

Star Wars

Jedi Apprentice 14

THE TIES THAT BIND

By Jude Watson

CHAPTER 1

The air was thin and sharp on this world. It had taken Obi-Wan Kenobi almost a full day to get used to it. Now he enjoyed the bite of fresh, cold air in his lungs.

He and his Master, Qui-Gon Jinn, were high in the mountains of Ragoon-6, one of a cluster of planets that were known for their spectacular, remote beauty. The two Jedi's mission was simply to survive. They took no more than their survival packs. Another Jedi had left a trail for them to follow to a transport. The trail led over snow, high cliffs, and huge sheets of rock, so it was not easy to follow.

Qui-Gon had decided on the test after their last mission. Upon their return to the Temple, he had seemed distracted, almost moody, which wasn't like him. At last he had appeared in the doorway of Obi-Wan's quarters one morning at dawn.

"It's time for some amusement," he said.

Amusement? Obi-Wan had never heard his Master use that word. He had pushed himself up on his elbows sleepily, blinking in the dim light. He wondered if he was dreaming.

Only an hour later he found himself on a transport headed to Ragoon- 6. A Jedi pilot named Rana dropped them off on a high, windy plain. Qui-Gon explained that they would be testing their survival and tracking skills, while also seeing some of the most astonishing scenery in the galaxy. Obi- Wan had felt cold and hungry and doubtful at the time. But for the past ten days, he had enjoyed himself thoroughly.

Obi-Wan sat on a flat rock overlooking the valley below. It was mid- morning, and the sun had already warmed the rock underneath him. He pressed his bare hands against it. Below him he could see a sea of bright yellow wildflowers in a mountain meadow. The sky here was very blue. At night it turned purple. During one storm, it had streaked yellow and green. Obi-Wan had never seen such deep, clear colors in the atmosphere. There were no cities on Ragoon-6, no industry or transports to give off emissions to cloud the pure air.

He and his Master hadn't spoken much. Qui-Gon was in a reflective mood. There were times that he seemed... not tense, Obi-Wan thought, searching for the right word, but distracted. Obi-Wan knew that Qui-Gon had something on his mind, but he also knew that it was not time for his Master to share it.

Obi-Wan was sixteen years old now, and his relationship with his Master was making a subtle shift. They were growing to be companions, as well as pupil and teacher. Obi-Wan knew he still had much to learn from Qui-Gon, but he enjoyed this new feeling of maturity. For the first time he could see the day when he would stand next to his Master as a full Jedi Knight.

He heard the crunch of his Master's footsteps over the snow. Qui-Gon squatted down beside him. His eyes swept the landscape below. "Tahl and I came here on a training mission like this one, long ago," he said. "We always said we would come back together. We never did."

Tahl was a Jedi Knight who had gone through Temple training with Qui-Gon. She was a renowned Knight now, and their friendship was deep and long. She had been blinded a few years before, and Obi-Wan could always pick up a strain of tenderness when Qui-Gon spoke of her.

Qui-Gon's blue eyes scanned the mountains and valley. "We are here now and gone in a moment of time," he said quietly. "You must be sure of what you want and believe, Obi-Wan."

Sometimes the way will be confused, but allow yourself the time to understand yourself. Take yourself out of your life if you must."

Obi-Wan nodded, but Qui-Gon's words seemed vague to him. Usually Qui-Gon's advice was clear and direct. Even his gaze was faraway.

Then, in one of the shifts in concentration that marked his character, Qui-Gon abruptly stood, his concentration clear now. "Something is tracking us," he said briskly.

"Something?"

"Animals. No doubt they are tracking us for food. The tracks indicate that it is a pack of malia."

"Malia?"

"Fierce beasts that live in the high country. They are not large - they travel on all fours, and come up to your knees, but they are very dangerous. It is said that if you are close enough to hear the cry of a malia, you are already dead."

Despite the bright sun, Obi-Wan shivered. "And they are tracking us?"

"It has been a hard winter here. It is better to avoid them. Let's go."

Qui-Gon slung his survival pack over his shoulder and began to walk. Obi-Wan hurried to gather his things and follow. They spent the next hour hiking over sheer rock, which led them to forest trails. The trail left by the Jedi was difficult, but with eyes sharpened by the Force they were able to pick up the minute differences in soil, leaves, and snow that indicated a presence had passed. They were able to move quickly. Obi-Wan hoped they were putting kilometers between themselves and the malia pack.

Suddenly, Qui-Gon stopped ahead. Obi-Wan could see that the trail now forked into two paths. The two Jedi studied the area, then split up to travel a short distance up each path, looking for clues. They did not need to confer; they had been through this process many times before.

Usually, either Qui-Gon or Obi-Wan found a clue as to which path to take. This time, they returned to the fork without a clear idea of which way to go. A probe or tracking droid would have been helpful, but this exercise was designed to teach Obi-Wan how to survive without them.

"Rana has given us a challenge," Qui-Gon said. "We have to pick a path and then travel back if it is the wrong one."

Obi-Wan nodded.

"If we have to double back, we'll lose the time we gained," Qui-Gon said. "We could run into the malia pack. Why don't you choose a trail?"

Obi-Wan stared at the two paths. Neither gave him an overwhelming feeling. He chose the right, which rose steeply up a rocky hill. Perhaps Rana had wanted them to work a little harder.

They walked for an hour without picking up any further clues. Finally, Qui-Gon stopped.

"I think we should head back, Padawan. We should have seen some indication before this that this path was the correct one." Qui-Gon scanned the sky. "It will be dark soon."

The going was tougher in the gathering dusk. The temperature had dropped, causing ice pockets to form in the rocky trail. They headed downhill, using all their concentration to avoid slipping.

As they drew near their starting point, Obi-Wan heard a high-pitched scream. He stopped abruptly.

"It's not human," he said. "At least, I don't think so."

"It's the cry of the malia," Qui-Gon said. "It sounded close."

Obi-Wan did not hear fear in his Master's voice - he never did - but Qui-Gon didn't sound too comfortable, either. "Do you fear them?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Not exactly," Qui-Gon said. "I respect them. If we run across them, Padawan, remember that they are very fast. Very cunning. When they hunt, they have a highly developed sense of strategy."

They continued down the slope, now walking as silently as possible. Obi-Wan did not disturb a rock or leaf.

"As soon as we find somewhere suitable, we should stop for the night, " Qui-Gon said in a low tone. "The delay will not hurt us. And a fire will protect us."

Obi-Wan did not hear or see any movement around them. The surrounding trees pressed close to the path here, with feathery blue-green leaves that did not stir. Yet he had the sense they were being stalked. Despite the cold, he felt a trickle of sweat break loose from the hair at the back of his neck.

The shadows of the leaves lengthened, dimming the path ahead. He could barely glimpse the fork where they had stopped. There was a clearing there where they could make camp.

Off to his right, he saw a flash of green, a fluorescent color strangely out of place in the natural hues of the forest. He was about to point it out to Qui-Gon when his Master suddenly drew his lightsaber.

"Malia!" Qui-Gon warned.

A split second later Obi-Wan saw a blur of blue-gray fur as an animal bounded out of the trees toward them. Now he knew the origin of that odd green flash. It was the eyes of the malia, gleaming with the fever of the kill. The malia was perhaps knee-high to Qui-Gon, lean and rangy. Obi-Wan was startled by the ugliness of the face, with its tapered snout and yellow teeth sharpened into lethal points.

Obi-Wan's lightsaber was in his hand, and he jumped back to protect Qui-Gon. At the same time, another creature darted from the trees on the opposite side. And then a third, and a fourth, and a fifth. They moved quickly, so fast they seemed to change shape. They circled, snapping their teeth at the Jedi's whirling light-sabers, but always staying out of reach. Their movements seemed choreographed to tire their prey. They kept the Jedi moving with the constant threat.

"They are playing with us," Qui-Gon said, turning to protect himself from a rear assault from two malia.

Obi-Wan gritted his teeth. "I can't wait for them to get serious."

"Careful, Padawan. Do not let them get close. If a malia gets its teeth into your wrist, it can rip off your arm."

"That's reassuring," Obi-Wan muttered.

"If we keep them at bay, they might give up and look for easier prey, " Qui-Gon said. He whirled and twisted in a fast combination, driving off three malia that had joined forces to attack.

Obi-Wan saw another blur out of the corner of his eye, and turned to meet the threat. A malia had launched itself from the branch of a tree, straight at Qui-Gon. Obi-Wan leaped forward, his lightsaber a blue glow against the lowering sky.

He saw the malia bare its yellow teeth at him in a frustrated snarl. It twisted in midair to land nearby, safely away from Qui-Gon.

Another malia streaked toward the trees. Now they would be attacked from above as well as the ground. Obi-Wan's foot slid on a patch of ice and he went down on one hand. Qui-Gon leaped forward to cover him, but not before a malia sprang forward, alert for any weakness. Obi-Wan saw the malia's sharp teeth reach for his outstretched hand. He flipped over and risked a quick kick to the animal's flank. He summoned the Force behind it, and the surprised animal flew back across the path, snarling and spitting.

Obi-Wan quickly regained his feet. He was breathing hard. He had never encountered such quickness in an animal before. The malia were relentless. The sound of their cries was bloodcurdling.

A malia suddenly dropped from a tree branch, leaping toward Qui-Gon, while two others attacked from the rear. Qui-Gon whirled, his lightsaber unstoppable. In a moment, the leaping malia was dead on the forest floor and the other two reversed their course. Qui-Gon caught one as it turned to attack again. It fell in a heap of fur.

The other malia stayed a few meters away, snarling at Qui-Gon. Obi-Wan saw its muscles bunch in preparation for a leap. Suddenly, its eyes rolled back and it fell dead.

Obi-Wan glanced at Qui-Gon. He saw that his Master was just as mystified as he was. As if they had silently communicated a signal, the rest of the malia suddenly streaked toward the cover of the woods.

"What happened?" Obi-Wan asked, his eyes roaming the surroundings to make sure the malia were truly gone.

"We'll know in a moment."

Suddenly the leaves parted and a group of beings appeared. They were short, with leathery brown skin and powerful chests. Their faces were covered in thick hair, their ears long and pointed. They held weapons Obi-Wan had never seen before, long tubes made out of polished stone. He guessed that they were a form of blowpipe.

"Don't move," Qui-Gon told Obi-Wan calmly. One of the beings stepped forward and spoke in Basic.

"You will have a more pleasant death at our hands than the malia," he said. "Our poisons are quick." He made a signal and gestured to the others. The tribe put their blow tubes to their lips.

"You are welcome to the malia," Qui-Gon said. There was no hint of hurry or distress in his tone. "We are only visitors to your world, on the way to our transport. We thank you for saving our lives."

The leader held up a hand. The blow tubes were not dropped, but the tribe watched the Jedi warily.

"You do not want the malia meat?" the leader asked.

"We have our own supplies, food from our own world," Qui-Gon said. "We are not here to hunt"

The leader studied them a moment. "Then pass on."

Obi-Wan was only too glad to do so. He did not want to turn his back on the tribe, but he noted how easily Qui-Gon did so. He followed his Master's lead. Together they skirted the three dead malia and headed down the other path.

"That was lucky," Obi-Wan breathed when they were out of earshot.

"This is beautiful country, but a hard one," Qui-Gon said. "I know the tribes use the malia for the food and skins they provide. They are hard to kill, and very valuable. That was their main concern. Most beings in the galaxy do not kill without purpose. If you can discover what that purpose is, you can forestall a battle."

"And those who kill but have no reason?"

"They are the ones to worry about. Now, Padawan, we should - "

Suddenly, Qui-Gon stopped short. He closed his eyes.

Obi-Wan waited. Something had disturbed his Master. He could see it as well as feel it. Qui-Gon seemed to weave for a moment, as if rocked by something deep inside.

When he opened his eyes, Obi-Wan could not read his clouded expression, but he could sense Qui-Gon was troubled.

"What did you see?" he asked.

Qui-Gon's lips pressed together. "It is dangerous to interpret visions," he said curtly. "We must return to Coruscant immediately."

CHAPTER 2

Immediately took too long to suit Qui-Gon. It had taken them another three days to get to the transport. Time and again Qui-Gon had meditated for patience, but he could not find it. He knew he was pushing

Obi-Wan, but it was not to teach his Padawan endurance. It was because of his own anxiety.

The vision had come without warning. One moment he was hiking down the trail, and the next Tahl had appeared before him. She had been in great distress.

On this trip Tahl had been so often in his thoughts. Was this the reason? Did Tahl need him? Or did his own thoughts summon the vision?

The pilot pushed the transport to its fastest speed. It was another seven-hour journey to Coruscant. Each minute seemed to tick by in crisp eternities.

Obi-Wan was silent during the journey. They had come to understand each other over the years. Obi-Wan knew when Qui-Gon needed silence.

Qui-Gon didn't know why the disturbing vision of Tahl had appeared. He only knew that he had to get back to the Temple and make sure she was safe.

At last they entered the atmosphere of Coruscant. The tall spires of the multilevel city came into view. Qui-Gon swung the craft into the fastest lane, cutting off a larger transport. Obi-Wan looked at him, startled, but Qui-Gon merely pushed the engines to go faster.

He landed the craft and activated the ramp.

He stood, but for the first time in four days he hesitated before moving.

"I'm sorry for my haste, Obi-Wan. I'll explain one day." When I understand this myself.

He didn't give his Padawan a chance to reply, but turned and hurried down the ramp. He would leave Obi-Wan the chore of arrival procedures.

He strode through the door and stopped at the security checkpoint, where Jedi Knight Cal-i-Vaun was stationed.

"I need to find Jedi Knight Tahl," Qui-Gon said.

Cal-i-Vaun quickly touched the screen in front of him. "She is not in her quarters. One moment." He touched another point on the screen. "She is not answering her comlink."

"Thank you." Even the simple courtesy cost him an effort to remember. "Is she here at the Temple?" he barked.

"Yes, I show no record of departure."

Qui-Gon's fingers drummed on the desk. He did not have the patience to search the Temple. There were only a few places Tahl could be where

she would turn off her comlink. She was either meditating or swimming in the lake or...

Or in the Jedi Council Room.

Qui-Gon hurried to the turbolift and took it straight to the Council Room. The doors were closed. The Council was in session. Qui-Gon broke a revered Temple rule and accessed the doors without requesting entrance. He strode in.

Tahl stood in the middle of the circle. She turned at the sound of the opening door. Even without her sight she knew his presence immediately. Qui-Gon was so glad to see her he did not mind her frown.

Yoda blinked at him impassively, but Mace Windu's eyebrows lowered.

"To what do we owe this... intrusion, Qui-Gon?" Mace Windu asked.

"I apologize to all the Jedi Masters," Qui-Gon said, bowing. "I knew Tahl was here, and I felt I had to be present."

To his surprise, Mace Windu nodded, as though Qui-Gon's reason was logical.

"We will allow you to remain, seeing that you have a connection to this mission," he said. "We would have requested your presence had we known you had returned."

Qui-Gon hid his surprise. Tahl clasped her hands in front of her for a moment. Beneath the folds of her long robe, he saw her long fingers clench and unclench. She was not happy he had interfered, that was clear.

Her voice was calm when she spoke, however. "I will resume the briefing," she said, angling her body slightly so that Qui-Gon was now slightly behind her. It effectively demonstrated to the Masters her desire to remain the focus of the meeting. "I received a distress call this morning from the twin sisters Alani and Eritha from the planet New Apsolon. "

Now Qui-Gon understood Mace Windu's reaction to his presence. Years ago, Tahl and Qui-Gon had been sent on a mission to Apsolon. They had been sent as Jedi observers to ensure a peaceful transition of government.

"Let me review my last mission there," Tahl said. "Apsolon used to have a totalitarian government ruling over a civilization split between a prosperous minority called the Civilized and a majority called the Workers. The Workers lived in a separate sector of the city in poor housing and had to pass through checkpoints at an energy wall to travel to work. The Civilized kept control through a feared and hated secret police, called the Absolutes. As no doubt members of the Council are aware, Apsolon is a center of the high-tech industry. The Workers tried to achieve what they called a 'bloodless revolution' through a campaign of industrial sabotage. The civil war was conducted with some violence,

but nowhere near as bad as we have seen on other worlds. Mostly the violence came from the Absolutes as they tried to stop the sabotage and demonstrations. But the Workers were not stopped. The economic pressures forced the government to call for free elections and give each Worker a vote. As a result, a Worker leader who had been a hero to the people, Ewane, was elected. Apsolon was renamed New Apsolon to symbolize this new direction."

Qui-Gon remembered Ewane well, as well as his two daughters. Ewane had been imprisoned for many years. The girls' mother had died when they were young, so they had been raised by his supporters. They had been pretty, quiet girls who had looked at Tahl with awe and brought out a tenderness in Tahl he had rarely seen.

"Ewane ruled for five years as Supreme Governor and was reelected," Tahl went on. "Shortly after this, he was murdered."

Qui-Gon closed his eyes in a moment of remembrance. Tall, elegant Ewane had been frail from his years of captivity, but his inner strength had given him an aura of nobility. His sense of loyalty and purpose had made him an ideal leader. He had been committed to bringing justice, not punishment, to his former enemies. How sad that he hadn't been given a chance to fulfill his great promise.

"His successor is his close associate, Roan, who was one of the few Civilized who called early on for social change. Roan was admired by most of the population at one time, but now many among the Workers believe he backed Ewane's killers and took the office in a coup. The planet has plunged into instability once again. Ewane's daughters, Alani and Eritha, are now sixteen. They are in hiding and fear for their lives. They have appealed to me for help. They want safe passage to Coruscant. I must go to New Apsolon and escort them."

"A worthy mission," Mace Windu said. "Of course the girls must be rescued."

"Sad it is that the planet is plunged into chaos once more," Yoda said. "Ask for our help the government itself does not, however. Therefore unofficial, your mission is."

"I owe the girls my loyalty," Tahl said. "I must go."

Qui-Gon was not surprised at Tahl's determination. She had formed a close bond with the young twins. They had been the cause of a serious disagreement between the two Jedi. Once the elections were held and Ewane had been elected, Qui-Gon had been ready to leave the planet. Tahl had been concerned about Ewane and his family's safety, and felt the new government was too fragile and new to trust. There were still powerful factions among the rich minority that wanted it to fail, and she suspected that the Absolutes had not disbanded, as had been promised, but were still working in an underground capacity. Qui-Gon had agreed that some of this might be true, but it was not the Jedi's job to remain as an occupation force.

They had argued over whether to remain or go. Privately Qui-Gon had felt that Tahl's connection to Eritha and Alani was influencing her feeling. The motherless girls had come to depend on her. But in the end, Qui-Gon prevailed, and they left the planet.

Was this the source of Tahl's coolness to him now? He could feel it like a presence in the room. Did she remember their quarrel? Did she feel justified now? The girls were in danger. Perhaps if the Jedi had remained to clear out the last nest of Absolutes, Ewane would not have been murdered.

Perhaps. There was no way to know. And lately there had been tension between Tahl and Qui-Gon that did not have to do with missions. It was a tension he did not completely understand. Tahl had taken the Jedi student named Bant as her Padawan, but had not entirely accepted her as a partner, often leaving to go on missions alone. She knew that Qui-Gon disapproved of this. He knew how capable she was and was astonished at how she compensated for her blindness. Still he feared that a situation could arise in which she would overestimate her abilities. Her need to go on missions alone distressed him.

No matter how he chided himself, he could not stop feeling protective toward Tahl. It was not because of her blindness. It was because of her need to prove her blindness did not matter.

"We will arrange for a transport and pilot to be ready," Mace Windu told Tahl. "We request that you keep in touch with us frequently, since you are going alone."

"I am willing to go with Tahl on this mission," Qui-Gon said quickly. "Since I, too, know the situation well, I can be of help."

"There is no need for Qui-Gon to accompany me," Tahl said. "I have a contact on New Apsolon. I should be able to collect the girls and return in a matter of days."

Qui-Gon nodded in Tahl's direction. "Respectfully, I must point out that the Jedi made enemies on Apsolon. There were some on both sides who did not welcome us. The Civilized blamed us for the election of a Worker. The Workers blamed us for supporting neutral trials for war criminals. Tahl could be in danger."

"I do not think that this warrants another Jedi presence - " Tahl began, but Yoda interrupted her.

"Made his point, Qui-Gon has," he said. "A good one, it is. Yet wish you do not a companion on this journey, and true it is that it will be a short one. Suggest I do that you conceal your identity upon your arrival."

Tahl looked relieved. "I can do that."

Qui-Gon opened his mouth to speak, but Yoda gave him a piercing glance.

"Settled it is, then," Yoda said.

Qui-Gon could do nothing more than follow Tahl from the room. He could not share his disturbing vision with the Council. He would not share it with Tahl. Jedi did not feel that visions should necessarily govern behavior. They were easily misinterpreted and were sometimes grounded in inner fears that one did not fully understand. It would be of no use for Qui-Gon to explain his anxiety.

As soon as they exited the chamber, Tahl turned to him. "I don't know why you insisted on interfering like that, Qui-Gon" she said. "But I do not like it."

"I was on the original mission," Qui-Gon replied. "I thought I could be of help."

She turned to him. Her unusual striped green-gold eyes were just as piercing as they'd ever been. One arched eyebrow lifted.

"Tell me. Did you know that New Apsolon was the subject of that meeting when you arrived?"

Qui-Gon could not lie to Tahl. "No. I did not."

Her face tightened. "Then it is as I thought. You will not allow me to act as a full Jedi Knight. Because I am blind, you think I need a caretaker."

"No - "

In a rare show of anger, she stamped her foot. Her caramel skin flushed with pink. "Then what? Why do you keep insisting on interfering?"

"Friendship."

One corner of her full mouth lifted. "Then in the name of friendship, dear Qui-Gon, leave me be."

She turned abruptly toward the turbolift. He felt the drift of her soft robe against his hand as she moved, and then she was gone.

CHAPTER 3

Matters that took place in the Jedi Council were private, but it was not difficult for Obi-Wan to discover what had happened in the Council Room. Tahl had briefed Bant, her Padawan, and a disturbed Bant had confided in Obi-Wan. He heard that Qui-Gon had barged in without an invitation and had asked to accompany Tahl on her mission. He knew that the Council and Tahl had refused.

Bant was upset that once again Tahl had left her behind. True, the mission was a short one, but Bant struggled not to feel that Tahl did not trust her fully.

"I must learn to accept the way she is and believe that she knows best," Bant told Obi-Wan as they walked around the lake early one morning. The illumination banks overhead simulated a soft dawn. "But it's so hard. I thought that at last we were beginning to become full partners. She seemed to rely on me more. She went on fewer missions alone. I think Yoda might have spoken to her about leaving me behind. Yet now I find that she has gone off with only a few words to me."

If Qui-Gon had done the same, Obi-Wan knew he would be as upset as Bant. Perhaps more so. He had been with Qui-Gon longer than Bant had been with Tahl. They had had opportunities to work out the various bumps in their relationship. Bant had a rockier time. Tahl was kind and humorous, but she kept a part of herself aloof.

"It took years for Qui-Gon and me to develop our closeness," Obi-Wan tried to reassure her. "The only thing I can advise is patience. Just as you once advised me."

"I don't get the chance to be close to Tahl," Bant said. "I'm too busy sitting here at the Temple without her."

Obi-Wan understood a bit of her distress. For the first time in a long while, he did not know what his Master was thinking.

In the days since Tahl had left, Qui-Gon's restlessness had deepened. Obi-Wan could see it. His Master had already decided to follow their tracking and survival exercise with physical training at the Temple. Qui-Gon threw himself into this without a break. He studied with the Jedi Masters, perfecting his battle skills, his endurance, his strength. Obi-Wan would often have to remind him to eat his evening meal. Qui-Gon looked tired and depleted.

"There is distance between me and Qui-Gon right now," Obi-Wan confided. "I don't understand it, but I know I will in time. Qui-Gon has told me that each of us is still an individual. We will have worries and concerns that are unique to us. We cannot expect to always understand each other. The commitment is what is important."

"But is that commitment important to Tahl?" Bant asked. Her silver eyes searched his.

"I think it is," Obi-Wan answered. "She is a Jedi."

"The mission was supposed to take two or three days at the most," Bant said worriedly. "It has been almost two weeks now."

Obi-Wan put his hand on Bant's shoulder. His words could not help her. He only hoped his presence could.

Qui-Gon tried to lose himself in training. If he worked his body hard enough, he could push worry aside for short periods. But the weeks passed, and the nagging feeling that Tahl needed him still preyed on his mind. She had not checked in with the Council. This was not unusual. Events happened that could prevent contact on any mission. Yoda had told him with unusual sternness that the Council was not worried.

He was the only one who worried. But did that mean he was wrong?

All he could see were her eyes. Usually they blazed like green crystals with traces of gold. Now they were black and dull, filmed with suffering.

When she saw him, they sparked to life. "It is too late for me, dear friend," she said.

Qui-Gon woke with a start. He put his hand on his heart. The grief that filled him was because of the dream. It was not real. He told his beating heart to slow down.

This grief was temporary. It was already fading as his heartbeat slowed. But the vision - the vision was real.

He swung his legs over the edge of the sleep-couch. Enough, he told himself. Enough of trying to convince himself the vision had been more about his anxiety about Tahl than anything real. Enough of respecting her request to leave her be.

Enough.

* * *

He waited until after the meditation period, when the Council members gathered for a short meeting. Then he headed toward the Council chamber.

He ran into Obi-Wan, who was on his way to the morning meal. His Padawan knew immediately that he had a purpose. Obi-Wan looked at him questioningly.

"I'm on my way to the Council Room," Qui-Gon said.

"Tahl?"

He nodded.

"I'll come with you."

He was about to argue, but he saw the resolute look in Obi-Wan's eyes. He kept on walking, and Obi-Wan swung into step beside him.

This time, Qui-Gon took the time to request permission to enter. He needed the Council on his side. It was granted.

He strode into the room, suddenly glad to have Obi-Wan with him.

"I wish to inform the Council that I am following Tahl to New Apsolon," he said without preliminaries.

"What is the reason for this action?" Mace Windu asked. He knitted his long fingers together and frowned at Qui-Gon.

"Tahl promised to keep in contact with the Council. She has not. It has been nearly three weeks since she left. She said she would be back in under a week."

"Jedi Knights are not required to conform to a schedule," Mace Windu said. "And missions reveal their own time frame. The Council members are not concerned."

"But I am," Qui-Gon stated firmly. "Complete this mission alone, Tahl wanted," Yoda said. "Best it is for her, we think."

"I have tried to honor her wishes," Qui-Gon said. "I feel that there is danger there. I have seen it."

"A vision?" Yoda asked. "Know you do that visions can lead us astray as well as guide us."

"This one must guide me," Qui-Gon said.

"You know that secrecy is crucial to Tahl's mission," Mace Windu said. "She could have already started her journey. She could have the twins with her. We will wait for her next communication."

"I will not," Qui-Gon said.

Yoda exchanged a glance with Mace Windu. It was clear they were surprised and displeased.

"Noted we have your concern for Tahl over the years since she was blinded," Yoda said. "Natural, it is. But good for her, it is not. Find her own way, she must."

"I am going," Qui-Gon insisted.

"Qui-Gon," Mace Windu warned, "you are not listening to our counsel. It is clear that you made a decision and will not be swayed. It is not like you to close your mind, nor is it like a Jedi."

Qui-Gon said nothing. He would not argue with Mace Windu. But he would not abandon his plan.

"You must open your mind to other opinions. We sit here on the Council because our vision is a wider one than that of any individual Jedi. "

Qui-Gon stirred impatiently. "I am wasting time," he said.

Obi-Wan looked at him, startled. Qui-Gon knew he had been rude, but he was on fire to leave the Temple. No matter what the Council said, he was going.

Mace Windu looked thunderous. "Counsel with us is wasting your time?" He pointed his finger at Qui-Gon. "Know this, Qui-Gon Jinn. If you leave to find Tahl, you do it against our wishes and direction."

It was the strongest condemnation Mace Windu could give, short of forbidding it. Qui-Gon nodded curtly. He turned and left the chamber, feeling Obi-Wan at his heels.

He did not stop but stepped immediately on the turbolift. Obi-Wan had to jump to accompany him.

"I have never seen you act so impolite," Obi-Wan said, running both hands through his hair. "You defied Mace Windu!"

The turbolift opened. Qui-Gon strode out.

"Qui-Gon, wait. Can't you talk to me?"

He stopped and turned. His Padawan's face was full of worry. He could see how torn he was. Obi-Wan did not understand how a vision could touch you so deeply that it was as though the real world dropped away and you were living in another reality. Qui-Gon had to get to Tahl. He had to see her, grasp her hands, look into her face. He had to know she was alive.

"You are going to New Apsolon today?" Obi-Wan asked.

"As soon as I can arrange transport."

"Then I will get my survival pack and meet you at the landing platform."

Qui-Gon took a breath to compose himself. "No, Padawan," he said as gently as he could. "You must remain behind. I cannot ask you to defy the Council on my behalf."

"You are not asking me," Obi-Wan said. "There are reasons to stay. I will not be gone long."

"That is what Tahl said."

Qui-Gon sighed. "Unlike Tahl, I will remain in touch with you. I will call for you if I need you." He held Obi-Wan's gaze. "You know that I will. "

Obi-Wan's gaze did not falter. Qui-Gon could see that his Padawan did not understand. Yet he would not back down.

"My place is by your side," Obi-Wan said. Qui-Gon took a deep breath. "Then let us depart."

CHAPTER 4

Before landing on New Apsolon, Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan changed from their Jedi tunics into the common street wear of travelers, hooded short robes of dark cloth with leather trousers tucked into boots. Qui-Gon would be careful to wear his hood while on the planet. He did not think many would remember him, but he would take no chances.

They set down their craft at a landing pad on the outskirts of the capital city, also called New Apsolon. The city was a large one, spread out over many kilometers. The rest of the small planet was devoted to its second-largest industry, harvesting the gray stone that was used in most of the buildings. There were a few small cities and villages, but the majority of the population lived in the teeming capital city.

They paid the owner to hold the transport, then took a turbolift to the surface of the planet.

They arrived in the Worker Sector of the city. The buildings were no taller than six stories, many built cheaply of durasteel. Others were built of native gray stone with small windows and rounded roofs. Qui-Gon recognized the style as one for those which sometimes lacked heat in winter. Ahead they could see the tall elegant buildings of the Civilized Sector. Although the Worker Sector was cleaner and better maintained than Qui-Gon remembered, its poverty was in marked contrast to the gleaming city they could glimpse ahead.

New Apsolon did not show many of the effects of the civil disturbances that had rocked the government six years before. Qui-Gon had visited worlds that had destroyed their cities through years of conflict. He had seen evidence of ruin - buildings that had been transformed into rubble, formerly blooming squares now mere patches of dirt. New Apsolon showed none of this destruction. The Civilized Sector still gleamed. The city had always been a tech center, and the buildings were tall, impressive structures. Any evidence of street fighting had long since been removed.

One thing Qui-Gon did not remember from his last visit was the presence of slender glass columns about his own height, lit from within. The columns appeared on street corners or in public squares. Sometimes they were arranged in groups; occasionally they stood alone. Some were glowing white, some ice-blue.

"What do you think they are?" Obi-Wan asked. "They don't seem to have any function,"

Qui-Gon recognized a street crossing. "This is where the energy wall to the Civilized Sector used to be." The largest cluster they'd seen yet of the glowing columns stood ahead in a small plaza. "Let's take a closer look at those columns."

The columns were arranged only a few centimeters apart. Together, they formed a tight glowing cube. Near the front of the cube Qui-Gon saw a polished black slab with words chiseled in its smooth surface.

HERE WE COMMEMORATE OUR FELLOW CITIZENS, WORKERS ALL, FORTY IN NUMBER, WHO WERE SLAIN BY THE ABSOLUTE FORCES WHILE ATTEMPTING TO BREACH THE ENERGY WALL.

Obi-Wan counted the columns. "There are forty columns. One for each Worker. These are memorials."

"Every spot where a Worker died is commemorated," Qui-Gon guessed.

The two Jedi gazed at the glowing columns. Now they seemed to take on the presence of living beings. Qui-Gon could imagine the forty Workers, striding toward the energy wall. Perhaps their arms had been linked together.

"I remember on our mission to Melida/Daan how shocked I was at the devastation in the city," Obi-Wan said. "Every ruin held so much sadness. You could see the lives lost and disrupted. This feels just as terrible, somehow. The city has not been touched, yet so many beings are gone. And life continues to go on around them." Obi-Wan touched the glass. "It is good to see what has been lost."

"Yes, I feel that, too." Qui-Gon also felt moved by the mute testimony of the standing columns.

They walked on, past the site of the old energy wall. The checkpoint was still standing, a security booth covered in armor. Across the front someone had scrawled ROAN KILLS.

As they walked into the Civilized Sector, they saw more evidence of the same graffiti. ROAN MUST GO read some. EWANE LIVES ROAN MUST DIE read others.

Workers in coveralls were busy trying to scrub the graffiti off the polished stone.

"There is unrest here below the surface," Qui-Gon said.

"I sense it," Obi-Wan agreed. "The people are not easy in their minds."

The streets became more crowded, the difference between the Civilized and the Workers perfectly clear. The Civilized had all the trappings of wealth - fine clothes and gleaming airspeeders. Since it was the middle of the day, the rich were on the streets, talking in small groups or lingering in the opulent cafes that lined the broad boulevard. The Workers were dressed in plain tunics and trousers and seemed to be hurrying to fulfill duties, not strolling and enjoying the day.

"We must report for a security check," Qui-Gon said. "It is required of all visitors. Just a formality, but perhaps we can learn something."

The government buildings were clustered in one grand neighborhood, all built around a series of interlocking large squares filled with flowers and benches. Unlike the gleaming tall structures around them, the buildings were not very tall and were built with more ornamentation, columns and ledges and sweeping grand staircases leading up to gleaming metal doors.

Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon were welcomed cordially at the front desk of the Administration Services Building, then led to the office of the Chief Security Controller. He was a short, balding man with a powerful chest and shoulders. He stood and nodded.

"I am Balog, your official greeter. Welcome to New Apsolon. We thank you for obeying our check-in procedures promptly. May I ask the purpose of your visit?"

"We have heard of the pleasures of New Apsolon," Qui-Gon said. "We are here as tourists."

Balog nodded. "Tourism has not been forbidden... yet. But I must warn you that the government is close to issuing an official warning to all who plan to travel here. New Apsolon is now a dangerous place for any foreigners. Our leader is under siege, and there is unrest here. Tempers are high. The society is volatile. I cannot guarantee your safety."

"We are not looking for guarantees," Qui-Gon said. "We do not plan to stay long, and we will be careful."

Balog nodded. "Then enjoy your stay."

Qui-Gon started toward the door, then pretended to hesitate. "You mention that your leader is under siege. We have heard that the former leader was assassinated. Do you feel that Roan is in danger as well?"

"There are some who believe that he placed the order for the death of Ewane," Balog said. "Of course this is false. Yet that is where the danger lies. These people want revenge. We have it under control. Ewane was a great man, but Roan is as well. He is a Civilized with great wealth, yet even before the bloodless revolution he defied members of his party to champion the Workers. I am an example of that. Roan was the one to raise me to this position. He has done the same for others. Roan has support among the Workers. Those who suspect him of murder are a small but vocal minority."

"Ewane's daughters are in hiding, are they not?"

Balog looked surprised. "Not at all. They were taken in by Roan after their father's death. They are living in the official residence, two blocks away."

CHAPTER 5

Obi-Wan looked at his Master as they left the security building. He could see that Qui-Gon was worried. If the twins were safe, why did they summon Tahl?

"Do you think the twins don't want anyone on Apsolon to know that they are afraid?"

"Most likely," Qui-Gon said. "Still, it is odd that they lied about being in hiding. I think it's time we saw them."

They asked a passerby for directions. Everyone knew where Roan's residence was. It was a gracious building built of the same mellow gray stone, not far away. Qui-Gon threw back his hood as he entered. He knew he would have to give his true identity in order to be allowed to see the twins.

At the security checkpoint, the screen flashed blue and a voice asked for his name. Qui-Gon gave it, explaining that he was friend of Eritha and Alani.

"Step forward for a retinal scan."

Qui-Gon, then Obi-Wan, did so. Qui-Gon didn't object. He was glad to see that the security was tight.

At last the door opened and the two were ushered into the private quarters of the residence. There, two young women waited in a brightly furnished room with a cheerful fire. They were identical, with long, braided blond hair and narrow faces enlivened by bright dark eyes. They both broke into dazzling smiles when they saw Qui-Gon.

"Qui-Gon!" they cried together, and hurried toward him.

Qui-Gon bowed. "I was not sure you would remember me."

"Of course we do." Qui-Gon was not sure which one had spoken. Six years ago, Alani had been slightly taller than Eritha, but now they were the same size.

As if recognizing his difficulty, the other girl smiled. "I am Eritha. This is my sister Alani."

"I'm afraid I can't tell you apart," Qui-Gon said.

"It's hard, but in time people can," Eritha replied.

"Some people," Alani amended. "Why are you here on New Apsolon? Is it a Jedi mission?"

"Not exactly. Let me present to you my Padawan, Obi-Wan Kenobi."

"Any friend of yours is one of ours," Alani said. "We will never forget your kindness to us six years ago."

"How is Tahl?" Eritha asked eagerly. "We were hoping she was with you."

"Tahl is on New Apsolon, but I'm afraid I'm not in contact with her yet," Qui-Gon said. "Did you send for her?"

The twins exchanged surprised glances. "No," Alani said. "Why would we do that?"

"You do not feel in danger?" Qui-Gon asked. "Since your father's murder, you might feel that New Apsolon is not safe for you."

"We are safe here with Roan," Eritha said. "He was our father's best friend. He will protect us. We have everything we need here and don't need to go out if we don't wish to. We have private gardens in the back of the residence."

"I see that you are troubled, Qui-Gon," Alani said. "Of course Eritha and I are aware that there are those on New Apsolon who believe Roan had our father assassinated. We do not believe such a thing."

"Roan has been like a father to us," Eritha said. "After our father's death, we saw his grief."

It was real. He would not allow us to leave this residence. He said he would be our father now." "We are a family," Alani said firmly.

Qui-Gon nodded. He would not challenge the girls' beliefs. But he would not take them as truth, either. He had known the girls at the age of ten, bewildered by their world's conflicts and longing for their father as he spent long years imprisoned. They had been protected by Ewane's followers, who had proven their devotion to their leader by sheltering his daughters. Perhaps they still were unable to cope with the complexities of a world where sabotage and treachery were practiced. The cozy room and private compound told him that they were still sheltered.

"So you haven't heard that Tahl is on New Apsolon?" Qui-Gon asked.

The girls shook their heads.

"If she is, I wish she would come and see us," Alani added.

Qui-Gon nodded. A feeling of dread loomed inside him. If the girls had not called Tahl, who had? And where was she?

CHAPTER 6

With no leads, Qui-Gon decided that until they thought of a plan of action, observation was their best strategy. They walked past the

government buildings, noting the high security. Everyone seemed to be on alert.

Obi-Wan read the inscription on a windowless building nearby. Unlike its graceful neighbors, this one was squat and long. "It's the former headquarters of the Absolutes," he said to Qui-Gon. "It's now a museum."

"Let's go in," Qui-Gon suggested. "It could be that the Absolutes still have power here. Groups such as that find it hard to disband. The more we learn about them the better off we are."

They paid a small fee to enter. They found themselves in a surprisingly tiny hall with a low ceiling. Carved into the stone archway above an entranceway to the rest of the building they read ABSOLUTE JUSTICE CALLS FOR ABSOLUTE LOYALTY

A petite, wiry woman approached them, dressed in a navy tunic and trousers. Her jet-black hair was cropped short, and Obi-Wan noted that her right hand was twisted, the knuckles of the fingers large and knotted.

"Welcome. I am Irini, your tour guide. All the guides to the museum are former prisoners of the Absolutes. Let's begin the tour."

They followed her underneath the archway and down a long corridor, where she accessed a thick durasteel door. Immediately they found themselves in a cell block. They walked past the deserted security desk through the row of cells.

"Here is where prisoners were detained before undergoing 'reclassification,' which was the Absolute term for torture," Irini explained. Her voice was calm and dispassionate. "Often prisoners were kept waiting without food or water for long periods, to break down their resistance. They were not allowed counsel or contact with their families. If you are visitors to our world, you may have noticed the many memorials, especially in the Worker Sector. The white columns stand for those who gave their lives on the spot. The blue columns memorialize those who were taken by the Absolutes and arrested. There is a column on Teligi Road for me."

Irini stopped before the last cell. "I was held here for three days, then moved to the reclassification area. I was a prisoner for a total of six months."

"Why were you arrested?" Obi-Wan asked. Since Irini was a tour guide, he assumed it would be all right to ask such a question.

"In addition to my job in the tech sector, I ran a Worker newspaper," Irini said. "We wrote about change through peaceful protest. Our venture was not illegal, but the Absolutes accused us of advocating violence. The charges were false. They were afraid of our influence with the other Workers. Technically the Workers were allowed freedom of

expression, but in actuality the Absolutes tried to control what we could say or do."

"Could you vote?" Obi-Wan asked curiously.

"Again, technically yes. But the Civilized Authority - which is what our United Legislature used to be called - placed the oldest voting systems in the Worker Sector. Often the systems broke down, or Workers could not register. Votes were not counted. Demands for recounts were refused. Soon we saw that to effect change, we had to take more dramatic means."

"Sabotage," Qui-Gon said.

She nodded. "Yes, that was the principal strategy. When I was released from this place, I joined this movement. We were high-tech workers sending goods out to the galaxy. If the goods were defective, profits would fall. The Civilized were worried about profits above all. Eventually they saw that they had no choice but to negotiate with us. It was a long, hard struggle. Let me show you how hard. Come this way to the torture rooms."

Irini led them through room after room, each one designed for a different kind of detainment or torture. Some rooms were bleakly empty of equipment, yet the thick walls and doors spoke more eloquently than any device of what had been done there. One room held a single object, a coffin like device made of durasteel and plastoid materials. There was a narrow slit at the top.

"This is a sensory deprivation containment device," Irini said quietly. "All of them were destroyed except for this one, which we keep as a reminder of what went on here. Some were kept in the device so long that they went mad. Others were given paralyzing drugs and died inside it."

She led them into another chamber with screens along one wall. Behind them a projector lens protruded from the back wall. "But this is what we feared the most. Here we were forced to watch the torture of others. Sometimes it was people we knew, friends, family. The Absolutes used probe droids largely to monitor the Workers. They kept the vital statistics of all of us on file for easy tracking. They could find anyone if they needed to." Irini stared at the blank screens. "They found out I was engaged to be married and found my fiancé."

Obi-Wan drew in his breath. He could not imagine the kind of mind that would devise such a torture. This time, he did not feel he could ask Irini what had happened.

Irini glanced at him. "What they did not realize, the Absolutes, was that for the one being tortured it somehow helped to know others were watching. The Absolutes thought only of the pain they could inflict - the double pain of the victim and the watcher, you see. But the victims took courage from the idea that they would be brave for those who knew and

loved them. They would withstand anything for love. Probe droids are illegal on New Apsolon now. No one wants to bring back those days again."

She looked back at the screens again. "There were many days in this place that I said goodbye to life. Yet I did manage to survive."

"It must be difficult for you to return," Qui-Gon said. "And yet here you are, giving tours to others."

"Remembering is most important," Irini said. In the dim light, she held up her twisted hand. "I considered myself lucky to leave with only one hand damaged. They broke my hand in order to prevent me from working in the tech sector again. But what they stupidly did not know was that I am left-handed. I was just as fast a worker when I got out. Maybe faster. I had no trouble getting another job." Her smile was unexpectedly brilliant, lighting up her tense, drawn face. "I had a cause to work for."

"Have all the Absolutes been arrested?" Qui-Gon asked.

Irini shook her head as she led them down a catwalk to a lower level, past another row of cells, these with low ceilings so that an adult could not stand upright. They had to duck their heads as she led them inside. Her tunic gaped slightly as she bent, and Obi-Wan saw a small slender chain with a silver emblem around her neck. The delicacy of the jewelry seemed at odds with her brusque manner and severe clothing.

"Not by any means. Many of the former Absolutes went underground. Some were protected by powerful allies among the Civilized. Recently secret records of the Absolutes were found. The government sealed them. That is one thing the Workers are still fighting. We want the records opened so that we can know who our enemies were."

"Why were they sealed?" Obi-Wan asked. Irini led them out of the tiny chamber and back to the catwalk. Obi-Wan took a relieved breath that he tried to hide. After only a few seconds in the dark, tiny space, he had felt as though an oppressive weight was on him.

"Those in power say that to release the records would compromise the efforts underway to find the criminals. Also, there were mere bureaucrats in the Absolutes - secretaries, assistants, tech people who were not involved in torture or containment. What kind of punishment do they deserve, if any? The government is afraid that if they release the names of these people, there will be mob rule and a chance for violence out of revenge. They say each person on this list must be investigated before the name is released. There are some among the Workers who do not believe this. They believe it is merely another attempt to shield the criminals. Roan had promised to release the records after he was elected, but has not done so."

"Yet," Qui-Gon said.

"Yet," Irini said. "Or maybe never. He is a Civilized, after all."

She opened the door back into the main area of the building. A draft blew from the empty space, blowing back Qui-Gon's robe. Irini stood, holding the door open, facing him. Her eyes flicked down to his utility belt.

Her dark eyes flared with surprise. "You are a Jedi."

"What makes you think so?" Qui-Gon asked.

"I know a lightsaber when I see one." Irini's gaze ticked over them. "I should have known you weren't just tourists. Why are you here? Did Roan send for you? Are things so dangerous for him on New Apsolon that he feels he needs to call on the Jedi for protection?"

"I get the impression that you do not trust Roan," Qui-Gon said.

Irini's eyes went flat, and she stared at him coolly. "The Absolutes taught me one thing, stupid as they were," she said. "Trust no one."

CHAPTER 7

As they exited the museum, Obi-Wan's mind was full of reflections on what he had seen. He could not imagine Irini's choice to continue to walk into that building and give tours, to return to a place where she had been tortured and abused. Then he remembered Bant. She had almost died in the waterfall pool at the Temple, yet it was still her favorite place to swim. She said it was better to remember than to forget.

But how much remembering was good to do? How did you know when to put memories aside?

He looked over at Qui-Gon, ready to ask the question, but Qui-Gon did not seem in the mood to philosophize. His face was set in grim lines as he walked purposefully down the avenue, even though they had no purpose in mind.

"Something is wrong," Qui-Gon said under his breath. "I can feel her. She is here. She is close. But something is wrong."

Qui-Gon's expression did not change, nor did his pace, but Obi-Wan felt a shift in his concentration.

"Do not turn around, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said. "When we come to the end of this avenue, go right. There appears to be an alleyway there. As soon as we turn, look for cover."

"Trouble?" Obi-Wan asked in the same calm tone.

"A probe droid."

"I thought they were illegal."

"Apparently they are still in use despite this. It could be merely surveillance. It might not be tracking us, but I think it is. Let's find out what it will do."

They reached the alley, and Obi-Wan quickly darted in, Qui-Gon at his heels. Immediately he saw that it was a service area for the buildings on that street. Gravsleds were outside some doors, and a skiff suitable for transporting goods sat in front of a utility entrance.

Without exchanging a word, Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan darted behind the skiff. The probe droid zoomed into the alley and revolved, sensors blinking, searching for them.

Qui-Gon did not move. Obi-Wan knew his Master was waiting to see what would happen.

Was the probe droid programmed to keep searching? How determined was the surveillance?

The probe droid zoomed up the alley and back down, searching for movement. The Jedi were trained to keep perfectly still. They did not even blink. They could slow down their breathing and their life processes so that even the sensitive probe droid couldn't pick them up.

The probe droid didn't leave the alley. Slowly it revolved, moving up and down the street.

"It's not going away. Fine," Qui-Gon muttered. "Let's provoke it."

He stood suddenly and strode toward the middle of the alley. The probe droid had picked up the movement immediately and had already revolved and positioned itself to get Qui-Gon back in its sensor range. With a gesture that seemed almost casual, Qui-Gon leaped into the air, activating his lightsaber, and cut through the droid in one smooth motion.

"Now let's see what - " he began, but was cut off by blaster fire from above.

The blaster fire was so close to his Master that Obi-Wan's heart gave a lurch. That did not prevent him, however, from activating his own lightsaber and slashing forward to protect him in the same moment. If Qui-Gon's reflexes had been a split second slower, he would have been cut down. As it was, the sleeve of his robe was seared by the blaster heat.

"Stay under cover!" Qui-Gon roared at Obi-Wan. Perhaps Obi-Wan had risked too much to race to his Master's side, but he didn't care. The fire came at them relentlessly from above as they zigzagged down the alley together, keeping their lightsabers arcing above. Trapped in the narrow space, they were easy targets.

"We have to get on the roof above," Qui-Gon said. "Activate your cable launcher when you can."

Obi-Wan had to time his movement to the blasts from above. He needed all his perceptions to keep up his defensive moves. He managed to activate the cable launcher as he moved sideways toward the wall of the building. It propelled him upward as blaster fire pinged around his head.

Obi-Wan leaped up on the roof. He realized that the blaster fire had stopped only seconds before. His gaze whipped around the roof as Qui-Gon jumped up behind him.

"There," Qui-Gon said.

They ran to one edge of the roof, where they could see a small pile of objects. First they searched the area, looking down to see if their attacker had returned to the alley. Then they scanned the roofs nearby to see if he or she had jumped. There seemed to be no avenue of escape that would allow for the attacker to disappear so quickly.

They returned to the pile. Qui-Gon crouched down and picked up a small transmitter.

"For the probe droid. And here's an ammunition pack." He tossed it to Obi-Wan. "Looks like it was only one person. But he or she had two blasters, at least. That was a constant stream of fire."

Obi-Wan turned the pack over in his hands. It was made of leather. Burned into one side was a small insignia. He crouched down to show it to Qui-Gon.

"I recognize this. Irini wore a necklace with this same emblem."

"At last," Qui-Gon said. "We have somewhere to start."

CHAPTER 8

Dusk had fallen and the air had chilled as Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan waited outside the Museum of the Absolutes. They kept their hoods over their heads and stayed in the shadow of a monument directly across from the building.

Soon they were rewarded as various people began to exit the building. They spotted Irini's compact figure immediately. She, too, raised her hood as she hurried down the broad steps and turned down the avenue.

The Jedi melted into the stream of people on the avenue, always keeping Irini in sight. She boarded a repulsorlift-engined airbus and they just managed to jump aboard on the rear platform. Luckily the airbus was crowded. All the Workers were on their way home.

The airbus made no stops as it sped through the boulevards and avenues of the Civilized Sector. It crossed into the Worker Sector and began to make regular stops. Workers exited at various points. Irini

stood, her hand lightly resting on a pole, near the middle of the airbus. She stared absently out at the dark streets.

Qui-Gon leaned in to speak to Obi-Wan. "We will have to get off soon, even if Irini doesn't. We can't take the chance that she'll see us. We'll have to follow the airbus on foot."

It would take some hard running through the crowded streets. Obi-Wan nodded. Better to take the chance that they could lose Irini than be spotted. They knew where she worked; they could always find her again.

Just then Irini began to move toward the exit. The airbus pulled over at the next stop. Qui-Gon made sure Irini had exited before signaling Obi-Wan to jump off the rear platform.

Irini moved quickly through the streets, occasionally exchanging a smile or quick greeting as she walked. The population was busy gathering food for the evening meal, or passing time in small cafes along the route. Mothers and fathers herded children before them, and lights began to come on in Worker housing. They could see families in the middle of their evening routines, children bending over datapads, adults preparing a meal or simply sitting at the window, watching the rest of New Apsolon find their various ways home.

The streets began to narrow, and there were fewer Workers around. Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan slowed down, giving Irini a longer lead. She was beginning to use the reflections in darkened windows to look around her.

"Checking for surveillance," Qui-Gon murmured.

Irini crossed the street. With a deft touch to his elbow, Qui-Gon directed Obi-Wan to melt back. They stood in the shadows as, under the pretense of looking for traffic, Irini swept the street with her keen glance. Satisfied that it was empty, she hurried into a plain stone building. It was slated for demolition along with its partner next door. A sign read BUILDING A BETTER FUTURE FOR ALL SITE OF NEW LUXURY WORKER HOUSING

Qui-Gon did his own careful surveillance before starting across the street, Obi-Wan at his heels. Obi-Wan started toward the door of the building Irini had entered, but Qui-Gon stopped him. He had been studying the building next door.

"Let's try this one first," he said.

The door was bolted with a strong durasteel lock, but Obi-Wan swiped through it easily with his lightsaber. They pushed the door open and stood for a moment in the dark vestibule.

"I don't want to take a chance with the glow rod," Qui-Gon said. "Wait a moment until your eyes adjust."

Obi-Wan didn't understand how the light of a glow rod would be visible to the next building, but he followed Qui-Gon's lead. In only

moments, his eyes had adjusted to the pitch-black interior. He saw that they were in a small foyer. There had once been a datapad station here, most likely for messages and mail for the inhabitants. It had been ripped out, the console parts thrown on the floor. There was a turbolift, but no doubt it was no longer working. A staircase cluttered with debris led above.

Qui-Gon began to climb. "I saw evidence from the outside that some floors here had been enlarged into the adjoining building, probably to expand apartments," he murmured to Obi-Wan. "We might be able to get close enough to Irini to hear what's going on."

Qui-Gon stopped on the first landing, listening intently. Obi-Wan did the same, but heard nothing. They continued upward, stopping at each floor. They climbed five flights before they heard something. It was a soft murmur, nothing more. They moved toward the sound.

It was so faint that they lost its direction a few times. They stood, blocking out the slight noises of the building - the rush of night air through an opening, the skitter of dust along the floor. Then they would pick up the murmur again, and move on.

They walked through abandoned rooms and found evidence of the lives that had been lived there. Narrow sleep-couches, torn and stained. A battered pan on the floor. One boot. A palm-sized datapad that appeared to have melted into the floor. Room after room opened up into the next like a maze. Once, Obi-Wan realized, there had been too many people crowded into these too-small rooms.

Qui-Gon stopped. "We are now in the other building," he murmured to Obi-Wan. "They are very close."

Obi-Wan could feel the presence of others as well as hear them. But the sound quality was muffled and disorienting. He paused to focus. When they moved, they moved as one. They had both discovered the source of the sound. It was behind a closet. Qui-Gon eased open the door. They saw a crack of light running from the floor to the ceiling. Squeezing inside the closet, they both put their eyes to the crack.

The room next door was lit only by a glow rod set at low power. Yet they could clearly pick out Irini, who sat in a semicircle of other men and women. They were dressed similarly in dark coveralls or tunics.

Now Irini's words came to them clearly.

"I have seen them myself, and I am telling you, they were brought by Roan," she said.

"They admitted to this?" one of the group asked.

"Why should they? They are his tool. The Jedi are sent here to ensure that the government stands. If the government stands as it is, none of the remaining Absolutes will be brought to justice. Therefore they are our enemy."

"With all respect to my fellow Worker Irini, the Jedi were neutral parties six years ago," a quiet-voiced woman said. "They supported the will of the people, whatever that might turn out to be."

"Their role was as peacekeepers only," a man chimed in. "Why are they now our enemy?"

"Because peace is not what we seek," Irini said fiercely. "Justice is. We must overthrow the murderer of Ewane."

Another woman spoke up. "We have agreed that before we plot the overthrowing of Roan we must have evidence of his guilt. We do not have this yet."

"We will," someone else said. "I think Irini is right. The Absolutes have re-formed. We know this. Every day they gain power. Roan must be behind it. And if he has sent for the Jedi, they must know it."

"What do you think, Lenz?" the quiet-voiced woman asked.

The man she addressed had not spoken, but Obi-Wan had noticed him. He watched the others with grave, intent eyes. There was a kind of power to him, even though he was hunched over, his hands dangling in his lap. His face was thin, thinner than Irini's. Obi-Wan did not know how he knew this, but he sensed that Lenz had suffered greatly at one time in his life, no doubt at the hands of the Absolutes.

"I have new information," Lenz said. "A new group of leaders have risen in the new Absolute order. No one knows their identity. They are taking pains to conceal them. All we know is that these leaders are clever. Harassment of our movement has begun. Some report an increase in surveillance. We must be careful."

"What does this have to do with Jedi?" someone asked.

"Maybe nothing. Yet both might point to Roan's desperation. First, he backs new leadership within the Absolutes to keep a lid on any opposition. Then, in a show of good faith to the galaxy, he asks for Jedi help. His best interest is to keep things as they are while he consolidates his power."

Even Irini listened to Lenz with respect. "So what should we do?"

"First we should change our meeting place. Every week a new site. Winati, you are in charge of finding a place. Mohn, you are in charge of notifying the others."

Lenz stopped abruptly and picked up his com-link. It must have vibrated, signaling an incoming communication. He listened for a moment, then clicked off.

"The Absolutes. It's a raid."

Lenz's voice held no urgency, but the group rose immediately and moved like a shadow. No one reacted, no one gasped or showed confusion. Obviously, they had trained for this.

Winati quickly accessed a recessed door in the wall. A staircase led upward. She waited while the others hurried across the floor and disappeared inside, then slipped inside herself. The door slid shut.

"Probably goes to the roof," Qui-Gon murmured. "Let's wait and see who is raiding them."

Moments later, the door burst open. A squad of black-clothed men stood in the doorway, blasters held at their hips. The leader strode forward.

"Too late." He accessed a device on his utility belt.

"Trouble," Qui-Gon murmured, backing up.

The device was a heat sensor. It beamed on the wall they were hiding behind. The wall began to glow.

Obi-Wan scrambled backward, but the close quarters made it difficult for them to move quickly. A moment later a cutting tool swiftly sawed an opening in the wall and a boot followed. The wall splintered, and the leader stepped through.

Obi-Wan had his hand on his lightsaber hilt, but he looked quickly at his Master.

"Submit," Qui-Gon said quietly, and in moments, they were surrounded.

CHAPTER 9

Qui-Gon allowed himself to be hustled down the stairs. Their captors said nothing, and he saw no need to volunteer any questions or comments. He was not sure if they knew that he and Obi-Wan were Jedi. He assumed that they were thought to be Workers.

In the cramped vestibule, thick strips of fabric were wound around their eyes to blindfold them. They were bound in energy manacles. Then they were pushed out the door. Qui-Gon felt himself being guided into a landspeeder. Obi-Wan was shoved next to him.

He concentrated, trying to gauge distance by calculating speed and time. He knew Obi-Wan was doing the same. The journey was short, and at the end they were roughly hauled out of the speeder and marched down a corridor. The speeder had been parked in an interior landing area. Listening for echoes, Qui-Gon estimated its size. For a landing area of this proportion, the building would have to be fairly large.

He heard a door accessed, and he was pushed inside a smaller area. He heard Obi-Wan stumble as he followed.

"This is where you belong, Jedi," a voice hissed.

So they knew their prisoners were Jedi. "Where are we and why are we being held? Who are you?" Qui-Gon asked.

"'None of your business' is the answer to your first question, and 'because you are enemies of the state' should answer your second. As for who we are, we are the saviors of Apsolon."

"You don't say," Qui-Gon remarked dryly. "Tell me, why are we your enemy?"

"We remember what the Jedi did six years before. Because of your interference, our true government was lost. It is up to us to recapture the glory we surrendered."

"New Apsolon did hold elections open to all - "

"We do not recognize New Apsolon, only Apsolon. And not every citizen deserves to vote."

"You are entitled to your opinion," Qui-Gon said. "Yet a government was legally elected by the laws of your world, so therefore - "

"Do you think I have time to argue with you?" The voice rose angrily.

The door slid shut.

"Well, that was an interesting conversation," Qui-Gon said. "We can see that the Absolutes are just as they appear. They are fanatics."

"Not good news for us," Obi-Wan said.

"I'm sure we'll have an interesting dialogue."

"Do you think they'll torture us?" Obi-Wan asked the question in a firm voice. He did not want Qui-Gon to think he was afraid. But when he remembered back to the different methods they had seen earlier that day, he couldn't say he felt comfortable with the notion.

"I have no idea what they are planning," Qui-Gon said.

They did not say any more. There was a good chance they were under surveillance. Qui-Gon moved closer to Obi-Wan and gently indicated his lightsaber with his fingers. It was to let his Padawan know that if torture lay ahead, they would not submit. Obi-Wan nodded.

They did not have long to wait. Less than an hour passed before they heard the door hiss open. They were pulled outside and then pushed

along for a short distance. Another door was activated. Qui-Gon felt himself shoved inside.

He did not know what lay ahead, but he had his lightsaber. His hands were still bound, but he would find a way to resist.

He was forced into a chair. A bright light was in his face. He knew his Padawan was beside him.

"Here are the Jedi."

"We can see that, brother." The voice was low and powerful, with a wry twist to the cadence that he knew well. "You may leave us."

Yes, his hands were bound. Yes, he was blindfolded. He was a prisoner with no way out that he could tell. But Qui-Gon's heart sang. He had found Tahl.

CHAPTER 10

He sensed other presences in the room. At least three, he thought.

"Why are you on Apsolon?" a male voice asked.

"A stopover," Qui-Gon replied. "We are traveling, and I was here six years ago. I had some curiosity as to how this world fared."

"Who sent for you?" another voice barked. "No one."

"Why were you present at a secret meeting of Workers?" a third shrill voice asked.

"We were not present at the meeting. We were observing it. Surely your own people could tell you that."

"Just answer the questions. Who is your contact in the Workers?"

"No one."

"You were seen with Irini. How did she contact you initially?" She did not contact us. We went for a tour."

On and on the questions came. Qui-Gon answered them briefly. Tahl did not speak again. No doubt she had spoken first to let him know that she was in the room. Somehow she had infiltrated the inner circle of the Absolutes. She had done it in a short amount of time, and she had done it well. Qui-Gon admired her skill, but then, he always had. He felt almost liquid with relief that he had found her. A growing desperation had haunted him, and he had had to push thoughts of his vision aside.

When he released her, her body could not stay upright. She seemed to fold into his arms like drifting silk. Odd, because he had always

counted on her strength. Now he felt the softness of her hair, her skin, the lightness of her bones. He felt how she could melt against him and become part of him. Tears sprang to his eyes at the way one of her hands curled weakly around his neck.

He wrenched his mind back to the present. He realized that the three men were arguing.

"Killing them would send a message," one said.

"Two messages. One to the Workers, one to Roan. It will show them we have power. But do we risk tipping our hand?"

"Perhaps if we threaten to kill them and then do so, it would be better."

The three continued to argue. Qui-Gon did not worry. The absence of Tahl's voice told him something important: She had done more than infiltrate the inner circle. She had gained power.

Again, Qui-Gon marveled at her fearlessness. Yet it only increased his own fears for her safety. His belief in his vision strengthened. Now he saw it as a vision that could happen, if she stayed on this dangerous course.

"T, you have said nothing," one of the men said at last.

"We will let them go," Tahl said. Immediately the others erupted in shouts. "

"Why?

"Just let them go?"

"This makes no sense!"

But the three quieted so abruptly Qui-Gon knew that Tahl had made some kind of gesture. That was the kind of power she had.

"Again you all fail to factor in the one thing that we lack in our struggle," Tahl said. "Popular support. We cannot achieve power without it. I know you don't like to hear this. But the people of Apsolon are used to thinking they have a voice in government now. We can give them that illusion. That is not difficult. But we still need their support."

"What does this have to do with the Jedi?" someone asked sullenly.

"The Jedi are still respected on Apsolon. The people think they were responsible for keeping the peace during the transition. They see them as neutral - "

"They supported our dissolution! They were against us!"

"I am talking about appearances," Tahl snapped. "Always remember that appearances are much more important than reality. If we kill the Jedi and take responsibility for it, our hope of popular support will be gone. There will be time enough to kill our enemies."

"Well, why don't we just kill them and get them out of our way? We don't have to take responsibility for it."

There was a short silence. Qui-Gon could feel the tension in the room. He could only imagine the look of scorn that Tahl was directing at the speaker.

When she spoke, her voice was measured and slow, as if she were talking to a child with no notion of the way things worked. "First of all, killing Jedi is not cut and dried. You don't just kill them and expect no consequences. There would be an investigation. Certainly one from their order, and perhaps one from the Senate. This time, when we take power, we want the backing of the Senate. We have discussed this. We will be clever this time. The people will have the illusion that they have some control. Second, if you do make the decision to eliminate a powerful enemy, you do it so that you will gain something from it. If we discredit the Jedi and then kill them, we will gain. We cannot discredit them if we don't let them go."

"But they have heard everything we have been saying! We spoke freely because we thought they would be eliminated."

"It does not matter," Tahl said. "We have control. We are more powerful than the Jedi on our own world. Stop being such cowards! Now leave me. I will send for R to release them."

Qui-Gon heard the three men file out. He heard a rustle of fabric being unwound next to him.

"Thank you," Obi-Wan said quietly.

Then Tahl approached him. But instead of unwrapping his blindfold, he felt her crouch in front of him.

"So, Qui-Gon," she said. "At last we are equal."

"Hardly. You were always my better." "Flattery will not give you back your sight." "I don't have to see you. It is enough to know you are safe."

Tahl sighed. He felt her warm breath stir his cheek. A moment later he felt the cool precision of her fingers as she unwrapped his blindfold.

It took a moment for his eyes to take her in. She was in disguise. Her distinctive green and gold striped eyes were now dark. Her hair was cropped short and the color of a pale moon, contrasting with her dark honey skin.

She kept her face toward him, as if reading him with her senses. He regarded her strange new eyes, and his disquiet at seeing her disguise faded as he saw his familiar Tahl behind their new color. He could not help it; he was happy.

She must have known it, for suddenly she reached out and touched his face with her fingertips. He felt her fingers against his lips.

"You are smiling."

"Yes."

"Don't."

She did not drop her hand, but kept it against his mouth. He saw that she unable to keep the small smile off her face and his own smile broadened beneath her hand.

"I can't seem to get rid of you," she said. "No," Qui-Gon replied. "You cannot."

Obi-Wan watched the two friends. He felt that they had forgotten he was in the room. They even seemed to have forgotten the mission. He could not begin to know the tangle of feelings in this deep friendship. Tahl had been angry at Qui-Gon. Qui-Gon had kept himself aloof from her for awhile. These things he knew. But he did not know why these things had happened. He only knew it had something to do with Tahl's resentment of Qui-Gon's need to watch out for her since she had been blinded.

On this mission, he had often felt out of step with Qui-Gon. Over the years he had learned how his Master strategized. But now it was as if Qui-Gon was following some sort of internal logic he could not decipher. He did not know what was in his Master's mind. There had been many times when Qui-Gon's thoughts had been unclear to him, but never had it felt quite like this. There was a veil between them. Yet, looking at Tahl, he saw that she did not feel it. He tried not to feel jealous of that.

Tahl stood. "We can't talk here. Follow me. There is an exit this way."

She walked purposefully toward the door and accessed it. Obviously she knew this place well. She turned right down a short corridor. Obi-Wan could not tell what kind of a building they were in. It was industrial, and completely bare. Perhaps it had been a warehouse of some kind.

Tahl climbed a ramp to the next level. They saw no one. She walked toward a set of tall bay doors suitable for loading merchandise. Next to them was a smaller door for workers. She accessed this and they stepped out into the cool night.

"It's an abandoned warehouse," she told them. "The Absolutes bought it. They have a large treasury. The street is down at the end of the yard. I'll walk a little way with you, but I must return."

They slipped through the yard and exited out on a narrow street.

"Where are we?" Qui-Gon asked.

"At the very edge of the Civilized Sector," Tahl explained. "If you follow this road, you will meet the State Boulevard where the government offices are."

CHAPTER 11

"Tell us your plan," Qui-Gon said. "Obviously, the situation is more volatile than we'd thought. We are here to help."

"I must admit that help would be welcome," Tahl said. "It wasn't hard for me to see that the twins are in danger. But I don't yet know from whom. I suspect the Absolutes, which is why I infiltrated them. But I've found nothing. Roan could be the secret leader behind them, but I've yet to discover if that is so."

"The twins told us they hadn't seen you," Obi-Wan said.

"They were trying to protect me," Tahl said. "We agreed I should go underground. They got me the false identity papers that said I was once a member of the Absolutes. It was a large, bureaucratic organization at one time. Many did not know the top-level operatives."

"So the twins did send for you," Qui-Gon said.

Tahl nodded. "When I arrived, I was surprised to find that they were not in hiding, as they'd said. They admitted embellishing their plea in order to ensure that I would come. They suspect that Roan was, in fact, responsible for the murder of their father. They are virtual prisoners in his home. I was ready to escort them off-planet into exile, but as we all discussed the situation, I was impressed with their maturity and courage, and also distressed by the state of things on New Apsolon. The twins are symbolic to the people. If they leave, the last traces of honorable government go with them. The twins changed their minds and insisted on staying. I decided that they needed to know exactly how much power the new Absolutes were gathering, and proposed that I go under cover. The twins were against the idea, but eventually agreed and helped me."

"How strong are the Absolutes?"

"Not as strong as they think," Tahl said. "Their numbers are small, and their organization is in a state of chaos. There is no real chain of command. It was easy for me to rise in the structure. The Absolutes are now engaged in low-level activity - gathering information, doing surveillance, and occasional harassment of the Worker Resistance. But what I don't like is that they have a vast treasury. They are amassing weapons."

"So they must have important backing from somewhere," Qui-Gon observed.

"Yes. But I don't know where. Yet. That's where you can help."

Obi-Wan glanced at his Master. He saw a struggle on Qui-Gon's face. He knew why. Qui-Gon did not want to oppose Tahl, but he did not agree with her. The reason was obvious.

"Tahl, the Jedi have not received an official request to help any party in this government,"

Qui-Gon said. "It is unclear as to whether Roan was involved in the late leader's death. It is uncertain whether the Absolutes will ever gain enough power to be a real threat. The planet is struggling with its new society, yes. But is that a reason for the Jedi to interfere?"

"But we did receive a request," Tahl argued. "From the twins. They are the daughters of the late ruler. Surely they have an official voice. And they are in danger."

"If that is so, then we should return to the original plan and get them off-planet," Qui-Gon said. "There is no reason to get involved in internal politics."

Tahl stopped walking. "What about our loyalty to those girls?"

"This is not a question of loyalty - "

"On the contrary. They asked for my help, and I intend to give it. They want more than safety. They want to remain on their home planet. A planet that is stable and peaceful."

"The Jedi cannot promise them that," Qui-Gon said.

"You are so logical," Tahl said, shaking her head. "You block out your feelings, just as you did years ago. You look at this so dispassionately. You do not care enough."

Obi-Wan saw that Tahl's words had wounded Qui-Gon.

"I am a Jedi," he said. "So are you. There are ways to approach a mission, ways that have been shown over thousands of years to work."

"You were always the first one to break the rules."

"When the mission called for me to do so. This mission does not. And please..." Qui-Gon's voice roughened. "Do not accuse me of not caring. That is unfair."

They walked in silence for a moment. Obi-Wan longed to find the wise words to heal this division between the two friends, but he did not know how. Tahl had hurt Qui-Gon. Qui-Gon had hurt Tahl. He could feel that. He felt helpless to change it. The two friends now seemed to almost

hate each other. He could feel their anger and disappointment in the crisp slap of their footsteps on the pavement.

At last Tahl spoke. "Let us reach a compromise," she said. "I need your help. Just give me one week. I will remain with the Absolutes under cover. You and Obi-Wan will investigate the murder of Ewane. I would ask you to begin with Roan's brother, Manex. Manex is extraordinarily wealthy - he used his political contacts to make a fortune before and after the bloodless revolution. There are many who suspect him of corruption. He could have been behind a plot to murder Ewane in order to bring his brother to power. Roan might have been involved in the plot as well. If we can find evidence that either Roan or his brother is guilty, we can begin to bring peace to New Apsolon."

"A week isn't much time," Qui-Gon said.

"Not for most," Tahl said. "For you, it will be enough. If we fail to uncover any new evidence, we continue to offer safe passage to the twins. If they refuse, we will go back to Coruscant and only return here if an official request for Guardians of the Peace comes to us."

Qui-Gon thought for a moment. "I don't suppose there is any chance of persuading you to leave Absolute headquarters right now."

"None at all," Tahl said.

"Then I accept the compromise. And may the Force be with us."

His Master's words seemed heartfelt, no mere matter of formal blessing. His worry lay over them like a heavy fog. Obi-Wan could tell that Tahl was annoyed by it. Without another word, she headed back toward Absolute headquarters. Qui-Gon turned to watch her until she was swallowed up by the dark.

CHAPTER 12

Qui-Gon found a guesthouse where they could spend the night. His Padawan fell deeply asleep, but he lay awake. He could not decipher what hung on his heart. He could not fathom why he felt so angry at Tahl. He had lost his calm judgment. He had never felt less like a Jedi.

His vision had disturbed him, yes. But he had thought this gnawing feeling would settle once he had found Tahl and embarked on a path to help her. It had not. What was he overlooking?

He wrapped his blanket around his shoulders and turned on his side. There was a small window set high in the wall. Through it he could see one of New Apsolon's three moons. Tonight it was full and brilliant, with a slight pinkish cast. Qui-Gon meditated on its beauty while he tried to empty his mind. He tried to eliminate thoughts of tomorrow and what it would bring, tried not to think of Tahl in the midst of those fanatical followers.

He turned again.

"Qui-Gon? Is everything all right?"

From the sleep-couch in the opposite corner, Obi-Wan's sleepy voice interrupted his thoughts. He was disturbing his Padawan. And they needed rest.

"Nothing. Go to sleep."

Qui-Gon willed his body to stillness and asked his mind to obey. His stubborn mind defied him, and sleep did not come. Instead, he stared at the moon.

If Obi-Wan noticed Qui-Gon's haggard looks the next morning, he did not mention it. His Padawan silently took the responsibility for their morning meal, disappearing and bringing back tea, bread, and fruit.

Qui-Gon was as grateful for Obi-Wan's silence as his consideration. They dressed, shouldered their packs, and set out for the address that Tahl had given them.

Manex, the brother of Roan, lived near the residence of the Supreme Governor. His home was vastly larger, built not of the gray stone they had come to know but of dazzling white and black stones arranged in patterns. The home was more like a palace, trumpeting its size and sheer audacity between its somber, stately neighbors.

"He certainly doesn't mind advertising his wealth," Qui-Gon remarked as he activated the chiming device to announce their entrance.

A protocol droid with a highly buffed, black metallic body answered the door. Qui-Gon announced their names and that they were Jedi. He saw no need for concealment now. Both the Absolutes and the Workers knew that Jedi were on New Apsolon. Tahl felt certain that her identity was secure. If they worked fast, they would not endanger her position.

Manex received them in a small room with walls, floor, and a ceiling of black stone. Thick green carpets were scattered on the gleaming floor, and the room was filled with overstuffed benches and seating areas, all upholstered in different shades of vivid green. Large pillows the color of new grass were thrown about on the floor. Thick emerald curtains hid the windows.

A tall, plump man was lying on one of those pillows, propped up on a long, low sleep-couch. He jumped up when they entered the room. His black, curly hair was cut short and covered his head like a cap. His eyes were blue and friendly.

"Welcome, Jedi. How nice of you to call. I'm delighted to see you."

Qui-Gon bowed. He felt a bit overwhelmed by the room and the effusive greeting. He had not expected it. He'd imagined Manex to be a cool, ruthless businessman.

"I was just doing my morning meditation. I understand you do the same." Manex's eyes were merry. "I meditate on all the beautiful things I must have. No doubt my process is different from yours."

"Yes," Qui-Gon said.

Manex noted Obi-Wan's fascination with the room. "Green is my favorite color. I can afford to indulge all my pleasures. Aren't I lucky? Sit, sit!"

Qui-Gon took a seat on the companion sleep-couch across from the one where Manex now lolled. He sank down into the plush upholstery. Obi-Wan sat next to him, trying to keep his spine straight. It was difficult on such a luxurious piece of furniture.

Manex gestured to a gold tray with sweets arrayed on it. "I have the best pastry chef on New Apsolon. Try one." He popped a fruit tart in his mouth.

Qui-Gon saw Obi-Wan eye the beautiful sweets hungrily, but his Padawan did not take one.

"What can I do for you?" Manex asked, dusting crumbs off his gold robe.

Qui-Gon had thought about how best to proceed. He wasn't sure what they could learn by simply talking to Manex. After all, he would hardly admit to being corrupt. Yet beings often gave away clues to their true nature without knowing it. In the end, Qui-Gon had decided his route would be honesty.

"I was part of the original Jedi team sent here to monitor the elections six years ago," Qui-Gon said. "I am not here now on an official mission, but I was curious to see how New Apsolon had fared. I must say what I have seen is cause for disquiet."

Manex sat up, as if speaking of serious things caused his spine to straighten. "Ewane's murder was a tragedy. New Apsolon was thriving. There was no need for unrest. We were just getting the economy to be as good as it was before all the troubles. Worker and Civilized alike stood to have their lives improved as the wealth began to pour in again. The galaxy lost faith in our products and is just now beginning to regain it. We lost our prosperity through conflict once. It is a great shame that we risk it again."

"Wealth is important to you," Qui-Gon said neutrally.

"Yes." Manex met his gaze serenely. "I enjoy having it. There are those who say I amassed my wealth through corruption and contacts. I assume that is what you are referring to."

Qui-Gon was impressed. He had a glimpse of the businessman now. Manex would speak plainly, or at least appear to.

"Contacts, yes. Why shouldn't I? My brother was highly placed in government. I took advantage of those trying to get on his good side. But that is different from corruption. I saw ways to improve business here. As a Civilized, I was allowed to trade off-planet. Workers were not. The law was unfair, but I would have been a fool not to profit by it. I was able to open up vast trade markets in the galaxy for the goods of New Apsolon. I had a network of info-tech contracts. So I was happy to see a Worker elected and the government stabilized."

"You did not join your brother in calling for unity at the time," Obi-Wan pointed out.

"My brother is the hero. I am the businessman."

Qui-Gon picked up a pastry. He did not want it. He took it because it had been offered, and Manex was obviously proud of what he had. Qui-Gon wanted to show respect and keep this meeting cordial. He popped the small, delicate sweet into his mouth. Instantly it melted into a silken explosion of taste - tart, sweet, complex.

Manex smiled, for Qui-Gon could not keep the surprise off his face. "I did not exaggerate. The best."

"Yes."

"I only call what I have the best if it is. I do not fool myself about anything. Take my brother." Manex crashed back against the soft pillows. "He is noble. Courageous. Dedicated to the common good. All the things I am not. I should despise him, for I'm told brothers become jealous when one is vastly superior to the other. Yet I don't despise Roan. I'm glad beings like him are on this world. They make it possible for me to live well."

"Since your brother is now Supreme Governor, you stand to profit even more," Qui-Gon pointed out. "You would not gain anything by despising him."

"I could despise him and still exploit him," Manex shot back. "Surely you have seen enough of the galaxy to know that, Jedi."

"Yes," Qui-Gon admitted.

"You are suggesting that I am behind the murder of Ewane," Manex said shrewdly. "I know others believe this. But why should I endanger my fortune in such a way?" Manex shook his head. "I like my comfort too much to risk it."

"Besides, it would be wrong," Obi-Wan pointed out.

"That too."

"Do you think your brother had anything to do with Ewane's murder?" Qui-Gon asked. "There are those who believe that, too."

"Roan?" Manex shook his head. "He loved Ewane like a brother. Look how he took in those girls."

"That could be to get sympathy on his side," Obi-Wan said.

Manex did not seem disturbed by this suggestion. He leaned forward. "You must understand something. Duty is everything to my brother. He feels responsible for Alani and Eritha."

"There are those who say the twins are in danger, living in the house of one who is a suspect in their father's killing," Obi-Wan said.

"There are those on New Apsolon who will say anything right now to get what they want," Manex said evenly. "Those girls are free to go, and yet they stay. They know Roan better than they knew their own father. All this grief they are displaying - who is it for? They never knew their father. Ewane was in prison for all the years of their childhood. Then he was Supreme Governor and had his hands full. He never really knew his daughters."

"One cannot fault a child's grief for a father, no matter how distant the relationship," Qui-Gon said.

"Of course not. I am sure the twins are sincere." Manex sat up and pushed the plate of pastries toward them. "Such somber talk for such a beautiful morning. Please, eat. I'll send for some tea."

Qui-Gon stood. "We must be going. Thank you for your hospitality."

"I am delighted to receive the Jedi. You may return anytime." Manex stood to bid them good-bye.

The same protocol droid led them to the door. Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan paused on the steps. Qui-Gon took a deep breath of morning. It was encouraging to feel the cool air and sunshine, but he felt no closer to helping Tahl.

"What do you think?" he asked Obi-Wan as they returned to the street.

"I found him unpleasant," Obi-Wan said. "He could have the cunning to engineer an overthrow of the government. But I can't see him having the energy to do so. He would have to get off his sleep-couch."

"You are allowing dislike to color your perceptions, Padawan," Qui-Gon said disapprovingly. "Remember it takes energy to amass wealth. Manex had it easier than most, but he did build an impressive financial empire."

"Which he uses for his own pleasure," Obi-Wan said disgustedly.

"I have seen men and women of vast wealth who did not enjoy their own comforts," Qui-Gon remarked. "At least Manex enjoys what he has built. His choices are not our choices. Do not let his enjoyment of pleasure blind you to his merits."

"You see merits there?" Obi-Wan asked incredulously. "I see corruption."

"I see a man who lives the way he wants to live and makes no apologies. The question is, how desperate is he to maintain his life of wealth and comfort?" Qui-Gon wondered. "If Manex seems weak, I suspect he is not. Despite his denials, he could secretly hate his brother. But we still should not discount his perspective, Padawan."

Qui-Gon reached inside the pocket of his robe. "And he reminded me of something important." "A clue?"

He handed Obi-Wan a pastry he had plucked from Manex's tray on the way out. "Even in the middle of a mission, don't neglect to taste the pastries."

CHAPTER 13

"Let's head to Roan's," Qui-Gon suggested next. "It's time we met the Supreme Governor."

The official residence was close by. Qui-Gon thought over the conversation with Manex. He wished he had learned more. He had hoped to take some information to Tahl. Instead, he had only vague feelings.

"Qui-Gon," Obi-Wan said softly, "look ahead. Ten meters to the right, near that monument."

Qui-Gon glanced over. His Padawan's keen gaze had picked out a small tracking droid. It hovered in the grassy square across from the residence of the Supreme Governor. He had not noted it. He sternly told himself to focus on each moment. He could not let his worry distract him this way.

"Do you think it's looking for us?" Obi-Wan asked.

"No. It is watching the residence. It's not a probe droid. It could be used just for security." Qui-Gon searched the area carefully, dividing it into quadrants and examining every meter. "There. By the trees in front. Another."

"Roan has stepped up his surveillance."

"Or someone has stepped up surveillance on Roan. I don't like what we're seeing. I'm feeling a disturbance in the Force. Come, Padawan."

Qui-Gon strode toward the residence. When they stepped up to the door and pressed the security button, a guard did not materialize onscreen. The blank screen merely shone blue.

Qui-Gon's foreboding changed to alarm. He pushed against the door, but it would not open.

"We could try the gardens," Obi-Wan suggested.

A high wall separated the front of the residence from the gardens behind. The top was ringed with electro-wire. It was not a challenge for the Jedi. Summoning the Force, the two leaped high and cleared the wall easily. They landed softly on the grass.

They ran alongside the great mansion toward the back, where the gardens were. As they ran Qui-Gon searched for access to the house but there were no windows on this side. Perhaps the residence was built with exits only in the front and back. It made it easier to defend.

They burst into the gardens. At first Qui-Gon could only pick out a riot of color from the masses of flowering bushes surrounding them. Paths ran through the bushes, narrow and twisting. It was impossible to get a view of any kind.

"See if you can glimpse the back wall," Qui-Gon directed Obi-Wan. "Look for signs of entry."

Qui-Gon scanned the back of the house. Everything looked quiet and serene. Not a curtain stirred. At first glance, there was no sign of distress or danger. Then Qui-Gon noticed that a door was slightly ajar.

"Qui-Gon!"

Qui-Gon turned and raced down the path. He caught up to Obi-Wan as his Padawan raced through the twisting paths. "I saw something ahead - movement. And I think.."

They turned a corner. Ahead they could see a team of intruders hauling something over the wall. It was about the size of a person, black and shiny. There was a slit in the top.

Qui-Gon recognized the sensory deprivation container from the Museum of the Absolute. But why were the intruders dragging it over the wall?

Then he saw, through the slit at the top, a strand of golden hair waving.

"They have the twins," he said.

They activated their lightsabers and charged.

The intruders were masked and dressed in dark clothing. They saw the Jedi approaching. One of them reached for a transmitter.

"Overhead, Obi-Wan!" Qui-Gon shouted.

Probe droids suddenly buzzed above them. Blaster fire rained down. Lightsabers swinging, Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan deflected fire while they raced to the wall.

Other probe droids approached, high enough to avoid retaliation and peppering the Jedi with fire. The intruders had the advantage. They dropped over the wall and disappeared.

It would be difficult to leap over the wall and deflect fire at the same time. Qui-Gon knew that. He had no choice.

He accessed the Force and leaped. Beside him, he saw Obi-Wan do the same. They sailed over the wall, high above. In those quick seconds, Qui-Gon had a chance to swipe two probe droids. Obi-Wan neatly cleaved one in half. The three droids fell sizzling to the ground.

They landed on the other side of the wall. A long expanse of grass stretched before them. Parked on it were large swoops.

The intruders had already loaded the two containers onto swoops. As the Jedi raced forward, they took off.

A concealed door in the wall opened and security forces rushed through. Qui-Gon recognized Balog, the head of security.

"What's going on?" he barked angrily. "What are you doing here?"

"I think the twins have been taken on those swoops," Qui-Gon said, pointing at what was now a fleet of dots in the sky.

Balog spoke quickly into his comlink, giving the coordinates of his position and asking for air support.

"Did you see them?" he asked.

"We saw two sensory deprivation containers, the same design that we saw at the museum. I saw one of the girls' hair. That's all."

Balog turned to the guards. "Check the house again. And check the grounds." He then turned back to Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan. "I thought you were tourists. What were you doing here?"

"We are Jedi," Qui-Gon answered. "We are not here on an official mission. I knew the girls six years ago. We came to see them."

Balog gave them the hard stare of a security officer who was used to lies. Something must have convinced him, because he sighed. "This happened on my watch. I thought security was perfect. Somehow they got through the house security and immobilized the guards. They tripped the alarms, but it took too long for us to get here."

"Do you have suspects?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Obviously, it could be the Absolutes," Balog said. "Those devices were supposed to be destroyed, but of course we know that some must have been smuggled out. Anyone could have bought them on the black market. In other words, no, I don't know who took the twins." He gazed at the sky. "I just hope that whoever took them is planning to ransom them. I hope this is a kidnapping, not..."

He did not complete the sentence. "The use of the containers points to that," Qui-Gon said. "If the intruders were going to kill the twins, they would have done so here."

Balog ran a hand over his forehead. "I must tell Roan personally. He will be devastated."

He walked off, too distracted to say a farewell.

Qui-Gon stared after him. "Unless Roan already knows," he said.

CHAPTER 14

They met Tahl in a prearranged location deep in the Worker Sector. It was a small park that commemorated an early protestor of Apsolon's system. A single white glass column stood in the middle of the small green. They kept their hoods drawn over their faces as they circled the park, around and around. Once she heard the news of the twins, it had taken three turns for Tahl to speak.

"I do not think it was the Absolutes," she said finally. "I believe I would know it. There were extreme factions of the group, but they are under the control of the central committee now. At least I think so. It's a possibility, but I'm more inclined to think that Irini and the Workers kidnapped the twins. They feel strongly that Roan murdered Ewane. Perhaps they could even justify the kidnapping as keeping the twins away from danger."

"You should join us in tracking the kidnappers," Qui-Gon said. "If you believe the Absolutes are not involved, it is a waste of time for you to remain there."

"I said I thought they weren't involved," Tahl corrected. "There is always the possibility that rogue members have done this. I need to stay in place and investigate. It would be natural for the Absolutes to try to find out who did it. I can use their surveillance resources."

Obi-Wan noted that his Master seemed to be restraining his objection. He did not understand why. Tahl was right. She should remain undercover, at least until they knew who had taken the twins.

"Do you think Roan could be involved?" he asked Tahl.

"I don't know," Tahl said. "Of course we need to entertain the possibility."

"We were on our way to speak to him when we interrupted the kidnapping," Qui-Gon said.

"Maybe we should try to speak to him now," Obi-Wan suggested.

"It might be hard," Tahl pointed out. "He will be on a full-scale alert. He won't have time for us."

Just then Qui-Gon's comlink signaled. When he answered it, it was Balog. Qui-Gon listened intently for a few moments, then clicked off the communication.

"It will be easier than we thought," Qui-Gon said. "Roan has asked to see us."

Roan met the Jedi in his office at the massive Institute of Government Service building. Despite the grandeur of the building, his office was sparsely furnished, with chairs lined up against a wall, a long table that served as a desk, and a bare floor of gray stone. The window looked down on the streets. On their own, Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan had seen the signs of protest beginning. As the word spread of the twins' fate, people were spilling out into the streets.

The Workers had organized quickly. Across the street in the square they had formed a solid cube of beings in the same shape as the many monuments in the city. More continued to arrive. The front line carried a banner: ARREST ROAN NOW

Roan turned from the window as they entered. He was, in midlife, an imposing figure, with one silver streak on one side of his dark hair. He bowed in greeting.

"Welcome. If I had known you were here before this, I would have called for this meeting earlier."

"We are not here officially, so did not want to trouble you," Qui-Gon said.

"Consider yourselves official," Roan said grimly. His dark eyes looked haunted. "We need help to find the girls. I know that you want to find them, too. I am also aware that there are those who believe that I was behind the murder of their father and now their abduction. I have summoned you here to tell you this is not so."

"Why do you think the rumor began?" Qui-Gon asked.

"Because since Ewane's murder the structure of the government has been in a precarious state. There are those who are calling for new elections. My enemies have encouraged the rumor that I killed Ewane." Roan paced in front of the window. It was coated so that he could see out, Qui-Gon noted, but the people massing below could not see him.

He turned and faced the Jedi. He spread his hands. "I do not know what to do. My planet has struggled for fairness and achieved freedom for all its people. Now it is in danger of losing that stability. I see visions of ruin whenever I close my eyes. Yet I know I can prevent this ruin. I just don't know how. Events seem to unfold before me and I am powerless over them."

Qui-Gon felt a rush of sympathy for Roan. The man truly looked haunted. And Qui-Gon himself knew what it was like to be plagued by visions. He knew what it felt like to have events rush by as if he'd once seen them unfold in a dream and had only now remembered it.

"What would you like us to do?" Qui-Gon asked.

But just then Roan's internal communication unit signaled. With an impatient gesture, he went to answer it.

"I left instructions that I was not to be disturbed - "

"Yes, Governor. But we have received an external communication. They ask for you only. They say they are the kidnappers."

Roan looked at the Jedi. "I would like you to hear this." He spoke into the comm unit. "Please put them through."

The voice that came through the comm unit was obviously electronically manipulated. It had an eerie, echoing quality, half machine, half living being.

"Good afternoon. Today the descendants of Ewane were taken in a raid. We are holding them. We are willing to release them upon your meeting certain conditions."

"Are they all right?" Roan asked. "Let me speak to them."

"They are safe and were not harmed. Do not speak. Listen."

"I will pay for their release - "

"Do not speak! We do not want money. We want you to resign your position as Supreme Governor. You will say you are bowing to the will of the people. You will call for new elections. You will never reveal that you have resigned in order to free the twins."

Roan met Qui-Gon's eyes. Qui-Gon saw that he would agree. He had no choice.

"Oh, yes. If you say you will do this, and you go back on your word, both you and the twins will be killed. Make no mistake that we are capable of getting to you anywhere. Even with Jedi protection."

"All right," Roan said, leaning toward the comm unit. "I agree to your terms. But I must see the twins and escort them to safety. I don't want them frightened again."

"That would be acceptable. We will contact you with details."

"When?" Roan asked urgently, but the communication was cut off.

Roan sat down heavily. "They are alive, at least. If we can believe them."

"You must not go to this meeting alone," Qui-Gon said. "When they contact you again, you must ask for a Jedi escort. You must ensure that both you and the twins come back from this meeting alive."

Roan nodded. "I will. I know you will protect them. I am all they have. I must do as the abductors ask. But I will be grateful for your assistance. Our first concern is the lives of those girls."

CHAPTER 15

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan left Roan, who promised he would call the Jedi as soon as the kidnappers contacted him again. They had only gone a few steps from the government building when Qui-Gon's comlink signaled.

"Qui-Gon, I need you."

It was Tahl. Qui-Gon felt his worry collect into one burning mass in his chest. She sounded breathless, in trouble. Not to mention that she was asking for his help.

"Tell me."

"I don't know how, but they discovered that I am a Jedi. They are afraid of how much I know. I escaped from the headquarters, but they've sent probe droids after me. Qui-Gon, I... I can't see the droids - "

"Do you know your location?"

"I crossed to the Worker Sector. I went four blocks south, three blocks east. I am concealed in a memorial, you know the ones with the standing columns?"

"Yes." Qui-Gon was already walking rapidly toward the Worker Sector.

"I'm hiding between the glass columns, but it won't take long before the probe droids locate me. There are many beings on the streets, so that will confuse them for a time, but - "

"We are on our way."

Qui-Gon quickly explained the situation to Obi-Wan, and they began to run. Tahl could not sense the droids through the Force, and this made her predicament all the more dire. He remembered precisely the location of the Absolute headquarters.

Was this it, was this the meaning of his vision? Would he find Tahl curled up between the columns? Would the probe droids have found her?

Her eyes were black and dull, but they sparked to life when she saw him..

He had seen Tahl's eyes in the vision, and they were dark, the color of the lenses she had donned to conceal their distinctive color. Qui-Gon remembered this detail like a blow. Did that mean the rest of the vision would come true?

"Qui-Gon, we're here." Obi-Wan spoke quietly by his side, his breath roughened by the hard run. "We should be cautious now. The probe droids might be searching for us, too."

It was a good point. He should have thought of it. He slowed his pace to a walk so that they were not obvious among the passersby. Then they gradually increased their speed, mingling with the crowd. Because of the unrest concerning the twins' disappearance, the streets were crowded.

Qui-Gon counted off the blocks, struggling not to run. Attuned to the air above, he did not see any probe droids. He did not know whether to be reassured or worried by this.

At last they reached the corner where the monument to the dead Workers stood. Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan hurried toward the glowing columns. They searched through the rows, at last finding Tahl near the back, at a place where she was hidden but still had room to escape the cube and run.

She turned her face up at the sound of their footsteps. Her eyes were dark, but not dulled with pain. She was fine. Her wry smile tore at his heart. "Thanks for coming."

Qui-Gon crouched down and signaled to Obi-Wan to do the same. "There are many on the streets. It will be hard for the probe droids to track you. I think the safest place for us now would be with Roan. Even if he is behind the kidnapping, he must maintain the illusion that he is not. Since your cover is blown, it doesn't matter who knows that you are Jedi."

"True," Tahl said. "Let's go."

Obi-Wan scanned the sky. "Surveillance will be heaviest around here. Once we get into the Civilized Sector, the probe droids might give up."

"Stay between us, and stay close," Qui-Gon told her.

They made their way cautiously out from the glowing glass columns, then into the flow of pedestrians. Gradually it became clear that the passersby had a destination.

"They are heading somewhere," Qui-Gon murmured.

"Probably a demonstration," Tahl guessed.

The demonstration turned out to be only a few blocks ahead. The crowd all turned toward the small park where Workers were massing. Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan, and Tahl were left alone.

"We could hide in the crowd," Qui-Gon said in a low tone.

"But we would just have to leave it later," Obi-Wan said.

"Maybe the probe droids will give up."

"No," Tahl said. "The Absolutes never give up."

"I say we go now," Qui-Gon said. "It's not far to the Civilized Sector and Roan. The kidnappers could be contacting him at anytime. He has agreed to a Jedi presence."

"I agree," Tahl said, and Obi-Wan nodded.

Quickly they turned away from the demonstration and headed toward the Civilized Sector. They had gone a short distance when Qui-Gon felt a presence.

"I feel it," Tahl said.

"Something is nearby," Obi-Wan agreed.

The probe droid zoomed into view, flying lower to get a fix on the three. Qui-Gon leaped up without warning, slashing out with his activated lightsaber. The probe droid crashed to the ground, smoking.

"There will be more now," Tahl muttered.

They quickened their pace. Soon three probe droids approached. Blaster fire erupted around them. Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan kept close to Tahl, moving forward while deflecting the fire.

Qui-Gon was worried. If more probe droids arrived, he and Obi-Wan would not be able to deflect that much firepower. Already their pace had to slow to protect Tahl and ensure her safety.

"I can get above them on that ledge," Obi-Wan said. "Can you cover Tahl while I do?"

"Yes," Qui-Gon said. It was their only hope. He was glad his Padawan's sharp eyes had seen the building ahead.

Obi-Wan shot out his liquid cable launcher and within seconds had gained the ledge high above. Even as the launcher propelled him through the air, he slashed at a probe droid that was zeroing in on Tahl. He cleaved it in two and it sputtered as it spiraled below to the ground.

One of the two remaining droids zoomed up to focus on Obi-Wan while the other continued to fire at Tahl. Obi-Wan hung from his launcher and pushed off against the building with his feet. He swung out toward the droid and attacked, missing it by centimeters. He used his feet to kick off the building again, propelling himself higher and farther. Unused to this unorthodox action from a being it was tailing, the probe droid circled, beeping. Obi-Wan slashed at it, destroying some of its circuits. It began to act erratically, circling and diving. On his next swing, Obi-Wan cut it apart.

Qui-Gon saw Obi-Wan demolish the droid, but he was busy with the remaining one. "There are some durasteel garbage bins ahead," he told Tahl. "I'm going to push you behind them and go after the droid."

In a few steps, he pushed Tahl down behind the bins, then leaped up on top of them. Obi-Wan saw his action and quickly ran closer on the ledge, still attached to his cable launcher. As Qui-Gon leaped high, Obi-Wan released the cable to fly down. They caught the probe droid between them and each struck a strong blow. Tumbling, on fire, the probe droid smashed into the pavement below.

Obi-Wan leaped lightly to the ground as Qui-Gon landed and reached for Tahl. The three now began to run. They did not tire and did not stop until they passed into the Civilized Sector, where the population now thronged the streets. They would be safe among them.

"I can honestly say I couldn't have done it without you," Tahl said, panting.

They pushed on to the Institute of Government Service. They hurried inside toward Roan's office. They burst in, but it was empty. His assistant came running in after them.

"You can't - oh, please excuse me. I didn't realize you were the Jedi."

"Where is Roan?" Qui-Gon asked.

"He has gone to a meeting."

"What meeting?"

The assistant hesitated.

"We are in Roan's confidence, as you know," Qui-Gon said. "Has he gone to meet the kidnappers?"

The assistant nodded.

Qui-Gon strode to the window, exhaling his irritation against the glass. This was unfortunate.

He did not trust the kidnappers. Roan could have been the real target all along.

Tahl questioned the assistant sharply, but it was clear he did not know where Roan had gone or any details of the meeting.

"What can we do?" Obi-Wan asked.

Tahl and Qui-Gon spoke together. "Wait."

They stayed for hours in Roan's office. At last Balog came to them.

"I have arranged accommodations in the Governor's residence," he told them. "You will be more comfortable there, and after all, that is where Roan will go when he returns with the twins." He hesitated. "I wish he had confided in me, too. I will wait with you."

Qui-Gon nodded. "Thank you."

Balog escorted them the short distance to the residence. Dusk had fallen, and the crowds protesting in the square had dwindled.

"Apparently the lure of the evening meal has caused some to lose their dedication," Balog observed.

As they neared the residence, Qui-Gon noticed a large package on the walkway leading up to the house. It was outside the security field.

"Balog, there is something - "

"I see it." Balog spoke quickly into his com-link, calling for security, even as he ran alongside Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan.

There was a deep unease in Qui-Gon that only grew as he ran. As he drew closer, what he feared took shape before him.

It was not a package. It was Roan, wrapped in dark fabric and tied with wire.

Qui-Gon knelt by his side. Roan's sightless eyes stared up at the gathering night. The Supreme Governor was dead.

CHAPTER 16

Gently, Qui-Gon placed his hand over Roan's eyes, closing them. Balog and Obi-Wan came forward. Balog sank to his knees.

"You can rest now, my friend," he murmured brokenly.

Carefully, Balog, Qui-Gon, and Obi-Wan lifted the body. They carried Roan inside his home for the last time. Tears now streamed down Balog's cheeks, but his face was composed and he said nothing.

"I must see to the arrangements," he said as they laid Roan in the reception room. "We must try to conceal this for as long as we can. We must find the twins first. I think it best that we not tell anyone just yet."

"This will be hard to conceal," Qui-Gon said. "Whoever killed Roan will want it known."

Qui-Gon was right. In a short time the darkness outside was lit with glow rods and candles. Obi-Wan had thought there were many in the streets that afternoon. Now it seemed that the entire population of New Apsolon was outside, pouring out their grief or their rage.

Balog stared outside at the demonstrations. "I must get a message to Manex. He should not find out this way."

The Jedi sat in an inner room. Obi-Wan was unsure of their next step. He knew they would not leave until the twins were found. Perhaps they would escort them off-planet since the situation was so volatile. He watched Qui-Gon and Tahl, who sat opposite each other but did not speak.

A short time later they heard a disturbance in the hall. Obi-Wan followed Qui-Gon and Tahl out of the room.

It was Manex. His voice was high with his distress. "I was hosting a dinner. They brought me the news." He looked slightly foolish in an opulent green velvet robe and a red tasseled cap that Obi-Wan thought inappropriate under the circumstances.

Balog spoke to him in a low tone. "We believe the cause of death was a paralyzing agent that attacked his heart and lungs. We do not know if the attempt was to kill or stun, but it was too late to revive him."

Manex nodded sadly and looked at the Jedi. "I saw this end for my brother," he said. "I think he did as well. Yet he went forward."

"He always went forward," Balog said.

Manex put his hand on Balog's shoulder. "Thank you for all you have done. Now I will sit with my brother until morning."

"I will send in refreshment for you," Balog said.

"Send nothing." Manex walked softly to the door where Roan lay, opened it, and disappeared inside.

The Jedi returned to the small room. "Do you think he was genuine?" Obi-Wan asked Qui-Gon. "He hardly looked the part of a grieving brother."

"Yes," Qui-Gon said. "But there is another perspective. You could say that he did not take the time to change but rushed here when he heard. His attire could be confirmation of his grief."

"Is that what you think?" Obi-Wan asked.

"I don't know. But I need to hold the two perspectives so my vision will be clear."

Obi-Wan nodded. They sat again. The hours passed. The lights were powered down until they gave off a soft glow. Obi-Wan felt himself beginning to nod off, but he did not want to suggest sleep until Qui-Gon did. It was unusual for Qui-Gon not to take notice of his fatigue.

Suddenly, Qui-Gon stood, his hand on his lightsaber hilt. "Someone is outside," he murmured.

Obi-Wan stood, ready for action, his sleepiness gone instantly.

"Wait here," Qui-Gon told Tahl. "Obi-Wan and I will investigate."

But Tahl followed them into the hallway just as the front door opened. Security officers ran into the hall, alerted by a hidden alarm. But instead of intruders, Eritha and Alani spilled in. The twins looked pale, their clothing wrinkled and stained, but they were not hurt.

"Where is Roan?" Alani cried. "Take us to him!"

Eritha came forward to Tahl. "You're here. I am so glad to see you. What has happened? We heard on the streets that Roan is dead. It can't be true. Is it?"

Balog took a few steps toward them. "I'm afraid it is true. He lies inside."

Alani turned to Eritha. She put her arms around her sister. "We must go to him."

"He did not kill our father," Eritha said. "He put himself in danger for us. Alani, we are the guilty ones!"

"He would not be dead if he hadn't tried to rescue us," Alani said, her voice rising.

"No." Tahl walked toward them. "You are guilty of nothing. Roan made his own choice."

"Did you escape or did they let you go?" Balog asked them.

"They let us go. We never saw their faces." Alani wiped tears from her face.

"We believe it's best if you come with us to Coruscant in the morning," Tahl said gently.

Alani looked at her sister. "Yes, I think it is best."

"I do want to leave this place," Eritha whispered. "I never thought I would say that, but it is true."

"We need to see Roan now," Alani said.

Eritha and Alani, their arms around each other, passed into the room where Roan lay. The door closed behind them.

Balog turned to the Jedi. "I was just coming to meet with you. All night we have worked to arrange a peace meeting. We do not know who was behind this, but we cannot wait to find out while unrest fills the streets. The Workers and the Civilized have agreed to meet. Also a representative from the Absolutes has agreed, as long as we give him safe conduct back to where he came from and do not arrest him. We have agreed to that condition because we must. I will also be at the meeting. As a Worker who is part of the current government, I am needed for balance. Irini will represent the Workers."

"This is good news," Qui-Gon said. "Only when you begin to talk can you begin to resolve this situation. The government must be stabilized."

"There is only one condition," Balog said. "A Jedi representative must be present. Each of the parties has asked for this - except for the Absolutes. However the representative has agreed reluctantly. The meeting is at dawn." Balog checked his chrono. "An hour away."

"I will go with you," Qui-Gon said.

"No," Tahl said. "I will go." She turned to Qui-Gon. "It has to be me, Qui-Gon. I infiltrated the Absolute organization. I know things the others do not. If the representative of the Absolutes tries to lie about the organization, I am the only one who will know."

"That is true," Balog said. "The Workers and the Civilized trust the Absolutes even less than each other."

"Take the twins to Coruscant in the morning," Tahl said. "I will join you there after this meeting."

Obi-Wan kept his eyes on his Master. Qui-Gon had gone pale. It was clear he was not happy with this turn of events. He wanted to be the one to go to the meeting. But there was something more there, some powerful emotion Obi-Wan did not understand. There appeared to be some sort of titanic struggle going on inside Qui-Gon.

Tahl picked up on it as well. She frowned and seemed about to speak.

Then, to Obi-Wan's surprise, he saw something flicker in Qui-Gon's eyes. It was almost as though Qui-Gon was amused by something, something private. It was gone so quickly that Obi-Wan was sure he was mistaken.

His Master shook his head as if to clear it. He appeared both shaken and determined at the same time.

Qui-Gon turned to Balog. "Will you excuse us? I need to speak with Tahl alone."

"Of course." Balog bowed and retreated.

Obi-Wan started off with Qui-Gon and Tahl toward the private room. But Qui-Gon turned.

"Please wait here, Padawan," he said kindly.

Surprised, Obi-Wan could only nod. He watched as his Master followed Tahl into the room and closed the door firmly behind them.

CHAPTER 17

"Dear friend," Tahl said, "there have been too many arguments between us. Do not let another one arise."

"I did not ask for privacy to argue with you," Qui-Gon said.

He knew that outside that door, life went on. People were grieving. Others plotted the overthrow of a government. The planet of New Apsolon continued to revolve in its orbit. Its moons were slowly dropping in the sky.

Yet it all meant nothing to him, not at this moment. At last he had come to see the truth. He had touched it and marveled at it and laughed at himself for not seeing it earlier. He had done all this in the space of a moment.

Oddly enough, the key to his revelation had been simple - the image of the pastry he had handed to Obi-Wan just yesterday. He had remembered the taste of it, the sweetness filling his mouth. That had been the lesson he had been searching for, the one he had given to his Padawan without much thought. In the midst of a complicated life of danger and service, he must sometimes remember to reach for the fruit.

"I wish to tell you something," he said. "Well, two things. The first is that I agree that you should be the one to go to the meeting. But we will not take the twins and go, not until you return. I cannot leave New Apsolon without you. I have a deep conviction that if I do, I will not see you again."

She started to pass off his remark, but stopped herself. "You feel this strongly?"

"I do. I felt foreboding back at the Temple. I was in a fever to see you again. Once we were together here, despite the fact that so much

was unsettled, I did not care because I knew you were safe as long as we were together."

She nodded slowly. "But Qui-Gon, I am not your Padawan. We cannot be together always."

"Ah," Qui-Gon said. "This brings me to the second thing I must say."

Yet now that the moment had come, he stopped. Tahl waited. She would not prompt him. She would give him time. She did not always do that - she was the one to prod him, ask him the very questions he did not want to ask himself. Yet she knew him so well that she always knew when to give him time.

His heart filled, and she seemed to know it. Her face softened. Still, she did not speak.

"I have come to know something," he said. "I cannot let you go, I cannot let another minute pass, without telling you this. I did not come to New Apsolon only because you are my friend. I did not remain because you are a fellow Jedi. I have come to see that you are not just a friend and a fellow Jedi, Tahl. You are necessary to my life. You are necessary to me. You are my heart."

He saw her chest rise and fall. Color rose in her face. "You are not speaking of friendship," she said.

"I am speaking of something deeper. I am speaking of everything a being can give another. This is what I offer you. I offer myself."

He could not have spoken plainer. Hard words to say, but they needed to be said.

Another being would have taken a step, sat, moved, spoken. She was perfectly still. He waited, counting his heartbeats. He had taken a decisive step. It would put their friendship to the test.

He was willing to take the risk. At last he had known himself and his feelings. He was not sure of hers. In that moment of revelation he had understood all the tension between them over the past months, all the misunderstandings and irritations. They all had one root. Somewhere inside he had known his feelings for Tahl had deepened, and yet he was reluctant to face that. Back in the hall, the certainty of it had felt like sweet relief.

But now he was not so sure. Tahl appeared flustered, but that could be for any number of reasons.

"If you do not feel the same, I will step back into place and be your friend again," Qui-Gon said. He was a man comfortable with silence, but not this one. He would never want to cause Tahl distress.

"No," Tahl said with sudden warmth. "Do not step back. Let us step forward together. I feel as you do, Qui-Gon."

He took a step forward at the same time as she did. She placed her hand in his.

"I did not know it until this moment," she said. "Or maybe I did. Maybe I've known it for some time."

He felt her fingers, warm and strong in his. "I pledge myself to you, Tahl."

"I pledge myself to you, Qui-Gon."

They stood, not moving for a moment. But both of them were now conscious of what waited for them outside the door.

"I must go to the meeting," Tahl said. "Yes," Qui-Gon agreed.

"We are Jedi. Our life together will be full of separations."

"Yet we will have one life, together."

"Yes."

"When you return, we shall escort the twins back to Coruscant," Qui-Gon said.

"Unless the government asks for our help," Tahl amended.

"Yes, unless we are asked officially to stay," Qui-Gon agreed.

"Whatever decision we make, we will be together," Tahl said.

"Yes," Qui-Gon agreed. "At last this is clear."

CHAPTER 18

Obi-Wan waited outside the door. He couldn't imagine why Qui-Gon had asked for privacy. What could he have to say to Tahl that his Padawan could not hear? Obi-Wan tried not to resent this. Whatever decision his Master made was undoubtedly the right one. Yet he still felt left out, sitting on the stairs outside the closed door like a child.

At last the door opened. Qui-Gon saw him on the stairs and walked toward him, Tahl at his side.

"Tahl will go to the peace meeting," he told Obi-Wan. "We will wait for her here with the twins. When she returns, if the official government of New Apsolon does not request our help, we will escort the twins off-

planet as they wish. We will monitor the situation from the Temple, and return if we are asked."

Obi-Wan nodded. He had known this before they had gone into the room. So why did Qui-Gon seem different? The hunted look on his face was gone. Something profound had changed inside that room.

"We are not leaving a stable planet, but at least we can bring the twins to safety," Qui-Gon said. "That was the initial goal of the mission."

"And we will leave with negotiations in place, I hope," Tahl said.

Balog appeared. "It is time."

Tahl nodded. "I am ready."

She did not say good-bye to Qui-Gon or Obi-Wan, but walked out with Balog. Qui-Gon watched until the door closed behind them.

With the dawn came activity. Roan's body was removed, accompanied by Manex. Arrangements were made for the Supreme Governor to lie in state before his funeral. The twins went to their quarters to rest before packing for the journey to Coruscant.

Qui-Gon arranged for a morning meal. Obi-Wan was grateful. It had been a long night, and his appetite had returned. He ate everything on his tray and watched Qui-Gon sip his tea and have a few bites of bread.

"Are you worried about the meeting?" Obi-Wan asked.

Qui-Gon stared into his teacup. "I wasn't. But there is something... something still troubling me."

They heard a loud voice outside the door and the sound of a scuffle.

"Take your hands off me, you slimy space lizard! Let me see them! Bring them my name! They will see me!"

Qui-Gon strode to the door and opened it. Irini stood, her arm in the grip of a security guard.

"Tell them to let me go!" she said furiously. "I have come for talk, not conflict."

Qui-Gon nodded at the guard. Irini gave him a baleful look as she brushed past him and walked into the room.

"What right do they have to abuse me?" she complained to the Jedi, straightening her tunic. "I am not a criminal. I am a citizen. And what do you need security for? You're Jedi. A neutral party, isn't that right?"

"Maybe we need security because people send probe droids after us and shoot at us in alleyways," Qui-Gon pointed out.

Irini looked blank. "Are you saying I did this?"

"We found your insignia on the ammunition," Obi-Wan said. He pointed to her necklace, which was swinging outside her tunic.

"This is the insignia of the Workers," Irini said. "It is not mine alone. I didn't shoot at you, Jedi. I admit, I wasn't happy to learn you were on our planet, but violence is not my path. Neither is it the path of the Workers. I do not think it was any of us who tried to harm you. Perhaps it was someone who wanted you to think so."

"Perhaps," Obi-Wan said. He did not know what to believe.

Qui-Gon gestured at her to sit down. "What brings you here, Irini?"

"I am concerned about the unrest on New Apsolon," Irini said. "We wanted change, but not like this. Not with another assassination and the kidnapping of children. I have some information that might be useful to you - if you really are here to guard the peace. Since we do not know who in the government to trust, we took a vote and decided to trust the Jedi." She frowned at them. "I hope you will prove worthy of our confidence."

"If you do not trust us, you will not be convinced by our assurance," Qui-Gon said. "It is up to you to make that choice."

She gave both of them a hard stare. "That choice has already been made by committee. I am the emissary. I must tell you that the Workers have been blamed by the Civilized for both the murder of Roan and the kidnapping of the twins. I am here to tell you that the Workers were not involved in either."

"You can speak for the Workers as a whole?" Qui-Gon asked.

"Yes," she said. "We are highly organized and speak as one bloc. If there were violent factions, we would know it."

"And would you admit it?" Obi-Wan asked.

Irini sighed. "It has come to this. We know we are on the brink of civil war again. No one wants this. So, yes, we would be frank if we thought there were outlaw Workers who were willing to kidnap young girls and murder a governor to get what they wanted. But we do not believe this."

"You said you had information," Qui-Gon said.

She leaned forward. "We know that someone in Roan's inner circle was behind both the kidnapping and his death. Someone important. Someone who wants more power."

"Who?" Obi-Wan asked.

"This we do not know."

"How can you be so certain that this information is correct?" Qui-Gon asked.

Irini hesitated. "Because we have a spy in this house. Someone to watch the twins, to protect them."

"They did not do such a good job," Obi-Wan pointed out.

"No," Irini admitted. "That is because the security procedures were violated at the highest level. As you know, this place uses top security. It could only be infiltrated by someone who knew it intimately. Someone who had the key to the code. Someone who knew exactly how to overpower the guards, and exactly how long it would take the second force to arrive."

"Who is your spy?" Qui-Gon asked.

"One of the security guards. That is why we know so much about Roan's security."

"If the Workers know the security, they could have kidnapped the twins," Obi-Wan pointed out.

"No. We know the procedures, but not the code," Irini explained. "Only a handful of people have that information."

"Who?"

She shook her head, frustrated. "We don't know that for sure. We just know they are close to Roan."

Obi-Wan turned to Qui-Con. "That first day, when we saw the twins..."

Qui-Gon suddenly looked pale. "Our security is in the hands of the top security officer, Balog himself..."

"Could it be Balog?" Obi-Wan asked. "If so, sending him to the meeting was not wise. He has a hidden agenda. He is not for Roan, but against him."

"So the chance for peace may be compromised," Qui-Gon said grimly. He turned to Irini. "You must be aware that Balog may be playing false in peace negotiations. We do not know for sure, but we need to consider this. This meeting is too important to risk."

"By the way, shouldn't you be there?" Obi-Wan asked. "It starts at dawn."

Irini looked puzzled. "What meeting?" she asked.

CHAPTER 19

The look on Irini's face made him act faster than he had ever moved in his life. Qui-Gon was out in the hall before he was even conscious of rising from his chair. But even as fast as he moved, he knew Obi-Wan was behind him.

He had sent Tahl off with Balog. There was no meeting. Balog had separated her from them for a reason. He did not know the reason, but he feared the worst.

He had failed her. With all his reliance on his vision, he had not trusted it far enough. He had let her go.

Balog had told them that the meeting was to be held in a secret meeting room in the nearby Institute for Government Service building. Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan raced there through the empty streets. The rising suns stained the pavement with red. The world was beginning to stir.

"We could be wrong," Obi-Wan said as they ran. "There are others who could have been behind the kidnapping. Irini thinks that several know the security code."

"Yes, we could be wrong," Qui-Gon agreed. But he did not think so.

He knew the secret meeting room was off Roan's office. They pounded down the hall. Roan's assistant was just opening up the office. He looked shocked as the Jedi burst in.

"What are you doing here?"

"The secret meeting room," Qui-Gon said. "Take us there."

"I... I don't know," the assistant stammered. Qui-Gon took three steps toward him. He said only one word. "Now."

The assistant nodded nervously. He accessed a hidden door in the paneling, then led them down a short corridor. Another durasteel door was at the end of it.

Qui-Gon's footsteps slowed at the sight of what lay outside the door. A voice cried out inside his chest.

No!

Tahl's lightsaber lay in a small bin. With it were several blasters.

She would never have been separated from her lightsaber if she hadn't been convinced that without it the meeting would not take place.

"Access the door," Qui-Gon ordered the assistant.

The door slid open. There was an empty table. Empty chairs. There was no sign of Balog or Tahl.

In an agony of frustration, Qui-Gon raised the hilt of his lightsaber and brought it down on the table. The table cracked and a long jagged split appeared.

Obi-Wan looked at him, astonished. He had never seen Qui-Gon lose control before.

Qui-Gon closed his eyes and weaved with the intensity of emotion inside him. He saw her dull eyes, felt her weak touch, heard her voice in his ear.

"It is too late for me, dear friend."

His Padawan spoke at his elbow. "We will find them, Qui-Gon."

He swallowed against his anguish and guilt, pushing them down, down deep where they would not interfere with his reason, his judgment, his purpose.

He opened his eyes and met the resolute gaze of his Padawan. He wanted to tell Obi-Wan that if they did not find her in time, if his vision came true, he knew one thing: He would be forever changed. Forever half of what he was. What he could have been.

"We must," he said.