. Mace and Qui-Gon had been friends and more for nearly as long as they had been Jedi.

“What of him?”

“He is on Bandomeer,” Qui-Gon answered with a weary sigh. Mace noted it, but said nothing. The Councilor knew all too well the deep wound that particular young man had

inflicted upon his friend and though Qui-Gon's expression was masked in serenity, Mace could still read the subtle flickers of grief, guilt, and anger in the master's eyes. He watched silently as Qui-Gon gathered his thoughts before speaking further.

"Xanatos has apparently taken charge of Offworld Mining Corporation and is extracting lokattractite at the expense of several Agri Corps projects."

"Is he engaging in illegal activities?"

"Not that I have determined so far, but once I have a chance to fully investigate I'm certain,"

"No."

It took a moment longer than it should have for Qui-Gon to process what he heard and even then the master could not hide his shock.

"No?"

"No, Qui-Gon."

"We are talking about Xanatos, Mace."

"No, we are talking about a private business owner who also happens to be a member of the royal family of Telos, a Republic planet," Mace countered mildly. Qui-Gon bit back his anger with difficulty.

"Whatever else he might call himself he is still dangerous. He is a rogue, Mace. The Order's directive on this is clear."

"As are the political ramifications. The Senate would not condone such action and the Council will abide the Senate."

"Since when do the Jedi allow the Senate to interfere in our internal affairs? Xanatos is our responsibility."

"If he commits a Republic recognized crime we will revisit the matter with the Senate, but we shall do nothing before that time. You shall do nothing before that time, Qui-Gon. That is an order."

"It is a mistake."

"Your opinion is noted, but the order stands," Mace replied coolly. The Councilor opened his mouth as if to say something further, but something out of the view of the projector caught his attention. There was a moment of silence followed by Mace's nod as

the bald master adjusted the view angle to encompass another participant to the conversation. Qui-Gon sighed mentally. He should have known.

“Master Yoda,” he intoned. The aged master stepped slightly forward then stopped, leaning heavily on his stick.

“News of Obi-Wan you have?”

Obi-Wan. For a moment the master had forgotten about the boy. Qui-Gon cursed inwardly, berating himself for allowing Xanatos’s presence to once again distract him so.

“I may, Master. I have spoken with Obi-Wan a few times now and he has informed me that... he can no longer feel the Force,” he answered. Both Councilors were silent in shock for several moments before well trained Jedi composure took hold once more.

“Explain,” Mace stated simply.

“I’m not sure that I can,” Qui-Gon replied wearily. “He said he has not been able to feel the Force or meditate since his arrival on Bandomeer. I attempted to meditate with him to see if I could detect the problem, but all I could feel was that there was a... block of some kind... and,” Qui-Gon hesitated. “And there was pain.”

“Pain say you?” Yoda asked, his large eyes narrowing. “What kind of pain?”

“It is... difficult to articulate, Master, but there was definite pain at our initial contact, however, it did dissipate quickly,” Qui-Gon answered shaking his head. “There is something definitely wrong with the child. He needs a healer’s care.”

“And he shall have it once Ja’Prinn arrives. Until then, keep us updated on Kenobi’s status,” Mace added. “May the Force be with you. And Qui-Gon?”

“Yes?”

“Stay away from Xanatos.”

Chapter 11: Serving Notice

Qui-Gon spent most of the afternoon reviewing the technical specs forwarded by Xanatos. The master had read through the dry descriptions of microcanonical adiabatic processes and municra gas exchange ratios in kinetic resonance induction drilling until his eyes began to cross and his mind began to wander to more mundane things like dinner and a hot shower. Qui-Gon sighed, closed his eyes, and pinched the oft broken bridge of his nose as he resisted the dull ache blossoming behind his eyes. Opening his eyes once again, Qui-Gon laid the data pad down and rose to his feet, stretching as he did so. The muscles in his back and neck protested the movement after so many hours of hunched over reading, but a few isometric exercises eased the worst of the stiffness. The master donned his cloak and briefly considered a stop by the cafeteria, then noting the late hour he decided against it. Instead he made his way deeper into the dormitories. He paused before the desired door and rang the chime. After waiting a patient few seconds, Qui-Gon rang the chime again. Again, there was no response. The master took a moment and sent a tendril of Force into the closed room, searching for the familiar Force presence. It was there, but it seemed even weaker than before. Spurred on by concern, Qui-Gon overrode the door's simple locking mechanism with a judicious application of Force and entered the small room.

"Obi-Wan?" Qui-Gon called out as he stepped into the small, darkened space. After a few moments, his eyes adjusted to the darkness and the master could just make out the outline of a small figure sitting on the floor, his back against the edge of the sleep couch. Qui-Gon gathered his cloak about his large, rangy frame and sat down charily beside the boy.

"Obi-Wan? Are you all right?"

"I'm tired," the boy whispered. Qui-Gon suddenly felt a prickly itch at the back of his skull. The Force was issuing him a warning, but to what the master could not tell. Qui-Gon couldn't feel any danger or malice around them. Was the warning regarding the boy himself? Qui-Gon closed his eyes and focused all of his awareness on the child beside him. Through his weakened Force aura the master could still feel the boy's extreme fatigue and despairing spirit, but there was nothing he could sense that was urgent or life threatening. Qui-Gon opened his eyes and turned his gaze to his young charge. Temporary charge the master reminded himself, chiding. Obi-Wan was in need of help and the master would give any help he could freely, but once Master Ja'Prinn arrived Qui-Gon would return to both Coruscant and his duties.

"Come, Obi-Wan, it's time for rest," the master said as he rose to his feet pulling the boy with him as well; the boy's resistance to being moved laodicean at best. Qui-Gon gently placed the boy underneath the light bedclothes of his small sleep couch.

“Sleep now, young one,” the master said softly. The boy closed his eyes in slumber under the heavy sleep suggestion. Qui-Gon then left the room and headed to his own chambers only noting remotely that the itch of warning had not abated.

The master did not notice the shadowed figure at the end of the hall that also turned to leave.

* * * * *

Morning seemed to find the master quickly leaving him far less rested than he had hoped, but there was nothing to be done about it and he had managed before on far less. After a quick stop by the cafeteria and a quicker firstmeal of some bread, cheese, and tea, Qui-Gon donned his cloak, hood up, and began the long walk to the southern mines. It would have been much faster to have borrowed a hopper from the Agri Corps transportation dome, but the distance wasn't far for a Jedi and Qui-Gon intended to use the time to think about his current situation.

Things on Bandomeer were nothing like he had expected. This was supposed to be a quick stop, an unscheduled layover for repairs, but instead the “quick stop” was rapidly turning into a confusing mélange of events that left the usually sure-footed master struggling to keep pace. First there was Kenobi and the strange illness and Force blindness plaguing the boy; and it was an illness of some kind, Qui-Gon was nearly certain of that. His meetings with the boy, though brief, had each time further cemented his own feelings and Force sense that something was wrong. The knowledge of the wrongness, however, did nothing to instruct the master on what he should do about it and before he had had any time to really focus on helping the child he was set off guard again.

For years just the mention of that name, that memory stirred an ache in his heart and set his teeth on edge in impotent and useless rage. But here on Bandomeer, Xanatos was more than a memory. He was flesh and blood, breath and betrayal. Betrayal. That was what he was. To Qui-Gon's mind, Xanatos's fair skin, midnight hair, and cobalt blue eyes were just the pleasant packaging that concealed deceit incarnate. A man with a gilded tongue and a blade behind his back. A man waiting for his opportunity.

Qui-Gon stopped in his trek and rolled the tension out of his shoulders. He took a deep breath and tilted his head to the sun, closing his eyes. Yes, he knew Xanatos, knew what the young man was capable of and he would not let him... Not let him what? Live? Qui-Gon lowered his head shaking it as he opened his eyes. The master didn't have an answer to that question nor was he sure he wanted one. Force willing it would not come to that and if it did... well, he would let the Force guide him.

Qui-Gon resumed his journey, focusing for the moment on just placing one booted foot in front of the other; a sort of moving meditation until he found himself some hours later standing before the empty mouth of the largest of the southern mines. Equipment of

all types lay strewn about the cave's entrance. The rock itself was discolored in some spots, blackened. The master reached out with two fingers brushing the darkened, hard stone. The tips of his fingers came back covered in ash. A fire or an explosion. His thoughts drifted back to the Administrator's comments. Muncra gas. He would have to be mindful. Highly volatile, muncra was impossible to see, smell, or taste, but it was detectable in the Force. The master began to explore the interior of the cave igniting his saber to illuminate the shadowed tunnel. He walked for a long while passing more pieces of equipment, many scorched or damaged beyond use. He noted one that seemed to be the broken remnants of the resonance induction drill described in the technical specs Xanatos had provided him. Qui-Gon moved closer to investigate the broken drill more thoroughly. Most of the wreckage fit what he had read about the device, but there was another part that didn't appear to belong. He knelt, picking up an arm joint, its hinge twisted by intense heat. There was something odd about the drill tip. Qui-Gon studied the tip intensely for several moments trying to reconcile the twisted bit of metal with his memory of the schematics, but to no avail. This was a mystery to be solved later. He stood, pocketing the appendage in his cloak and continued his slow march deeper into the mine. Soon he reached a fork; three separate pathways carved into the stone. The master closed his eyes and reached out into the Force with his senses. He traced all three paths some distance only to discover that the mine was a labyrinth of tunnels as twisted and serpentine as a nest of vipers. It would be a simple thing to become lost here.

Qui-Gon turned around to make his way back to the mine's entrance when he felt a now familiar itch in the back of his skull. The last time he felt it he had attributed the sense of warning to Obi-Wan's presence, but now he realized it was something different. The master resumed his walk at an easy pace seeming to focus on nothing at all even as he extended his senses once again searching... searching... and this time finding.

He was being followed.

Qui-Gon made no move, no indication that he was aware of his tail only continuing as he had been even as he began his long walk back to the Agri Corp facilities. He would discover the reason for his surveillance later. Right now, the master had other questions and only one place he could find the answers he sought.

* * * * *

"Master Jedi!" the lab tech exclaimed slightly startled by the taller man's silent entrance. Qui-Gon bowed shallowly.

"Zilae, correct?"

"No, I mean yes, I mean you can call me Sair, Master Jedi," the young man stuttered. He flushed brightly, his pale skin now a rosy lavender. "Sorry, I am usually more articulate than this."

Qui-Gon smiled lightly.

“It is my fault for interrupting your work. I did not mean to startle you.”

“You didn’t... the work, I mean. You did startle me, but I wasn’t getting much done at the moment. Too distracted,” the Sephi answered as he turned on his stool away from his microscope to face his guest properly. “What can I help you with?”

“I would like you to analyze this,” Qui-Gon said reaching into his cloak and retrieving the small machinery piece. He placed it in the young man’s outstretched hand. The man immediately began to scrutinize the part examining and taking in what he could with his senses.

“What do you want to know?”

“What it’s for, how it’s used, how it can to be damaged, what it’s composed of,” the master said, his quickly rattled off list trailing away as he saw his point was made. Sair nodded in understanding.

“How fast do you need it?”

“As quickly as possible,” the master answered and again Sair nodded his head then he looked up at the Jedi master, his light eyes intense with both worry and hope.

“Will this somehow help Obi-Wan?” he asked. With a noticeable frown on an otherwise serene expression, Qui-Gon was forced to shake his head.

“No, this is for something different.”

“Oh,” Sair replied turning back to his desk. “I hadn’t heard anything from the doctors yet so I just assumed,”

“The doctors?” Qui-Gon interrupted, his tone a bit harsher than he intended. Sair swiveled his seat back to the master.

“High moons! You haven’t heard have you?”

“What haven’t I heard? What has happened?”

“Obi-Wan, he collapsed in the fields this morning. He was rushed to the medical building. I haven’t heard anything since, thus,” he said waving his hand about indicating the stacks of incomplete work, “the distraction.”

“No, I had not heard, but I will go and see to him now,” Qui-Gon replied then with a curt nod he swept out of the laboratory the dark brown of his cloak swirling in his wake.

* * * * *

With hurried steps that didn't quite amount to running, Qui-Gon made his way down the long corridors of the science complex, under the weather-beaten awnings that connected the disparate buildings and domes, and into the quiet halls of the medical facility. There he encountered a young Arkanian female with bright white eyes and delicate lashes. Dressed similarly to the researchers in the science complex, she was donned in a light, white cloak.

"Can I help you, Ser?"

"Yes, I am here to see Obi-Wan Kenobi. I was told he was in your care," the master answered politely, but his tone denoted a sense of urgency that was not lost upon the young healer. She bowed her head politely.

"This way, Ser," she replied sweetly then she turned and began to make her way down a series of halls leaving the tall Jedi to follow quietly behind her. Outside of one of the many non-descript doors she paused turning to the master.

"This room is his, however, I must tell you he needs his rest. Your visit must not be overly taxing."

"I will not interfere with his rest, I assure you," Qui-Gon answered and, in return, the girl gave a demure smile gesturing to the door before returning to her post. The tall master opened the door and stepped into the brightly lit and sterile room. The small knot of worry in his chest expanded exponentially as he took in the room's occupants.

"What are you doing here?" he growled at the man hovering too near to Obi-Wan's bed. Obi-Wan, for his part, seemed to be asleep.

"One of my men was injured in a mine," Xanatos replied with a sigh. "I came to check on his condition."

"That does not explain your presence here," Qui-Gon snapped as he moved between the liar and the sleeping child. Xanatos, refusing to relinquish his spot despite the master's intimidating closeness, just crossed his arms over his chest, his chin raised in defiance.

"The kid was brought in while I was awaiting word on my man. What's in your head, Jinn? You think I did something to this child to put him here?"

Qui-Gon tensed slightly, his hand drifting to rest on his saber hilt.

"If you did it would be the last crime you will have to answer for," he responded. An unmistakable flash of anger surged across Xanatos's usually smug expression.

“I am no criminal, Jinn,” he hissed then he closed his eyes. When he opened them, the smug expression had returned; a small half smile tugging at his thin lips. “What’s your interest with the boy? Or is this yet another stray you’ve managed to pick-up?”

“My interest is only in keeping people safe from you,” Qui-Gon answered coolly. “Now, get out.”

“Hmm,” Xanatos smiled as he turned and left the room without another word. Once he was gone, Qui-Gon allowed himself to relax a moment before turning his worried gaze to the small, pale figure curled under soft blue bedclothes. He ran a hand lightly through the unruly and dull mop of auburn hair and saw the mop’s owner frown mildly in his sleep at the touch. The master felt the dull ache in his fingertips as well and wondered once again what exactly was wrong with this boy?

* * * * *

Qui-Gon sat beside the small medical couch actively attempting not to brood and failing miserably. His thoughts chased one another in a vicious, never ending circle of guilt, frustration, and anger; each emotion heady and potent as it fueled its kin and displaced his center. Qui-Gon was absently reaching to pinch the bridge of his nose, something he had found himself doing a lot lately, when his eyes caught a small motion to his left. He turned to fully face the narrow sleep couch and its occupant and was met by sleep heavy and clouded eyes.

“Obi-Wan?” the master asked quietly as he reached out to remove a stray lock of hair from the boy’s brow then suddenly aborted the movement remembering the minor pain his previous touch had inspired. “Obi-Wan,” he repeated. “How are you feeling?”

Qui-Gon watched silently as the small, pale figure shifted slightly, barely uncurling from its tight, protective ball. If anything, the child looked younger and more vulnerable than ever before. His complexion was paler than last the master saw him, his blue-gray eyes flat, dull, and set inside darkened circles giving his appearance a sallow, sunken effect. Hair that was once the color of golden flames was now a limp, scraggly mess of rust color tinged tangles. Taken in all, the boy looked more than simply tired or sad. He looked like a person suffering from a great wasting disease, one that was slowly eroding everything healthy and happy within the boy.

Qui-Gon leaned closer to the child, allowing one arm to rest nearby on the edge of the sleep couch, but not quite close enough to touch.

“Obi-Wan? Please answer me, young one,” the master said softly. Slowly, reluctant eyes drifted over his face before resting again to meet his steady gaze. Small, nearly gray lips parted slightly releasing only the barest of sound, a sound so low only the master’s Force enhanced hearing permitted him to catch it.

"Tired," was the whispered response. Qui-Gon smiled ruefully.

"I know, child, I know," the master replied as he tucked the bedclothes more securely around one slender shoulder. "Obi-Wan, can you tell me what happened?"

"Nothing," the boy spoke in another strained whisper. It seemed as if the simple task of speaking threatened to overtax the already depleted reserves within the frail frame.

"Nothing?" the master repeated his brows raised minutely. "I was told you were unwell, that you were found in the yndeloi fields."

"Nothing," Obi-Wan repeated. "Nothing left."

Those two words were uttered with such soft finality that it chilled the master's soul to his core. They felt like a portent and the master found himself immediately having to release a substantial wave of fear into the Force. Qui-Gon reached out to Obi-Wan both with his hands and with his mind. One large hand rested on the boy's shoulder, the other on his forehead and even as they both felt the first brush of pain from the skin to skin contact, Qui-Gon pushed in with his mind. The moment the master touched the boy's mind every nerve along his neck and spine seemed to light at once. There was a fire in the back of his skull and a supremely uncomfortable pressure at his temples. As the jangling along his nerves worsened and the blaze in his head grew hotter, Qui-Gon tightened his grasp on Obi-Wan both mentally and physically. As expected, the intense pain quickly began to wane until the sensation was only an unpleasant tingling vibration along his nervous system. The initial discomfort passed, Qui-Gon directed his focus to assess the state of Obi-Wan's body and general health. He sensed the boy's bone deep exhaustion and a certain... sadness, like a film over his conscious mind, but there was more than that. Qui-Gon could feel something else, something like an echo in the vastness of the boy's too quiet thoughts. Mentally, the master cast himself a little deeper into the boy's mind in search of the elusive something only to find it when his own Force presence brushed up against something interminably gelid. Qui-Gon gave what only could be described as a psychic flinch. He had felt this only once before, back when he was a new knight struggling to eek peace from a war-torn nation. He had been aiding in a make shift infirmary after a terrorist attack targeted a small restaurant near the governmental buildings. There was a woman injured severely in the blast; so severely the medics could do little else but make her comfortable. Qui-Gon had stayed with her, eased her passage into the Force by touching her with his mind and sharing his own sense of peace as he helped to banish her fear. With the confines of the woman's consciousness he had felt the approach of death, the slow march towards her end that was as steady as her heart beat had been before the bombing...

He felt that same touch now, in Obi-Wan's mind.

No matter what else was at play here, Qui-Gon now knew one thing with absolute certainty.

Obi-Wan was dying.

* * * * *

“You are behind schedule.”

“There have been some... setbacks. The process you have insisted upon using is highly unstable. My men have taken severe injuries and,”

“I am neither interested in your miners or your excuses,” the shadowed figure answered from the small screen of the communications terminal. Xanatos bit back an impatient frown.

“You will receive your shipment as promised. I honor my business deals,” he replied with only a trace of annoyance. The hooded figure nodded slightly, evidenced only by the bob of the heavy material.

“See that you do.”

“There is one more thing,” Xanatos quickly added, interrupting what he knew to be a prelude to the end of the transmission. The hooded figure said nothing, waiting for him to speak. Xanatos took a deep breath.

“There is a Jedi here.”

“And this should concern me why?”

“I... know this Jedi. He will not be deterred by the usual means,” Xanatos said and for a moment the figure seemed to fall preternaturally still within the silence.

“Find a way to distract him. He must not interfere with your operation.”

“And if I can’t distract him?” Xanatos asked.

“You’re a clever man, I am sure you will come up with something, because if you fail to deliver...”

“As I said before, I honor my business dealings.”

“You had better,” the figure retorted then the channel was closed. Xanatos leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes only to open them a second later as he slammed his fist on his desk cracking the glossy durasheen finish.

“Force damn you, Qui-Gon Jinn!”

Chapter 12: Shift Change

Qui-Gon had continued to sit with Obi-Wan for several more quiet hours with the teen drifting in and out of sleep. After some time, the boy's attending physician had ventured into the small room to examine his young patient. The Sullustan tsked and sputtered to himself as he checked and rechecked the different displays and leads monitoring Obi-Wan's bio signs. Qui-Gon waited silently, if not quite patiently, as the man finished his assessment. When he finally turned to leave, the master moved out of the room to follow stopping them both just outside the room's door.

"What is his condition?" Qui-Gon asked politely, though abruptly. The Sullustan, being considerably shorter than the tall Jedi, looked up at the master with wide, blinking eyes.

"And who is the boy to you? I cannot share confidential information about his health even to one such as you, Ser Jedi."

"I understand your position, healer..."

"Dr. Quafinak," the physician replied. Qui-Gon gave a politic nod of his head and continued.

"I understand your position, Dr. Quafinak, but I have been authorized by the Jedi Council to see to Obi-Wan Kenobi's health as he was one of our initiates and the Agri Corps still falls under the authority of the Order. Therefore, sharing this information with me will cause no breach in your ethics," the master stated, his tone calm and carrying only the barest hint of Force suggestion. With a learned nod the doctor began his recitation of the boy's condition.

"The child is dehydrated, malnourished, and is overly lethargic. His neurochemistry is out of balance as are his electrolytes. His mental status varies from alert to near catatonia and his muscles seem to be suffering from the early stages of atrophy."

Though Qui-Gon was already aware of nearly each issue the doctor named to hear them spoken so plainly, so clinically detached made the master feel poignantly ill at ease. Outwardly, his face showed nothing but the typical Jedi stoicism expected of one of his Order, but inwardly the master felt anything but.

"Your diagnosis?" he asked, though he had little faith in the healer's understanding of what was afflicting this particular patient. The man did not disappoint.

"Extreme fatigue coupled with severe mental unbalance," Quafinak answered. "In short, the child is exhausted and depressed."

Qui-Gon's lips thinned at the definitive tone of the Sullustan. The doctor took notice of the reaction, his broad chest puffing up immediately.

"You disagree with my assessment, Ser Jedi?"

"On the contrary," Qui-Gon began in the same soothing, yet authoritative voice he used for more dicey negotiations. "I agree with your assessment. I am, however, more curious as to the cause."

The doctor's facial flaps fluttered in a display of condescending amusement.

"Cause? Who can know the cause of such things? Children become distressed for many reasons," he replied shaking his head vigorously. "No, no. Cause is unimportant. Treatment is what the child needs. Nourishment, water, and rest. These he shall get, Ser Jedi, but I must now return to my work. I do have other patients to attend you know."

Qui-Gon ignored his own irritation at the blatant dismissal and bowed to the doctor even as he turned to leave.

"Of course, Dr. Quafinak. I thank you for your time," he said giving a dismissal of his own as he retreated to Obi-Wan's room and closed the door behind him. The master moved back beside the sleep couch to find Obi-Wan still lying in a tight ball, his eyes open, but unfocused.

"Obi-Wan?" the master called and slowly blue-gray eyes settled on him. Qui-Gon tucked his cloak around him as he sat down in the chair beside the bed. He looked deep into those cloudy and dim eyes and mustered up a small smile. "I would like to try something with you, Obi-Wan, if you will permit me."

The boy didn't answer verbally, but he did give a slight nod of his head. Having received the permission he desired, Qui-Gon reached out to the boy with both hands only to stop short of actual contact. His small smile turned rueful.

"I'm afraid this may hurt at first," he said, but Obi-Wan remained still neither breaking his gaze nor his silence. Qui-Gon decided to interpret the non-action as consent and placed his hands upon the boy once more. The pain came again as expected and, as expected, receded just as quickly. This time, however, instead of reaching out to Obi-Wan's mind, the master reached out to the Force gathering its power around him before gently channeling its warmth through him and into the body under his hands. A startled gasp escaped Obi-Wan's chapped lips as he felt the power ease under his skin and seep down into his very bones. It felt as if he were breathing fresh air for the first time in his life or feeling the sun shine on his skin after an eternity underground. He began to warm, inside and out. The fog around his mind began to thin a bit around the edges and still the master poured more Force energy into him.

How long the two remained that way, Obi-Wan did not know. At some point he knew he must have fallen asleep for when he woke, Master Jinn was asleep as well his head resting awkwardly on the edge of Obi-Wan's bed. He knew that sleeping in that position would cause the Jedi master discomfort upon waking, but Obi-Wan could not bring himself to rouse the older man. So, instead he chose to close his own eyes and join the Jedi in slumber.

* * * * *

When Qui-Gon awoke from his impromptu nap, he felt more tired than he had ever remembered feeling before. He was bone tired and hungry. Hungry, but with no desire to eat. Even his connection with the Force seem to require more energy than before to sustain it. The master stretched, rotating his head and shoulders as he tried to work out the painful kinks in both. His eyes fell upon Obi-Wan's sleeping form. The boy looked a bit better at least. Some of the color had returned to his cheeks and though the dark circles still loomed heavily under his closed lids, at least the master could take comfort that those too would be improved with the boy's continued rest. With that rest in mind, Qui-Gon rose to his feet and quietly exited the small medical room. A quick look to a wall chrono informed him that it was shortly after firstmeal. Apparently, he had slept most of the night away by the child's side. Straightening his cloak about his frame, the master made his way back towards the main research building. He found that his gait was slower than usual and more than once he stumbled slightly, reminiscent of his days as a padawan when growth spurts turned him into an ungainly mess of knees, elbows, and very little grace. Qui-Gon paused a moment and gathered the Force around him in an attempt to bolster his flailing reserves. Once he felt more composed, he resumed his journey back to Sair's lab. When he entered the brightly lit room he found his quarry waiting for him.

"Master Jedi!" Sair greeted as he looked up from his microscope. Qui-Gon moved closer to the elfin researcher and returned his greeting with a short bow.

"Sair, you seem to be better focused this morning."

"Ah, well," the Selphi grinned sheepishly. "You gave me a puzzle and I love a good puzzle."

"Were you able to solve this particular puzzle?" the master asked with a small half-smile; the younger man's enthusiasm proving contagious.

"Solve, perhaps not, but the other questions..." Sair answered as he picked up a data pad and quickly shuffled through pages of information. "Ah, here we go. That bit you gave me yesterday, it was from a resonance induction drill unit. It is designed to extract delicate minerals and ore from particularly hard or unstable rock structures. It was damaged due to exposure to extreme heat, thus the melted disposition of the materials."

Qui-Gon sighed. All this he had already devised on his own. When he picked up the destroyed bit he had been certain there was more to it than what it readily appeared.

“You discovered nothing more?” the Jedi inquired with a slightly noticeable disappointment. At this the Selphi youth beamed.

“Oh oh oh, much more. First of all, your drill bit has usual scoring along its edges that is not indicative of resonance drilling and here,” he said pointing to a diagram of the bit on the pad, “here I found discoloration from exposure to a highly unstable gas compound.”

“Municra. Offworld uses it in its mining process,” Qui-Gon offered. Sair nodded.

“Right, but municra gas does not cause this type of discoloration, at least, not by itself. To do that it would have to come into contact with some mineral with a particularly complex lattice structure. And there’s more.”

Qui-Gon nodded again encouraging the scientist to continue though his patience was wearing rapidly.

“The heat needed to melt this... it would have had to have been a violent burst of energy well over 30 onns.”

“30 onns? Are you sure?”

“The science doesn’t lie. Nothing Offworld uses in those mines is capable of producing that kind of energy and it is definitely not naturally occurring. Where did you find it?”

“In one of the Offworld mines,” Qui-Gon tergiversated easily. “I thank you for your help. This information has proved most useful.”

“Thank you for the distraction,” Sair smiled. “You don’t mind if I keep diging do you?”

“Not at all and please keep me informed of any new discoveries, but I would ask that you keep your findings between us for now.”

“Of course,” Sair replied, his enthusiastic grin sobering into a more serious expression. “Master Jinn, if you don’t mind my asking how is Obi-Wan?”

“He is resting in the medical ward. It seems yesterday’s incident was a result of extreme fatigue,” Qui-Gon answered placidly. At his response, an invisible weight seemed to be lifted from the young man’s features.

“Praise the moons,” Sair exclaimed in a light exhale. “I am glad you’re here, Master Jinn. You’re the key to our little ghost getting better, I just know it.”

For some reason, the young man's words caused an uneasy stir in the master's heart. It was a sense of foreboding, but Qui-Gon was not one to dwell on potentials, only on the moment at hand, so he quickly dismissed the feeling, shunting his disquiet into the Force.

"I, of course, will do whatever I can to help him recover," he replied mildly then, with a short dip of his head, the master left the research center intent on heading back to the mines to continue his investigation. He barely reached the outer doors when his comm. unit beeped. He reached downed, plucking it from his utility belt.

"Jinn."

"Master Jinn, this is Administrator Voluk. Ser Du Crion is with me in my office. He asked me to call for you to join us."

The Administrator's words were clipped, her anger evident in her tone. Mentally Qui-Gon sighed. Whatever Xanatos wanted it could not be good, but at least he could confront the man with the information he had discovered.

"I am on my way."

* * * * *

"Ah, Master Jinn. I'm glad you could join us," Xanatos greeted genially as he rose from his seat in front of Ilia's desk. Ilia for her part was looking over some data in a valiant attempt to ignore the oily business man entirely, however, she did look up with a sigh of relief at Qui-Gon's entrance.

"As am I," the master intoned. "I have a few questions after my... tour of one of your mines."

"Of course you do," Xanatos sneered lightly as he brushed an ebony lock behind one ear. "The mining business is extremely technical. I'm sure quite a bit went over your head."

"I wouldn't be so sure, Xanatos. I am a rather tall man," the Jedi answered coolly acknowledging and dismissing the intended slight. Xanatos grinned even larger.

"That you are. So, what questions do you have?"

"The schematics you provided me were very helpful in understanding resonance induction drilling," Qui-Gon began in his typical phlegmatic tones. At Xanatos's nodding smile he continued. "However, it would have been more helpful if that was in fact the method Offworld was using in the mines."

Xanatos's smile wavered for the span of half a heartbeat, but it was enough to give the old Jedi a slight blush of satisfaction.

"I don't know what you mean, Jinn."

"I think you do. I also think you know that I know you are not extracting lokattractive."

"What?" Ilia exclaimed jumping up from her seat like she had been burned. Both men ignored her.

"I know no such thing," Xanatos retorted. Qui-Gon held the younger man's stern gaze serenely for several moments before speaking again.

"Then I suppose you are also unaware of the danger of utilizing municra and the vast energy sources you are employing? Perhaps things in your own organization have gone over your head as you are a bit shorter than I," Qui-Gon added, unable to resist giving the mild taunt. Xanatos took a breath to compose himself and reassemble his features into the sinister smug expression he preferred in his business dealings.

"Tell me, Qui-Gon, how is the boy, Obi-Wan?"

The question had the intended effect and a flicker of shadow fell over the master's face.

"Obi-Wan is no concern of yours."

"But I am concerned," Xanatos crooned. "After all, with all the recent injuries and accidents... Bandomeer can be a very dangerous place for those who aren't careful and you do have a habit of... misplacing your apprentices..."

Qui-Gon did not bother with correcting Xanatos's incorrect assumption about his relationship with Obi-Wan. The threat in the younger man's words was clear enough. Without another word, Qui-Gon slipped out of the room and headed with due speed back to the medical ward. He burst through the main doors nearly bowling over a pair of nurses before going through the door to the familiar room where he had earlier taken his rest. The master's eyes immediately settled upon the twist of sheets sprawled across an empty medical couch.

Obi-Wan was gone.

Chapter 13: Exceeding Tolerances

Obi-Wan had awakened to find Master Jinn gone. The master's absence did not truly surprise him, but his own reaction to the missing Jedi's presence did. Obi-Wan found himself wanting to be around someone for the first time since he set foot off Coruscant. His previous encounters with the tall, aloof master had been... tolerable, polite, impersonal, but this last time... when the Jedi Master had chosen to share Force energy with him Obi-Wan had felt... more. The feeling was not quite the warm contentment he remembered from his days living among the Jedi, but at least now Obi-Wan felt he could remember it and the memory, though painful for the bitter loss, was still favorable to the sense of abject misery and desolation that had become his waking nightmare. In fact, at the moment, Obi-Wan was in better spirits than he had been any day since his assignment to Bandomeer some three months ago.

Three months.

Is that all it had been? It felt like he had lived a lifetime. Well, perhaps lived was too strong a word. Suffered, endured, tolerated. Those were closer to the truth. But with Jinn's last gift some of that had changed at least for the moment. For that alone Obi-Wan would be forever grateful. Which was why the master's absence upon his waking had left him surprisingly disturbed.

Obi-Wan stretched as he moved to sit on the edge of the medical couch. He slid down from the soft mattress until his feet touched the cold surface of the floor. He shivered slightly. At some point the medical personnel had relieved him of his Agri Corps uniform and dressed him in a long white tunic and no trousers; only his small clothes were left to protect his modesty under the too thin gown. He was just about to poke around the few cabinets in his room when the door slid open. Obi-Wan looked on with a deep sense of dread as the broad figure of the Codru-ji he had seen the day he arrived filled the narrow doorway.

"Come," the caninoid growled. Obi-Wan resisted the urge to take a step away from the intimidating figure blocking the room's only exit. Instead the youth drew himself up as best he could and schooled his features into the neutral mask his instructors had taught him at the Temple.

"I haven't been released by medical yet," Obi-Wan replied calmly, but the other being did not appear to be swayed. After several silent seconds the Codru-ji growled again.

"Come."

"No," Obi-Wan said shaking his head. "No, I want to speak with a doctor or Administrator Voluk," he declared crossing his arms defiantly over his chest. The flesh

around the caninoid's muzzle drew into a feral sneer, his black gums rippling over a bright white row of fangs.

"Come or the other Jedi dies."

Obi-Wan's eyes grew wide in shock for just a moment then his arms fell to his sides, his hands curled into small fists.

"What have you done to Master Jinn?" he demanded, but the Codru-ji responded only with the same snarled command.

"Come," he said and with little other choice Obi-Wan did.

* * * * *

"Where are we going?" Obi-Wan asked from his seat in the sleek Offworld hopper. After discreetly spiriting him from the Agri Corps medical facility, the hitherto unnamed Codru-ji had planted him bodily into the passenger seat before taking the pilot's seat. The two had sped past the vast acreage of the fields and were now crossing the open plains of Bandomeer. The farther his escort drove them away from the Agri Corps complex the more convinced Obi-Wan became that he had made the wrong choice. Glancing out at the passing scenery he noticed the large rock formations that had begun to dominate the horizon. His stomach clenched tightly.

They were heading to the mines.

"Where is Master Jinn?" Obi-Wan asked deliberately infusing his adolescent voice with indignance if only to mask the trepidation he feared would squeak out. Much to his disappointment, but not his surprise, the Codru-ji said nothing. Closer still they drew to their destination. Now Obi-Wan could begin to make out the tell-tale signs of a large mining operation and the entrances to the voluminous caverns that promised wealth to those with the will and technology to extract their hidden treasures. Treasures hidden deep with its caves; caves the large, growling caninoid was now steering him towards as they exited the vehicle. Obi-Wan's steps slowed to a reluctant stagger that forced his escort to grab his arm roughly and drag him towards one cavern's entrance.

"What are you doing? Where are you taking me? Where is Master Jinn?"

"Master Jinn will be with you soon enough," the Codru-ji replied as he pulled Obi-Wan deeper into the mine. Finally given a least some kind of answer, Obi-Wan wasn't sure if he felt better or worse for the knowledge.

* * * * *

"Where is he?" Qui-Gon roared as he burst back into Ilia's office. Xanatos hadn't moved from his seat and he still didn't even as an enraged Jedi master towered over him.

"I'm sorry, Qui-Gon, have you lost something or perhaps someone?"

"Master Jinn, what's going on?" Ilia asked stepping from behind her desk. "What's this norlian bog rat done now?"

"He's taken Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon replied without looking at her, his thunderous gaze firmly locked on Xanatos. "Where is he?"

"I honestly have no idea where the boy may be. Have you checked his quarters, the dining hall, maybe the recreation room? Or perhaps he met a nice girl?" Xanatos answered politely. The unassuming, innocent expression on his darkly handsome features threatened to further inflame the master's rage. Qui-Gon took a small step back, studying his adversary intensely. With a few deep breaths the master managed to rein in his increasingly corybantic emotions.

"Xanatos, whatever your business here, whatever your problems with me," Qui-Gon paused awaiting a protest, but finding none he continued. "Obi-Wan is not a part of it. He's sick, Xanatos. He's very sick. He needs Jedi healers. Please, tell me where he is," he finished his eyes pleading with the man as much as his words. "Please."

"I... I can't help you, Qui-Gon," Xanatos answered unusually sober.

"Can't or won't?" the master retorted clearly not expecting an answer and receiving none. Qui-Gon turned to Ilia, her face tense with conflicting expressions of horror and anger. The master did not have the luxury or energy to deal with her upset and hoped feverently that she could calm herself enough to be of use to him to deal with the current crisis.

"Administrator Voluk, I need you to organize a search for Obi-Wan. We will need as many hands as possible to cover as much ground as possible," the master intoned sending clam reassurance through the Force.

"Yes, of course," Ilia responded. Some of the lines in her face eased as she spoke, falling easily into the familiar confines of authority. She reached over to her comm. panel, keying in a quick sequence. "Hal."

"Hal here."

"We've got a code 819."

“The missing person?”

“It’s the Ghost and he’s ill.”

“I’ll put someone from medical on each team then. I’ll setup a base in the back of field one and we’ll operate from there,” the female voice on the comm. spoke quickly.

“Hal, find him,” Ilia said her voice firm and brooking no other possible outcomes. There was a second of silence before the other voice responded just as earnestly.

“We will,” Hal replied and with a solemn nod Hal couldn’t see, Ilia ended the transmission. The Administrator then turned her attention back to the Jedi master.

“What else do you need?”

“I must contact the Council and then I must meditate to see if I can help locate him,” Qui-Gon replied evenly as he turned to leave the room. He paused as he glanced down at Xanatos’s seated figure. “I cannot lawfully hold you here, but I would suggest you remain with the Administrator for the time being.”

Smirk gone, the younger man gave an uncharacteristically humorless nod.

“Qui-Gon, I do want you to find the boy. Believe that,” Xanatos spoke his blue eyes narrowed, his gaze stern, mildly compassionate, but clearly unrepentant. Qui-Gon turned his attention back to the view of the empty corridor just outside the office’s open door, his back to Xanatos.

“It is my sincere wish that I could, Xanatos,” the master replied wistfully then he exited the room.

* * * * *

“Master,” Qui-Gon greeted softly, his head usually cowed. He knew he should have contacted the Council, but somehow he knew that they would have been no help or, even worse, they would have been a hindrance. Instead he had chosen to call upon one of the only other beings whose judgment he knew he could trust especially when he couldn’t trust his own.

“Qui-Gon, look well you do not,” the blue image of the Order’s oldest, living Jedi replied. Qui-Gon stifled a rueful smile. If he appeared half as enfeebled as he felt he must truly be a sight indeed. The holo-figure of Yoda flickered slightly as the Grand Master’s left ear perked up and turned out.

“Happened something has.”

“Yes, Master. Obi-Wan has been taken, hidden away by Xanatos.”

“Certain you are that work of Xanatos this is?”

“There... is no proof, but yes, I am certain,” the younger master replied. Yoda closed his eyes, his large ears rising minutely as he silently communed with the Force. Qui-Gon waited patiently not bringing his own powerful Force sense to bear. His talents had never favored prescience as he was more firmly rooted in the Living Force, but he too had long since learned to never discount the uncanny insights granted to the elder master through his extraordinary connection to the Unifying aspects of the Force. After several quiet moments, the Grand Master opened his large, sapient eyes.

“More than missing our young one is, hmm?” the wizened master asked. Qui-Gon nodded, unsurprised that the elder somehow knew of Obi-Wan’s increased distress.

“Yes. I fear he is dying, Master.”

“Likely that may be,” Yoda replied cryptically. Qui-Gon raised one elegant eyebrow in question.

“You know what afflicts him?”

“Know, I do not. Suspicions only I have,” Yoda corrected. “Know for certain one thing I do. Find Obi-Wan you must.”

Yoda’s emphasis on the penultimate word was not lost on Qui-Gon’s hearing, but a growing sense of exigency prevented him from following up with unnecessary questions. Instead, with a half bow to the elder, the master ended the call, closed his eyes, and settled into a deep state of meditation.

Chapter 14: Neither Help nor Hindrance

Stone. Stone was everywhere. Stone and darkness. Darkness and stone. Hard, unforgiving, and impenetrable. Obi-Wan closed his eyes and tried to steady his breathing. The Codru-ji had led him deep within the mine, dragging him down tunnels and shafts with seemingly innumerable twists and turns. He had lost all sense of direction by the time the large caninoid threw him down on the ground at the dead end of a nondescript tunnel. From there Obi-Wan had been bound, hands and feet, with stun cuffs. The caninoid answered none of his questions and ignored his protestations. Instead the tall Codru-ji gave him one more glare and snarl before making his way out of the cave system leaving Obi-Wan alone and in the dark.

The Codru-ji had taken the light with him.

Obi-Wan returned his attention to his breathing. The air in the mine was hot, stuffy, and full of dust and other particulate matter. Individual beads of sweat rolled down his spine causing the thin tunic he was wearing to cling to his skin in some places. Obi-Wan clumsily rose to his feet, his movements hobbled by the cuffs around his ankles. He lifted his fettered wrists, his fingers lightly tracing a ridge of rock on the nearby wall. He could not see the stone walls around him. The darkness was too complete for that, but Obi-Wan knew it was there surrounding him, entombing him. His chest tightened under his tunic, his breath caught, and his head grew dizzy as memories and nightmare fragments assailed him. Obi-Wan's knees buckled and he sank to the ground with a whimper. All he could feel was panic. Panic and darkness and stone.

* * * * *

As a master of the Jedi Order it had been a very long time since Qui-Gon Jinn had difficulty entering into a meditative trance that was not the result of illness or injury. Even bouts of extreme exhaustion from the most grueling of missions had never proven any real hindrance. No, when the master was healthy and whole and rested meditation had never been a problem since he was a wee thing in the Temple crèche, never that was, until now.

Try as he might, Qui-Gon could not relax himself into even the most superficial of trances. The initial exhaustion he had felt upon waking in Obi-Wan's medical room had increased three-fold and, though he hated to admit it, his own general Force sense seemed... muted as if he were trying to draw breath through a thick cloth. Qui-Gon shuddered. Was this a presage to the full Force blindness afflicting Obi-Wan? Qui-Gon shook his head, his eyes still closed. No, he would not dwell on what might be, only on what was and as it was he was still connected to the Force. That would have to be enough.

Qui-Gon opened his eyes and slowly rose to his feet, stretching stiff muscles as he did so. He had just begun rotating his right shoulder when he was driven back down to his knees in an explosion of panic. The master grabbed instinctively for his chest, his hands seeking to somehow calm his racing heart. His head swam dizzily. His breath was shallow and sharp. His fingers and toes felt numb. Qui-Gon allowed himself to exist fully in the rampant fear tearing through his body and mind for a few short seconds before slowly wresting back control with his conscious mind. As his thoughts cleared he realized quickly that the terror had not been his own. It had been Obi-Wan's; he was sure of it. The problem was it shouldn't have been possible.

Qui-Gon took several moments as he focused his attention inward. He pushed away the panic as if he were moving through a dense fog, but this fog had a source. In his mind he kept moving, kept sweeping away cloudy barriers, but his own muffled Force sense was returning, impeding his progress until he lost his way. The fog had dissipated, the trail was gone and with it the sudden sense of connection with Obi-Wan. Qui-Gon concentrated and stretched out with his mind looking for any trace of the boy, any hint as to Obi-Wan's location, but once again the Force was quiet, empty, and unyielding of any answers. With a heavy sigh Qui-Gon opened his eyes and rose to his feet once more. He would have to find Obi-Wan the old fashion way, so he left his room and headed to field one to join the search.

The scene at the rear of field one was one of highly organized chaos. Agri Corps members manned various stations around the makeshift command center. Some stations issued scanners, comm. units, and glow rods, others gave ration bars and water. Some tracked those departing and returning, but it was the center station that interested Qui-Gon. That was the table that gave information. The young woman he had seen the day he arrived, Hal he recalled, stood behind the small table dispensing orders and culling information from the many slates and data pads dotting the table or placed in her hands by other Corps members. The woman was small, but athletically built, her lithe, lean musculature well defined even beneath her dark tunic and trousers. Her skin was the deep pink of a Nabooian sunset and her light brown fur somehow didn't wilt under the oppressive humidity of the fields. She displayed the typical angular features that gave Devorians the reputation of being overly smug and aggressive, but there was a certain softness around her almond eyes that made Qui-Gon suspect a more restrained sense of passion.

In contrast, Ilia's expression appeared downright murderous as she barked out instructions and dismissed her people with a glare. In addition to her brobdignagian dislike for Xanatos and Offworld, her affection for Obi-Wan was making his abduction a personal assault on both her and the Agri Corps family in general. The moment Qui-Gon approached the table the administrator's eyes locked on to his, her expression now baring a weak and rueful smile instead.

"I don't suppose you've come here to tell us we can call this whole thing off, that you've found him?" Ilia asked, her attempt at humor collapsing under the weight of the master's grim expression. The administrator sighed. "I had hoped that somehow some Jedi magic prayer would have found him."

Qui-Gon didn't want to admit the truth that he had hoped the same thing. That, under normal circumstances, a Jedi Master should have been able to find Obi-Wan and that it shamed and puzzled him that he, a self same master, could not. Still, he would not voice his concerns, would not share with others his guilt or feelings of complicity in Obi-Wan's continued disappearance. Instead, the master gave a stately shake of his head.

"No," he answered. Ilia gave him a curt, if resigned, nod. She gave Hal a short glance and the woman nodded and departed the table. Ilia then focused her attention back on the many pads around her. Qui-Gon glanced down at the map that dominated much of the table. It illustrated the vast acreage worked and maintained by the Agri Corps while a second, smaller map lay across the left edge of the first depicting the mining caves to the west and south.

"We have teams scouring every inch of the fields and a few smaller groups methodically checking each facility. Hal is also questioning anyone who might have seen him," Ilia said as she pointed to locations on the large map. "Once we've cleared the active zones the teams will be divided, one set to search our few inactive fields the others will use hoppers to search the barrens beyond."

"And the mines?" Qui-Gon inquired surprised at the evenness of his own voice. Ilia shook her head.

"The cave systems are unbelievably vast. We haven't enough people to search them. Plus, current operations there have made the tunnels unstable making any search extremely dangerous. Besides, the Ghost," she halted with a slight frown. "Obi-Wan is not overly fond of caves."

Qui-Gon chose not to comment on the fact that wherever the boy had been taken was probably not a place of his choosing, cave or no.

"We could get the miners themselves to assist us," Qui-Gon offered. "Their knowledge of the tunnels would be useful and they have already demonstrated themselves to be accepting of the risk."

"They accepted the risk for pay, Master Jinn."

"But would not accept it to save a child?"

Ilia sighed heavily in frustration. She never believed herself a cynic, but could a Jedi be truly so naïve? She placed the pads she was studying down on the table, bracing her now empty hands on its large surface.

"Maybe a few would," she acceded, "but we would still be woefully short manned to conduct any meaningful searches and," she paused, "you would still have to convince the corporations, convince Offworld to allow it."

At the mention of Offworld, Qui-Gon immediately began to spy the surrounding area returning his gaze to the administrator only when his eyes had verified the absence his mind had already noted.

“Where is Xanatos?” he asked and Ilia shrugged.

“He disappeared not long after I joined the setup here,” she replied the look in her bright eyes offering something of an apology. Qui-Gon nodded, the small movement communicating both his forgiveness and the lack of need for it. Seemingly satisfied, Ilia remained silent, her eyes locked on the map below her. Qui-Gon, too, stared at the map, but his gaze was unfocused, unseeing, his diminished Force sense was struggling to tell him something, to show him something. He strained to hear it reaching, but not reaching, grasped at it, but with no attempt to contain it lest it slip away from his fingers. His eyes settled on the southern mines, narrowing to one specific mine, the mine he had visited the day before. His eyes refocused and as he looked up he found the administrator staring at him with a knowing expression.

“What?” she asked. “What is it?”

“I don’t know,” Qui-Gon answered as he turned away striding swiftly from the table. “But I am going to find out.”

* * * * *

The pull to the largest of the southern mines was strong, almost magnetic, but he was unable to determine what he was being pulled to. He hoped it was Obi-Wan, but as he pulled the borrowed hopper to a stop and spotted the black clad, familiar figure of Xanatos, Qui-Gon wasn’t so sure.

“What are you doing here?” Qui-Gon asked brusquely as he hopped out of the small transport and walked towards the younger man. To his credit, Xanatos was not intimidated by the master’s penetrating glare. He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned casually against a piece of empty hauling equipment.

“An odd question to ask a man standing on his own property. The better question, once again, is what you are doing here, Master Jinn.”

“I have no time for games, Xanatos. Is Obi-Wan here? Is this where you’ve hidden him?” the master barked. Xanatos sighed in thinly veiled exasperation.

“What do you want from me, Qui-Gon?”

“Only the truth, something you have always seemed incapable of giving.”

Xanatos's eyes flared suddenly in anger.

"Is your ego so damn fragile that you must paint me as the villain always?" the younger man hissed, his causal stance abandoned for an en guard position though he had yet to draw his weapon. "I am a business man, Qui-Gon. Let me conduct my business and be done with it!"

"What is it you fear, Xani," Qui-Gon said using the man's old nickname as a deliberate taunt. "That I will finally expose you? That the galaxy will at last see you for what you truly are?"

"If I am anything I am what you made me," Xanatos snapped. "Leave this place, Qui-Gon. Leave this place or Force help me,"

Qui-Gon didn't hear the last of Xanatos's threat as a noiseless wail rang through his mind echoing off the walls of his skull. It was Obi-Wan! He was here, close, and terrified.

"Obi-Wan!" he shouted aloud uncaring that the boy was likely beyond hearing. Qui-Gon surged toward the mine's entrance passing Xanatos in a Force enhanced blur even as he dimly acknowledged the man's shout of protest as he passed. Further and further the master dove into the mine oblivious to the path he was taking, centering only on the spindle thin thread of connection he somehow held with Obi-Wan. Heedless of his own fatigue, Qui-Gon forced his increasingly heavy limbs onward, his actions and mind driven by a laser like and singular focus until, after a time of interminable minutes, his body came to an abrupt halt.

He did not see Obi-Wan. He could not. The darkness was too complete for that, but the sound that reached him confirmed what his eyes and Force sense could not.

"Who... who's there?" the small, yet cultured voice asked. Without answering, Qui-Gon reached for his lightsaber and ignited it, its green beam casting the small alcove in a strange and surreal glow.

"Obi-Wan."

"Master Jinn!" the boy exclaimed uncurling from a tight ball and springing to his feet in a flash. His face drew into a brilliant smile, but then faded just as quickly when he realized the inappropriateness of his response. Qui-Gon watched as the child composed himself, his joy quickly tamped down until he held a calm appearance more associated with a proper Jedi in training rather than the spontaneous spirit of the child he still was. For a moment, the master regretted the change though he understood and believed in the necessity of it.

"Are you injured?" he asked. Obi-Wan shook his head, his face ghostly pale under the saber's glow.

“No, Master Jinn,” Obi-Wan answered. Qui-Gon’s eyes drifted down to the stun cuffs at the boy’s wrists and ankles.

“We’ll get those off of you and then we will leave this place,” Qui-Gon said as he took a step closer to the boy, but before he could get any closer a sound made him turn back toward the tunnel.

“I’m sorry, Qui-Gon, but I can’t let you do that,” Xanatos replied from a position further down the passageway. Before master or child could respond there was a great rumble of earth, thunderously loud against the hard walls of the cave as stone shifted and collapsed in on itself. When the dust settled and only silence reigned in the small space, Qui-Gon could see for himself what his heart already knew.

Xanatos had sealed them in.

Chapter 15: Sight and Shadow

“This complicates matters.”

It was the epitome of understatement to be sure, but the words Qui-Gon Jinn had uttered were certainly true. Xanatos had collapsed a length of tunnel sealing the master and child in the small, stone alcove. The only light the two had was supplied by the verdant glow of the master’s saber, a saber he held aloft as he examined the impromptu, yet efficient barrier. Behind him, the master could hear the slight shuffle of Obi-Wan’s movements as the boy shifted his weight from one foot to the other in a mostly quiet display of nervous tension. Qui-Gon ceased his inspection of the rock wall and walked the few meters back to where Obi-Wan stood still bound in stun cuffs. He knelt down before the boy still wielding his lit lightsaber to illuminate them both.

“Let’s get these off, shall we?” the master said his rich baritone easily filling the small space and echoing off the walls. Qui-Gon closed his eyes and allowed his free hand to hover above the cuffs on Obi-Wan’s wrists. It was usually a simple matter to trace the complex circuitry in the manacles and trip open the appropriate locking mechanisms, but the Jedi master found himself straining to the very edge of his concentration to manage it, but manage it he did. Once he successfully released the child’s hands Qui-Gon began to work on the fetters at his feet. Obi-Wan remained ghostly silent throughout the difficult work. Ghostly. Looking at the youth now he appeared more flesh and bone to Qui-Gon’s eyes than the specter he had encountered mere days ago. Yet still the boy had a haunted look, exaggerated now under the harshly lit angles cast by his saber’s light. Still far too lean for his growing frame, Obi-Wan’s medical gown hung limply from his shoulders, the light material soiled, sweaty, and torn in some places. Qui-Gon released the cuffs at his ankles then raised his hand asking Obi-Wan to raise one bare foot. The boy rested on hand on the wall behind him for balance, but voiced no objection to the examination. Given the rocky and uneven terrain of the cavern’s floor had Obi-Wan walked here with his captor Qui-Gon would have expected the boy’s foot to reflect some damage, but Obi-Wan’s sole was merely dirty, not cut. Perhaps his abductor carried him in, but why, unless maybe Obi-Wan had been unconscious at the time. And if he were unconscious then maybe the child had suffered some injury at the hands of his kidnapper that he had yet to mention to the master out of fear or embarrassment. Qui-Gon nodded alerting the boy he could place his foot down on the ground again. The master gave the youth another once over with his eyes before settling on the child’s slightly wild gaze.

“Obi-Wan,” he began, his voice soft and slow as if he were trying to coax a frightened animal out of hiding. “Were you injured when they brought you here? Did they hurt you?”

“No... Master Jinn,” Obi-Wan muttered. Even without a strong sense of the child in the Force, Qui-Gon could tell the boy was hiding something.

“What is it?” he asked and in response Obi-Wan dropped his eyes to the floor.

“He didn’t have to hurt me. I let him take me here.”

Whatever else the older man had been expecting that certainly wasn’t it.

“You left willingly? Why?”

“Because... because,” Obi-Wan faltered unable to get the damning words passed his throat.

“Because,” Qui-Gon prompted. Obi-Wan took a deep, but still shuddering breath.

“Because he said if I didn’t he would hurt you,” he answered so softly that even in the silence of their stone chamber Qui-Gon scarcely heard him.

“Obi-Wan, look at me please,” the master gently instructed. Slowly, but surely a pair of shining eyes rose to meet his. “That was very brave and compassionate of you, but also very foolish. Next time, you should seek help rather than take on unknown dangers on your own. Do you understand?” Qui-Gon asked his tone still gentle even in rebuke, but Obi-Wan steadfastly ignored the gentleness, his eyes dimming as he gazed into the master’s eyes seeing through them to those things that went far beyond normal sight.

“It doesn’t matter, not anymore now that we’re here,” the boy stated his pubescent voice a disquieting monotone that made the fine hairs on Qui-Gon’s neck stand on end. But Obi-Wan took no notice of the master’s discomfort as his continued speech only served to deepen it.

“Stone and darkness. Stone and darkness. Smothered by shadow, swallowed by rock. Hard. Pressing. Pressing. Always pressing until... until...”

“Obi-Wan!” Qui-Gon yelled as he gripped one of the boy’s shoulders and gave him a hard shake. The pain of contact and the sudden violence of the motion seemed to shock the child out of his panicked trace state.

“Calm yourself,” the master ordered and though the command came out a bit more harshly than he intended it did have the desired effect. Obi-Wan swallowed thickly as he focused on the Jedi master’s eyes, eyes turned ochre under the saber light.

“Take a deep breath,” the master said, continuing when he saw the boy comply. “Good, now take another. Breath deeply, let your breath fill you up and then slowly release it. Yes. Yes. Again.”

For several minutes the pair did no more than breathe together until finally Qui-Gon was satisfied that the child had calmed enough to return their focus to the situation at hand. When the master made to rise from his kneeling position and Obi-Wan sought his

hand, clasping it tightly like a frightened crèche despite the wave of pain that swept through them both, the master made no protest, but instead allowed the boy the simple comfort of his grip. Once the pain subsided, they both walked to the rock wall blocking their path. Once again Qui-Gon raised his lightsaber high using the light to better appraise the obstacle before them.

“Can’t you just use your saber to cut us out?” Obi-Wan asked meekly from Qui-Gon’s side. The master shook his head causing a lightly silvered lock to escape its binding.

“No, if my saber should strike a piece of lokattractite I risk igniting the municra gas in these mines. No, we shall have to do this the long way I’m afraid,” he replied as he turned to face Obi-Wan. He lifted the hand held between them and removed his hand only long enough to replace it with his lightsaber. He held Obi-Wan’s hand in his even as he closed the boy’s grip around the too large hilt.

“You will need to hold this for me while I clear the rocks enough for us to pass through,” he said knowing that though Obi-Wan had never himself wielded a saber as a Jedi initiate he understood the power it commanded as well as the dangers it entailed. “Hold it here and keep it steady,” he explained as he smoothly transferred the task of pressing the activator button from his finger to Obi-Wan’s without ever disengaging the beam.

As expected, the boy was sufficiently in awe enough at holding the saber to allow his previous anxieties to fall to the wayside, at least for the moment. Qui-Gon permitted himself a small smile before he turned to face the task before him. It would be a lot of hard work to remove enough of the rocks for the two of them to pass through, but he also had to consider the overall stability of the cave’s roof as he did so. He did not want to clear their way only to have them both crushed to death in a more substantial cave-in.

That was another thing that bothered Qui-Gon as he lifted a heavy piece of stone in his hands and placed it to the side. This cave-in could have, should have been much worse. Xanatos was more than skilled enough in the use of the Force to bring the tunnel down on their heads while still ensuring his own safety. In fact, it took more fine skill and much finer manipulation to create the controlled destruction Qui-Gon was now working to clear away. Which begged the question: why? Xanatos’s actions made no sense, no sense at all unless... unless he didn’t want to kill them, unless he wanted only to slow them down.

I am a business man, Qui-Gon. Let me conduct my business and be done with it!

It was all about the mining, the ore. His own arrival on Bandomeer had surprised the other man and when he began to investigate, Xanatos responded by kidnapping Obi-Wan. The abduction was a distraction then, not a plot for revenge. Qui-Gon heaved another heavy rock away.

Well, that explained Xanatos a bit, but what of Obi-Wan? Was the boy’s inexplicable Force illness truly a coincidence? After all, he had found Xanatos by the boy’s bed side and it was Obi-Wan he had chosen to abduct. Not to mention Xanatos had been on the planet

likely long before Obi-Wan ever arrived so if he were targeting the boy he had plenty of time and opportunity to do so, but for what motive?

Qui-Gon exhaled breathily as he wiped his brow with the back of one dusty hand. All of the smaller rocks and stones had been removed. What remained were stones too large to lift physically or ones that rested in too precarious a position to risk upsetting without the support of the Force. Qui-Gon eyed the haphazard structure wearily. In his current state he was unsure if he had the mental acuity or Force dexterity to complete such a task, but there was no one else and no other options. The master would not risk the boy's life by wielding his saber. With a deep breath he closed his eyes centering himself completely before reaching out to the Force. It came when he called, not as strongly, not as vibrantly, but it came nonetheless. The Force was no longer a river he could draw from, it was a stream and he hoped it was enough.

One by one and with painstaking slowness, the master levitated the enormous blocks of stone always placing them down a ways away before turning back to the shrinking wall to begin again. Obi-Wan watched on as silent as the stones themselves as the Jedi master continued at his steady pace. The man's brow was wrinkled and frowned in concentration, his jaw clenched tightly, his eyes shut against distraction, his face slick with sweat from his exertions. To Obi-Wan he was a marvel to behold.

Finally, hours later, the master laid the last stone to rest near his feet. There was now a space wide enough for even the master's large frame to fit through, but only just. Qui-Gon kept his eyes closed and felt himself swaying slightly on his feet. Little gods, he was tired.

"Master Jinn?" a small voice called from his left. Qui-Gon succeeded in the monumental task of opening his eyes as he turned and met the pale, thin face and worried eyes with a wry and weary half smile.

"I'm all right, Obi-Wan, just a little tired is all," Qui-Gon answered with a pat to the boy's shoulder. The pain from the brief contact caused them both to flinch and the master to retract his hand with a sigh. "All right now," he began as he held out his hand for his lightsaber. "Up you go."

Obi-Wan passed the lit blade back to its owner and made his way to climb the nearly two meters up to access the hole Qui-Gon had created. Carefully on his hands and knees, Obi-Wan moved through the space and then lowered himself down to the floor on the other side. Through the hole he could still see the green glow of the master's lit saber for several seconds before it winked out, casting him back into darkness, its soothing hum replaced by silence. Then the silence too was replaced by the sounds of small, shifting rocks and scratched fabric as a too large body pushed its way through a too small hole. With an audible grunt, Qui-Gon pulled himself out and into the darkness of the tunnel. He climbed to his feet reigniting his lightsaber. He found Obi-Wan standing off to one side, his tunic a bit more torn than before.

“Let’s go,” the master said as he moved forward. Obi-Wan fell into step slightly behind him and to his right.

“You know the way out?” Obi-Wan asked recalling his own disorientation when he was brought here. The tall master, when he answered, didn’t look at him, he just kept walking forward resolutely leading them through the darkness.

“I trust the Force,” was the master’s reply. Obi-Wan frowned though the Jedi, thankfully, couldn’t see it. Though raised to do just that, Obi-Wan hadn’t trusted the Force, hadn’t really felt the Force for some time. The thought of it now made him truly uncomfortable if he were honest with himself. They continued their journey through the mine, twisting and turning, passing through forks and intersections, the master moving with a seemingly unquestionable sense of clarity and confidence. Obi-Wan felt no such certainty about their route through the labyrinth of tunnels or anything else.

“Who was that man?” Obi-Wan asked breaking the silence of their progression. “I’ve seen him before, the day I arrived and other times.”

“Other times?” Qui-Gon prompted. Obi-Wan shrugged.

“Just around. So, who is he?”

“His name is Xanatos du Crion. He is the CEO in charge of Offworld Mining.”

“What does he want with me?”

“Nothing,” Qui-Gon replied and for a moment Obi-Wan thought that was going to be all the master said on it, but then the older man spoke again. “Xanatos kidnapped you because of me.”

None of this was making any sense to Obi-Wan. Why would this man, this Xanatos think that he meant anything to the Jedi Master? If anything, the master had only shown the type of interest in him that any Jedi with compassion would have shown to any pathetic life form fortunate enough to cross his path. If there was only one thing Obi-Wan was sure about it was that he wasn’t special, not to the Jedi, not to the Corps, not to Jinn, not to anyone.

“Why?” Obi-Wan pressed and for once there was the slightest hesitation in Qui-Gon’s steady stride.

“Because I had reason to suspect him of illegal activity. He used you to distract me from further investigation.”

“But,” Obi-Wan objected still puzzled at the logic Xanatos employed. “Why me? Why not the Administrator or some other Corps worker? I mean, you would have come to rescue anyone he had taken.”

“That is true.”

“Then,”

“Because he thought you were my apprentice,” Qui-Gon answered curtly. Obi-Wan stopped in his tracks, his legs as unable to move forward as his mind was unable to wrap itself around this latest revelation from Jinn. Qui-Gon, noticing that the boy was no longer following, paused and turned to face the child.

“He thought I was your... apprentice?” Obi-Wan stammered his voice as unsteady as his control. Qui-Gon’s shoulders slumped visibly as he regarded the boy, his eyes tinged with more than a little guilt.

“Yes. Xanatos mistook my interactions with you for a master/apprentice relationship. Operating on this erroneous assumption he attempted to use you to get to me. Were it not for his history of animosity towards me you would have never been put in such danger. For that, I am sorry,” he said. Obi-Wan blinked mutely unable or unwilling to process what he just heard. When the master continued to regard him quietly he opened his mouth to speak only to promptly clamp it closed again.

Something was very wrong.

“No! Please no!” Obi-Wan screamed. Qui-Gon jerked at the sudden, desperate exclamation, but before he could question the boy’s outburst the ground around them began to shift and shake. Dust, dirt, and small rocks began to rain from the tunnel’s ceiling. Qui-Gon had only a few milliseconds to react, but react he did. With a quick and brutal Force shove that consummately lacked his usual finesse he hurled Obi-Wan several meters away from him and down the tunnel. He managed to catch a glimpse of the child’s horror-filled expression just before his world crashed into silent darkness.

* * * * *

Obi-Wan awoke to his nightmare. Only this time, he wasn’t dreaming. The air around him was thick and dusty causing him to choke and cough. The tunnel was eerily quiet and enshrouded in a near impenetrable darkness. Obi-Wan stumbled a step forward almost losing his balance and falling to the dusty floor. As he righted himself, Obi-Wan felt something roll near his left foot. Squatting down and searching blindly in the dark, his hands fumbled upon a welcomed treasure. He stood grasping the Master Jedi’s saber hilt and ignited it. At first, he couldn’t see even with the light of the saber. His eyes watered and stung from the swirling particle debris, but even through his constant blinking and blurry vision the scene clearing before him was unmistakable and instantly recognizable. A wave of nausea hit him forcing him to squeeze his eyes shut. He must have hit his head. Pushing his pain and queasiness aside, he pulled himself on all fours toward the heap of stone rubble that lay where a Jedi Master once stood.

“Ma...” Obi-Wan tried to call only to fall into a fit of rasping coughs. After a few deep breaths he tried again and managed to utter something more akin to a voice. “Master Jinn!”

There was no answer.

Obi-Wan’s heart pounded heavily against his rib cage as he reached with dirty, trembling fingers toward a stone. His fingers clasped around the jagged edges uncaring of how the rock cut into his flesh. He rose to his knees and pulled the stone away. First one, then another, and another, and another. He did so unthinkingly, unfeeling, simply driven by the compulsive action to dig, to find, to... save what was likely long gone. When the removal of a particularly heavy stone revealed a swatch of brown fabric, Obi-Wan’s breath caught stilling him for a moment before he plunged back into desperate action. He kept moving, kept clearing until finally the swollen and bloody visage of the Jedi could be seen.

Obi-Wan crept closer as if he were afraid to disturb the master from a natural slumber. His heart jumped as he saw the subtle rise and fall of the man’s chest. Jinn was breathing! He was alive!

“Master Jinn! Master Jinn! Please wake up! Master Jinn, please. Please wake up!” he yelled in a frenzied mantra, until at last, dusty, blood encrusted lids began to stir.

“Master Jinn!” Obi-Wan exclaimed again when a hint of blue eyes met his under a heavy squint.

“Obi... Obi-Wan,” Qui-Gon wheezed, the air as thick to him as it was to Obi-Wan. The boy in question scooted nearer.

“Master Jinn,” he replied no longer yelling. Qui-Gon raised his heavily hooded gaze and waited for the boy’s face to come into hazy focus.

“Are... are you all right?”

“Yes, you... you saved me,” was the boy’s whispered reply. Obi-Wan could have been mistaken, but he could have sworn he saw the corners of the master’s lips turn up slightly as if to smile.

“Good,” Qui-Gon exhaled and then the half-covered body was seized by a violent coughing fit. Before Obi-Wan could ponder what to do, the master raised the hand on his unburied arm.

“I’m... okay, Obi... Wan, but...” Qui-Gon paused closing his eyes as he took a moment to take stock of his injuries. The Force told him nothing, but the pressure of the stone slabs on his chest and legs gave him information enough.

“But what?” Obi-Wan whispered, reminding the master he never finished his statement.

“But I’m pinned under these stones. They are far too heavy for you to lift... And I can’t... help you...,” Qui-Gon panted, the weight on his ribs making him fight for every breath. “You will have to use... use the Force, Obi-Wan...”

Obi-Wan shook his head violently, his eyes wide and wild.

“There is no other way... can’t get free without the Force.”

“I’m sorry,” Obi-Wan wailed, tears falling down his cheeks as he realized the truth of the master’s assessment. “I’m so sorry. I can’t... I can’t...”

Chapter 16: Grave Concerns

Qui-Gon's mouth was as dry as the vast emptiness of the Dune Sea of Tatooine, but whether the arid state of his mouth was due to his injuries or Obi-Wan's whispered, yet definitive statement he did not know. But he did know one thing.

Obi-Wan would not help him.

That's what the boy had said through a voice roughened with tears. Despite his apparent grief and regret over the refusal to help, Obi-Wan's certainty that he would not help was obvious to Qui-Gon even without the Force. The Force. It was gone from him, truly and completely. Qui-Gon closed his eyes and tried to swallow around the hard lump in his throat. He was unable to produce the necessary saliva and the attempt drew from him a series of dry, rasping coughs that caused the boy to look his way. Qui-Gon managed to steady his breathing and, though it remained painful and labored, he was able to relax enough to erase the immediate frisson of concern he had seen on Obi-Wan's face. He would have to rely on his ability to read the boy's expressions and body language, a skill he had honed through years of diplomatic service, but was now wielded feebly in the shadow of his Force blindness.

Force blind. Just like Obi-Wan.

Probably dying. Just like Obi-Wan.

Then again, Obi-Wan had not seemed like he was dying when Qui-Gon found him. The child seemed tired and afraid, yes, but he did not show the same... exhaustion, the same... distance and despair the master had witnessed in the medical ward. The energy he shared with the boy must have helped some. Qui-Gon had hoped it would, but at the time he had no way to be certain and then after he had done so... Qui-Gon had assumed that his own fatigue was a result of his expenditure, but perhaps it wasn't. Qui-Gon's brow tensed as he pondered things left previously unexplored due to the exigency of the situation. He had a bit of time now, pinned and injured as he was to think his way through his most recent events and hopefully gain some insight that could at least save Obi-Wan if not himself.

Was it possible that Qui-Gon had contracted the same illness as Obi-Wan? Perhaps even from Obi-Wan? But what of Obi-Wan's seemingly improved condition? Did Qui-Gon's energy sharing merely mask the disease, ease it, cure it, or did he do something far worse. Spread it.

Qui-Gon shook his head mentally arguing with himself. No, Obi-Wan was better, not cured, not whole, but better he was certain of it even if he couldn't search the Force for the

truth of it. Qui-Gon of course knew that the Force was still there, still around him and within him, but to be cut off from its warmth, its whispers, its warnings...

Its warnings.

Qui-Gon's eyes widened in sudden revelation. He turned his expectant gaze on the boy. Obi-Wan was still sitting not far from him, his lit saber held loosely in the boy's hand, the boy's head down, eyes staring holes into the ground.

"Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon called and slowly eyes nearly gray under the green light rose to meet his. He used his free hand to wave the child closer. Obi-Wan reluctantly obeyed. Qui-Gon took a moment to gather his thoughts. This would not be an easy conversation, but if his theory were right...

"Obi-Wan," he repeated and the boy edged a little closer.

"Yes, Master Jinn?"

"You knew this was going to happen?"

"What?" Obi-Wan exclaimed suddenly, his grip on the master's lightsaber faltering throwing them both into darkness. He fumbled for a few moments with the hilt before curving his fingers around it, realizing at least on some level each motion was just to delay the inevitable moment when he would have to look into the Master Jedi's eyes, when he would have to answer the man's questions.

"Leave it off for a moment."

"Master?" Obi-Wan responded, his tone asking a question, but asking what he knew not. Somehow it seemed to him that the older man understood.

"Just for a moment, I think," Qui-Gon began then paused as a minute shifting of rock pulled a pained groan from him, but before Obi-Wan could vocalize his concern, the master spoke again.

"You knew of this, didn't you, Obi-Wan?" Qui-Gon asked, but Obi-Wan knew it was more statement than question. There was a silent moment before he found his voice.

"Yes," Obi-Wan answered. Qui-Gon nodded slightly even though he knew Obi-Wan couldn't see it and the movement cause a fresh spike of pain to lance through his skull. Obi-Wan shifted slightly.

"In my vision," he added quietly. Qui-Gon frowned. It was not the answer the master had expected, but the new information did nothing to change his conclusions, if possible it strengthened them.

“You were warned about the cave in.”

“It was just a vision!” Obi-Wan yelled, his higher voice echoing throughout the tunnel. To Qui-Gon’s ears it sounded like Obi-Wan was pacing back and forth across the short width of the tunnel; his sharp movements kicking up clouds of dust that stung the master’s eyes causing them to water. He said nothing though he swiped at his eyes, wincing at the sharp pain in his shoulder and chest that the gesture caused. Obi-Wan continued to pace.

“I didn’t know it would be here, that it would be you. I only knew...”

“Knew what, Obi-Wan?”

“That whoever it was would die because of me,” Obi-Wan said pausing his frantic perambulation. “You’re going to die here, Master Jinn, and it will be my fault.”

To have such words spoken into the darkness seemed both appropriate and imminently foreboding.

“Obi-Wan,” Qui-Gon called again into the darkness, but Obi-Wan ignored his calm plea and resumed his pacing.

“I’ve seen it. I’ve felt it over and over for years. In my visions, in my nightmares... it’s... it’s... always the same. You ask for my help and I... can’t. I’m too weak, too scared, to... me,” the boy stopped his pacing again and by the sound and direction of his voice, Qui-Gon knew he had turned to face the supine master.

“Don’t you get it! You were right, Master Jinn, all of you were right. I’m... I’m useless. I’m worse than useless. I’m a failure.”

Silence followed, and had Qui-Gon not known that Obi-Wan were there standing a half meter away from him, he could have believed he was in the cave alone so complete and still was the quiet around him. The child had carried this burden with him since before he left the Temple. Qui-Gon closed his eyes and attempted to find his center though he could only take shallow breaths due to the pain in his ribs. Visions, he understood, were often taxing enough to ruffle the most seasoned of Jedi, but to see the death of another, a death one felt unable to prevent... It was no wonder the child had suffered so. Was this the thing that had haunted the boy at the Temple? What Master Yoda and Vresh had been working with him on, what Yoda had asked for Qui-Gon to help with? Oh little gods, he hoped not, for if it was, if that was the task Yoda had set for him, Qui-Gon knew how badly he had failed Master Yoda, Obi-Wan, even himself. After sometime in that deathly stillness that lay between the two of them, the master found his voice.

“Obi-Wan, I don’t believe that the Force has brought us to this moment for you to fail.”

“I can’t feel the Force, remember?” a small voice replied. “It’s given up on me too.”

“Nonsense,” Qui-Gon answered flatly. There was a slight stirring around him and then the quiet was replaced by the familiar hum of his lightsaber. He squinted, looking up to find tired eyes staring at him in disbelief.

“You know I can’t,” Obi-Wan repeated. The master lightly shook his head, but the motion still caused his headache and his vision to double.

“I know you couldn’t, but you can now. You’ve already done it once. You can do it again.”

“I...,” Obi-Wan started shaking his head in denial and a bit of confusion. “I haven’t... I...”

“Did,” the master answered his voice heavy with his own certainty. “The cave in, you may have envisioned it before, but you never knew when until today when the Force warned you,” Qui-Gon finished. He watched the boy struggle with his pronouncement, the boy’s youthful features marred by the frowns and furrows denoting his concentration. Finally, the boy met his gaze again.

“How?”

“I don’t know,” Qui-Gon admitted. “Perhaps... when I shared energy with you or perhaps just now when the Force required this task of you.”

“To save you,” Obi-Wan spoke softly.

“To save us both,” Qui-Gon corrected then he pushed one step further all the while hoping it was not too far. “Will you not even try, Obi-Wan?”

There was a moment when Qui-Gon feared he had indeed pushed to far, but then he heard a quiet voice, tremulous, but resigned.

“I will try.”

* * * * *

It was too much to hope. Could Master Jinn be right? Could he somehow prove the vision wrong and save the master? It seemed unthinkable now after so long enthralled in a recurring nightmare of failure, but the master had spoken so surely... but then again the master was trapped beneath rock and stone. Obi-Wan was his only hope, of course the man had spoken with certainty. He had to. To think otherwise was to embrace the same certainty of his own death.

Obi-Wan! You must try! I need you! Obi-Wan!

The vision Jinn had spoken with certainty as well. That Jinn had called for him, on him to save him, to do... something lest he die. Obi-Wan felt himself frozen upon the edge of a precipice. Master Jinn said he could still feel the Force, that he had heard it warn him of the cave's collapse. Had he? He wasn't sure. He had felt something, yes, but was it the Force? The Force was a feeling so long denied him that to hope to feel it again frightened him utterly. He said he would try. He told the master he would, but what if he did and failed? What if Master Jinn was wrong and this attempt was as doomed as his vision had told him it would be all a long? Could he live with that? Could he live with himself if he didn't try at all? And what if he succeeded? What if he could save the master, what would that change for him? He was still not a Jedi. He still never would be, but maybe... maybe he could do one thing, one small thing that would mean something to someone before he faded away into the nothingness that constantly beckoned to him since he had stepped foot on Bandomeer.

He said he would try.

And so, he would.

Obi-Wan lifted his eyes from the intense stare of the Master Jedi pinned beneath the heavy stones. He closed his eyes, the borrowed lightsaber still clasped in one hand, the other out stretched toward the rubble. In his mind he reached out with his being as he had been taught to do from his time at the Temple. He reached out for the Force and... he felt it, but it was just beyond his reach. He tried again, his brow knit tightly in concentration, but always the infinite power flitted between his fingers, teasing him before shunning him completely.

Master Jinn had been wrong.

He had failed. Again.

* * * * *

Qui-Gon did not know how long it had been since he watched the boy reach for the Force only to return empty handed. The child had made a few attempts, but ultimately had turned away from him, hiding eyes wet with tears, an expression of abject guilt and despair. He had pulled away from him then, physically and mentally. Obi-Wan sat against the far wall, his knees pulled into his chest, his head down, his right hand still holding the saber lit to keep away the physical darkness. But the other darkness, the one they both carried with them was not hindered by such weak light.

* * * * *

More time passed and Qui-Gon opened his eyes to find Obi-Wan in the same curled spot. The master had drifted into unconsciousness again. His reserves were failing along with his body. If he were to guess, they had been trapped in the cave for over a day, perhaps two. What he did not have to guess, however, was that he would not make it another day or two. Qui-Gon swallowed weakly noticing that, for once, his mouth was not dry, but it was also not saliva that wet his tongue. The light, coppery taste was instantly recognizable. Blood. This new development confirmed his suspicions of worsening internal injuries and galvanized his weary mind into action. Perhaps it was his fate to die here, but it was not a fate he would have brought upon the boy. Obi-Wan would not die here and, moreover, Qui-Gon would not let the boy watch him die.

“Obi-Wan,” he muttered, his voice far weaker than he had expected. Apparently, it was still enough to be heard for a head topped with russet locks raised to meet his gaze. “You have to... get out of here,” he rasped. “Go,” he managed before a wave of razor-lined coughs ripped through his chest. When he pried his eyes open again, Obi-Wan was kneeling in front of him, his child eyes wide with worry.

“Master Jinn...”

“No,” Qui-Gon interrupted though his usual baritone was little more than a whisper. “You... must... go. Save yourself...”

“I can’t just leave you,” the boy all but sobbed. Qui-Gon forced a small smile to his lips. Blood caked and cracked as they were he hoped he managed some degree of reassurance.

“Not leaving... you will find... help. You will... come back,” he whispered, but looking in the youth’s eyes they both knew his words for what they were. A lie. Obi-Wan would not come back because there would be nothing to come back for. Obi-Wan shook his head violently.

“No.”

“You must,” Qui-Gon ordered as strongly as he could and for a moment he thought perhaps the boy would listen as he saw Obi-Wan rise to his feet and turn a half step away. But then the child turned again and raised his free hand once more towards the rubble.

“No,” Obi-Wan repeated as he closed his eyes and threw everything he had, everything he was into his focus. At first Qui-Gon felt nothing. In fact, he heard it before he felt it. There was the sound of rock shifting, then an unsettling of dust, and then finally a respite from the constant pressure that had been sitting on his chest. Obi-Wan didn’t remove the stone slabs, his Force control was not fine enough for that, but he was lifting them slightly... oh so slightly. Qui-Gon tried to wiggle his body to slide from under the heavy weight, but the small gap Obi-Wan had created was not enough.

“More... Obi-Wan... just a little more...”

Obi-Wan's face tensed. His body rigid with the exertion, but Qui-Gon felt the weight upon him lighten a little more. He tried wiggling again and this time he found some purchase. Slowly, agonizingly he pulled his body with his one good arm away from what would have been his tomb until eventually he was free of the rocks. He turned his gaze to the boy, his compact form trembling from the work of holding the stones in defiance of gravity.

"Enough, Obi-Wan. You can let go now."

And he did. The stones fell to the ground with loud thud that reverberated off the cave walls, echoing long after they had settled into silence. Obi-Wan's knees failed him and he sank bonelessly to the ground, his hand still clutching the activated saber. The boy looked dazed, stunned, as he were falling into psychic shock. Qui-Gon knew he had to say something, to do something that would keep the boy with him in the here and now, but he didn't know what. So, he did what he had done all his life. Even if he couldn't feel the Force, he would let it guide him now, but when the words came to him he felt he could not speak them aloud. Yet in his mind his voice clearly said what he knew somehow to be true.

/You've done well, Padawan./

Chapter 17: Moving Forward

Qui-Gon hurt. Every shambling step was painful. Every pull of skin and muscle was torture. Every inhale and exhale was agony, but still he pushed forward though he was forced to lean heavily on the young boy at his side. The boy hadn't spoken since he had freed Qui-Gon from his rocky tomb. In fact, Qui-Gon wasn't entirely certain the child wasn't in some mild form of psychic shock; a not so uncommon side-effect of excessive Force use, especially in the under or untrained. But Obi-Wan was upright, moving, and shouldering a considerable amount of the master's weight so the effects could not be that bad. Qui-Gon himself was desperately trying to stave off shock of his own, not a psychic state, but a physical one caused by his injuries. And from what the master could tell, his injuries were numerous indeed. His entire left side felt like he had been trampled by an overweight bantha. His left ankle was swollen, tender, and most likely broken as he also suspected was the case of his wrist and forearm. His chest and side pained with every breath and deep inhalation was impossible. Qui-Gon figured since he still could move and breathe the damage was likely a case of cracked ribs rather than completely broken ones. What concerned the master most was the pain and impaired movement in his left hip. It might be fractured as well, but not too badly as he could force himself into movement. However, Qui-Gon had to admit to himself that that movement was getting harder and harder as the pain and aches of his abused body clawed at his resolve, eating away at his will by inches. He could not even draw upon the Force for strength or relief as he remained blind to its presence and power.

Speaking of being blind... The world of green light, stone, and shadow began to blur as a wave of vertigo assaulted Qui-Gon's senses. He stumbled hard causing Obi-Wan to adjust his grip on the master and the master's saber to keep the Jedi from accidentally impaling himself. Qui-Gon was dead tired. He had nothing left. He needed to sit down, to rest, yet part of him knew if he stopped moving it was unlikely he would move again. Ultimately, the choice was taken from him as his weak left side folded sending him to the ground in an agonizing heap that pulled a low, wailing moan from him. Obi-Wan sank with him, carefully holding the lit saber out of harm's way. Qui-Gon looked to the child's face. Even his current double vision could not hide or fully distort the wide-eyed fear in the boy's expression or his small body's extreme fatigue. Qui-Gon closed his eyes hard. He had to think, to focus. He had to get them out of here.

When he opened his eyes again his vision had somewhat cleared, but the pounding in his head, a concussion for certain, had not abated in the least.

"Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon called, his voice rough and weak. Large waiting eyes focused on his. Qui-Gon licked his lips, trying to dull their ache with saliva he didn't possess. "I need to rest a bit, Obi-Wan. Why don't you go a little ways ahead and see if you can see or hear anything," he said in between labored breaths and stabbing bursts of pain behind his eyes. Obi-Wan said nothing, simply rose to his feet and proceeded down the tunnel. Qui-Gon

watched his figure retreat leaving the space where he sat in darkness. He held his battered arm tight against his damaged ribs, closed his eyes, and tried his very best not to die.

* * * * *

Obi-Wan tried not to think. Thinking was bad. Thinking led to things like planning and planning led to hoping and hoping, well, that was just something he could not afford to deal with right now. He continued down the mine shaft, bearing Jinn's saber like a torch. He should be happy or, at least, if not happy better than this. He had saved Master Jinn after all, hadn't he?

Obi-Wan ran his free hand along the rough wall of the cave. Yes, Master Jinn was alive, for now, but how much longer could the man go on? And as far as he could tell, he and the Master Jedi were no closer to finding a way out of the stone labyrinth. Master Jinn might very well still die here and it would still be Obi-Wan's fault.

Obi-Wan sighed and prepared to turn back before he became too lost to find his way to Master Jinn when something pricked in the back of his mind. Then something to his right caught his attention, a small glint of light half buried in the dirt. Obi-Wan reached down and picked up the grim encrusted object. He turned it over examining it this way and that and with each pass with his eyes he felt twinges of the Force tickling his senses. But this tickle was not playful, it was cold and distinctly unsettling. Obi-Wan palmed the odd object and headed back to Jinn. Perhaps the Jedi could make more sense of it. When he returned, he found the master right where he left him, his eyes closed as if he were dozing.

Or dead.

"Master Jinn?" he called out weakly both afraid he would wake the man and afraid he would not. Jinn's eyes opened slowly relaxing at least some of the deep worry in Obi-Wan's heart. He moved closer until he was kneeling on the master's left.

"Obi-Wan," the older man greeted. His voice was rough and wet, nothing like the smooth baritone to which Obi-Wan found he had grown accustomed.

"Master Jinn, I didn't... I didn't find a way out, but I did find well... something," he said as he presented the glinting rock. With exceedingly careful movements the master reached for the stone in Obi-Wan's hand. He held it lightly at first as if testing the weight and feel of it then he brought it closer to his eyes and squinted at it, blinking profusely.

"A crystal," the older man finally stated with a sigh dropping his hand and the crystal onto his lap. "They are common geodes to be found in any excavation."

“But it feels funny... in the Force. You don’t feel it?” Obi-Wan asked. For a second, to Obi-Wan, it seemed that the master hesitated as if debating whether he deserved an answer.

“Tell me what you feel, Obi-Wan.”

“When I held it, it felt... cold and... tingly... and it had a sort of... hum to it,” Obi-Wan answered then he looked directly into the master’s blood-shot, blue eyes. “It sings.”

The Jedi Master held up the stone again, turning it over in his hand.

“It’s a Force crystal,” the older man whispered. Obi-Wan turned his gaze to the small, dirty gem.

“But I didn’t think Force crystals came in red.”

“They don’t.”

* * * * *

Qui-Gon held the ruby crystal in his hand, confounded by what it could be. What Obi-Wan had described was undoubtedly a Force crystal, but a red one? They simply did not exist in nature or so he had been taught. Once again he damned his Force blindness. This was a mystery that needed solving.

Qui-Gon closed his fingers tightly around the ruby crystal and pulled it to his chest. He closed his eyes and reached for the Force using the crystal as a focus point. It wasn’t much, but the master allowed what little Force he could touch to gather more closely around him. It wasn’t enough to manipulate just barely enough to feel again. Qui-Gon allowed the feeling to work across his mind and instantly he became aware.

Oh Gods. Oh Gods. What had he done?

* * * * *

Jedi Master Vresh Tivi was tired. He was tired and hungry and even a bit annoyed in a most un-Jedi like fashion, but he could finally be un-Jedi like here in the privacy of his and his padawan’s appointed rooms. The negotiations on Bellestrass had gone from dull to contentious to infuriating and round again for everyday of the eleven days the Jedi team had spent on this Sith-foresaken, backwater, spitball of a planet. Vresh sighed as he pulled off his tunics and threw them carelessly about the floor. To make matters worse, his padawan, Lantis, spent most of the talks suffering under crippling headaches. It had

seemed that her empathic abilities had chosen to have a surge in the midst of this easy mission. Vresh rolled his shoulders and tried to release some of the tension he was carrying there. It was a good thing really, that his padawan's power was growing, but it couldn't have been at a worse time. Because of the emotional tumult at the negotiation table Vresh had been forced to maintain shields around his own mind and his padawan's throughout much of the day; the resulting strain gifting him with a headache all his own. But it was of no matter. Tomorrow he would face another grueling round of contumacious, political squabbling while he held his young padawan together emotionally. That was tomorrow though. Tonight, it was just him and a nice warm bed...

...and a comm. chirp that had to be spawned from the very depths of the seven Sith hells. Vresh pushed himself up from the very warm, very soft, very comfortable bed and made his way groggily to the chair and desk combination that housed the room's communication unit. He put on his very best masterly scowl and opened the requested channel.

"Tivi."

"Master Vresh?"

Vresh's scowl dropped.

"Obi-Wan? What are... Where are... Are you alright?" the master stammered in a stunning display of verbal ineloquence. Immediately the boy on the screen frowned.

"I woke you."

"No, I mean yes, I mean..." Vresh took a deep breath and wiped a hand over his face. "You did, but it's fine. I told you you could contact me anytime for any reason. How are you?"

"I'm... fine," Obi-Wan answered hesitantly, his eyes darting to glimpse something off-screen. Vresh leaned forward in his chair.

"Obi-Wan?" he asked softly. Blue-gray eyes swept across the small screen to meet his and a tumble of words fell out of the child's mouth.

"I didn't know what to do. I didn't know who to call. I don't have a Temple code and they probably don't want to hear from me, but I thought that someone should know because they'd want to do something or send someone or I don't know, but I had no one I could call and then I remembered you said I could call you, but I didn't know if I should or if he'd be angry that I did, but it would be okay if he's angry because that would mean he's awake and,"

“Obi-Wan!” Vresh snapped, his sudden tone ending the youth’s verbal vomit. Once he had the boy’s silence and attention he allowed his expression to soften and a smile to form on his lips. “Now, take a deep breath and let’s try that again in Basic, shall we?”

Vresh watched as Obi-Wan indeed took a deep breath and calmed himself before attempting to take up his tale again. The boy looked so thin, so tired. The worry that had surged in him when he first took the call began to bubble its way up again, but Vresh firmly pushed it down.

“Now,” he said, “tell me what happened.”

“My vision... I know who it is... who it... was...”

Vresh felt his mouth go dry, but somehow he still managed to form words.

“How do you know?”

“Because it’s happened.”

“Who, Obi-Wan? Who was it?”

“Master Jinn,” was the boy’s reply. Vresh fell back against his chair, his mouth hanging open, but silent. Vresh knew of Obi-Wan’s vision, knew it in almost as much painful detail as the boy and he also knew how it always ended, but... it couldn’t be. Qui-Gon could not be dead. He would have known it. He would have.

“Qui-Gon isn’t dead,” the master intoned.

“No, he isn’t,” Obi-Wan replied. “Not yet.”

“Obi-Wan...”

“It happened like it always does, like it always did... in my vision except... I was able to save him, but... Master Vresh, he’s injured so badly and...,” Obi-Wan paused taking in a deep breath. “He’s in the medical ward, but he hasn’t woken up. I thought... I thought the Council would want to know.”

“They will know,” Vresh replied leaning forward once again. “I will tell them, but Obi-Wan?”

“Yes, Master Vresh?”

“This is not your fault.”

“But!”

“Stop it,” Vresh commanded and immediately the child’s mouth clamped shut.
“Absolutely, unequivocally, Not. Your. Fault. Understood?”

“Yes, Master Vresh,” was Obi-Wan’s meek reply. Vresh let out a deep sigh.

“Obi-Wan, do you still have your naming day gift from me and Lantis?”

“Yes,” Obi-Wan answered clearly puzzled at the odd inquiry. Vresh nodded.

“Good. Keep it with you. It may just come in handy. In the meantime, you hang in there. I will contact the Council and we will sort this out, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Okay,” Vresh repeated. “Call again if you need me and Obi-Wan, Qui-Gon’s a stubborn old horranth. He’s not going anywhere,” he added and after Obi-Wan’s nod and slight smile they both closed the channel. Vresh ran both hands over his face. There would be no comfy bed or sleep tonight.

* * * * *

Awareness was slow coming for the Jedi Master. A myriad of aches and pains assaulted his body, but none were quite as bad as he would have thought and there was a curious foginess eclipsing his mind. Drugs. He had been drugged. Between that determination and the slight decrease of general agony, Qui-Gon deduced he must be in a medical facility or at least under someone’s care. That meant he had been rescued... he and Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan.

The remembrance of that name brought back Qui-Gon’s memory in a rushing wave. He gasped as a new wave of pain crested over him, but this new torment wasn’t physical. No, this pain was the familiar burn of the folly of his own pride and foolishness. It was a pain he had not felt so acutely for a long time. A pain not felt since...

“Master Jinn?”

The voice called Qui-Gon from the blackness that beckoned. He knew there would be more pain, and not all from his body, upon fully awaking, but the softly spoken worry in that voice could not be ignored. The master cracked one recalcitrant lid open, then another and found his vision shortly filled with a tired, but youthful face.

“You’re awake!”

"It seems that I am," he croaked and immediately he felt the hard rim of a glass shoved to his lips. He drank slowly, relishing the coolness of the water as it soothed his parched and savaged throat. A moment later, the glass was removed and a pair of blue-gray eyes settled upon him.

"Are you alright, Obi-Wan?"

"Yes, Master Jinn. I'm okay."

The boy appeared to be telling the truth, after all, it wasn't he but the master who lay confined to bed. Qui-Gon nodded then stopped anticipating the pounding between his temples to return and was surprised when it did not. He would have to thank the healers for that blessing. He turned his attention back to the young teen by his couch.

"I am glad you are well, that we both are. I have you to thank for our rescue?" he asked and a swinging of coppery locks accompanied the boy's head shake.

"You... you passed out and I couldn't wake you. I didn't know what else to do so I just grabbed you," the boy paused looking down for a moment before lifting his head again with a sheepish expression. "I had to drag you. You're even heavier than you look."

To that remark, Qui-Gon raised a stately eyebrow and was rewarded by a small, but radiant grin.

"It is impolitic to call a wounded man such as I fat," he stated wryly. If anything, Obi-Wan's smile grew brighter.

"I wasn't calling you fat, Master Jinn, just... heavy," he replied in a fit of giggles. The master could help the thought that laughter looked good on the boy.

"Hmm," Qui-Gon answered a small smile on his own rough visage then his expression immediately sobered. There was something he had to do, something he needed to say.

"Obi-Wan, I owe you an apology."

Suddenly all the boy's giggles ceased and the master felt a pang to see it go.

"Master Jinn, you don't,"

"Please," Qui-Gon interrupted raising his right hand slightly off the medical couch. "Let me finish," he continued. Obi-Wan closed his mouth and sat back in his chair though fear and uncertainty shown clearly in his eyes. Qui-Gon took a deep breath. This was going to be hard, but he knew it must be done.

"I owe you an apology, Obi-Wan. I have treated you very poorly and you have suffered much for it. For my part in your suffering, I am truly sorry," Qui-Gon said as he

closed his eyes and turned his head towards the ceiling. "When I met you at the Temple I was determined not to take another padawan. My last one... things did not end as they should have and I had no intentions of putting myself through that again, so when Yoda insisted I meet you, I resisted, assuming he hoped to have us paired." Qui-Gon opened his eyes and turned back to Obi-Wan.

"I was wrong. Master Yoda wanted me to help you and in that I failed."

Unable to keep his tongue any longer, Obi-Wan surged forward in his seat.

"But you did help me. You help me to accept that I wouldn't be a knight."

"No, Obi-Wan, you should never have accepted that, I should never have made you accept that. You were meant to become a Knight, a Jedi. That day in the gardens... you accused me of lying," Qui-Gon paused as Obi-Wan opened his mouth to object, but Qui-Gon continued. "You accused me of lying about not feeling anything when we touched and rightly so, but I was not lying to you so much as lying to myself. I did not want anything between us and so I convinced myself there was nothing and I convinced you, much to my shame, that there was something lacking in you and that was the greatest lie of all."

"But my visions..."

"Can and will be managed with time and training. Obi-Wan, I believe what we felt, what we've been feeling is a training bond, a Force forged training bond that I have assiduously ignored which I now think has manifested into the pain we feel when we touch mentally or physically. By ignoring it I fear I have damaged it, possibly beyond repair, but if you are willing, if you believe you could in time forgive this foolish, old man for his foibles then there may yet be time to repair it," Qui-Gon said and then he drew himself up as best he could in his supine position.

"Obi-Wan Kenobi, would you grant me the honor of becoming my padawan?"

Qui-Gon held his breath as he waited for an answer. His face showed only a gentle serenity, but inside he felt anything but. What if the boy refused? He would deserve it. What he had done in ignoring the Force bond between them was as unconscionable as it was unforgivable. He was a Jedi Master for Force sake and what he did, to act in such blatant disregard to the will of the Force, was the worst kind of hypocrisy.

Obi-Wan, for his part, sat quietly trying fervently to move past his own disbelief. He needed to get his mouth to work again. He needed to answer the older man, the Master Jedi who had admittedly rejected, betrayed, and lied to him. This was the man who had caused him one of the greatest hurts he had ever felt in his life. This was the man who looked him in the eye and told him he would never be a Jedi Knight. This was the man who allowed him to be sent away from his home, from his friends, from his future. And now this man asked him for forgiveness, asked him to be his padawan.

Obi-Wan answered with the only word he could.

“Why?”

“Why?” Qui-Gon repeated, slightly stunned. The master had expected a swift yes or no not a further inquiry into his motives, but then again what had he done to do anything other than give the boy reason to doubt him.

“Why do you want me as your padawan? Is it just because I saved you?” Obi-Wan asked earnestly. Qui-Gon knew the boy deserved no less than an equally earnest answer.

“No. My decision is not because you saved me, saved us, I might add.”

“Then why?” Obi-Wan pressed. He had to know because otherwise... well, otherwise nothing else mattered.

“Because you are meant to be a great Jedi Knight. Because I believe I am meant to train you and because it is the will of the Force... a will I have denied for far too long. This is what I should have done three months ago. This is what I should have offered you and it is yours to claim if you still want it. Do you still want it?” Qui-Gon asked his meekness and uncertainty in stark contrast to his usual Jedi persona. Obi-Wan stood and stepped closer to the master’s medical coach.

“Yes, I still want it.”

Chapter 18: Borrowing Trouble

The rest of Qui-Gon's day passed with short moments of consciousness followed by longer periods of sleep. Obi-Wan, on the other hand, had been an alert and anxious presence at his side, alternating between sitting restlessly in his seat, pacing restlessly around the small room, or restlessly fingering the small holo recorder Vresh had given him as a naming day gift without ever actually turning it on to hear the message. Finally, after one restless circuit too many and a very loud stomach growl, Qui-Gon ordered him out of his room to rest and eat.

No sooner than when Obi-Wan had departed that Qui-Gon received his second non-medical guest.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you, Master Jinn."

"Not at all, Administrator Voluk as I seem to be at the mercy of your healing staff," Qui-Gon replied wryly. Ilia smiled as she stepped into the room proper.

"Then you are indeed a brave man. I hear they have all manner of needles, pokers, and sharp objects laying about here."

"Indeed, I believe I have been on the receiving end of some of their more nefarious devices during my stay here," Qui-Gon rejoined. The Administrator sidled up beside the Jedi's bed and looked down on his wrapped and wired body.

"How are you, really?"

"Far better than I was a day or two ago."

"From what the doctors say you are far better than you should be. Do all Jedi heal so quickly?"

Qui-Gon attempted a shrug, but his left shoulder was entirely uncooperative. Ilia pulled the seat that Obi-Wan had claimed closer to the bed.

"I saw Obi-Wan earlier. He looks much better now. When we first found you two in that mine we thought the worst had happened."

"You found us?"

"You don't know?" Ilia asked then she shook her head. "Of course you wouldn't know since you were quite unconscious at the time. Well, anyway, after you went off to find the Ghost we continued our search. When I hadn't heard from you the next day we added

looking for you to our search patterns. I remembered your interest in the mines so a few of us started there.”

“I thought you didn’t have the numbers needed to search the mines.”

“We didn’t, but I hoped we didn’t have to. I figured if you went into the mine to find him you would probably also be able to find your way back out,” she answered. Qui-Gon nodded his head in understanding.

“You needed only to position your teams at each entrance and wait for us to emerge,” he finished for her.

“What I didn’t expect was for the little Ghost... I mean, Obi-Wan to stagger out alone. Apparently, he had been dragging your body through a kilometer of mining tunnels before he thought he heard something and rushed ahead to find help. When we found you, you were clutching this,” she said as she reached into her trouser pocket and produced the small, red crystal Obi-Wan discovered earlier.

“What is it?” she asked. Qui-Gon managed to keep his surprise from reaching his face.

“You don’t know?” he responded. The administrator shook her head.

“I’ve never seen this before in my life, but what I do know is that this is what Offworld is after.”

That caught the master’s attention.

“How do you know?”

“The process they’re using... it’s dangerous and expensive. It never made sense unless...”

“You are searching for crystal,” Qui-Gon concluded, but then he frowned. “Still, to use municra gas is,”

“Highly dangerous, I know. Which means that Offworld wants these pretty badly and pretty quickly.”

“Where is Xanatos?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen him since, well since you disappeared,” Ilia replied as she got to her feet. “I know that the miners have been working around the clock for the past few days. Someone’s put a fire under their arses,” she continued as she walked to the door. Once she reached it she turned back to the Jedi.

“Don’t worry. I’ll look into it and give this to Sair to study. You just get better and watch out for our Obi, okay?”

Qui-Gon bowed his head in acknowledgement and Ilia let herself out. He closed his eyes fighting his own fatigue. He needed to think this through. He needed to understand Xanatos’s plan and he needed to figure out how to stop him. Fate, however, didn’t appear to be on the master’s side as a medical aide stepped in and informed him that he had a communication coming through from Coruscant. Qui-Gon allowed the aide to patch it through. The aide then left to give the Jedi some privacy. It was only the wait of a few seconds before an image of the High Council appeared on the small monitor in his hands.

“Masters,” Qui-Gon greeted from his recumbent position on the medical couch. Mace, as always, was the first to speak.

“We received word you were gravely injured,” the Korun Councilor began without pretext. Qui-Gon nodded.

“I was, but thanks to Obi-Wan and the Agri Corps medical staff I am on the mend. In fact, were it not for Obi-Wan Kenobi I would not be alive to speak to you now,” he added as a way to test the waters before diving in. Unsurprisingly, Master Yoda took the plunge with him.

“Dire things were when last spoke you of young Obi-Wan’s condition. Changed this has?”

“Yes and no, Master,” Qui-Gon answered. Such circumspection earned him no favors among the assembled Councilors. Ki leaned forward in his seat.

“I trust you will explain this answer?”

“Obi-Wan’s condition seems to have... stabilized and perhaps even improved. I believe this was accomplished by my sharing of Force energy with him.”

“And the boy has suffered no ill effects?” Eth asked.

“No, Obi-Wan was completely unharmed by the exchange,” Qui-Gon answered carefully. Mace’s frown deepened further. Apparently he hadn’t answered carefully enough.

“And were you unharmed in the exchange as well?”

“There was a slight, unexpected consequence. I have temporarily lost my ability to feel the Force,” the master intoned. The Council chamber fell into stunned silence. It was Adi who found her voice first.

“Temporarily?”

“Yes.”

“How do you know this?”

“Faith,” Qui-Gon responded and it was all Mace could do not to roll his eyes at the infuriating master before him.

“You will remain on Bandomeer until Master Ja’Prinn arrives. When he does he will examine you and Kenobi. If he feels it is appropriate you and he will return the boy to Coruscant for further examination and treatment. In the meantime,” Mace paused as he steepled his fingers. “You will prepare and submit to the Council a detailed report of your activities on the planet including how you sustained your,” he paused here picking up a reader, “broken ribs, broken wrist, broken ankle, broken pelvis, dislocated shoulder, internal injuries, and concussion,” he finished putting down the reader. “We are interested in how you acquired such numerous injuries while awaiting a simple ship repair. You will give the details of this and the circumstances of your rescue. Is this understood, Master Jinn?”

“Quite plainly,” Qui-Gon intoned, “but I can tell you now Obi-Wan will need to return to Coruscant with us.”

“I thought it was your belief that the child was improving,” Plo inquired. Qui-Gon gave a small dip of his head in acknowledgement to the Councilor.

“Obi-Wan will not be returning because of his ailment. He will return with me because it is his place to do so. I have taken him as my Padawan Learner,” Qui-Gon replied. This time his response did not bring forth silence, it summoned chaos. All the Councilors were speaking at once as Qui-Gon sat perfectly still, content to recline in quiet calm while the other Jedi bickered over his latest “maverick” action. Finally, the loud clack of Yoda’s gimer stick upon the Council floor returned the room to its former order.

“Sanction this the Council did not,” the ancient master announced. Qui-Gon could not hide his shock. After all, it was Yoda who had pushed so hard for him to take the boy in the first place.

“My decision was not offered for Council approval because there was no need for it. A master may choose whomever he or she wants for an apprentice. That right is absolute and well known to you, my masters.”

“A master may choose from the available initiates. Kenobi is not among them. He is too old and is therefore ineligible,” Saesee stated, but Qui-Gon had no intention of being so easily dismissed.

“That stipulation is by tradition only, not by the Code,” Qui-Gon responded. His answer was greeted with the silent not silence of the Council that usually denoted

telepathic communication among its members. After some quiet conference Mace turned his attention back to Qui-Gon.

“The Council can bar a pairing if there be cause,” Mace offered softly. Qui-Gon’s eyes narrowed as he stared at his friend.

“You would assert that I am a danger to Obi-Wan?”

“We are merely reminding you that more discussion should take place before any rash decisions are made,” Mace intoned.

“That rule is invoked against abusers and deviants! How dare you accuse me of such gross conduct!”

“We are not accusing you of anything, Master Jinn.”

“The hell you aren’t!”

“Enough!” Master Yoda yelled, his voice lacking the amused tilt he was known for. “Speak of this when returned to Coruscant you have,” the ancient master said and then the transmission ended.

Chapter 19: Irrational Predictability

To say Qui-Gon Jinn was angry would have been an understatement of the profoundest order. The Master Jedi was absolutely incensed. That the Council would dare oppose a master in his choice of padawan was practically unheard of. Any challenge of that sort threatened one of the most sacred trusts of the Order and was never done lightly. Only in the most extreme of circumstances had the High Council ever questioned a master's choice and only twice in the long history of the Jedi had a pairing actually been formally opposed. That they had threatened to do so now exceeded the very heights of incredulity.

Qui-Gon held no illusions about how most of the Council felt about him and his field work, but there had always been a level of respect, if not for his status within the Order then at least for his greater than average success rate. That they would do this... speak this... Qui-Gon felt a barely contained rage grow in his chest. Had he still had his Force sense he would have undoubtedly sent much around the room flying in a Force tempest of anger, but as it was, he was Force blind, bed confined, and inordinately pissed off.

No, he was quite ordinally pissed off.

"Master Ji..." came a quiet gasp to Qui-Gon's left. Wild eyes settled on blue-gray ones, blue-gray eyes that held much fear. Qui-Gon immediately closed his own eyes and attempted to calm himself before opening them again. When he did, many heartbeats later, he tried to present an image of a serene Jedi, even if he still did not feel like one.

"Obi-Wan, please come in," he intoned. The boy had yet to step into the room and still seemed disinclined to do so even after being invited. Qui-Gon tilted his head as he observed the teen.

"What's wrong, Padawan?" he asked and Obi-Wan started slightly.

"I'm still your padawan?" he replied timidly. Qui-Gon frowned. Had he truly been such a fright to the boy just now?

"Of course you are. Why would you think otherwise?"

"You were angry. Really angry."

"I was and, in truth, I still am, but not at you, Obi-Wan. Please, come inside," Qui-Gon beckoned as he lay back a bit more comfortably against the pillows that helped to prop him up. Obi-Wan walked sedately into the room and took his customary seat in the chair near the master's medical couch.

“What were you angry about then?” he asked and the master allowed himself a long sigh before he turned his gaze fully on the youth beside his bed.

“It is a long story, one you need not concern yourself with now, but I would like you to trust me when I tell you, you have done nothing to make me angry and I apologize if my lapse just now frightened you. That was not my intent,” Qui-Gon answered calmly. Obi-Wan nodded though he still seemed somewhat uncertain to the master’s eyes. “Obi-Wan,” he paused and began again. “Padawan, there are certain things, certain rituals that are attendant to becoming a Padawan Learner, but I fear we will not be able to do these things until we reach Coruscant and return to the Temple. Know that this fact does not make you any less my padawan in any way. Do you understand?”

“You’re taking me back to the Temple?”

“Of course,” Qui-Gon replied more than a little surprised. “Why would you think otherwise?”

“Because...” Obi-Wan began he gaze shifting down towards his booted feet. “They sent me away from there. I didn’t think... I could ever go back.”

“Did you think I would not go back?”

“No,” Obi-Wan said as he looked back up at the Master Jedi. “Of course not! You’re a Master Jedi! They need you!” he finished and Qui-Gon nodded.

“Yes. Yes, they do. As a Knight and Master of the Order, my place is at the Temple, but tell me, Obi-Wan, where is a padawan’s place?”

“Beside his master two steps behind and to the right,” Obi-Wan responded automatically. It took only a moment before he saw the trap the master had set for him. Qui-Gon saw the realization dawn in his eyes and smiled.

“So then where is your place, my Padawan?”

“By your side, my Master, on Coruscant at the Temple,” Obi-Wan smiled back.

“Exactly and like I mentioned earlier there will be much to do for example,” the master began as he reached over and gently mussed the copper locks of the boy’s head. “You are bound for a haircut.”

Obi-Wan’s eyes widened in what the master could only describe as unqualified wonder.

“A padawan’s cut,” Obi-Wan nearly whispered.

“Indeed,” the master replied letting some of his amusement color his tone. “Not the most handsome of styles, but I think that is the point.”

“I don’t care. I will wear it proudly, Master Jinn,” Obi-Wan beamed.

“I have no doubt you will. But you needn’t call me that any longer, Obi-Wan. I am your master now. You may refer to me as Master Qui-Gon or simply Master.”

“Yes, Master,” the boy replied happily if a bit shyly. Qui-Gon’s smile faltered for a moment as some of his recent anger threatened to bubble back to the surface. He tamped it back down, but not before it was noticed.

“Master?” Obi-Wan asked and immediately the joy was gone and the fear was back in his eyes. Qui-Gon sighed mentally. Perhaps he could do something about that.

“Some things will await us on Coruscant, Padawan, but... perhaps there is something we can do now. Come closer,” he said and the boy obediently stepped closer to the master’s bedside. “As I told you earlier, there is already a bond between us, a training bond. You were told of these in your classes?”

“Yes, Master,” Obi-Wan nodded. “They are mental bonds that a master creates to help train the padawan.”

“Yes, most times a master does create the bond, but sometimes they are created by the Force itself like ours was. What I want to do is show you that bond now. Are you interested?”

“Oh yes!” Obi-Wan nearly exclaimed before he caught himself and repeated more sedately, “Yes, Master.”

“Alright then,” Qui-Gon began. “Give me your hand.”

“Won’t that... hurt?” Obi-Wan asked. Qui-Gon had almost forgotten about the pain their contact seemed to have, but it was endurable and always short lived and this particular lesson was important to him. It would have been much easier to guide him to the bond through shared meditation, but with his current Force blindness he was forced to get a bit more creative.

“I suspect it will, but not for long. Shall we try?” the master invited again as he held out his right hand. With only a second’s hesitation Obi-Wan took the master’s hand and waited for the pain to set in only this time... it didn’t.

“It doesn’t hurt.”

“Perhaps that means that things are finally as they should be,” Qui-Gon stated then continued before the boy could ask questions he could not answer. “Close your eyes. I want

you to feel the Force around you and within you. Breathe into it and let it blow out of you. Good. Now look into your own mind, feel that presence which is not you, but something more, something else. Follow it. Do you see it?"

"Yesss," Obi-Wan responded without opening his eyes. "I can see it! It's like... a little bit of bridge... like a tangle of vines. Some are blue and some are green... there's a lot of blue ones..."

"Very good, Padawan. Now, I want you to focus on that bond and what you are feeling right now and I want you to push it across that bridge," Qui-Gon instructed. He knew he would be unable to judge the boy's success from his side, but he reasoned that he would be able to assess it somewhat through the boy's body language. He shouldn't have worried though. A crease appeared on the boy's brow as he concentrated on his task and then Qui-Gon felt it. A little wave of joy and wonderment washed over his mind leaving tingling bursts of light in its wake.

"Do it again," Qui-Gon whispered and soon he felt a stronger wave wash over him and this time he too could feel and see the bond they shared. A dam of relief and a happiness all his own flowed back over the bond to Obi-Wan where the boy opened his eyes in amazement. Qui-Gon wondered if he shared the same look on his face.

"That was..."

"Incredible," the master finished for him. Qui-Gon shook his head slightly as if to clear it, but no, it was real, it was there. His Force sense was back. He had no idea how that came to be or why, but those were things to sort out later. Right now he had an ecstatic apprentice nearly vibrating by his bedside.

"Well done, Padawan. You have accomplished much just now."

"Thank you, Master," Obi-Wan replied eagerly. "Now what?"

Qui-Gon laughed.

"Now, your Master is going to rest," he replied and immediately the expression on the boy's face fell a little. "Padawan, have you ever witnessed a healing trance?"

"No, Master."

"Ah, well you are about to. I want you to focus on the bond again, but this time I want you to pay attention to what you feel coming from me. I am going to trance down. It will be like a deep meditation only this time I will be allowing my body and the Force to help speed the healing process. While I am in trance, you can monitor what you feel from your side of the bond and then we will discuss your observations when I wake."

“Alright, Master,” Obi-Wan replied and he stepped even closer to his master’s side still holding his large, calloused hand in his smooth, smaller ones.

“My Master,” he whispered reverently. Qui-Gon squeezed the boy’s hands in his.

“My Padawan,” he replied then he closed his eyes and entered into a deep healing trance.

Chapter 20: Not Without Cause

Qui-Gon eased into his healing trance feeling a bit better than he had in quite a while which was why he was so unprepared for the unbalance he had felt upon his waking. The first thing he noticed was the noise. As a general rule, Qui-Gon found most medical facilities to be quite, sedate places aimed at calming and comforting those made invalid by injury or illness as well as those who trotted underfoot of the healers to fret and frown over those they cared for. What the master had awakened to was neither calm nor sedate.

It was chaos.

There was a charged energy in the air, a nearly palpable frenzy that rankled his Force sense and pricked at his shields. Taking only a second to mourn the loss of tranquility from his trance, Qui-Gon opened his eyes and glanced around the room. There were many things he found odd under his studious inspection—the opened door to his room, the few medical instruments that lay on the floor from where they had been knocked off the countertop, the cacophony of voices coming from the hallway—but what Qui-Gon found most amiss was Obi-Wan’s absence. The boy’s customary seat was empty and his lingering Force signature was diffuse meaning the child had been gone for some time.

Qui-Gon frowned. Not only was it improper for a padawan to leave without his master’s knowledge or permission, but to do so when the master was in trance and, therefore vulnerable, could easily lead to a fatal mistake. Not that Obi-Wan would know these things. After all, the boy had been his padawan for only a few hours, not the few months the relationship should have had as its foundation. Qui-Gon raised himself into a sitting position, the slight pull of muscle and skin uncomfortable, but not particularly painful. To further test his healing body Qui-Gon swung his long legs over the side of the medical couch and placed his bare feet on the cold floor. In one fluid movement he stood up, swaying only slightly as a flash of dizziness passed and his usual sense of equilibrium settled over him. Satisfied he was not going to collapse where he stood, the master allowed himself to take a few careful steps away from his bed towards the far side of his small room. His entire left side from hip to ankle felt weak and sluggish, but he experienced very little pain. The bones had knit well, but the muscles and surrounding tissues would need much more time to rebuild their strength and flexibility.

Qui-Gon opened the cabinet doors to his left and found his Jedi robes, tunics, trousers, socks, obi, belt, and sash folded neatly inside. A further search of his room revealed his boots placed under his bed, but no lightsaber. Obi-Wan must still have had it. He had trusted the boy with it in the mines. It was only sensible to trust it to his keeping while he was under the healers’ care, but Qui-Gon still could not help his discomfort at not having his saber’s familiar weight on his hip. He needed to find his padawan, his lightsaber, and some answers.

It took a few minutes longer than normal for him to dress, the stiffness in his limbs affecting him more than he cared to admit, but soon he was done and leaving his room looking for all the galaxy the proper Jedi.

If the first thing he had noticed was the noise, the second thing was the movement. The entire medical facility was a hive of motion. Not the flurry or bustle of a busy office, but more the corybantic maelstrom caused by group panic in reaction to an impending disaster. Qui-Gon, in his calm stillness, was like a heavy stone seated in the midst of a river's turbulent rapids, waves of people rushing and breaking around him. The master reached out and gently, but firmly grabbed one of the facility's medical aides by the arm.

"Excuse me," he offered politely, "but could you explain what is going on here?"

The aide, an old Skärtis male, glanced up at the Jedi with a bemused expression.

"Haven't you heard?"

"I'm afraid not. I have been... indisposed until very recently. What has happened?"

"Everyone's talking, everyone's saying that the mines are going to explode, that the whole complex is going to be swallowed up into the earth!" the aide replied his tone bordering on hysteria. Qui-Gon reached out with his senses to test the currents and eddies of the Force. Indeed there was a sense of panic, a sense of terrible fear and uncertainty underlying the frantic swells of emotion and activity around him. He turned his attention back to the aged aide.

"Who told you this? Where did this begin?" Qui-Gon asked mildly, but the other man's agitation only increased. He pulled his arm out of the Jedi's loose grip.

"Who cares?" the man snapped. "I don't have time to answer your stupid questions. I'm getting out of here!"

Qui-Gon watched as the frightened Skärtis all but ran away from him and into the milling crowd of the corridor. Rather than question another random Agri Corps member, the master made his way down the busy hallway, healers, aides, and others automatically parting before him and remingling in his wake. Just as he cleared the last crowd and stepped out of the building a familiar voice called out to him.

"Master Jedi!"

Qui-Gon turned towards the young man who stood just to the side of the breezeway connecting the science and medical facilities. The young man was waving at the master avidly even as he approached.

“Master Jedi, you’re better,” Sair exclaimed excitedly. Though Qui-Gon could sense none of the same fear he felt among the other Corps members from the Sephi, Sair appeared to be just as animated in his agitation.

“I am much improved, thank you Sair,” the master replied serenely. “I don’t suppose you know where I might find Administrator Voluk?”

“Ilia? Last I saw her she was trying to calm everyone down in the cafeteria. Everyone has gone crazy since the miners cleared out last night.”

“The miners are gone? All of them?” Qui-Gon asked allowing his surprise to show on his face for a moment. “Did they give a reason for their departure?”

“You mean other than exploding mines and imminent death?” Sair laughed casually then shook his head. “No, that seems to be the prevailing motivation.”

Qui-Gon studied the young man with an appraising air. As the master had done for the majority of his life he decided to trust his instincts and gestured for the young scientist to join him off the walkway and out of easy earshot of any passersby.

“But you do not believe the rumors of explosions to be true?”

“Of course not,” Sair shrugged then he looked at the serious façade of the Master Jedi. “This is just the demented humor of some drunk dirt diggers, isn’t? I mean,” Sair paused as his smooth forehead suddenly wrinkled in thought. “Considering what they’re using in the mines has caused several fires and explosions already... none of this should be surprising, but... the miners were talking about an explosion that was going to happen and not a small one either.”

“Then, unless the miners are precognitive, this explosion will not be an accident,” Qui-Gon concluded his rich baritone completely neutral despite his grim pronouncement.

“But... why would Offworld want to blow up their own mines?”

“Why indeed. Perhaps,” Qui-Gon started, but cut himself off abruptly as his Force sense pricked. “Follow me,” he ordered the scientist though he truly had no authority to do so. That fact also posed no hindrance to Sair who followed the Jedi unquestioningly back through the doors of the medical center. Qui-Gon’s gaze swept quickly over the main receiving room, lighting briefly on everything, lingering on nothing. Then his eyes raked across one of the many large monitors mounted around all the Corps facilities. He paused there, the Force once again an itch of warning at the base of his skull. Sair stepped forward a bit to stand beside the master.

“Master Jedi, what is it?”

"The monitor. Watch," Qui-Gon replied never taking his eyes off the same. Sair was about to question the Jedi further when suddenly the screen blinked to life. It was only a matter of a few seconds before the Corps staff responded and fell into a well trained silence to listen for the news being broadcasted. However, it was a bit of a surprise to all when the person on the screen was not their beloved and trusted Administrator, but instead a young man with dark hair and a scar.

"Members and employees of the Agri Corps project here on Bandomeer, my name is Xanatos du Crion, CEO of Offworld Mining. I apologize for my... unorthodox usurping of your communications channels, but the situation we now face demands it."

Qui-Gon watched the man's well known and aristocratic features intently trying to determine the man's motives and veracity. As if Xanatos was somehow aware of his scrutiny he spoke again.

"I know the Agri Corps and the employees of Offworld share a tenuous relationship, even so far as to harbor feelings of dislike and distrust..." Xanatos paused, his eyes seeming to bore into Qui-Gon's. "But you must trust us now. There has been an awful accident in one of our mines. An influx of municra gas has caused the delicate balance of our mining efforts to become wholly unstable. The gas is continuing to build in pockets of our most extensive mining shafts and our technicians are unable to stop it or safely disperse it. To make matters worse, one of drills has malfunctioned and cannot be shut down. Whether this is a result of coincidence or sabotage is no matter. Once the gas reaches a certain level of saturation, the energy from the drill will ignite the fumes and well... there will be a rather significant change in the landscape of Bandomeer."

Qui-Gon ignored the increase of murmurs from the crowd, his attention fully on Xanatos.

"Your facilities must be evacuated immediately. I have already sent my men to safety and you must do the same for yours or else a great number of lives will be wasted. I have provided four ships of my own to help get the Corps off planet until the danger has passed. Please forget your animosity towards me and my company and take this situation seriously. I do not wish for anyone to perish as a result of this tragic circumstance we now find ourselves in," Xanatos said his face and voice the picture-perfect image of sincerity. Then as quickly as he had appeared on the screen, he was gone and the noise and chaos of before erupted gaining strength with the increased level of panic. Qui-Gon ignored it all save for the voice that spoke at his elbow.

"Why would they do this?" Sair asked aloud though he did not appear to asking the Jedi directly. The master turned to the young scientist.

"To destroy the evidence of their operations here, if I were to guess," Qui-Gon intoned. "Administrator Voluk had a crystal from one of the mines, a ruby crystal. She said she would give it to you for analysis. Do you still have it? It may be the only evidence that remains."

Sair blinked stupidly for several seconds before his brain caught up with the Jedi's words then he shook his head slowly.

"No, it was stolen from the lab a few hours ago. I never got to complete my tests on it," he said and immediately Qui-Gon felt another smack of warning from the Force. Everything he experienced since waking from the healing trance seemed to coalesce for one brilliant moment into undeniable knowledge. He closed his eyes for the space of three heartbeats and reached out across the nascent bond he shared with his padawan. He then took a deep centering breath, opened his eyes, and asked the question to which he already knew the answer.

"Does Obi-Wan know that the crystal is missing?"

"Yes," Sair responded clearly puzzled by the older man's change in demeanor. "What difference does that make? Surely you don't think Obi took the crystal?"

"No," Qui-Gon answered sadly. "No he wouldn't, but he would know that that crystal is the only hard evidence we have about whatever Xanatos has been doing in those mines."

"You think he went looking for it? For whoever took it?"

"No, that would take too much time with no guarantee of success," the master replied. Sair's light eyes opened wide to almost comic proportions.

"He's planning to go back to the mines."

"I'm afraid he already has and he has no idea of the danger that awaits him."

* * * * *

"Everything's been set just as you asked."

"Good, and the Jedi?"

Xanatos resisted the urge to grimace at the question.

"They have nothing and they know nothing. You needn't concern yourself with them," he replied calmly.

"You made them my concern. Perhaps it would be better to ensure that they will not pose a problem in a more... finite way."

Xanatos leaned forward on his desk, his fingers grasping the edges in a white-knuckle grip. He stared at his monitor, his usual charming tones now as icy as the winds on Hoth.

“I said I’ve dealt with it. What we’ve done here will not be discovered.”

“See that it doesn’t or else you will find yourself dealt with in a more finite way.”

Chapter 21: Demands

Obi-Wan brought his borrowed speeder to a stop outside a place he had once hoped he would never return. Still, he didn't quite experience the sense of anxiety he had expected as he approached the mine entrance. Things were different now. The place that had been the literal stuff of his nightmares had actually been the catalyst that was going to make his dream, his only dream finally come true. Master Jinn had asked him to be his padawan. More than that, the master had nearly lost his life saving him. That's what Jedi did after all, save people. Master Jinn was doing his duty in investigating that man from Offworld, the man who had kidnapped him because the man thought Obi-Wan was already Master Jinn's padawan. And Master Jinn had come for him at great risk to himself and suffered for it. Obi-Wan had been able to give something back though—not saving the master's life, he was the cause of the man's jeopardy after all—no, Obi-Wan had found the crystal, the crystal Sair had told him would unravel the mystery of Offworld's operations on Bandomeer. That little rock that Obi-Wan had accidentally discovered had in very short order become key to Master Jinn's investigatory efforts. Then it was stolen. Taken right out of an Agri Corps laboratory. Sair had told him of the theft, had explained the crystal's import to Jinn's work, and significance to Offworld's dealings. He did not need to speak with the Master Jedi to know what needed to be done. Obi-Wan was a padawan now, a Jedi. His duty to the investigation, to the Order, to his master was clear.

He had to go back. He had to get another crystal.

Obi-Wan lifted the nearly empty satchel he carried over one shoulder and fingered the holo-recorder in his trouser pocket. It was his hope that when he left this place the satchel would be full of more crystals for his master. He hoped for many, but he would settle for one.

Obi-Wan entered into the mine, his eyes moving in a constant and meticulous scan of the tunnel's interior. He would settle for one. Is that what Master Jinn had thought as well, that he would settle? Indeed, Obi-Wan was under no illusions that he was a prize padawan for the esteemed Master Qui-Gon Jinn to take on. Obi-Wan reached down and sifted through a pile of rubble with his fingers. In fact, the Jedi Master hadn't spoken at all to any worth he associated with taking him as an apprentice, only that he had to do it because of the bond they shared. Obi-Wan frowned as he let the bits of rock and earth fall loosely from his fingers. He had taken him because he felt he had to, because he was forced to.

Apparently, this was another thing duty demanded.

Obi-Wan walked further down the mining shaft. He knew he should be letting the Force guide his search as he had done before, though not intentionally, yet he couldn't bring himself to open up to it. Where once all he ever wanted was to feel the Force again, to

be considered a Jedi again, now... now it felt... less, cheap, and undeserved. He wasn't wanted, only tolerated. Wasn't chosen, only accepted. Wasn't appreciated, only pitied.

But there was nothing for it, so Obi-Wan did his best to push it from his mind. He cleared his racing thoughts, pulled his awareness closer to his skin, and focused his attention on the few palm-sized rocks at his feet. He toed one of the larger rocks with his boot and a gleam caught his eye. He reached down and picked up the shabby bit of earth, turning it over in his hand and smiling. Perhaps he could prove his worth to his master after all.

* * * * *

Qui-Gon eased his speeder to a graceful halt as he came to the entrance of the main southern mine. He closed his eyes before debarking, stretching his awareness across the nascent bond he shared with his padawan. New as it was he couldn't hear the boy's thoughts and only had the barest of impressions of his feelings, which were more or less positive and pleasant at the moment. But the master could determine the child's location, his Force presence both a bright spark and shinning tether leading him to his apprentice. Qui-Gon's hand slid over an empty notch on his belt and again he let himself feel a pang of displeasure at his lightsaber's absence. With an exhale he let the feeling go and headed into the mouth of the mine. He traveled the tunnels at a steady pace, sure of his path and his destination, but as he drew deeper into the labyrinth a sense of wrongness struck him.

Supposedly, all of the Agri Corps was in danger due to the exponential build-up of municra gas, an odorless, invisible, and highly volatile emission, but Qui-Gon knew municra was detectable through the Force and here, deep within the mine, Qui-Gon could sense only trace amounts. He looked around the shafts more intently. The given reason for the danger aside, it was clear that the mining operation had been closed and rather hastily at that. Offworld and the other mining companies had evacuated their staff, but the question remained: why? Again, the simplest explanation seemed to be one of evidence. If Xanatos were intent on keeping his dealings here secret, the decimation of the entire mining complex would certainly accomplish that task. Qui-Gon continued to ponder the situation until a blast of surprise and fear traveled across the bond. Without thought, the master hurried his steps and in a matter of minutes he found himself rounding a corner and his gaze falling on the back of a kneeling figure.

"Padawan?"

"Master," Obi-Wan replied, but he did not turn around or rise from his position. Qui-Gon advanced slowly towards his apprentice.

"Are you injured?" he asked though he could feel no pain coming from the boy. Still, something about the child's stillness worried him.

"N-no," Obi-Wan stammered. "I found something, Master."

Qui-Gon knelt beside his apprentice, his eyes focused on the small, square device nestled neatly between the wall and the rock floor. Obi-Wan's hands hovered above the device cradling the box's cover in a trembling grip. Qui-Gon viewed the box with an inaudible sigh and then turned his gaze to his slightly pale-faced padawan.

"Obi-Wan,"

"It's a bomb, isn't it?"

"Yes," the master answered calmly. Obi-Wan gave a brief nod, but otherwise he did not move.

"When will it go off?" he asked and Qui-Gon returned his gaze to the explosive. He examined it thoroughly with his eyes and with the Force before answering.

"There does appear to be a timing mechanism, however, there is no display so there is no way to determine the length of its countdown sequence. It is armed though, of that I am certain."

"Can you... um... disarm it?" Obi-Wan asked meekly. Qui-Gon allowed the corner of his mouth to quirk up in a small grin as he looked at his apprentice.

"I can," he answered. "In fact," Qui-Gon continued as he gently took the bomb's cover from Obi-Wan's hands. "We shall do it together, Padawan."

Qui-Gon watched, pleased to see some of the tension leech out of the boy's shoulders and a flutter of relief and awe drift across the bond. With patience and a steady hand, Qui-Gon led Obi-Wan through the defusal process until he was certain the device no longer posed a threat. Once neutralized, the master pocketed the inert explosive in his cloak only to find his padawan's questioning gaze upon him.

"Evidence," Qui-Gon supplied to Obi-Wan's unspoken question. At that his padawan grinned brightly and reached for the satchel that lay by his side.

"Sair told me the crystal you brought back was stolen, but I found a few more, Master. Now you have more evidence for your investigation," Obi-Wan beamed. Qui-Gon gave the boy a stern look.

"While I applaud your initiative, Padawan, it was dangerous and reckless for you to return here alone and further it was highly improper of you to do so while your master was in trance," Qui-Gon admonished gently. Still, the boy quelled under the mild rebuke. The master allowed his expression to warm slightly. "These are things you will learn when we formalize your apprenticeship, as for the rest... we shall on work on those things together."

A padawan with no flaws has little need for a master," Qui-Gon smiled and Obi-Wan nodded his head.

"Yes, Master," the boy responded.

"Now, a moment if you would, Padawan," Qui-Gon said as he closed his eyes. He reached out with the Force searching the long and winding kilometers of tunnels for that particular touch of inorganicness that dotted the otherwise smooth currents of the Living Force. The master opened his eyes with a frown, his suspicions verified.

"Come, Padawan, we must leave," he said as he rose gracefully to his feet. Obi-Wan rose a bit more awkwardly a second later.

"But... what about your investigation?" Obi-Wan questioned even as he moved to follow the tall master. His master's brisk pace and long strides had him nearly running to keep up.

"That bomb you discovered is but one among a great many placed throughout this mine and, I suspect, all the others as well," Qui-Gon answered without slowing. Obi-Wan jogged a few steps to move beside his master.

"But why? If this is how Offworld makes it's money, then why blow it up?"

"That is a good question, Padawan. What do you think?" Qui-Gon asked without looking down. Through the bond he could feel Obi-Wan's focus narrowing as he considered the question put before him.

"Well," Obi-Wan started, "if Offworld was mining something it wasn't supposed to... destroying the mines could hide what it was doing... or if Offworld suddenly had to stop mining, but didn't want anyone else to do it either blowing up the mines would prevent competitors from mining them too."

"Both are reasonable conclusions, Padawan."

"But which is right, Master?"

"Both actually."

Master and Padawan came to a sudden halt as two figures stepped out of the shadows a few meters ahead of them. Qui-Gon pushed the disquieting realization of how effective Xanatos's ability to shield himself and others in the Force was to the back of his mind even as he took a clearly protective step in front of Obi-Wan. Xanatos gave the two a long, appraising look, though Obi-Wan was mostly obscured by the master's large frame.

"You both look well considering..."

“Considering when we last met you left us to die?” Qui-Gon finished for the younger man. For a moment, the raise of an elegant eyebrow was the only response.

“Is that what you really think, Master?”

“Master?” Obi-Wan repeated stepping slightly out from behind Qui-Gon. Xanatos looked to the boy and then back to the Master Jedi, an unreadable expression on his scarred face.

“You didn’t tell him,” Xanatos stated. It wasn’t a question so Qui-Gon didn’t answer it. “Well I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised and... well, it no longer matters. Gyter,” Xanatos said with a sideways glance to the Codru-ji beside him. The large caninoid stepped forward towards Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon stepped forward to meet him. Xanatos raised a hand stopping any further movement or immediate escalation.

“No need for all that,” he said and then he turned his attention to Obi-Wan. “Give Gyter the bag, little Jedi.”

“No,” Obi-Wan answered calmly as he clutched the satchel closer to his side. Qui-Gon kept his attention on the Codru-ji even as he spoke to his apprentice.

“Padawan, hand him the bag.”

“But, Master, the mission!”

“Do as I say, Padawan,” Qui-Gon snapped. Instantly he could feel the sense of hurt and confusion roll over the bond before being pulled behind the boy’s shields. Gyter kept his eyes on Qui-Gon though one of his hands reached out towards Obi-Wan. With one last glance at his master, Obi-Wan reluctantly placed the satchel in Gyter’s large, paw like hand. With a snort, the Codru-ji stepped back beside his employer, passing him the bag. Xanatos peered inside, chuckled quietly to himself, and then closed it with what looked to Qui-Gon like a sad smile.

“Now what, Xanatos?”

“Hmm?” the younger man answered distractedly as if the Master Jedi had interrupted a deep meditation. Qui-Gon placed his hands in the sleeves of his cloak.

“You have the crystals now and the means for a quick departure, yet you linger.”

“My business on Bandomeer isn’t complete,” Xanatos replied. With a small sigh he shouldered Obi-Wan’s bag and pulled out his lightsaber, igniting it in one smooth stroke. Gyter unholstered dual blasters and Qui-Gon’s hand twitched, fighting the urge to reach for a weapon he knew was not there. Qui-Gon stared Xanatos in the eye.

“I thought you were a business man and not a criminal,” he intoned. Xanatos returned his gaze with a sense of unmistakable resolve and something else... something Qui-Gon couldn't quite identify. Regret? Before Qui-Gon could consider it further, Xanatos shifted in his stance, his blue eyes now hard and cold.

“I am what you made me, Master Jinn. Always what you made me,” he said then he raised his lightsaber into a striking position. “And now it's time to conclude my business on Bandomeer.”

Chapter 22: One Last Time

Time was running out.

Qui-Gon walked the short perimeter of the storage container once again searching for weakness. It was sturdy, made of several inches of durasteel. It would have proved quick work with his saber, but he didn't have his saber. Qui-Gon resisted the urge to curse aloud, but that did not stop him from unleashing a torrent of foul words and phrases in his mind and in a variety of languages. His lightsaber, all curses upon the little gods, had been in the satchel he ordered Obi-Wan to handover to Xanatos. Qui-Gon had not known that little gem of information at the time, but truthfully it would have made no difference. Xanatos wanted the bag and would have injured them, perhaps even killed them to get it. That Qui-Gon's lightsaber was among the bag's contents was just an added boon for the younger man. Still, Qui-Gon could not help but feel the shame of a Jedi who had lost his lightsaber.

Shrugging off his displeasure and relegating his shame to the back of his mind, Qui-Gon set himself to his task. He had to find a way out of the death trap Xanatos had enclosed him and his padawan in and, despite any question to Xanatos's previous attempts to remove them from the equation, this was indeed a death trap.

By all appearances it was simply a portable storage container, tough and well reinforced, but through the Force or through the lack of it, Qui-Gon knew this was no ordinary unit. Xanatos had seen to its modifications its new and improved design incorporating a high degree of Force shielding. Both he and Obi-Wan were again cut-off from touching the Force. They were trapped, saberless, and Force blind and then, of course, there were still the bombs to consider...

"This is all my fault," a small, dulcet voice sounded from behind him. Qui-Gon turned around to find his padawan sitting on the floor, his knees pulled tightly to his chest, his arms wrapped around his body in a protective embrace. The master spared the boy a searching glance before turning his attention back to the task of escape. Though he continued his inspection, he attempted to address his padawan's concerns.

"Assigning blame at times such as these is rarely productive. However, ease your mind and know that none of this is your fault."

"How can you say that!" the boy yelled, disbelief and outrage clear in his voice. Qui-Gon did not need access to their bond to read the tumultuous emotions churning behind those blue-gray eyes, but he also knew that this simply was not the time to deal with them.

"Padawan, focus!" the master snapped and immediately Obi-Wan stiffened in response. Qui-Gon allowed himself the luxury of a mental sigh before turning once again to

face his apprentice. "This is not the time. Right now we must focus on the task before us and not on our feelings, so you will control yourself, Padawan."

The Master Jedi waited a moment to receive Obi-Wan's slow nod and quiet, "yes, Master," before returning to his work. Suitably chastised and all the more miserable for it, Obi-Wan rose unsteadily to his feet. His jerky, unbalanced movements causing the course material of his Agri Corps uniform to shift expelling the singular content of his pocket. The small holo-recorder fell to the ground with a quiet thump and beep as it activated on impact. Before Obi-Wan had fully registered what had happened, a tiny image of Jedi Master Vresh Tivi sprang to life; his utterly serene expression seeming absurd as he stood parallel to the ground due to the tilted emitter.

"Obi-Wan, Lantis and I bring you greetings and warm wishes on this your naming day," the familiar smooth baritone rang out in the small storage unit. Without thought, Qui-Gon turned at the sound, his eyes fixed on the scene in front of him. Obi-Wan reached down and picked up the recorder, holding it almost reverently in trembling palms even as the holo-image of Vresh continued speaking.

"I know our gift isn't much, but it has been my experience that often the very things people overlook turn out to be the most valuable of treasures," the holo-Vresh smiled then suddenly his expression dimmed and grew more solemn. "Obi-Wan, I know you feel alone right now, that you've been abandoned by us, by the Jedi, but hear me clearly Obi-Wan... you have not been forgotten. You have not been abandoned, not by the Jedi and certainly not by me. You are not alone. Remember that, I beg you," the small image pleaded. Obi-Wan's eyes became increasingly glassy as the recording continued.

"What has happened," Vresh paused sighing, "what we've allowed to happen... it isn't right, Obi-Wan. It was never supposed to go this way. The Agri Corps is not your path. I know you've been told otherwise, that you think you are somehow... unworthy or incapable of being a Jedi. That is a lie, Obi-Wan, a patent untruth and I would have serious words for anyone who says otherwise," Vresh snarled his anger evident even in his hologram. Qui-Gon closed his eyes a moment, the sting of his estranged friend's words cutting through him as efficiently as any blade.

"You are meant to be a knight, Obi-Wan because you are a Jedi already. Not for your training or your midichlorian count, but for who you are," Vresh said his mouth tilted in a rueful smile. "Since I first saw you during story time in the crèche, I have been awed by your compassion, your sincerity, your Light. You are so much more than your gift, Obi-Wan. And it is a gift though I know it's hard to see that now. The Force has a plan for you. I've seen it. Yoda's seen it, but it means nothing if you don't believe it," Vresh continued. The holo-image glanced at something off to his right and then turned back to the recorder. "I'm almost out of memory, so I will be brief. If you need anything, you call me and if it's within my power I will see it done. I made a promise to you, a promise to help you fix this and I have not forgotten it. I made this message so you don't forget it either. You are not and will never be alone, not ever. On that I give my oath, Obi-Wan. May the Force be with you," the Master Jedi finished with a bow and then the image was gone, the playback complete. Obi-

Wan stood silent still holding the recorder in his hands. Qui-Gon stood frozen in place, paralyzed between the unsettled emotions rolling across the training bond and the increasingly urgent prickle of warning from his Force sense. Time was short and with each passing breath it was growing shorter. Despite his desire to deal with the turmoil the boy was feeling, Qui-Gon knew that he could not. Not yet. There simply wasn't time. Escape had to be his priority.

"Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon called, but the boy didn't move, didn't even look up. Using his "masterly" tone Qui-Gon tried again. "Padawan."

That got the response the master expected. Obi-Wan's eyes shot up to meet his own though the boy's were red-rimmed and glassy.

"Come here, please," he gently ordered. Obi-Wan mutely did as he was bid, his young face expressionless save his eyes. "I need you to give me the recorder. Its power matrix should be powerful enough to connect with the explosive we retrieved in the mine. The resulting explosion should be enough to free us," Qui-Gon spoke softly. He paused looking deeply into the troubled blue-gray eyes that stared back at him. The master swallowed thickly then added, "Please."

Qui-Gon didn't want to take the recorder from him. He didn't want to steal away and destroy something he knew meant so much to his padawan. He briefly considered using a Force suggestion to urge the boy into handing it over, but the idea was like ash in his mouth. Because of time he was prepared to force the issue, but he would not Force the issue. He owed this child more than that.

The master waited the length of two heartbeats more before he made the decision to simply take the device, but just before he could move his hand Obi-Wan spoke.

"I understand," he answered softly as he held out the recorder. Qui-Gon took the offering from his padawan's hands and examined it for himself. He looked at the small device and then to his apprentice.

"Thank you," he said. He placed a hand on the boy's shoulder, squeezing it once before turning his back on his apprentice and his attention on the storage door. With swift and determined movements he removed the outer casing, made the necessary adjustments to the holo-recorder's power matrix and connected it to the explosive he had carried in his cloak pocket. Once he had completed the modifications, Qui-Gon powered the emitter on, after setting a short delay. He retreated to the far side of the container pulling a silent Obi-Wan with him and covering the smaller body with his much larger one. A split second later the silence around the two Jedi was shattered as the violence of the relatively controlled explosion tore through the solid durasteel. When Qui-Gon turned back to the door, he was pleased to find the door was completely blown out of place revealing the empty landscape of the Bandomeer flats that surrounded the mountains that housed the southern mines. Qui-Gon turned to his apprentice.

“Let’s go,” he said turning back to the new opening and heading out, knowing without looking back that Obi-Wan would follow. A quick glance around revealed disturbing news. The speeders were nowhere to be seen which meant Xanatos had taken them. Apparently, the man was going to take no chances that the Jedi might make it out alive. Qui-Gon frowned. Unless they were extremely lucky they would not have enough time to cover the distance to the Agri Corps facility on foot, but then again staying where they were was not an option either. Near impossible survivability was still preferable to certain death.

“Now what?” Obi-Wan asked as he looked up at his master. Qui-Gon met the boy’s eyes with a calm gaze.

“Now we run,” he replied. With only a nod in response the two Jedi began to run across the plains. At first, Obi-Wan was keeping pace with the master well, but after ten or so minutes his breath was getting harder and harder to catch. Qui-Gon spared him a glance of sympathy. The child was not fully recovered from his months of relative inactivity and illness and Qui-Gon could feel his own body protesting the exertion from his barely healed injuries. Still he had to keep going. Without a word, Qui-Gon scooped up his apprentice before the child could complain. With a single-minded and fierce determination, the master kept running. He allowed himself no more focus than what was required to keep one foot in front of the other; that was until his prickle of Force sense turned into a spike of alarm.

They were out of time.

The first explosion was loud even at their distance, but the subsequent explosions gained velocity and volume as the chain reaction picked up speed until the whole world seemed a cacophony of violent thunder. Obi-Wan turned his head peering around his master’s arm. His eyes went wide as a wave of dust and smoke began to rush towards them at an alarming speed. Qui-Gon never looked back, but instead he drew even more of the Force around them, coaxing the energy into speed for a Force enhanced run.

It made little difference.

The cloud was gaining on them. Both master and padawan could now feel the heat rolling off the blast wave. When the wave was nearly upon them, Qui-Gon channeled all his energy, all his strength from escape to survival. He fell to his knees, covered Obi-Wan’s body with his own, and began to weave a complex Force web around the boy. There was a chance it would hold, that it would be enough to protect the child from the thermal violence about to wash over them both.

The heat was all around them now. Obi-Wan had grown quiet, falling unconscious under the intense heat. Qui-Gon fought to remain conscious, for when he fell the shield he had created would likely fall with him. His tunics were singed and smoking, his hair curling and breaking off in burnt wisps, but still he worked. He could feel his skin start to blister and darkness crept around the edges of his vision, but he could see something... in the distance. What it was he saw or thought he saw no longer mattered as he was forced to close his eyes in pain; the soft orbs slowly roasting in their sockets. The master managed

one last harsh draw upon the Force, funneling the last of his strength into Obi-Wan's shield and then he let the darkness and heat take him.

* * * * *

Yoda sat in his favorite chair in his quarters. He held his favorite cup and it held his favorite tea. All of these things usually brought him comfort, but not today. Not now. Now these trappings were just that, trappings and only meditative release into the Force eased the ache within him. Across from him and seated on a cushion was his friend and fellow Council member, Mace Windu. The Master Jedi was equally disturbed, his frown deeper than usual. Both Councilors had remained in an unbroken silence for quite some time, a silence that would have no doubt continued for some time longer were it not for the sudden chirp of the Grand Master's comm. console. Mace rose gracefully to his feet and crossed over to the room's communications desk. Yoda followed behind him, his gimer stick tapping softly on the carpet. Mace activated the unit.

"Mace? I thought... I asked to be put through to Master Yoda's quarters."

"Reached me you have," Yoda replied as he stepped into view. On the screen the two masters saw Vresh bow his head slightly in greeting.

"I hope I am not disturbing you, Master, but I wanted to know if there has been any news from Bandomeer. I have not heard anything from Obi-Wan and..."

"You were worried about Qui-Gon," Mace finished. Vresh's jaw visibly tightened, but his tone remained mild as he spoke.

"I was concerned about the situation. Has there been any word?"

"When last we spoke to Qui-Gon recovering from his injuries he was," Yoda replied. Mace shot the Grand Master a look, but said nothing. Vresh, noticing the byplay, paused a moment before asking his next question.

"And Obi-Wan?"

"Recovering too he was when Qui-Gon reported," Yoda answered and Vresh let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

"Taken Obi-Wan as his padawan, Qui-Gon has," Yoda added and immediately Mace saw the other Jedi tense, his shock and anger almost visible in the Force despite the distance between them.

"He what?"

“After you informed us of his situation, the Council contacted him. It was during that call the Qui-Gon informed us of his intention to take Kenobi as his apprentice. The Council...” Mace paused with a brief glance to Yoda. “The Council has yet to render its decision on the matter.”

“Discuss we will when to Coruscant they return,” Yoda added. Vresh’s expression was carefully blank as he took a few moments to think.

“My padawan and I are currently en route back to the Temple. We should be there in 20 hours. I would very much like to be present for that discussion, Master Yoda,” Vresh intoned. Yoda’s ears twitched slightly, but he said nothing. Mace looked to the ancient master and then back to the screen with a nod.

“It will be permitted,” he replied, “but Vresh, you should know that... there have been reports of an incident on Bandomeer.”

“What kind of incident?”

“The explosion and collapse of the entire mining system. The Agri Corps and the mining companies have been evacuated to several ships that are now holding in orbit until it is deemed safe to return to the planet’s surface. At the moment, there is still significant geo-instability and small seismic events occurring,” Mace paused again waiting for acknowledgement of his words. Vresh nodded and he continued, but this time his voice was deeper and more hushed than before.

“The last report from the Agri Corps administrator did not account for the whereabouts of Qui-Gon or Kenobi.”

“Are they...,” Vresh started, but his voice failed him and he had to begin again. “Is it possible that they have been missed in the chaos? That they are aboard ship and have been overlooked?”

“We are still awaiting further word,” Mace hedged not wanting to say the same possibility that he knew Vresh did not want to hear. “There is one more thing you should know.”

“Why do I get the feeling you have not been holding the good news for last?” Vresh replied with a rueful smile. “What? What is it?”

“In Qui-Gon’s reports he mentioned...,” Mace sighed closing his eyes for a moment then he looked straight at Vresh. “Xanatos was on Bandomeer,” he said. Vresh failed to stop a gasp from escaping his lips. He closed his eyes and slowly shook his head.

“Force help us all.”

Chapter 23: Of Things Unsaid

Qui-Gon came to consciousness slowly, his first thought that of surprise. He hadn't expected to wake or at least not in his physical form. Jedi did not fear death nor did they rush to it, but when faced with the inevitability of their end they accepted it. In that moment, in the firestorm of the blast wave, Qui-Gon had come to such an acceptance, at peace with his fate. His only regret then was for Obi-Wan and the uncertainty of not knowing whether his padawan would live or would follow him into the Force. But here he was... alive which meant his padawan should be alive as well. Without even opening his eyes, Qui-Gon reached out along the bond and was greeted with an enthusiastic wave of relief and joy from Obi-Wan. Qui-Gon sent his own relief to the boy along with a touch of gentle reassurance. The sound of a door sliding open brought the master's awareness back to the outside world. He opened his eyes slowly, blinking repeatedly as he adjusted to the brightness of the room.

"You're awake, that's good," an unfamiliar Jedi said as he stepped to where Qui-Gon lay. "You were fortunate that some of these crafts had bacta facilities. You managed to obtain some rather extensive injuries."

Qui-Gon took in the Jedi Master before him. Humanoid, male, tall, but not quite as tall as he, pale white skin marbled with gray streaks, dark purple hair with flecks and highlights of green that hung past his waist in one thick braid, and a decorative red and gold veil that covered his eyeless sockets. A Miraluka then. Blue robes and a dark brown cloak meant he was a Healing Master. Qui-Gon did not personally know this Jedi, but he knew who he must be.

"Master Ja'Prinn," he greeted. The Master Healer gave a short bow, which Qui-Gon returned with a nod; the most he could manage from his present supine position.

"Master Jinn," Cesca Ja'Prinn replied as he placed an audio reader bud in his ear so he could study the displays by Qui-Gon's medical couch. The recumbent master closed his eyes and took an inner stock. Ja'Prinn noted the man's change in focus, his Force aura shifting slightly from the tan of peace to a dark shade of blue that denoted concentration. Though Cesca was blind, as were all Miralukas, those of his kind who were Force sensitive like he was could "see" the emotional states of others through the shifting colors of their Force auras. The dark blue change of Jinn's aura told the healer that the other Jedi was attempting to focus his attention, most likely on a personal assessment of his health and injuries. Ja'Prinn continued his study of the master's biometrics as he spoke.

"You had first and second degree burns over much of your body and an interesting collection of older, barely healed injuries. The bacta treatment has repaired the worst of it. The most severe burns, however," he paused ending the playback in his ear and turning directly to his patient who had now opened his eyes. "Those burns will require bacta

dressings for the next several days. You had to be taken out of the tank before the last of the burns could heal due to the need of the tank for other more critical patients.”

Qui-Gon nodded. His own internal scan had confirmed as much about his state of healing. The master slowly moved himself into a seated position; the tight, scarred skin of his back and shoulders pulling painfully as he did so.

“How is Obi-Wan?” he asked. Even though he had felt nothing worrisome from the boy through the training bond, Qui-Gon wanted to hear the assurance from the healer himself.

“The youth had a few superficial lacerations and bruises. They have been treated conservatively and left to heal on their own. He was also underweight for a human male of his age and height. I will of course follow procedure and leave notice of my findings and recommendations with his appropriate Agri-Corps guardian,” Ja’Prinn replied primly.

“That will not be necessary, Master Ja’Prinn, but I appreciate your thoroughness in the matter,” Qui-Gon offered sincerely. The healer dipped his head in acknowledgement.

“I was only attending to my duties, Master Jinn. Protocol is quite clear in these situations.”

“I thank you just the same,” Qui-Gon responded as he swiveled around in his bed and prepared to stand. Immediately, the healer placed a restraining hand on his chest.

“It would be improper for you to be out of bed at this time. You are no longer in danger, but you are not yet recovered. As there are no pressing concerns for you at the moment I must insist that you remain abed,” Ja’Prinn intoned as he gently, but firmly pushed the other master back onto his medical couch; compromising with the master for a reclining position. More tired and sore than he cared to admit Qui-Gon was unwilling to argue and acquiesced with a sigh.

“Very well. I suppose my “pressing concerns” can be brought here to me instead, lest I suffer your wrath,” Qui-Gon stated dryly. “Please have Obi-Wan come to me here.”

The pale skin visible above the healer’s eye veil drew slightly together.

“The boy, Kenobi, is currently being housed with the other non-critical Corps members aboard this ship. It is my understanding that once the current ground team gives clearance, he and the others will be returning to the surface to begin salvage and reconstruction efforts.”

“Obi-Wan will not be returning to the planet. He will remain here with me and he will journey with us back to Coruscant.”

“Those were not my instructions from the Council, Master Jinn,” Ja’Prinn replied calmly. Qui-Gon, on the other hand, had to quickly check his flash of irritation though the healer still noticed the master’s reaction as a spark of magenta that arced through the master’s Force aura.

“Then you have not spoken to the Council since your departure, I take it,” Qui-Gon answered smoothly. The healer shook his head.

“I had intended to file my report after concluding my exams of you and the child. I have only just done so.”

“Ah,” Qui-Gon responded. “Then allow me to update you. Obi-Wan Kenobi has been taken as my padawan. As such, it would be improper for him to return to the planet,” he said deliberately mimicking the healer’s smug attention towards procedure and protocol. It appeared to work.

“Of course, Master Jinn. I will see that your padawan is sent to you at once.”

“Thank you,” Qui-Gon replied as he settled back more firmly into the pillows behind his back. It was a matter of a few moments between Ja’Prinn’s departure and Obi-Wan’s arrival. He stood meekly in the doorway not yet stepping into his master’s room, but Qui-Gon could feel the steady thrum of relief tinged with a touch of excitement. He hid his smile as he called the boy over.

“Come here, Padawan,” he said. Obi-Wan stepped into the room and came forward until he was standing beside Qui-Gon’s medical couch.

“I’m glad to see you are well... Master,” Obi-Wan said, adding the title shyly.

“As am I, Padawan,” Qui-Gon answered with a small, but genuine smile then his expression sombered somewhat. “Padawan, do you know the circumstances of our rescue?”

Obi-Wan’s forehead immediately creased and Qui-Gon could detect wisps of confusion creep over the bond. The boy shook his head slowly.

“I... I thought you saved us, Master,” Obi-Wan offered. Qui-Gon gestured encouragingly for the boy to continue. Obi-Wan took a deep breath.

“We were running, but we weren’t fast enough. You...,” he paused the space between his brows creasing as he searched for the right word. “You weaved the Force like a... like a net. You put it around me and... the next thing I knew I was aboard this ship and you were gone.”

Qui-Gon searched his own memories, but could find none between his last thoughts of protecting Obi-Wan and waking up only minutes ago.

“It appears we owe someone our gratitude and our lives. The Force was with us these past days, Padawan,” he intoned.

“What happens now, Master?” Obi-Wan asked his voice even, but soft. Qui-Gon held his gaze for several moments.

“Now, we go home.

* * * * *

Qui-Gon allowed himself a brief moment of pleasure as he rotated his shoulders and stretched his back muscles. The stiff pull of skin had eased much over the past few days confirming that the grafts were healing nicely. The healer, Ja’Prinn, continued to dress his burns daily and each night Qui-Gon slept in a healing trance. All in all, his beleaguered body was well on its way to recovery, but there was still one injury he had not attended to. The smile the master had displayed at his regained movement faded as his thoughts turned to the conversation he knew was coming, a conversation that was long overdue.

Erasing the frown that had set upon his features, Qui-Gon schooled himself into his usual serene countenance and left his small shipboard quarters. He cast his awareness subtly out along the training bond searching for his padawan. He was met with a sense of tempered giddiness and concentration. Obi-Wan was in the cockpit of the ship. Apparently, his apprentice was fond of flying. Immediately it occurred to Qui-Gon that he knew next to nothing about the boy; something he would need to rectify if their relationship were to be successful. With his destination determined, Qui-Gon made his way to the bridge of their transport vessel where he found both his pilot and his padawan only the pilot wasn’t piloting. Obi-Wan was.

“And here I thought only those with the proper piloting credentials were allowed to fly,” Qui-Gon commented from his position in the hatchway. Obi-Wan spun around with a startled expression while the pilot, a Corellian, just crossed her arms and leaned back in her seat with a well cultivated nonchalance.

“The kid’s got some chops and I didn’t mind the company.”

“Perhaps we should be paying him your fee then,” Qui-Gon remarked dryly.

“You wouldn’t do that to a poor, old spacer now would you?” the pilot smiled as she rose to her feet and crossed over to stand in front of the much taller Jedi Master. “You’re looking much better now, Qui-Gon.”

“I am feeling much better,” he replied as she stepped forward into his easy embrace. “I’m sorry I was unable to greet you properly when we boarded, Appen.”

“Since you were on the wrong side of crispy when they brought you aboard, I’ll forgive you,” the red-haired vixen smiled with a wink, “this time.”

“It’s been awhile.”

“Ages and ages, but then again the galaxy is a big place.”

“Not so big,” Qui-Gon said his expression slightly more serious. Appen patted him lightly on his chest.

“None of that, now, but you could tell a certain Jedi Master he could drop me a line from time to time.”

“I will see that your message is passed along,” Qui-Gon answered. Appen’s gaze narrowed as she studied him for a few moments. Then, without warning, she thumped him on his arm.

“You two are fighting... again,” she said with a glare. Qui-Gon looked over her shoulder to where Obi-Wan was still sitting in the co-pilot’s chair watching them with wide eyes.

“A conversation for another time,” he placated. “For now, I need to speak with my apprentice, if you can spare him.”

Appen glanced back at Obi-Wan and then to Qui-Gon.

“Sure, I guess I can handle this bird by myself,” she replied then she turned to Obi-Wan. “You heard the man, Pilot.”

Obi-Wan slid out of his seat and bowed to their actual pilot.

“Thank you for the opportunity, Captain Stormare.”

“Anytime, Squirt,” she answered as she ruffled Obi-Wan’s hair affectionately causing him to blush brilliantly. Qui-Gon mentally rolled his eyes and suppressed a smile.

“Come, Padawan,” he said turning on his heels and leaving the cockpit. Without glancing back he knew that Obi-Wan was only a half step behind. The two Jedi walked the short distance back to the room that served as the ship’s mess hall. The space was small, but functional requiring little actual room for a simple transport vessel whose complement usually remained between three to five people. The master took a seat on one side of the single table that graced the eating space. His padawan silently took the seat across from him, his eyes eager, but his expression neutral as would befit a Jedi.

Qui-Gon took a long assessing look at the boy that sat across from him before speaking.

“Padawan.”

“Yes, Master?”

“There are things that we need to discuss before we reach Coruscant,” he began carefully. Obi-Wan, for his part, simply nodded and waited for his master to continue. Qui-Gon took a measured breath before speaking again.

“I feel I must once again apologize to you for the things I said when last we were on Coruscant. Master Yoda specifically asked me to speak with you, to help you, but in my ignorance... my arrogance, I misunderstood his intent. I am certain now that Master Yoda wanted me to speak with you because he had hoped I would take you as my padawan. That he knew I was supposed to take you as my padawan,” Qui-Gon said, pausing as he tried to gauge the boy’s reaction. Through the bond he could feel very little as the child was tightly shielding his emotions. The shields were crude, as would be expected at his novice level and could be easily penetrated if the master so chose, but of course he would not. Instead, he studied the boy’s subtle expression changes, his year’s of diplomacy and studying body language coming to bear. Surprisingly, he could read very little from the child’s expression as Obi-Wan’s stoic mask had yet to give even the tiniest slip.

The two sat there for several moments before Obi-Wan spoke.

“Yet you didn’t,” he finally said.

“No,” Qui-Gon answered with a slight sigh. “No, I did not. I’ve already spoken to you of the bond between us, of how I realized that the bond had been there at our very first meeting and of how I ignored it. Deliberately. That...” the master paused as he searched for the right word, “denial, I believe is related to your subsequent illness on Bandomeer. That your feelings were somehow a result of a bond that was never fully formed. I don’t understand exactly how that is possible, but I do believe it to be true, nonetheless.”

“Then you only took me as your padawan because of the bond?” Obi-Wan asked hesitantly, his voice the only measure of his discomfort at the master’s disclosure.

“Yes and no,” Qui-Gon began as he clasped his hands together and leaned forward onto the table. “The existence of the bond does mean that the Force wants this pairing. Therefore, our relationship as master and apprentice is an extension of the Force’s will. I would prove myself only more the fool to ignore it still and you have already suffered too much for that folly. That is the ‘yes’ of your answer.”

“And the no?” Obi-Wan pressed, still respectful, but not giving an inch of relief to the older man.

“The ‘no’ is that the bond is not the sole reason behind my decision.”

“Then why?” Obi-Wan blurted out, the plea in his eyes matching the desperation for understanding his master could see plainly in his expression. Qui-Gon held his gaze for a moment, but found himself forced to look away as he prepared to answer.

“The message,” he began haltingly. “What Vresh said in your naming day message... I do not have his or Master Yoda’s talent for foreseeing, but,” he paused as he once again met the blue-gray eyes that stared at him from across the small table. “I know what he said to be true. That I made you doubt that... That my actions nearly... I am truly sorry, Obi-Wan.”

Qui-Gon finished his admission softly then waited for the boy’s judgment. He would either forgive him or he would not. He would either choose to remain his padawan or he would not. There was nothing left for the master to do except wait and accept whatever answer the boy gave. Obi-Wan said nothing for several moments. Instead he stared into the dark blue eyes of the man who would be his master. He kept staring because he was searching for something. And he found it.

“I forgive you, Master Qui-Gon,” he replied quietly. Qui-Gon then found himself searching the boy’s eyes and the bond for any hint of doubt, but he found none. The only doubts he felt now were within himself. As if sensing the master’s morose thoughts, the boy dared one last question.

“Master, you knew the man from Offworld... from before Bandomeer,” he stated and at Qui-Gon’s slow nod, he continued. “How did you know him?”

“He was once... my apprentice.”

Obi-Wan sat wide-eyed and stunned. Of all the answers he had contemplated that had not been one of them. Qui-Gon took a deep breath and leaned back away from the table. He kept his gaze directed towards Obi-Wan, but in truth, he was not looking at him, but at something both far away and very, very close to him.

“Xanatos was my second padawan. His was never an easy apprenticeship,” he sighed. “When the time came for his trials for knighthood, he was faced with a choice. Light or dark. He chose dark... and he fell.”

“You blame yourself for his fall?” Obi-Wan asked. The gently posed question startled Qui-Gon out of his memories. He again turned his focus on the child before him.

“I was his master. His failure was my own. That is why I did not want you as an apprentice. I could not bear to fail someone like that again.”

“I don’t think you will,” Obi-Wan said with a seeming certainty that Qui-Gon couldn’t fathom. Before he could reply, Obi-Wan continued. “Master Vresh told me I would be a great knight and you said the Force wanted us together, so... this time... you won’t.”

Though deep within himself Qui-Gon still held doubts, he could not help the small smile that graced his expression as he gazed upon this child... his padawan... who looked at him with such trust and assurance.

"It is said that when the student also teaches the master, it is a good match. At this moment, you show yourself to be a far wiser Jedi than I, my padawan," he spoke finally, but then his smile turned rueful. "However, there are others who do not share your confidence in me. When we return to the Temple the Council will question us. They will question you."

Obi-Wan felt a bit of fear at that pronouncement, but he also felt something else... something stronger... something he hadn't felt for a long time. Faith.

"The Council may ask me what they wish, but I want you as my master, Master. Nothing they can say will change that," he replied. It was just that simple and just that complex.

Qui-Gon Jinn would be his master or he would be no Jedi.

* * * * *

The time had come. Over the passing days, master and padawan had spent much more time talking. Talking of their fears, their mistakes, and most importantly, their resolve. Still, when the time came and the ramp of their small transport began to lower, Qui-Gon could not ignore the bright blossom of disquietude in his chest. Through the bond, he could sense Obi-Wan's similar anxiety, but also his determination and that eased his own ache a bit. Together they descended the ramp, Master Ja'Prinn in the lead, Qui-Gon next, and Obi-Wan following two steps behind him and to his right.

As the master expected, members of the Council awaited them on the landing dock. The trio reached their welcoming party and exchanged bows. Masters Windu, Gallia and Koth represented the Council and Mace immediately turned and addressed the master healer of their group.

"Master Ja'Prinn."

"Master Windu."

"Do you have anything to add to the report you sent us regarding the health of either Master Jinn or the child, Obi-Wan Kenobi?"

"Nothing, Master Windu. Both have recovered nicely from their wounds and illness. I find no sense of stress or dysfunction in the child though he still has much weight to recover to be consistent with the norms of his race and age. Master Jinn has healed much over the past days, but I would recommend at least another tenday of rest and

rehabilitation before returning him to active service,” he replied. Mace turned to his fellow Councilors and then back to the healer.

“Thank you for your service, Master Ja’Prinn. You may return to your duties,” the Korun Councilor said in dismissal. With another deep bow, but not another word, Ja’Prinn left the assemblage and journeyed into the Temple. Once the healer was gone, Mace turned his attention to the youngest of their group.

“Kenobi.”

“Yes, Master Windu,” Obi-Wan replied stepping forward. Mace gestured to the Zabrak Councilor on his left.

“You will go with Master Koth. He will see to your needs until this... situation is resolved.”

“There is no situation to resolve,” Qui-Gon said stepping forward and placing himself nearly in front of Obi-Wan.

“Master Jinn,” Mace began warningly, but Qui-Gon would hear none of it.

“I have asked Obi-Wan to be my padawan and he has accepted. There is nothing more to discuss.”

“There is a great deal to discuss, Master Jinn,” Master Gallia cut in smoothly. “But I believe you would agree that this is not the place or time for that discussion,” she said with a subtle tilt of her head toward the young boy standing behind him. Qui-Gon opened his mouth to respond, but stopped as he felt the weight of a small hand on his forearm. He looked down at his padawan and the two shared a conversation of no words or thoughts, just an accord born of faith in the each other and in the Force. Qui-Gon gave a slight nod and Obi-Wan once again stepped forward.

“Master Koth?” he asked politely of the Councilor. Eth smiled pleasantly in return and gestured towards the Temple.

“This way please, Obi-Wan,” he said and the remaining three masters watched the two leave in a heavy and tension filled silence. Finally, the trio turned to the Temple and entered as well. The three walked in silence through the hallowed halls until Qui-Gon could no longer keep his tongue.

“This is wrong and you know it.”

“Please do not be angry, Qui-Gon,” Adi answered. “This is difficult for all involved, but we must look out for the best interests of the child. You would fault us for that concern?”

“The concern over the best interests of any child is never a fault,” Qui-Gon replied coolly. “It is not your concern I question, it is your reasoning for that concern. Has my status within the Order changed somehow from maverick to monster in my absence?”

“No one is accusing you, Qui-Gon,” Adi tried, but the long-haired master shook his head.

“Then why am I being challenged? Why are we being separated?”

Before Adi could respond Mace answered him as they all came to a stop in front of the door to Qui-Gon’s quarters.

“There will be a hearing before the Council tomorrow morning. Whatever there is to be said will be said there,” the dark-skinned master spoke with a rueful and exasperated sigh. Qui-Gon’s jaw tensed at his words, but he said nothing more. Instead, he walked into his home and palmed the door shut behind him.

Chapter 24: Of Things Unheard

Obi-Wan poked at the well-done nerf steak sitting on his plate. He had been shown to his temporary quarters in the guest wing of the Temple by Councilor Koth and then left to his own devices with the strict instruction not to leave those rooms until he was called for. Any familiarity with the Temple that might have brought him comfort at his return to Coruscant was vastly diminished with his separation from his peers. He wasn't taken to the initiate dorms or his master's rooms. He was given only a temporary place to stay; a place usually reserved for strangers and visitors to the Jedi home. The certainty he had shown his master aboard their transport was slowly eroding with each passing hour he spent alone in the stark and quiet space of his rooms. Even the arrival of his latemeal, brought by a droid, did not peek his interest. Thus he spent most of his time poking at his dinner rather than trying to eat it.

Obi-Wan dropped his fork on his plate and fell back in his chair in an undignified slouch. He contemplated just going to bed and calling an end to the day when the door chime sounded. Probably the droid returning to collect his plate. With a sigh, Obi-Wan walked to the main door and palmed it open.

"Obi-Wan."

Obi-Wan's eyes drifted up to meet his visitor's, growing wide as recognition set in.

"Master Vresh!" he shouted through a smile. Vresh's face split into a broad grin as he opened his arms to the boy who immediately rushed into his embrace.

"Obi-Wan, it's so good to see you," the master said as he held the boy close. After several long moments, Obi-Wan pulled back a bit embarrassed by the scene he had created. He gestured for the master to come inside. Vresh stepped in and the door slid closed behind him. The master took a moment to take in the room and its occupant. Standard guest accommodations, not ornate, but comfortable. He glanced over to the small table where a plate of unfinished food sat. His gaze then fell on the youth in front of him, tired and underweight, but smiling brilliantly.

"It seems I interrupted your meal," Vresh said. "And it looks like you've missed a few too many already."

Obi-Wan darted a glance at the still full plate then looked back at the tall master.

"Things got a little weird for a while..." he muttered. Vresh placed a hand on his shoulder and led him to the small couch in the center of the living space.

"Why don't you tell me about it?" he asked as the two sat down.

"I don't even know where to start," Obi-Wan replied with a shake of his head. Some of the longer strands of his coppery hair fell in his eyes with the sudden motion. Vresh gently brushed the locks aside.

"Why not start at the beginning, hmm? When last we spoke you mentioned that your vision had come true?" Vresh prompted. He watched carefully as Obi-Wan nodded slowly and organized his thoughts.

"It was all true... the cave, the danger..."

"But not the death," Vresh finished. Obi-Wan looked up at him with small smile.

"No, not the death. Master Qui-Gon came to rescue me from the mines after Xanatos kidnapped me, but there was a cave-in and he saved me, but was hurt himself. I used the Force to get him out, but he was hurt really, really badly, but he got better and then there were these strange crystals that Xanatos wanted from the mines. We had one, but it got lost so I went back for it and then Master Qui-Gon went back for me and then I found one of the bombs and Xanatos took us prisoner and he took the crystals and he locked us in a storage unit and,"

Vresh finally held up his hands when Obi-Wan's recitation never paused for breath.

"Whoa! Whoa! Whoa! I thought only ships were capable of lightspeed," he grinned when he saw the boy's shy grin in return, but then the master's expression grew more serious. "You say Xanatos was there and he kidnapped you?"

"Well, yeah. He didn't really want me though. He just wanted to get Master Qui-Gon to stop investigating him and he thought I was Master Qui-Gon's padawan, so he took me to mess with him," Obi-Wan replied. Vresh nodded grimly. This was the opening he was looking for to talk about the thing that had been disturbing his meditations since he was first told of it.

"I heard that you are Qui-Gon's padawan."

"Well, I am now, but I wasn't then," Obi-Wan responded positively beaming then his face fell. "Or at least I think I am. Master Qui-Gon said that the Council doesn't want him to teach me because of what happened with Xanatos."

"You know what happened with Xanatos?" Vresh asked, his eyebrows raised.

"Yeah, Master told me," Obi-Wan replied simply. Vresh sat in silent surprise at the admission. He knew personally that Qui-Gon never spoke about his second padawan if he did not have to. Most times he just tried to bury it, tuck it away as if it never happened at all. It was a type of self-imposed denial that he was well acquainted with. Still, Xanatos was not Vresh's only concern.

“And what of before?”

“Before?” Obi-Wan repeated, clearly puzzled by the question.

“Before he asked you to be his padawan. As I recall, he had some rather misguided views on the matter.”

“Oh. That,” the boy replied softly, lowering his head.

“Yes, that,” Vresh answered in an equally soft voice. He put a finger under the boy’s chin and tilted his head back up towards him. “How do you feel about that?”

Obi-Wan gave a half shrug.

“He told me why he said those things and why he was wrong to. And he apologized.”

“And you,” Vresh almost said ‘believe him,’ but stopped just before the words escaped his lips. “And you accepted it?”

“I did,” Obi-Wan replied suddenly serious. “Besides, I don’t think either of us really had a choice anyway, you know, because of the bond and all.”

“What bond? Have you already formed a training bond with him?” Vresh inquired. A part of him was already privately seething at Qui-Gon’s audacity to form a training bond before getting Council approval, but then part of him was completely unsurprised that the man, yet again, would act without a moment’s regard for anyone else.

“Yes,” Obi-Wan answered. “But Master Qui-Gon said the bond was already there long before he asked me to be his padawan. Back even before I left the Temple. He said that it was because he didn’t acknowledge it that I got so sick on Bandomeer.”

“You were sick?” Vresh said once again finding himself surprised at the contents of the tale he was hearing. Obi-Wan, for his part, didn’t seem to notice.

“Yeah, I got really sick for a while, but then Master Qui-Gon did something and made me feel better, but then he got sick...,” he paused. He shook his head slightly, his hair once again falling in his eyes. “I don’t really understand that part so much, but Master said it had to do with the bond, that because the Force made it and we didn’t do as it wanted I got sick. You think that’s true?” Obi-Wan asked as he looked at the older master.

“I... I don’t know, Obi-Wan. I suppose it’s possible.”

“Do you think...”

“Do I think what, Obi-Wan?” Vresh asked. Obi-Wan held his gaze firmly.

“Do you think that Master Qui-Gon is supposed to be my master?”

Vresh suddenly found himself unable to maintain the tight eye contact with the child in the face of such an earnest question. He turned his head and looked at nothing. Instead he searched the familiar currents and eddies of the Unifying Force looking for his answer. With a sigh, he turned back to the boy who stared at him, still awaiting his response.

“I don’t know.”

* * * * *

The firstmeal droid hadn’t been gone long from his quarters when he heard the door chime for the second time that morning. Obi-Wan palmed the door open to find an unfamiliar padawan waiting outside.

“Obi-Wan Kenobi?” the young Rodian inquired politely. At Obi-Wan’s nod, he bowed slightly. “I am Padawan Glau Pana. I am to escort you to the Council chambers. Are you ready?”

Obi-Wan tugged self-consciously at his wrinkled Agri-Corps uniform as he eyed the crisp cream robes of the padawan with more than a touch of envy. He took a deep breath and tried to banish the feeling from his mind. With a shaky sense of calm he answered.

“Yes, I am ready.”

* * * * *

Qui-Gon sat on one of the stone benches outside the chamber doors of the Council room. He had been summoned some time ago, but it seemed that whatever session preceded his appointment was running over long. Finally, the large ornate doors pulled open causing him to rise to his feet. With swift and practiced movements, the master straightened his robes and walked into the round room of the Council chambers. Immediately, he noted the presence of his padawan standing in the center of the room. Apparently, the Council had seen fit to question the boy first. Qui-Gon felt a mild irritation at that, but he quickly released the emotion knowing full well he would need to remain centered and calm to face the session that was to come.

Obi-Wan glanced at him briefly before letting his gaze drop as he bowed neatly before the assembled members of the High Council and stepped back and away to give his master the center of the floor. Qui-Gon gave him a subtle nod of approval before taking his place and bowing before the Councilors.

“Masters,” he said in greeting. He straightened from his bow and serenely placed his hands in the sleeves of his cloak.

“Master Jinn,” Mace intoned with a slight head nod. To the Councilor’s far right, another member, Adi Gallia, turned her attention to Obi-Wan.

“Thank you, Kenobi,” she said, her rich, mellifluous tones echoing in the chamber. “Please wait outside.”

Obi-Wan bowed again and made to leave, but Qui-Gon raised his hand clearly gesturing for the boy to stop.

“No, Obi-Wan should remain here, after all, this concerns him as well,” Qui-Gon spoke. His statement was followed by a series of exchanged glances among the Council members. Finally, one member addressed him.

“There are many things the Council will wish to discuss with you, Master Jinn. Matters of both past and present,” Master Ki-Adi-Mundi replied with a significant look to Qui-Gon. “Are you certain you want the boy here?”

“Obi-Wan is my chosen padawan-learner. There is nothing you may ask me that he does not know or have a right to know.”

“Very well, the child can stay,” Mace stated. He then looked down at the control panel beside his seat and pressed a single button. “Master Tivi, you may re-enter now.”

Qui-Gon heard the hiss of the doors to the Council room’s small antechamber open. He watched as Vresh strolled into the room. The tall, short haired master entered, staying to one side of the Chamber. He gave a bow to the Council never once glancing at Qui-Gon. Qui-Gon turned his attention back to Mace.

“What is he doing here?”

“He requested to participate in these proceedings. Given his previous involvement with Kenobi the Council decided to grant his request,” Master Saesee Tiin answered smoothly. Qui-Gon bristled at the Ikotchi master’s cool tone, but did his best to hide it.

“If he must, but I do not recognize your reasons for his presence,” Qui-Gon replied unable to keep the hard edge out of his voice.

“Your objection has been heard and is noted,” Mace responded over steepled fingers as he leaned back in his chair. He glanced at Ki and the questions began.

“Master Jinn, it was Master Yoda who first brought the boy to your attention, correct?”

“Yes, Master Mundi,” Qui-Gon replied grateful that things were finally underway. “Master Yoda asked me to attend the Annual Initiate Exhibition so that I might observe Obi-Wan.”

“For what purpose?” The question came from Master Eth Koth. Qui-Gon turned slightly so that he might address the Council member directly.

“At first I thought it was because he wanted someone to talk to Obi-Wan about his... difficulties in finding a master and how serving the Jedi in the Agri Corps would be no less important than serving as a knight.”

“You said that was your first thought. Did your opinion change?” Ki asked. Qui-Gon replied swiveling his head again.

“Yes. I later realized that Master Yoda’s true purpose was to facilitate my taking of Obi-Wan as my padawan.”

“But, when Master Yoda asked this of you, you chose not to take Kenobi as your apprentice,” Adi continued.

“That is true, Master Gallia. That was my mistake, a mistake that I have now corrected,” Qui-Gon answered placidly even though the rapid fire questioning made him feel like he was trying to watch a hyper ball tournament. Master Even Piell’s gruff and heavily accented voice rang next in the chamber.

“This is not the first of such mistakes, though, is it, Master Jinn?”

Qui-Gon frowned uncertain of where the shorter master’s question was going.

“I am not sure what you mean.”

“Then let me be clear. This is not the first mistake you have made regarding your padawan learners.”

“If you are referring to Xanatos then simply say what it is you wish to say,” Qui-Gon replied sharply, his control and calm slipping for a moment under the one-eyed glare of the Lannik Councilor. “The Council is well aware of those facts... As is Obi-Wan.”

“Forgive us, Master Jinn, but you can understand why the loss of your previous apprentice would affect this Council’s decision for you to take another,” Master Plo Koon cut in smoothly, his voice mechanized by the distortion of his anti-ox breather.

“Xanatos’s choices were his own,” Qui-Gon answered. The long neck of Master Yarael Poof began to sway as the Councilor spoke.

“Is it your position then that, as his master, you had nothing to do with his fall?”

"I... Looking back, there were... things that I may have done differently, but of course things are always more apparent with the benefit of hindsight."

"As I recall, the Council expressed concern about your apprentice many times during his apprenticeship," Master T'un chimed in. "Perhaps hindsight was not required to see that there were problems, only attention."

"I did what I thought best at the time," Qui-Gon answered, his chin slightly raised in what most members had come to see as his typical display of casual defiance.

"Yes, Master Jinn. That is something this Council has heard from you many, many times," Master Depa Bilaba responded. Her cool, smooth voice washed a bit of the tension from the room if only for a moment. "It seems to be your response regarding decisions you've made on a number of occasions."

"Indeed," Eth added. "Your reputation as a "rebel" is well known both within and without the Jedi."

"Much to the Council's frustration," Mace muttered. Qui-Gon turned and faced his friend directly.

"I have always let my actions be dictated by the Force."

"And what of the Council? The Code? The Senate?" Saesee retorted.

"We are servants of the Force first and foremost," Qui-Gon replied mildly.

"Then Council opinions mean nothing to you?" Adi responded, her tone holding a mix of rebuke, shock, and genuine curiosity.

"With respect, Masters, I am only offering that if the Council's opinion contradicts the will of the Force, the greater loyalty must be to the Force."

"And that is for you to determine? Your wisdom exceeds that of these Masters?" T'un inquired. Before Qui-Gon could respond, he was assaulted with another question.

"Master Jinn, you encountered Xanatos on Bandomeer, correct?" Ki asked.

"Yes," Qui-Gon replied, slightly relieved at the shift to less contentious topics. "His corporation, Offworld, was engaged in a mining operation there."

"And upon meeting your former apprentice again, what was your intent towards him?"

"I am not certain I understand your question."

“Enough of this,” Even barked, cutting his fellow Councilor off before he could reply. “I will speak plainly. You planned to kill him, didn’t you Jinn?”

Qui-Gon drew himself up and squared his shoulders, unconsciously taking a battle stance.

“The Code regarding rogue and fallen Jedi is clear. I intended to take him into custody, but if you are asking whether I was prepared to kill him the answer is yes I was.”

“And you proceeded along this course of action despite the Council’s specific order not to do so?” Plo asked.

“At the time, I felt it was more important to determine what Xanatos was up to.”

“You disregarded the direct order of a Council member and as a result you suffered grave injuries and a loss of your Force sense,” Eth rejoined.

“That is not precisely what happened,” Qui-Gon replied, but before he was able to speak any further he was interrupted by the familiar voice and cadence of Master Yaddle.

“Lost your Force sense, how did you?”

“When I encountered Obi-Wan on Bandomeer I found he was very ill. He was suffering from some unknown ailment. He was very weak, depressed, and underweight. In addition, he had lost his ability to touch the Force. I... attempted to aid him by sharing some of my own Force energy with him... It helped him, but had the temporary side-effect of Force blinding me.”

“Why did you not wait for the healer you yourself asked the Council to dispatch?” he heard Adi ask to his left.

“The healer would not arrive for several days. I felt that the wait was too long.”

“Again your wisdom exceeds that of the Council,” T’un broke in. “Since you were unable to wait for a trained healer to assess the situation, can you tell us what was the cause of the boy’s illness?”

“I believe it was a result of the incomplete bond between us” Qui-Gon replied. Depa leaned forward in her seat.

“You formed a training bond with Kenobi?”

“No,” Qui-Gon answered calmly. “The bond was created by the Force. It is now my belief that because the bond was created, but not completed it caused the psychic distress and symptoms that Obi-Wan and, to a lesser extent, I felt.”

“You suffered the same symptoms as well?” Mace asked surprise and concern marking his expression. Qui-Gon noted that this was the first time Mace had actively asked him anything during the session. He also noted that Master Yoda had yet to speak. The ancient master only sat quietly in his seat, his head and eyes bowed. Qui-Gon tried not to think about how much the master’s silence disturbed him. Instead he focused on answering Mace.

“While on Arquin Naht I labored under a constant sense of malaise and encountered great difficulty with concentration and meditation. And before you ask, no I did not think to report my difficulties to the Council at the time because they did not seem worthy of note. In fact, it was not until I encountered Obi-Wan and felt the symptoms ease that I began to understand their possible significance,” Qui-Gon conceded.

“Your first experience with a Force bond, this was not,” Yaddle stated. Qui-Gon dipped his head in acknowledgement.

“No, Master. I had a similar bond with... my first padawan,” Qui-Gon answered and immediately he could sense a subtle trickle of surprise and curiosity over the bond he shared with Obi-Wan.

“Explain then your actions with this bond, can you?”

“Only that my denial of it was a mistake. A mistake I have already admitted to Obi-Wan and that now I freely admit to you. I allowed the bitter sting left by my previous apprentice to improperly influence the taking of my current padawan,” Qui-Gon replied. He gave a quick sideways glance to Obi-Wan. He pushed a feeling of genuine remorse and guilt over the bond before Master Plo’s voice brought his attention back to the Council members.

“The taking of which we have yet to permit, Master Jinn. You would do well to remember that.”

“Oh, I am very aware that the Council stands in opposition to what is clearly an issue only between my apprentice and myself. What I am still not aware of is why,” Qui-Gon answered purposefully allowing a bit of his frustration to flow through his words.

“Is evidence of your last choosing not enough of a reason for the Council to exercise caution?” Depa asked.

“Obi-Wan is not Xanatos.”

“Perhaps not, but the Council was concerned regarding that pairing as well. A concern that was not heeded.”

“And the Council did not express such concern with Jenavin because it was clear by our Force bond that the pairing was to be, just as our current Force bond illustrates the necessity of this pairing,” Qui-Gon retorted.

"Perhaps," Adi temporized.

"Tell us, Master Jinn, what did you learn of your former padawan's plans? Your report was... interesting to say the least," Eth asked changing topics yet again.

"Xanatos was harvesting mass amounts of Force crystals. Red Force crystals."

"Red Force crystals do not exist in nature, Master Jinn, surely you know this" Ki replied, his voice a bit too smug for Qui-Gon's liking. The master was rapidly losing control as this session... no this inquisition, drew on.

"I do, but I also know what I saw. They were red crystals, Master Mundi."

"And you have proof of this?"

"No," he answered as he tried to tighten the hold on his fraying control. "Circumstances prevented me from returning with the samples I had intended."

"So, we are to take your word then?" Even growled. Suddenly, a new voice was heard in the chamber.

"There were red crystals, Master. I saw them too!" Obi-Wan said as he stepped forward. He opened his mouth to say more, but the harsh look from Mace caused him to snap it shut.

"You will be silent at this time, Kenobi," the Head Council member ordered. Obi-Wan nodded, slightly abashed, and took several steps back. The boy almost seemed to be willing himself into the shadows. Qui-Gon's ire rose dramatically. He turned and stared at the Lannik Councilor through narrow eyes.

"The word of a Jedi Master is not sufficient for you?"

"Perhaps the word of this Jedi Master is not sufficient."

"Enough of this, there has been," Yaddle interrupted before things could escalate further. "To discuss the potential apprenticeship of young Kenobi are we here to do."

"Yes, please let us discuss that. Why do you oppose this action?" Qui-Gon said addressing all the Council at once. There was a subtle, but clearly derisive snort on his left.

"I would think that after all that has been said here that would be clear," Saesee replied.

"I have heard nothing that warrants the Council's interference on this matter."

“Heard nothing?” Ki repeated, his expression showing a very uncharacteristic amazement.

“Indeed,” Qui-Gon replied resolutely. To his right he heard Mace sigh. The Korun master rubbed one hand over his bald head, a mannerism Qui-Gon knew he only did when he was supremely irritated.

“Master Jinn, you have admitted that you willfully and knowingly denied the existence of a Force bond between you and Obi-Wan Kenobi. You have admitted that you rejected this boy because of your own personal reasons; reasons that you have admitted were contrary to the will of the Force. You have admitted that your actions regarding the Force bond caused the illness from which Kenobi suffered for months. You have admitted that your former apprentice, a fallen Jedi, presented a danger to Kenobi because of his relationship to you. You have admitted that you ignored the clear and specific orders from a Council member not to intervene in Xanatos Du Crion’s affairs and, as a result of your subsequent interference, both you and Kenobi nearly lost your lives. You claim exigent circumstances, but you have admitted you have no proof of which to offer this Council to substantiate your claims. And you have admitted that you have a history of such insubordination regarding orders from this Council. Yet you are going to stand here and tell us you find it unclear why the allowance of this apprenticeship is of concern?” Mace finished his dark brown eyes fixed on Qui-Gon’s. Qui-Gon took a deep breath before speaking.

“As you have so painfully pointed out I have admitted to all these things, both to you,” he began then he glanced at his apprentice “and to Obi-Wan.” He turned back to Mace. “The decision to be my padawan then should be his and his alone. You still have no right to,”

Qui-Gon’s words were cut short by the loud and echoing clack of a gimer stick striking the hard floor.

“Listened you still have not. Little choice are we left,” Yoda said sadly.

/It’s over. They are going to send me away... again./

Qui-Gon glanced at Obi-Wan, but the boy’s attention was still on the ancient master.

“Master Tivi,” Mace said breaking the silence that had descended upon the chamber. “Is there anything you would like to add?”

“No,” Vresh intoned, once again avoiding eye contact with Qui-Gon. “I have already given you my opinion on the matter. I have nothing more to add.”

“Then the Council is ready to render its decision,” Mace stated, but again Qui-Gon’s attention was diverted.

/No.../

He had heard Obi-Wan. Heard his thoughts through the training bond. It was true that telepathy was expected to develop over time for any master/apprentice connection, but never had it happened so quickly. Not even with Jenavin.

/Be at peace, Obi-Wan./ Qui-Gon sent back to his apprentice. Obi-Wan glanced at his master then, his blue-gray eyes opened wide.

/M-master?/

It was in that moment, in that simple, one word response that things began clear for Qui-Gon. He looked at his apprentice... no, he looked at Obi-Wan and he knew now more than ever before what was at stake and what he must do to secure Obi-Wan's future. Qui-Gon turned back to the members of the Council then, without a word, he sank to his knees and lowered his head to the floor, formally prostrating himself before the Council as he had never before. Several quiet seconds passed before he spoke and when he did it was from that place, that moment of luminous clarity shared with Obi-Wan.

"Masters, I place myself at your feet and at your mercy. I have erred most grievously. I have ignored the wisdom of others out of my own sense of rightness. This is the path of arrogance and the fault lies within me. Therefore, I humbly beseech this Council not to punish the child, Obi-Wan Kenobi, who is innocent in this. If you believe me unfit to be his master....," Qui-Gon paused swallowing the urge to fight for what he thought was the right course choosing instead to submit to the wisdom of others. "Please, allow another to take him. He is strong in the Force and a pure hearted soul of light. Do not punish him for my failure. I beg you. I await your judgment."

Silence that seemed to last a small eternity fell at the conclusion of his plea. Then finally, a familiar and surprisingly warm, gravelly voice responded.

"Listened you finally have. If only to one voice," Yoda said with a knowing glance to Obi-Wan. Qui-Gon looked up at the old master as Yoda fixed his gimlet gaze upon him. "It is a start. Allowed you will be to take Obi-Wan as your padawan."

"Thank you, Masters."

* * * * *

"I still can't believe this is real. That this is really happening," Obi-Wan said as he stepped into Qui-Gon's... no, his and his master's home. His master smiled gently at the somewhat awe-stricken youth and relieved him of the bundle of clothes in his arms. Qui-Gon laid the clothing aside in his armchair and turned back to his padawan.

“Believe it, my padawan. This is your home now and I will give you time to get settled, but first,” he said turning to gesture to two meditation mats by the balcony doors. “There is something we need to do.”

Obi-Wan looked up at his master and then to the mats. With a brilliant smile and a nod he went and took his seat on one of the cushions. Qui-Gon first went and retrieved a small box from a nearby shelf before folding himself neatly on the cushion facing his apprentice. He placed the box to his side and opened it revealing a well-used, but well-kept set of clippers, some leather ties, and an assortment of colored beads. He reached down and took the clippers in hand, then he rose and circled behind Obi-Wan. Qui-Gon knelt and placed a gentle hand on the back of Obi-Wan’s head guiding him down as he began to shear off the unruly mop of copper locks.

Obi-Wan sat still by sheer dint of will as his giddiness strove to overwhelm him. Finally, the last of the sunset colored hair drifted to the ground and the clippers were turned off. Qui-Gon got up and took his seat across from his apprentice. As he put the clippers away, Obi-Wan ran one hand idly over the short crop of hair left on his head.

Qui-Gon turned his gaze to meet that of his apprentice. He smiled briefly then his expression turned serious. Obi-Wan’s expression soon echoed his master’s seriousness.

“I take you, Obi-Wan Kenobi, as my padawan learner,” Qui-Gon began in his rich and rumbling baritone. “As your master, I pledge to instruct you in the ways of the Force and the Jedi. I pledge to share with you my knowledge, my experience, and my skills. I pledge to nurture your body, your mind, and your spirit, to protect you from harm, and to train you to protect others. I pledge to raise you in the Light until you become a Knight of the Order and I am no longer your master. Will you accept my pledge?”

“I accept your pledge, Master Qui-Gon,” Obi-Wan answered ritually. Qui-Gon nodded and waited now for him to speak. “I take you, Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn, as my master. As your padawan, I pledge to receive your instruction in the ways of the Force and the Jedi. I pledge to listen and to abide your orders without fail and honor your lessons in my thoughts, words, and deeds. I pledge to improve myself under your guidance physically, mentally, and spiritually. I pledge to follow where you lead me and walk my path in the Light until I am made a Knight of the Order and I am no longer your padawan. Will you accept my pledge?”

“I accept your pledge, Padawan Obi-Wan Kenobi,” Qui-Gon intoned then he reached out to gently run his fingers through a lock of hair he left uncut just behind Obi-Wan’s right ear. With a deftness that belied his large fingers, he began to divide the lock into three strands which he then started to weave together as he spoke the ritual words.

“In the master-padawan training bond there are three components: the master, the apprentice, and the Force,” he said as he continued to braid slowly. “All three must work together in harmony for a bond to be successful. The braid worn by a padawan is a symbol of this. The hair is woven with three strands, the master, the apprentice, and the Force,

interlaced and integrated to form a stronger whole. Remember this each time this braid is plaited and let the remembrance renew your spirit and your vows," he finished, as he slide one yellow bead on the braid's end, tying it off with a bit of leather.

Obi-Wan held the stubby braid between his fingers and glanced back up at his master.

"I will, Master. I promise."

Chapter 25: Under Construction

Qui-Gon was restless and he didn't know why. The day had gone well, all things considered. He had endured the crucible of the Council session and his padawan, Obi-Wan, was sleeping happily in his room just a few meters away; yet Qui-Gon was troubled.

Master and padawan had exchanged their pledges of instruction, loyalty, and obedience. Qui-Gon had given Obi-Wan the traditional haircut for human, male padawan learners and he had plaited Obi-Wan's braid while reciting the ritual words. The master and padawan then had cleaned up, eaten latemeal, and meditated together before Qui-Gon had insisted that his apprentice go to bed. Obi-Wan obeyed unenthusiastically, but dutifully; his excitement over the day's events only slightly outpaced by his fatigue.

Once the boy had gone to sleep, Qui-Gon found himself at loose ends. With a sigh, a shrug, and a weary shake of his head, Qui-Gon set himself to the task of brewing some tea. He was just adding the leaves when the door chime sounded.

"Come," he called from the kitchen. With a soft hiss the main door slid open and a tall, cloaked figure stepped inside. Qui-Gon never stopped in his movements nor did he leave the kitchen to greet his guest.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"Not at all," Qui-Gon replied from the other room. "Tea?"

"Yes, please," his guest answered as he crossed over to the couch and took a seat. A few moments later, Qui-Gon returned to the main room holding two steaming cups. He handed one to his guest then took his customary seat in his armchair.

"I'm glad you stopped by, Mace," Qui-Gon said after a few minutes silence. Mace looked at him with a raised eyebrow.

"Are you? After the session this morning... I wasn't certain if..." Mace's voice trailed off, but the unsaid 'if I would be welcomed' still hung in the air between them.

"The Council's opinion notwithstanding, you are my friend, Mace. That will not change easily," Qui-Gon replied, his voice colored by his fierce resolve. Something in the answer soothed Mace and he visibly relaxed at the utterance. The Korun Councilor regarded the other master.

"I am... relieved," Mace finally spoke. Qui-Gon tilted his head, studying his friend closely. A slight frown marred his expression.

“You were really in such doubt?”

“As necessary as the Council hearing was I feared it could only end one of two ways- either it would work and you would understand or it would fail and your relationship to the Order would suffer irreparable harm,” Mace supplied with a shake of his head. “I am grateful it was the former and that you now understand why we had to do it that way.”

Qui-Gon didn't answer, choosing instead to take a long slow sip of his cooling tea. Mace stared at him for several moments then looked down as he placed his own half-full cup on the low table with a sigh.

“But you don't understand, do you?”

“Honestly?” Qui-Gon began. He waited until Mace looked up to meet his gaze before deciding what he would say next. He placed his own cup on the table. “Before I answer, may I ask you something?”

Mace nodded, regarding the other master seriously.

“Are you asking me this as a Councilor or as my friend?”

“I didn't think the two had to be exclusive,” Mace responded dryly, but when Qui-Gon gave no further reply he gave a sigh and rubbed a hand absently over his bald head.

“As your friend then,” Mace answered. Qui-Gon nodded and leaned forward in his seat staring at floor, his elbows resting on his knees.

“I do understand that the hearing had a purpose greater than deciding whether Obi-Wan would be my padawan,” he temporized. “But in truth, I'm not sure exactly what happened this morning or at least what was supposed to happen.”

“Then it was all an act?” Mace asked, his voice somewhat sharp. The tone of the question did not escape Qui-Gon's attention. His head shot up and he found himself responding with equal heat.

“Of course not!”

“Then why did you do it?” Mace yelled.

“Because Obi-Wan is more important than my pride!” Qui-Gon yelled back. Silence fell as the two masters stared at each other, each breathing heavily yet silently, nostrils flared and jaws tensed. Neither man was able nor willing to break the quiet stalemate, but the option was taken from their hands when the soft hiss of a door sliding open echoed in the quiet space. Qui-Gon looked away from Mace to his padawan.

“Padawan?”

"I'm sorry, Master," Obi-Wan replied his voice somewhat muzzy. He was dressed in his old, worn sleep clothes and his newly cropped hair was as rumpled as the soft fabrics he wore. He stepped forward looking carefully between the High Council member and his master.

"I heard shouting..." he finished softly. Qui-Gon took a moment to consciously release his anger into the Force before speaking. A moment later he could feel Mace doing the same. Qui-Gon crossed over to where Obi-Wan was still standing expectantly.

"I apologize, Obi-Wan. We did not mean to wake you."

"Were you and Master Windu fighting?" Obi-Wan asked. Qui-Gon glanced back at Mace and was met with a faint, wry smile. He turned back to his apprentice.

"We were not... fighting. We were... discussing some matters of importance."

"You discuss awfully loud, Masters," Obi-Wan replied with a grin. Qui-Gon felt the corners of his mouth creep up seemingly on their own accord.

"Imp," the master said as he ruffled the boy's hair affectionately. "All is well here, Padawan and it is quite late. Back to bed with you."

"Yes, Master. Master Windu," Obi-Wan acknowledged with a short bow before returning to his room. As the door to his room shut, Qui-Gon began to speak, but he did not turn around. His gaze remained fixed on the door to his padawan's room.

"He never doubted that I should be his master. Even after everything I said to him, everything that happened to him... He never doubted me."

"We never doubted you either, Qui."

"Would that I believed that," Qui-Gon sighed. "But I fear that even those closest to me had grave doubts... Doubts that I gave them good reason to have."

"You're speaking of Vresh," Mace filled in, but Qui-Gon gave no reply. "You should know that when there were some among the Council who began to doubt, it was Vresh who tipped the scales back in your favor."

Qui-Gon turned around, a single eyebrow raised over his leonine features.

"After what he has said in the past and what took place this morning, I find that difficult to believe."

"It was Vresh's testimony that ultimately swayed things in favor of the Council giving you a chance, Qui-Gon. But know this, the Council never doubted you," Mace continued. "What we doubted was your ability to listen to the wisdom of others. Your ability to hear a

voice other than your own for once. Your intention to take Kenobi as your padawan simply provided an opportunity for the Council to address those doubts.”

“I am not so intractable or thick-headed as to believe that I am all knowing, Mace. I am as fallible as any Jedi. As any man, for that matter.”

“Yes,” Mace answered, “but when you’ve decided on a course of action you think is right you will not be swayed. Sometimes it is strength, but sometimes your narrow focus causes great injury to those around you, your intentions aside.”

Qui-Gon took a step forward as he turned over Mace’s words in his mind.

“Then... it was all to get me to notice?”

“Yes.”

Qui-Gon stood silent for a moment and then nodded.

“Alright, I’ve noticed. Now what?”

“Now,” Mace replied as he rose to his feet. “You do what you do best. You teach.”

* * * * *

Sleep found Qui-Gon easily after Mace left his quarters. His mind finally stilled enough to permit rest, though he would have much to meditate on over the next few days. To simply shrug off a lifetime of self-assuredness and reliance in favor of deferring to others was almost unthinkable, but he would have to think about it. The Council obviously thought it was important for him to see this and, hopefully, to change because of it. Qui-Gon may not, perhaps, always trust the Council’s judgment, but he did trust the judgment of his friends and both Mace, Yoda, and Vresh had felt yesterday’s haranguing was warranted, so he must believe it to be true. It would not be something about himself that he could change overnight, but it was something he would at least consider, if for no other reason than for Obi-Wan’s training. The clarity he had experienced briefly in the mines and again in the Council chamber only reinforced what the Force had been trying to tell him all along.

That Obi-Wan Kenobi was meant to become a great Jedi Knight.

That simple, yet powerful revelation had been the reason he had prostrated himself before the Council and it would be what he would return to, to guide him in the future. Care and training for Obi-Wan was his paramount concern and to that end, Qui-Gon had risen early.

He had work to do.

By the time the master had returned to his quarters, the sun was rising on the Coruscant horizon and, unsurprisingly, his padawan was still fast asleep. Qui-Gon placed the box he had been carrying on the low table in front of the couch. He then went to the kitchen to prepare firstmeal for himself and his apprentice. It was only a matter of a few minutes work to assemble a simple meal of Correllian kestrel eggs, fruit, and grain bread. Qui-Gon then set a pot of tea brewing before reaching out across the training bond.

/Good morning, Padawan./

/...?.../

/It is time to wake, Padawan./ Qui-Gon sent and this time he was gifted with an unintelligible mental grumble and the distinct feeling that Obi-Wan had pulled the covers over his head.

/Padawan./

/Five more minutes.../ came the sleepy reply.

/Very well. I suppose the meal I've prepared can go into the recycler.../

/...!.../

Qui-Gon had to work hard to suppress the chuckle that threatened to escape his chest at his apprentice's sudden shift towards wakefulness. After raising two padawans of his own, the master had long since learned that food was often an excellent motivation for lethargic or distracted apprentices. Sure enough, sounds of stumbling and a muffled "ow" could be heard coming from his padawan's room. Qui-Gon smiled as he placed two plates on the small dining table. He was just beginning to pour two cups of tea when a sleep disheveled and frowzy looking teen entered the main room.

"Good morning, Padawan," Qui-Gon repeated aloud.

"Good morning, Master," Obi-Wan answered around an enormous yawn. Qui-Gon gestured to the empty chair across from him. Obi-Wan took the offered seat and Qui-Gon settled in as well. Both Jedi tucked into their meals enjoying both the food and a companionable silence. Towards the end of the meal where only quiet sips of tea and the occasional nibbling of fruit remained, Qui-Gon decided to put his plan into action.

"Padawan, there are some things we must discuss."

The small cube of muja fruit that had been on its way to Obi-Wan's opened mouth was absently lowered back to his plate as Obi-Wan automatically stiffened at his master's words.

“Yes, Master?” he replied, quietly grateful that his voice had not squeaked under the nervousness he was suddenly feeling. Qui-Gon leaned back in his seat and studied the boy carefully as he sipped his tea. The master was well aware of the growing discomfort the boy was feeling under his silent scrutiny, but he let the moment stretch out a few seconds longer before speaking again.

“Now that we have made your apprenticeship formal, there are several things that require our immediate attention.”

“Of course, Master,” Obi-Wan replied seriously. “How should we begin?”

“Well,” Qui-Gon began as he sat down his cup, “first I will need to speak with your former crèche master and teachers about your academic records. Then we can see about which classes you should be placed in for this academic term. You will, of course, need to be assessed in each subject area before placement.”

Qui-Gon watched as Obi-Wan followed him with rapt attention, nodding every so often to what his master said. Qui-Gon hid his smile as he continued to speak.

“Then there is the matter of getting a full work-up from the healers, building your lightsaber, getting your new uniform from the quartermaster, creating a training schedule,” he continued, until blue-gray eyes widened in sudden comprehension.

“What did you say, Master?”

“I said we need to get you your padawan uniform and create a training schedule for you to follow.”

“No, before that,” Obi-Wan asked. Qui-Gon made a show of thinking back over his words.

“That you would need to get a complete work-up from the healers?”

“After that,” Obi-Wan pressed. Qui-Gon frowned and stroked his beard.

“I don’t recall anything else...”

“Maaaster...” Obi-Wan very nearly whined. Finally, Qui-Gon could hold back his grin no longer.

“Oh, you mean the bit I said about you building a lightsaber.”

Obi-Wan’s eyes were wide and his expression was one of barely contained joy.

“Really? I mean.... really?”

“Yes, really. In fact, I think it is long over due.”

“Oh stars!” Obi-Wan exclaimed now almost vibrating in his seat with anticipation.

“Have you given any thought to the design of your first saber?”

“I might have... a few drawings...” Obi-Wan offered a bit shyly. Qui-Gon chuckled mentally. He suspected the boy had a stack of drawings half a meter high dedicated to ideas for his first lightsaber build.

“Well then, Padawan, would you bring over that box on the low table?” Qui-Gon asked as he pointed to the container in question. Obi-Wan hopped out of his seat and retrieved the box as requested. He placed it on the table and stood beside his master, his curiosity spilling warmly across the bond.

“What is it, Master?”

“Why don’t you open it and see. It is for you, after all,” the master replied. Obi-Wan didn’t need any more coaxing. He opened the box and revealed an assortment of casings, emitters, dampeners, matrices, and more. He turned to his master.

“Is this...”

“Everything you will need to build your lightsaber, save your crystals. That we will pick out together when you have completed the basic construction.”

Obi-Wan ran one hand over the box’s contents in a semi-reverent gesture. Then he turned to his master and attacked the man with a sudden hug.

“Thank you, Master,” he whispered. Qui-Gon was startled for a moment, but he quickly wrapped his arms around the boy, returning the offered affection physically and across the bond.

“You are most welcomed, my Padawan.”

* * * * *

The next three days had been a whirlwind of activity for the Jinn-Kenobi pair. Obi-Wan had been consumed with his sketches and tinkering to the point that his master had to order him to stop his work on his lightsaber to eat, sleep, and attend to other commitments like visiting the healing halls for his physical. But as all things do, Obi-Wan’s work finally came to an end when he presented his completed hilt to his master for inspection. Qui-Gon scrutinized the boy’s work visually and through the Force, searching for any misconnection

or misalignment, any bit of wrongness to be found. Satisfied that everything was, in fact, in order he made the announcement that it was time to visit the crystal keep of the Temple.

Obi-Wan's excitement at that had been nearly palpable. The two Jedi went down to the lesser used area of the Temple complex and spoke at length with the crystal keeper, Master Beharie Kadin-Len, who explained to the young padawan the importance of selecting the proper Force crystals for use in a saber. The process of selecting was long and unhurried as picking the wrong crystal could result in disaster.

Several hours later, the decision had been made and the two were headed back to their quarters where Obi-Wan would install the crystal and prepare his saber for its first lighting.

"It's ready, Master," Obi-Wan said as he stepped to stand before his master. Qui-Gon was sitting in his favorite armchair reading through the day's newsfeeds when his padawan presented his lightsaber for a final inspection. With a nod, Qui-Gon took the deactivated saber from the child's hand and studied it closely. He scrutinized every element, focusing most intensely on the alignment of the crystals stored inside. When things went wrong the cause was usually in the alignment and an alignment error could result in anything from a failure to ignite the saber to moderate burns to the wielder to serious injury in the case of an explosion. Thus, every time a padawan was to activate a new saber or one that undergone significant repair, it was the duty of the master to ensure that all was in proper order prior to activation.

Qui-Gon handed the shined and polished hilt back to his padawan with an approving smile and nod.

"May I light it now, Master?"

"You may, Padawan," Qui-Gon replied. There was a moment's hesitation as Obi-Wan's thumb hovered over the activator button, but then the button was depressed and a brilliant blue beam shot forth from the hilt with the familiar and distinctive hum characteristic of a Jedi's lightsaber. Careful within the close quarters, Obi-Wan waved the saber around his eyes glued to the glowing, azure blade. Finally, he released the activator extinguishing the beam. He turned to his master with a brilliant grin. Qui-Gon returned it with a warm smile of his own and sent a wave of pride over the bond.

"Well done, Padawan. Now, your training will truly begin."

Chapter 26: As Goes the Master

“Master!” came a semi-impatient whine from the common room. Qui-Gon strolled into the main room to find his padawan literally bouncing in place by the door, his hands grasping his saber in a white-knuckle grip. With effort, Qui-Gon was able to suppress a smile at the young boy’s antics. He had promised the boy that, after midmeal, they would go to the training salles and do some saber work. That promise had been made three hours ago and Obi-Wan had been a bouncing bundle of excited energy ever since.

“Are you ready to go now, Master?” Obi-Wan asked hopefully as he shifted his bouncing to a marginally more restrained full body vibration. As endearing as watching his padawan lose the battle of controlling his anticipation was Qui-Gon needed to speak with the boy about rather serious matters.

“In a moment, Padawan. First there are some things we must discuss,” he said and immediately Obi-Wan responded to his master’s formal tones, his frenzied energy draining out of him like gas from a broken seal.

“Yes, Master. Of course, Master,” Obi-Wan replied with a bow, looking once again the composed and proper padawan. Pleased at how quickly the boy had calmed himself, Qui-Gon gave an approving nod before addressing his apprentice again.

“As you know and as I promised, today we will start your lightsaber training in earnest as you now have a real blade with which to practice. I know you are excited to take this next step along your path to becoming a knight, but even so, you need to understand the gravity of this step and the responsibility that comes with learning to wield a lightsaber,” he spoke and after receiving a nod of understanding from Obi-Wan he continued. “Hold out your lightsaber, Padawan.”

As ordered, Obi-Wan held out his saber for his master’s inspection, but instead of taking it from him like he expected, his master rested one hand on top of the hilt and knelt in front of him.

“Tell me, Padawan, what is a lightsaber?”

“It’s the main weapon of the Jedi,” Obi-Wan answered carefully. He tried to read his master’s expression for a clue as to what the older Jedi was after, but the Jedi’s face revealed nothing so with some thought and a deep breath Obi-Wan continued. “It’s a defensive weapon and its crystal provides a meditative focus for us. It’s a symbol of our Order and of our promise to others as peacekeepers.”

Qui-Gon nodded.

“Yes, a lightsaber is all that, but is there nothing more?” the master pressed. When he saw Obi-Wan’s brow knit in confusion he decided to try to guide the child a bit further. “What is our responsibility in using such a weapon?” he asked.

“Um,” Obi-Wan started as he bit his lip with a pensive expression marking his young features. “It’s a powerful weapon... and a dangerous one, so we would have to be careful with it, very careful,” he finished. Again, Qui-Gon nodded.

“Yes, that is quite true, but this lightsaber is still far more than a simple weapon and though it is very dangerous, it is potentially more dangerous to its wielder than its target.”

“I don’t understand, Master,” Obi-Wan answered honestly. His master nodded and Obi-Wan had the distinct feeling that his utter confusion was completely expected.

“How is a weapon more dangerous to the being holding it?”

“It would generally not be true of any weapon, but a Jedi’s lightsaber is quite different from other weapons. This lightsaber,” Qui-Gon said as he patted the hilt in his padawan’s hand. “It is your life. It is a part of you and a part of who you are just as my lightsaber is a part of me. And because it is a part of you there is an aspect of risk when wielding such power,” Qui-Gon answered, pausing as he could sense through the bond the strong befuddlement dominating Obi-Wan’s thoughts.

“Padawan, do you know of the Crystal Code?” he asked and when Obi-Wan shook his head he continued. “The Crystal Code is as old as the history of the saber itself. It is that which speaks to the relationship of a Jedi and his lightsaber. The code says that the crystal is the heart of the blade. The heart is the crystal of the Jedi. The Jedi is the crystal of the Force. The Force is the blade of the heart. All are intertwined, Padawan, the crystal, the blade, the Jedi. We are one,” Qui-Gon intoned.

“So,” Obi-Wan began somewhat hesitantly, “because my saber’s crystal and I are connected through the Force... then... it is... sensitive to the Dark and the Light sides of the Force as well?”

“Precisely, Padawan,” Qui-Gon replied as he let his pride flow over their bond. “Remember this. Control your actions. Control your emotions. Control yourself, only then can you truly control your blade. Do you understand?”

“I think so, Master.”

“Good,” Qui-Gon answered as he rose to his feet and ruffled the boy’s hair. “Then I think we had something to attend to this afternoon. That is, if you still want to?”

“Oh yes, Master!” Obi-Wan replied his earlier excitement returning faster than a smuggler breaking a blockade. Qui-Gon finally allowed himself a smile as master and padawan walked through the quiet corridors of the Temple towards the training halls. Obi-

Wan was doing his level best to keep his proper place two steps behind his master, but had to often stop moving entirely to allow his sedately walking master to pass him as he kept finding that he had rushed past the elder Jedi in his haste to reach the salles.

Obi-Wan slowed after he realized he had once again passed his master, but this time he found that Qui-Gon had stopped moving. Master Windu had come to his master's side and had entered into a conversation Obi-Wan couldn't hear. Despite his curiosity, Obi-Wan kept his distance determined not to eavesdrop. Qui-Gon sent him a quick burst of approval then the master turned his full attention to the Council member at his elbow.

"I see your padawan has a lightsaber now."

"He does. We were just on our way to the practice halls to test it out," Qui-Gon replied evenly. "But I somehow doubt you tracked me down to discuss my padawan's new saber."

"Unfortunately you are right," Mace admitted with a fairly grim expression. "We have received news from the team we sent to Bandomeer and I am afraid you won't like it."

Qui-Gon gave a sideways dart to Obi-Wan, who was trying his best to find interest in the tiled floor patterns, before taking Mace by the forearm and leading the other master a few more steps away.

"What is it?" he asked when he was certain he was out of earshot of his apprentice. He released Mace's arm and awaited what he too believed would be unpleasant news.

"Knights Simicsa and Benzali have uncovered nothing unusual regarding Offworld's operations on Bandomeer. Nothing. Not a single file, permit, or decicred out of place."

"Xanatos is many things, Mace, but he is neither sloppy nor stupid. Any signs of impropriety in his business are bound to be subtle to say the least," Qui-Gon replied with a touch of exasperation he couldn't quite hide. "What about Xanatos himself? What did the investigation team get from him?"

"Nothing. No one has spoken to him. In fact, no one can find him," Mace responded and before Qui-Gon could interrupt he raised his hands in surrender to the unspoken objection. "I know, Qui-Gon, I know, but Offworld is stalling every effort to locate him and the Jedi simply do not have the evidence or the jurisdiction to force the issue."

Qui-Gon's lips drew into a tight line as he placed his hands in the sleeves of his cloak.

"There must be something he missed, something he left behind?"

"There's nothing."

“Administrator Voluk,” Qui-Gon spoke suddenly. “I spoke to her many times regarding what I was uncovering in my own investigation. She could corroborate my story; maybe even provide new information of her own.”

“I am afraid that is not possible,” Mace answered and if it were possible his expression grew even grimmer. “Administrator Voluk is dead.”

“Dead?” Qui-Gon repeated his eyes wide. “I didn’t think she was injured in the explosions or evacuations.”

“She wasn’t. Her body was found near one of the repair scaffoldings at the main complex. To all appearances she fell and broke her neck.”

Qui-Gon’s eyes narrowed as he carefully studied the face of his friend.

“But you don’t believe that’s what happened?” he asked. Mace sighed and shook his head slightly, one hand running lightly across his bald head.

“Honestly, I don’t know, Qui-Gon. It feels...”

“A little too coincidental.”

“Yes,” Mace said finally. Qui-Gon frowned as he searched his memory for something else, something he might have missed. Suddenly, he blinked in surprised. Not something, someone.

“The scientist, Sair. He studied one of the crystals. It was lost, but his notes,”

“Benzali spoke with him already. He claims you never brought him anything to study.”

Qui-Gon took a step back, his arms falling limply to his sides in shock. He shook his head in fervent denial even as he voiced the same.

“No... that’s not possible. I had a crystal. I spoke to him about it!” he yelled. Mace shot a glance to Obi-Wan who had suddenly looked up at the two masters with an expression of surprise and fear. Mace grabbed Qui-Gon’s arm and shook him hard.

“Lower your voice, your padawan can hear you,” he hissed. Qui-Gon glanced at his apprentice, slightly abashed at his loss of control.

/Master?/

/All is well, Padawan. Forgive my outburst. I will be with you in a moment./ he sent along the bond with a wave of calm reassurance. Obi-Wan looked far from convinced, but

he turned away and resumed his inspection of the floor. Qui-Gon turned back to Mace who gave him a hard look. Qui-Gon nodded to the unasked question and Mace let his arm go.

“Is it possible he could have been tampered with?” he asked calmly.

“It’s... possible, I suppose, but without his consent we would have no way of knowing and Knight Benzali has reported that he has already been... less than cooperative.”

“So, now what?”

“Now? Now nothing.”

“Mace,” Qui-Gon bit out harshly, but after a look from Mace he took a calming breath and started again. “Mace, Xanatos was collecting Force crystals for a reason. Iliia’s death, Sair’s sudden memory loss... it all points to him desperately wanting to keep the reason for his being on Bandomeer quiet. We must do something.”

“We can’t do anything, Qui,” Mace snapped back, but then he too forced himself to calmer tones. “But, I will make sure the investigation remains open. Perhaps if we find more evidence...” the Councilor finished with a small shrug. “It’s the best I can do.”

Qui-Gon didn’t like it. It wasn’t enough, not nearly enough, but it would have to do. He closed his eyes with a sigh as he looked for and found his center.

“I’m sorry, my friend,” Mace offered. Qui-Gon opened his eyes and gave the man a small, yet sad smile.

“You have no fault in this,” he answered wearily. “If there is any fault to be found it is mine. We will just have to wait and hope that when we do find out what Xanatos is up to it won’t be too late and I have no desire to expose him to Obi-Wan again. Once was more than enough.”

“The Force will see us through,” Mace replied with a pat to Qui-Gon’s shoulder. Then with a short nod of his head, the Councilor took his leave. Qui-Gon took another calming breath and then moved to rejoin his apprentice. Obi-Wan looked up at his master’s approach.

“Master, is everything alright?”

“No,” the master answered honestly. “But it’s nothing that you need worry yourself about. Come, we still have a saber to test.”

Through the bond Qui-Gon could feel that Obi-Wan was not satisfied with his answer, but that he also understood that it was something that his master was not going to discuss further. The apprentice nodded and the two resumed their slow walk to the training salles.

It only took a few minutes to reach the practice halls. All of the private rooms were occupied leaving only the larger rooms available. There would likely be other masters and padawans in the larger rooms, but there would also be plenty of space for others to use as well. Qui-Gon selected the nearest room and he and his apprentice walked through the doors and over the threshold where he stopped cold.

This room did indeed have another pair in practice.

“Master Vresh!” Obi-Wan called out as he ran over to where the tall, short haired master was standing. He was on a mat facing his padawan, Lantis, but he immediately turned at the sound of his name, a huge grin spreading quickly across his face. He opened his arms wide and scooped up the happy boy who had run to him.

“Obi-Wan!” he exclaimed, “It’s good to see you.”

“You too, Master Vresh,” Obi-Wan replied. Vresh set him back down on the floor and Obi-Wan immediately turned to hug Lantis as well.

“You’re looking much better,” Vresh said when the hug was done. Obi-Wan turned to him with a large smile.

“I am much better. Master Qui-Gon makes certain I eat and sleep enough even we I really don’t feel like it,” he answered in a stage whisper. Vresh looked up at that, his gaze fixing on the master still standing in the doorway.

“That’s good to hear,” he answered not looking at Obi-Wan. The master’s continued scrutiny seemed to finally spur Qui-Gon back into motion. He walked over to where the trio of Jedi were standing and stopped, giving a small bow to the padawan.

“Padawan Mir,” he said politely then he looked at the master. “Master Tivi.”

“Master Jinn,” Vresh responded coolly polite. Mentally, Qui-Gon winced, but outwardly he betrayed nothing of his true feelings.

“Would you and your padawan mind sharing the space with us?”

“Of course not. I see your padawan has a saber now.”

“Yes, we came here to test it out. I see your padawan has earned one of her own as well.”

“Yes, a couple of months ago.”

“Ah,” Qui-Gon replied at a loss for what to say next. He had never felt uncomfortable around this man before, but with what had passed between them... everything was now awkward and stilted.

“Master Qui-Gon was going to help me test it out with some sparring,” Obi-Wan interjected and Qui-Gon wanted to hug the boy for the temporary reprieve. Vresh glanced at Obi-Wan and then at his own padawan. He paused for a moment then brought his attention back to Qui-Gon.

“Perhaps our padawans could spar each other?” he offered. Qui-Gon started slightly, but quickly recovered. If this were an olive branch he would take it.

“That would be acceptable,” he replied. He turned to his padawan. “What do you say, Obi-Wan? Are you ready for your first real sparring match?”

“Yes, Master,” Obi-Wan nodded eagerly.

“Then off you go,” Qui-Gon smiled as he watched the next generation of Jedi bow and take up opposing positions on the mat. He and Vresh moved to the sidelines near one of the room's seemingly omnipresent benches. The two masters watched their padawans in silence both carefully cataloging each misstep or awkward block for later correction, but also each master was carefully avoiding eye contact with the other. Finally, Qui-Gon could stand the silence no longer.

“She’s coming along beautifully,” he spoke hopefully broaching a neutral topic.

“She is,” Vresh responded rather shortly. Qui-Gon decided to try again.

“It is a credit to her training and her master,” he replied and Vresh shot him a quick glance and then he turned his attention back to the fighting padawans.

“Her talent and dedication are there for anyone to see if one is willing to look.”

“You are right, of course,” Qui-Gon said with a sigh. “But sometimes it is hard to see the strength of others when one is blinded by his own weaknesses.”

“Perhaps corrective surgery is in order.”

“Or a kick in the ass from those who can see.”

“And is such treatment successful?”

“I surely hope so,” Qui-Gon replied his eyes following his padawan with a small smile as the boy attempted to parry an overhead attack from Lantis. “If not, I am told that the treatment can be reapplied as needed.”

Vresh finally turned to face Qui-Gon.

“It may take several applications,” he said and Qui-Gon turned to face him with a slightly raised eyebrow.

“Are you volunteering for this... service?” he asked. Vresh just shrugged and waved his hand in a careless gesture.

“Well I do have the experience.”

“Indeed,” Qui-Gon answered dryly then his expression sobered. “I owe you an apology.”

“No,” Vresh said with a shake of his head. “You owed him an apology, which you have given and he has accepted. The rest doesn’t matter.”

“I disagree,” Qui-Gon countered and when Vresh went to open his mouth to object, Qui-Gon continued. “But if you will not accept my apology then at least accept my gratitude. I am told that it was your words that swayed the Council in our favor.”

Now it was Vresh’s turn to disagree.

“I only spoke the truth. If anything swayed them it was you throwing your head to the floor, your ass in the air, and your pride out the window.”

“You have an interesting way with words.”

“Best to be blunt. It saves so much time,” Vresh answered with a smirk.

“And now that you have been so expeditiously blunt, what shall we do with this abundance of time?”

“Depends,” Vresh said as he appeared to be in deep thought. “What’s the score?”

“Me by two.”

“Hmm, well I guess I will use this time to remedy that obvious scoring aberration.”

“You may by all means try,” Qui-Gon said as he bowed and gestured to a vacant mat.

“But there is no try,” Vresh answered with a wag of his finger. With a light chuckle, both masters shed their outer robes, unclipped their sabers, and took to the mat and while each master sought to land a blow against the other, shared wounds were finally mended.

* * * * *

A little more than an hour later, master and padawan took their leave leaving Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan alone in the practice room. The two had taken a brief respite after their

mutual sparring matches, but now the master was standing and beckoning his padawan to once again join him on the mats.

“Are you ready for another opponent, Padawan?” Qui-Gon asked as he raised his lightsaber in a formal salute. Obi-Wan smiled broadly and mimicked his master’s gesture.

“I am ready, Master.”

* * * * *

“You think yourself ready to learn what I could teach you? You are ready for nothing. Your recent bungling of the operation on Bandomeer has shown this.”

Xanatos scowled fiercely at the condescension in the other’s voice, but bit his tongue. His head was down hiding his displeased expression, but he was unable to hide the resentment in his tone.

“The interference of the Jedi could not be helped, but I was able to salvage much of the,”

“A partial failure is still a failure, little Jedi,” the other spoke and once again Xanatos was unsuccessful in curtailing his anger at the deliberate taunt. When he spoke his words were an ill-tempered hiss.

“I am no Jedi.”

* * * * *

“You are a Jedi,” Qui-Gon said as he led his apprentice through a series of simple attacks and strikes. “Therefore, sparring is not simply fighting; it is an opportunity for the Force to flow through you. Let it guide your movements.”

“Yes, Master,” Obi-Wan said as he tried to center himself and narrow his focus to the moment at hand. His master nodded and raised his saber.

“Good. Now, try to strike me.”

* * * * *

"You want to strike me, don't you?" the other spoke smugly. Xanatos hated that smug look. The icy slickness of the other's voice made his skin crawl. A smile grew on the other's thin lips. "Yes, you do, little Jedi. Even now I can feel your anger, your bitterness, your frustration, and your fear."

"I am not afraid of you," Xanatos replied his head rising and his hand unconsciously drifting to the two sabers at his hip. The other broke out into laughter, the mirthless tones echoing against the metal decking of the ship.

"Oh yes, I like that bit of spirit. It will make breaking you so much more satisfying," the other said as a gleaming red saber hissed to life as it was retrieved from its hiding place within the other's voluminous deep purple cloak. Xanatos lit his twin sabers in response, one blue, one green. Qui-Gon's hilt felt awkward in his hand, but he had fought with far more unwieldy weapons and the Telosian had the feeling he would need the extra advantage of a second blade against his nauseatingly confident adversary.

"I may no longer be a Jedi, but you will see I was trained by one of the Order's finest swordsmen," he replied as he settled into a battle stance. The other smiled sickeningly.

"Little Jedi, your training has only just begun."

* * * * *

"Padawan, your training has only just begun. Do not allow yourself to get discouraged," Qui-Gon offered gently as he called a halt to their sparring. The master had easily sensed the boy's mounting frustration as he was unable to penetrate Qui-Gon's solid defense.

"I'm sorry, Master," Obi-Wan mumbled as he deactivated his lightsaber. "I just..."

"Want to be an expert swordsman right away?" Qui-Gon finished for him. Obi-Wan blushed as his chagrin rolled easily across the bond. Qui-Gon deactivated his own newly built blade and knelt before his apprentice. He placed a hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Obi-Wan, if you already had the skill to defeat me in combat there would be substantially less for me to teach you. Are you so eager to put this old master out of a job?" he asked teasingly and he was happy to see a light in the boy's eyes in response to his humor.

"No, Master," Obi-Wan replied with a shy grin.

"Good," the master said as he rose to his feet. He stepped back a few paces and reignited his blade. "Now, try again."

Obi-Wan nodded and activated his saber. He took a breath and centered himself once more. A heartbeat later, he brought his blade in a slash aimed at his master's midsection.

* * * * *

The other deftly blocked the green saber's attempted strike at his midsection. Xanatos cursed in frustration as he lashed out again attempting to use both blades to beat back his opponent with a furious and unrelenting onslaught of strikes, but each time his attacks were adroitly rebuffed. Still, the young man pressed further and harder.

Strike.

Parry.

Slice. Spin. Strike. Roll. Thrust.

Parry. Parry. Spin. Dodge. Block.

* * * * *

Thrust. Slash. Thrust.

Block. Block. Block.

An approving smile.

A grin and carefree laughter.

* * * * *

A frustrated growl.

A mocking grin.

Thrust. Slash. Thrust.

Block. Block. Block.

* * * * *

“Very good, Padawan.”

“Thank you, Master!”

* * * * *

“Pathetic, little Jedi.”

“Fark off, Sculag!”

* * * * *

The hiss and whiz of lightsabers clashing filled the air as the two combatants circled in the potentially deadly dance, each block and strike a metronomic measure of time. The two shifted and swayed, crossed and countered. Every subtle movement both somehow mirrored and responsive. Action and reaction living in brilliant swatches of color.

* * * * *

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* * * * *

The Force sings with joy.

* * * * *

The Force screams with horror.

* * * * *

And then...

* * * * *

...the music stops.

* * * * *

Obi-Wan lay flat on his back, his vision momentarily blurred by the impact. Above his chest hovered the glowing tip of a green blade. He smiled despite his defeat.

"I yield, Master," he managed to get out between huge, heaping breaths. Qui-Gon grinned, deactivated his saber, and placed it on his hip. He reached down a hand to Obi-Wan who took it gratefully and allowed himself to be pulled to his feet.

"You've done exceptionally well today, Padawan."

"Thank you, Master, but honestly I'm just glad it's over. I'm exhausted!"

* * * * *

"This isn't over!" Xanatos spat from his position lying flat on his back. His breath had been knocked out of him with the force of the impact and parts of his brain still felt like they were swimming around in his skull. Above his chest hovered the glowing tip of a red blade. He scowled in his defeat.

"Yield. You have lost this day, little Jedi."

"I will never yield to you!" Xanatos managed between huge, heaping gasps. The victor smiled eerily, lowering the saber's tip until a faint wisp of smoke and the smell of singed fabric filled the air.

"You are nothing, little Jedi, but you will be. I will make you into a weapon that I will loose upon the galaxy. Darkness will be your sword and the destruction of all that you once loved will be your legacy. I will carve you in my own image and you will be beautiful," the other said as the blade's tip dipped lower still. The other kept speaking, but Xanatos heard

none of it. He senses were far too overwhelmed with the smell of his burning flesh filling his nose and the sounds of his own mad screams filling his ears.

* * * * *

As goes the master, so goes the apprentice.

Fin.