

STAR WARS

JEDI QUEST



THE TRAIL OF THE JEDI

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SCHOLASTIC

Star Wars Jedi Quest #2 The Trail of the Jedi

By Jude Watson

Chapter One

From deep space, the planet Ragoon-6 lay concealed by a bluemist shimmering in the midst broke in sparkling particles that swirled around the viewscreen. The ship broke through into a planetary atmosphere so clear it seemed as transparent as water. Glinting below was a planet as green as a flashing jewel.

Anakin Skywalker's breath caught as he leaned forward. He had never seen such a beautiful approach to a planet.

Obi-Wan Kenobi put a hand on Anakin's shoulder as he, too, leaned forward. "I had forgotten how beautiful it is."

Anakin glanced at his Master. Despite his beard, his face suddenly looked young, even younger than when Anakin had met him five years before, when Anakin was nine years old. Obi-Wan had been a Padawan then, just like Anakin was now. No doubt Obi-Wan was remembering his other trips to the planet, the ones he had taken with his own Master, Qui-Gon Jinn.

Wren Honoran, their Jedi pilot, nodded. "I always forget until next time I see it. It takes your breath away every time."

"It's amazing that it hasn't been colonized," Anakin said.

"It was given in trust to the Senate by its own government," Obi-Wan explained. "Only small tribes of natives still inhabit it. A Senate committee handles requests to visit. Only the Jedi and small groups of beings can visit at any time. Access is strictly controlled. That is why Ragoon-6 will remain unspoiled, as the government wanted. There are no air lanes, no factories, no cities."

"The Ragoons never allowed colonizers to settle," Wren said. "Their own population sickened and dwindled until finally there was only a handful left. They could no longer keep out all those who wanted to come."

"They knew they would have to give up what they loved most in order to save it."

"But if they'd just allowed colonizers to come, they could have kept their planet," Anakin pointed out.

"Yes, but they chose not to. The beauties of their world were too important to them," Obi-Wan explained. "To keep the planet unspoiled was their first goal."

"They sound selfish to me," Anakin said. "They wanted to keep their planet beautiful for themselves and a few others,"

"Or perhaps they were wise," Obi-Wan said. "It is not for us to say."

Anakin turned his gaze back to the planet's surface and sighed under his breath. One of the hardest things he found about becoming a Jedi was suspending judgement. To Anakin, things were good or bad, smart or stupid.

Obi-Wan had this maddening way of not taking a stance on things.

"If I had a planet that was truly my homeworld, I wouldn't give it away. I'd want to be able to come back whenever I wanted," Anakin said. He had spent his early years on Tatooine, but he had been a slave. He did not feel as though the planet was his home, even though his mother still lived there.

"The Temple is your home," Obi-Wan said gently.

Anakin nodded, but he knew in his heart he did not feel that way.

He loved the Temple and was always glad to return there. He loved its order and its grace. He loved the beauty within it, the Room of a Thousand Fountains and the deep green lake. But it did not feel like home.

Unlike other Jedi students, Anakin had once had a home. Unlike them, he remembered his mother. He remembered running home through the heat and bursting through the door to be met with cool air and shade and open arms. He remembered his warm cheek against her cool one. . . .

No, his home had not been a planet. It had been smaller, and humbler, and much more precious.

Life in that home had not been easy. There had been times of food shortages, times when they had shivered at night for want of fuel.

The Temple was never short of food or fuel. The temperature was maintained at the optimum degree for the various beings who lived within.

It was warmer and safer than the slave quarters on Tatooine.

But it still didn't feel like home. Home will always be where Mom is. No matter how old I get. No matter how long it's been since I've seen her.

"There are the Rost Mountains," Wren said. "We'll land and I'll say goodbye there." He grinned over his shoulder at Anakin. "And then you'll try to catch me." Wren was an older Jedi with a graying beard who had chosen to teach at the Temple rather than continue to go on missions.

Anakin had studied the politics of governments with Wren, and he knew the Jedi Master had a wide-ranging grasp of political philosophies in the galaxy. As part of his Jedi service, Wren also volunteered to take part in training missions for Jedi teams.

Anakin and Obi-Wan would try to track Wren through the wilderness.

The exercise was designed to strengthen the bond of trust between Master and Padawan. On Raqqoon 6, they would have only each other to depend on as they tracked Wren through rugged terrain.

Anakin's eyes danced as he bowed respectfully to Wren. "It will be my honor and pleasure to find you in a single day, Wren."

"Ah, in only one day, you say. You are almost as cocky as your Master used to be," Wren said. "I think my clues just got harder. I enjoy teaching lessons to overconfident Padawans."

Anakin hid his grin. In his classes, Wren had been respected, but he'd also been teased behind his back by Jedi students for taking himself a little too seriously. Anakin would love to find him before a single day had passed. That would deflate his superior manner a bit!

Still, Anakin couldn't help wondering why Obi-Wan had decided to take him on this training exercise. He already trusted his Master with his life. They had been on difficult missions together. He had known him since he was a boy. Every mission brought them closer. Why did they have to take a detour for what seemed to be an elaborate game?

They skimmed over a meadow lush with wildflowers and tall green grass. Above the grassy field, snow-capped mountains hugged the tiny meadow. The sky was deep blue streaked with violet. Anakin could almost smell the fresh scent of flowers. He had never seen such a lush world with so many vibrant colors.

Wren landed the craft expertly in a sheltered spot tucked into the rocky side of the mountain. He accessed the landing ramp and turned to them. "Remember, you must leave your comlinks aboard the ship. No homing devices or droids can be used. You must rely on each other and the Force."

Anakin and Obi-Wan nodded. They both knew these things, but it was part of the ritual that Wren made them repeat them. They placed their comlinks in Wren's hand, and he stowed them in the secure storage bin.

"If you can't find me, we will meet back here in ten days. "Pausing only to sling a survival kit over his shoulder, Wren nodded a good-bye.

"May the Force be with you." His gray eyes twinkled. "You'll need it."

Wren ran lightly down the ramp. He swung himself up on a flat rock, then jumped to another. Within a few moments, he had disappeared.

"Wren is certainly looking forward to puzzling us," Obi-Wan observed.

"He really should get out more," Anakin said.

Obi-Wan turned to Anakin. "Do you think Wren is taking this too seriously?"

"No," Anakin said hesitantly. "But I don't understand why a Jedi Knight would want to spend his time this way when he could be on missions."

"Wren has been on hundreds of missions," Obi-Wan said with a frown.

"He has served for most of his life. Now he wishes to give back his knowledge to the Padawans. It is a noble gesture."

Noble, but boring, Anakin thought.

He thought it better not to share the thought with his Master. "How long do we give him?" he asked instead.

"Just a few hours," Obi-Wan answered. "Time enough for us to explore the surroundings a bit and have

a meal, you'll be glad to hear.

"We'll be on rations and protein cubes once we leave, but we can raid the ship's galley now." Obi-Wan gave Anakin a piercing look. "This is designed to teach us, Anakin. But it is also supposed to be fun."

"Of course, Master." Anakin didn't want Obi-Wan to think he wasn't looking forward to the exercise. He knew Obi-Wan had been here twice with Qui-Gon and treasured the memories. Anakin wanted to have that same experience with his Master.

Obi-Wan heated up a meal for them, which they ate sitting in the meadow surrounded by flowers. The morning sun was brilliant yellow, casting its warmth on Anakin's skin. He ate quickly, anxious to start the day.

"Qui-Gon and I tracked a Jedi named Winso Bykart," Obi-Wan said, pushing aside his plate and leaning back on his elbows. "It was our second trip to Ragoon-6. On the first trip, we had to cut the exercise short. I didn't know why at the time, but Qui-Gon had just received a disturbing vision about Tahl."

"I have heard about her," Anakin said. "She was supposed to be brilliant."

"She was. Brilliant and funny and kind. She was unique." Obi-Wan looked out over the meadow. "She was a great friend of Qui-Gon's. I don't know if he ever truly accepted her death."

"But a Jedi must accept death," Anakin said. "It is part of life."

"Yes," Obi-Wan said quietly, his gaze still far away. "That was the difficulty for Qui-Gon."

What do you mean? Anakin wanted to ask. But something stopped him.

Sometimes, when Obi-Wan spoke of his Master, he became distant. Anakin could tell by the expression on his face. He did not want to intrude by asking prying questions.

Silence fell between them. Anakin was used to that. Usually their silences felt comfortable. This one was not. Anakin watched Obi-Wan's face. He saw the quiet yearning there. Obi-Wan was missing Qui-Gon. And for the first time, it bothered Anakin.

He wasn't feeling jealous of Qui-Gon, Anakin told himself. It wasn't that. He had loved Qui-Gon, too. Something else was bothering him about his Master's preoccupation.

Maybe it was because he was still envious of their relationship.

Obi-Wan had taken Anakin on as his Padawan with reluctance. Anakin had always sensed that. Qui-Gon had believed in him, and Qui-Gon's belief had influenced Obi-Wan. How could Obi-Wan ignore his beloved Master's dying wish?

Anakin had thought himself lucky at the time. To arrive at the Temple already chosen by a Jedi Knight! It was unheard of.

Now that he was fourteen, he had seen his fellow Jedi students wait and hope to be chosen by a Jedi

Knight. He had talked to his new friend, Tru Veld, about it. Tru had told him about how his Master, ~~Ry-Gaul, had studied him. Tru had felt Ry-Gaul's eyes on him during lightsaber matches, during classes, even walking around the Temple.~~ They had shared many conversations together. When Ry-Gaul had officially chosen Tru at last, he had felt honored.

Anakin too had always felt honored to be Obi-Wan's Padawan.

But why? Anakin suddenly wondered. Obi-Wan did not choose me.

Today, for the first time, Anakin saw the difference.

Then a new thought pierced his heart. Had Obi-Wan brought him here as a desperate act, to develop the closeness he did not feel?

Chapter Two

Obi-Wan didn't dwell on the past. It was not the Jedi way. But his Master was still a part of his life, more of a constant companion than a memory.

On Ragoon-6 it was hard not to drift back to the past. On his first visit here, Qui-Gon had received a vision that Tahl was in danger. He had not told Obi-Wan. They had left abruptly and had ended up going after Tahl against the wishes of the Council. In that dangerous mission, Qui-Gon's vision had come true. Tahl had died. But not before Qui-Gon had risked everything, including his way on the Jedi path, to declare his love for her.

These were all things Obi-Wan had not known at the time. Some of them Qui-Gon had told him later. Others Obi-Wan had realized himself.

Qui-Gon had never spoken of his love for Tahl. It was a place within him too deep for Obi-Wan to go. He was not invited there.

Now he had a Padawan, and he understood Qui-Gon's sense of privacy.

There were things it had been better for him not to know.

But how do you know what to share with your Padawan, and what to keep to yourself?

There were times when Qui-Gon's silence had annoyed or hurt him.

Yet in the end, it had not mattered. Nothing had mattered except the bond between them.

He wanted to have this bond with Anakin. He knew it would develop over time. Why was he in such a hurry to make it happen? Something was driving him on, but he did not know what it was. It was as though Anakin would slip out of his grasp if he did not secure him. He had to do all the right things the way Qui-Gon had done.

Obi-Wan thought back to his second visit to Ragoon-6. It had been close to the time he and Qui-Gon had left for Naboo on what would become their last mission together. But on Ragoon-6 that ending was far away.

They had enjoyed the tracking exercise, the time together, the break from their missions.

For even then, they had known the galaxy was changing. Missions were more numerous. Trouble sporadically erupted constantly. The senate called for their help more often. It had often been difficult to find the time for the training exercise, but Qui-Gon had insisted on it. He had promised Obi-Wan that they would return to Ragoon-6. When Obi-Wan had pointed out that they had plenty of time, a fleeting look of deep sadness had crossed Qui-Gon's face.

"It seems there is always time when you are young," he'd said. "But you cannot hold a moment with a Padawan. It runs out like water in your fist."

"You must seize it when you can, even as it falls away."

Obi-Wan could have kicked himself. He thought at the time that he had reminded Qui-Gon of Tahl. He had, he supposed, but now he also knew that Qui-Gon was thinking of how fast time could pass, and how crowded a life could become.

Remembering this had spurred Obi-Wan on to slot the time for this visit with Anakin. It hadn't been easy. The Jedi Council needed Master-Padawan teams. Yet Yoda and the Council were always careful to grant a request for this training mission. They had seen how many times it had strengthened the tie between a Master and an apprentice.

Would it strengthen theirs? Obi-Wan hoped so. He knew Anakin wasn't looking forward to the exercise as he was. Anakin wanted to be doing serious things. He was anxious to prove himself on missions, anxious to see the galaxy. This time together would be a pause before a future Anakin was eager to meet. Obi-Wan hoped that the exercise would not be too tame for someone as gifted as Anakin.

That was why he had asked Wren to participate. Anakin might smile at how seriously Wren took his role, but he would soon appreciate how challenging Wren's cleverness could be.

Obi-Wan stood. "Come, Padawan. It is time to go."

They took off in the direction Wren had gone. At first the tracking was easy. Wren had not bothered to hide the clues that a Jedi would catch

- a disturbance of leaves on the forest floor, the slight indentation of a heel. After two hours, they were momentarily stumped when they could not locate his direction, until Anakin plucked a silver-gray hair from a leaf and pointed.

"This way," he said self-satisfied.

Behind Anakin, Obi-Wan shook his head. Sometimes he felt there was so little he needed to teach his Padawan. Even to Obi-Wan, who knew him so well, Anakin's command of the Force could be astonishing.

Wren had better come up with his most clever tricks, or Anakin would follow through on his promise and find him by nightfall.

* * * By midday, Anakin and Obi-Wan had to admit they were lost. Wren's clues had grown increasingly difficult, and Anakin's cocky confidence had hardened into dogged resolution.

Frustrated, Anakin suddenly stopped. With one smooth motion, he swiped a rock and tossed it into the woods. It hit a tree with a satisfying thud.

"Feel better?" Obi-Wan asked.

"No."

"I didn't think so. Frustration is part of the exercise, young Padawan."

"I know. I know," Anakin muttered. "Breathe in my impatience. Then let it go."

"Correct," Obi-Wan said serenely. He waited a moment. "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"I didn't see you breathe." Obi-Wan knew he was straining the patience of his Padawan. Yet these small tests were good lessons.

Obediently, Anakin shut his eyes. He took a breath and released it.

He opened one eye. "Can I stop now?"

"I suppose." Obi-Wan grinned. "If Wren could see us now, he'd be very happy."

A gleam of humor lit Anakin's eyes. "The day isn't over yet."

"Come on, let's backtrack," Obi-Wan suggested, heading back down the train. "We must have taken a wrong turn."

Dappled sunlight streamed through the thick leaves overhead. They moved from pools of light into shadows and back again. The sun warmed their skin, then the shadows cooled it. The air smelled fresh and softly scented. It was a good day to be lost.

Anakin suddenly crouched down and examined the trail. "He stopped here." He pointed to the dirt on the trail.

Obi-Wan bent down. "Yes, I think so."

"Definitely." Anakin's voice rose in excitement. "And then he passed over the grass here. This way."

He led the way off the trail into the forest. Obi-Wan noted the clues and followed. After a morning of looking for tiny changes in the ground and leaves overhead, Wren had left a substantial clue to his progress. It must be part of his strategy to mix up his hard clues with some easier ones.

Anakin led the way through the dense forest. It was easier to track Wren now. The ground was soft and the leaves underfoot were still wet.

Obi-Wan allowed Anakin to take the lead, enjoying the fragrant walk through the trees.

Anakin stopped and turned. "There's a clearing ahead," he said in a hushed tone. "And some coves. Do you think we've caught up with him already? Those marks still look fresh."

"I doubt it," Obi-Wan said. "But proceed carefully. We have to get close in order to end the exercise."

"A lightsaber's length away," Anakin said. "But I think our only chance is to surprise him."

"Anakin -"

"Obi-Wan's call was swallowed in the shadows. Anakin ran silently ahead, and then dashed out into the clearing.

Obi-Wan followed, wishing he could teach his Padawan to curb his impatience.

He wished this even more when he realized where Wren had led them.

They had stumbled on a malia den.

He remembered the malia from his first trip to Ragoon-6. They were fast, agile, deadly creatures—fierce predators with triple rows of teeth.

Anakin stood frozen in the middle of the clearing. He had seen the malia spread out on the rocks. At first their blue-gray fur had melted into the shadows.

At least they hunt at night.

He had fought them with Qui-Gon. He remembered the gleam of fluorescent green eyes, the cunning of the creatures as they circled. He did not want to meet up with them again.

"What are they?" Anakin whispered.

"Just . . . back . . . up . . ." Obi-Wan murmured.

But even as they took two steps backward, Obi-Wan saw one creature stir. A long, tapered snout lifted. Two fierce eyes opened. A low rumble deep in the malia's throat told Obi-Wan that they were in trouble.

Chapter Three

The malia sprang at the same time as Obi-Wan. The creature was just a blue streak in the air. Obi-Wan slashed at it and it fell with a wounded howl.

The rest of the pack rose. Obi-Wan counted swiftly. Sixteen. But there could be more in the cave. They were lean rangy creatures. One malia stepped forward and lifted its snout. Its eyes flashed as it bared its triple row of yellow teeth.

"Attractive creatures," Anakin said, his lightsaber at the ready.

"Back up slowly. Perhaps they won't attack. But if they do, don't underestimate them," Obi-Wan said rapidly as he backed up a step. "I fought them with Qui-Gon. They have very quick reflexes. They will come at us from the trees. They will try to separate and surround us."

Anakin took a cautious step back. "How did you defeat them?"

"We didn't," Obi-Wan said. "A native tribe helped us."

"You needed help?" A flicker of nerves crossed Anakin's face.

"Yes, Anakin. Even Jedi need help occasionally. So just keep backing up . . . very . . . very . . . slowly. Oh, and another thing.

Don't look them in the eye."

"Oops," Anakin said.

The snarling pack surged forward. Obi-Wan saw a streak of blue as two malia separated from the others and headed for the trees. Another dodged to come at Anakin from his left.

"Anakin -"

"I see it -" Anakin almost stumbled, surprised by the speed the malia took on as it pounced. He barely got his lightsaber lifted in time to slash at the creature's neck.

Obi-Wan made sure his Padawan had succeeded even as he tracked another malia that was circling toward him from the left. At the same time, he kept his gaze roaming in the trees, where two malia were jumping from branch to branch. "Whatever you do, don't let any of them get behind us," he said as he leaped toward the malia, brandishing his lightsaber.

The malia retreated, snarling, its eyes a flash in the shadows.

Anakin whirled to fend off two malia that were attempting to get behind him. At the same time, another malia dropped from the tree.

Obi-Wan leaped toward him to help his Padawan. Back-to-back, the two of them fought the snarling

pack.

The air seemed to be full of flying fur and pointed yellow teeth.

The malia attacked in a fury. Obi-Wan and Anakin had to use their feet to kick, as well as their lightsabers. Anakin was not yet able to easily use the Force to move living objects, but Obi-Wan was able to send several malia flying with his outstretched left hand.

They continued to back away into the forest. Now they could use the trees as barriers. Anakin fought furiously. The rhythm of the battle took over his actions. His lightsaber was a red blur in the shadows and his body became a weapon as well. He leaped, kicked, and whirled. He sent a malia flying with a well-timed chop of his hand to the animal's windpipe.

A strangle snarl ended in a yelp as the malia flew backward and hit a tree.

There were now eight left, half the original pack. Two were limping from the battle. The others circled, snarling. They still bared their teeth and howled at the Jedi, but Obi-Wan could see that the attack had become less focused. They had not expected such resistance.

Next to him, Anakin was breathing hard. His lightsaber was held firmly in his hand. Not even the slightest tremble betrayed how hard he had been working.

"Let's keep backing up," Obi-Wan murmured. "Slowly. Do not look at them directly."

Anakin gritted his teeth. "Believe me, Master. I won't make that mistake again."

The malia continued to follow them, but kept a few meters away as the Jedi retreated. Obi-Wan did not blame the malia for the attack. The Jedi had stumbled on their territory. He did not want to wipe out their entire pack.

The Jedi speeded up their pace a bit. The malia did not follow.

They huddled together and roared their anger as Obi-Wan and Anakin retreated. The shadows gradually swallowed them up, and soon all the Jedi heard were their angry snarls.

Anakin shivered as he deactivated his lightsaber. "The sound alone is enough to scare you," he said. "Do you think they'll follow us?"

"I doubt it. Despite their cunning, they are simple creatures,"

Obi-Wan said. "They were defending their home. We were lucky that it was daylight. They weren't in hunting mode."

"You mean they would have fought harder?" Anakin asked incredulously.

"And longer." Obi-Wan tucked his lightsaber back in his belt. "They would not have given up."

"And here I thought this was a peaceful planet," Anakin remarked.

"Why would Wren lead us into a malia den? That seems extreme, even for Wren."

"He wouldn't," Obi-Wan said. "We must have misread the clue. Let's return to the place on the trail where we saw it."

They quickly moved through the trees, retracing their steps. They bent over the clue once again.

"It was my fault," Anakin said. "I saw the flattened at the edge of the trail, and I assumed it was Wren." He carefully searched the surrounding ground as Obi-Wan continued to study the disturbance in the dirt.

Anakin was right - it was an impression of a heel... Wren had put too much weight on his foot, enough to leave a mark. It indicated that he had stopped here for a moment. It was an easy clue for the Jedi to follow. Wren had not bothered to conceal it or make it harder to read.

It wasn't like him. Then again, maybe it was. Wren enjoyed being inconsistent.

"Master - this way," Anakin called. "This time, I'm sure."

Obi-Wan crossed to the opposite side of the trail. Here, the level ground dropped sharply to a steep, rocky hillside.

"Look, here. And here." Anakin left the trail and leaped down the slope from rock to rock. "He went this way."

Obi-Wan followed. It was important to let Anakin lead. That was part of the point of the exercise.

Anakin made his way down the steep slope, his footing sure and swift. They reached the bottom of the slope and immediately plunged into a forest so thick that the overhanging branches shut out all light. They paused for a short moment so that their eyes could adjust. The trees were tall, with long, flat leaves and vast trunks with thick, peeling bark.

Anakin began to study the ground again.

Obi-Wan searched without moving, his gaze traveling over the dirt, rocks, and surrounding trees.

Frustrated by his inability to find a clue, Anakin straightened and began to study the trees around them. He hurried forward to a tall trunk and leaned in to examine it.

"He rested here. He touched the trunk with his finger."

Obi-Wan saw the slight flaking of the bark near Anakin's pointing finger. "How do you know? All the trees have peeling bark."

"There is sap running alongside. Here's a fingerprint. Smudged. But it's there."

"Yes. So he went - which way?" Obi-Wan enjoyed the keen look in Anakin's eyes.

With the trunk of the tree to guide him, Anakin eagerly searched the ground again. "This way!"

called triumphantly. "We'll catch him yet!"

Smiling, Obi-Wan followed Anakin through the forest. This was what he'd hoped for. Anakin had forgotten him impatience with the exercise and what he'd thought was his secret feeling that it was a waste of time. He was now filled with the excitement of the chase.

They moved through a thick curtain of needles and bark. They could no longer see the mountains looming over them. It was as though they were tucked away in a fragrant green cave.

Then the trees stopped abruptly and they came upon a sheer rock wall. The wall curved around them and rose on three sides. There was no way to go except back the way they'd come.

"It's a dead end," Anakin said, disappointed. "But I was so sure Wren came this way!"

"Hold on," Obi-Wan said, "Look around you. You might be missing something. Remember your temple exercise to explore the present moment?"

Close your eyes."

Anakin closed his eyes. Obi-Wan waited until he was sure his Padawan had focused. What did you see?"

"Bark and leaves under my feet. Sheer wall ten meters ahead with insufficient handholds for climbing. Small plant growing in a crevice thirty meters up. Snow dusting at top of cliff. Bird circling twenty degrees to my right. At the base of the rock wall, what appears to be a small opening -a den of a small animal, or -" Anakin's eyes popped open.

"A cave."

Obi-Wan smiled. He had seen the entrance to the cave minutes before. "Let's see what it is."

Anakin and Obi-Wan examined the small opening. "It's not as small as it looks," Obi-Wan said. "It could be the nest or den of an animal."

"It looks like it opens up," Anakin said, peering inside. "Let me go in."

Obi-Wan hesitated. He would rather be first. But part of this exercise was also for the Master. He had to learn to let go, to allow his Padawan to test his skills. He knew Anakin was well trained and could handle what lay beyond.

"All right, Padawan."

Without a glow rod, Anakin would have to feel his way. He eased inside the hole carefully, one hand on his lightsaber hilt.

Obi-Wan heard Anakin's voice echo hollowly. "It's a cavern! It's beautiful!"

Obi-Wan squeezed inside the hole. It was a bit more difficult for him to make it. He wondered how the tall, stocky Wren had managed.

He was able to straighten after crawling just a few meters. Anakin stood ahead of him, scanning the cavern.

It truly was beautiful. The walls shimmered with phosphorescence, lighting the space. The cliff face outside had been gray, but this stone was pink with veins of bright gold and silver. Cone-shaped deposits of the stone hung from the ceiling and rose from the floor.

The smooth floor sloped steeply downward. Anakin hurried ahead, running his hand along the wall. "Hell never expect us to find him here."

Obi-Wan took a deep breath, testing the air. It smelled fresh.

There was most likely another opening in the direction they were headed.

Wren had probably left the cavern by now.

The air smelled damp as well. That was normal in a cavern. Pools of water sat in the depressions on the stone floor. Some of them were quite deep . . .

"Anakin!" Obi-Wan snapped Padawan's name. His voice echoed, but Anakin had run ahead, around the corner, and hadn't heard. Obi-Wan picked up his pace.

He rounded the corner. Anakin had paused before another opening in the cavern. This one was large and began above Obi-Wan's shoulders.

Through it they could see only a patch of blue-and-violet sky. Against the shimmering pink and gold of the walls it was a breathtaking sight.

"Anakin, we should get out of here," Obi-Wan called as he quickly made his way toward his Padawan. "I think this cavern may flood periodically."

Anakin nodded and waited for his Master to catch up. Just then Obi-Wan heard a noise. A slight whoosh sound. He moved faster. Anakin turned back to the opening.

"It's so beautiful," he said in a hushed tone.

The whoosh grew louder. Now it was a roar.

"Hang on!" Obi-Wan shouted as a wall of water suddenly blocked out the sky and headed straight toward them.

Chapter Four

Anakin desperately clung to a ledge as the water rushed into the cavern the force of it battered him against the cavern wall. Another wave entered, and the water went over his head. The shock of its coldness almost made him lose his grip.

He fumbled for his breather with one hand while he hung on with the other. He began to feel lightheaded as he struggled to attach his breather with one hand. Spots swam before his eyes.

He managed to insert his breather and inhaled deeply. He felt strength flow back into his muscles. Still, his body was being pummeled by the furiously rushing water and battered against the domes and the wall of the cave. He had to get out or he would drown.

He glanced back. He could barely see his Master, who was clinging to a rock hanging from the ceiling. As Anakin watched, Obi-Wan transferred his grip to the next cone. Fighting the rushing water he pulled himself forward.

Anakin grabbed the ledge a short distance away. He pulled himself forward, too, every muscle straining with his effort. He reached for the next handhold. Then the next. He fought for every centimeter.

At last he felt the smooth curve of the cavern entrance. He paused there, holding on against the violent water, waiting for his Master.

After a few moments, Obi-Wan pulled himself up next to Anakin. He pointed up. They would let go now and try to get to the surface. Anakin nodded.

Anakin rolled his body into a ball and rested his feet against the cavern wall. He closed his eyes, gathering his strength and the Force.

When he felt the enter him, he pushed himself off the cavern wall.

The power of the water almost battered him back against the wall and swept him inside the cavern, but Anakin fought it with all his strength, swimming up, trusting that air and sunlight were above.

After a few meters, the pull of the water lessened. He was able to make headway against it. He saw lightening above. Sunlight. He swam toward it eagerly. The dappled patterns seemed to beckon him.

He burst above the surface of the water. Ahead he saw a booming waterfall, spilling down from a cliff above. That was the source of the powerful current both above and below the surface. Anakin waited until his Master broke the surface and then struck out toward the bank.

He pulled himself up onto dry land. He ripped the breather from his mouth and gasped for breath. Water streamed off his clothes and the ends of his hair as he bent over; gathering strength. Beside him, Obi-Wan was doing the same.

"The malia dean, and now this," Anakin said when he could speak. He shook his head, sending water

droplets flying. "Did I misinterpret the clues, Master? They seemed so clear."

"No, I think we went the right way off the trail," Obi-Wan said.

"But we shouldn't have gone through the cavern. Jedi clues are designed to be difficult, not life-threatening."

Anakin flushed. It was his fault. In his impatience to impress his Master, he had rushed into the marketplace and into the cavern.

Obi-Wan wouldn't say anything. That was the problem. It was worse for Anakin to have to wonder what his master was thinking.

Obi-Wan scanned the surrounding area. "No doubt Wren used a cable launcher to vault the cliff face."

"But I didn't see any marks above," Anakin said. "Wouldn't the launcher have scarred the rock face?"

"Let's return and examine the cliff again," Obi-Wan decided.

"I'd rather not take another dip," Anakin said with a shiver.

"We can climb the hill here," Obi-Wan said scanning the steep incline that rose from the bank. "That will bring us on top of the cliff overlooking the cavern."

They climbed up the steep incline, occasionally using their cable launchers. The sunlight dried their clothes and hair and warmed them as they climbed high above the water. At last they reached the top of the cliff.

Anakin stood at the top. From here he had a commanding view of the waterfall below and, in the distance, the valley. Still more mountains rose behind him.

He turned and found the overlook to the forest's edge below. It didn't take him long to find where Wren had been.

"Look, Master. He was here," he said, pointing to a place where the grass was flattened. "He could have been watching from above while we stood there."

"Possibly," Obi-Wan said. "There was no way for him to know that cavern would flood, I suppose."

"At least we know for sure that we have him," Anakin said. His Master still looked uncertain. "Don't you think we?"

"Let's follow the trail," Obi-Wan said.

Anakin moved to track Wren's progress over the top of the cliff. A trail led into the mountains, and he began to trudge up it.

He could sense that his Master was uneasy. Something was bothering him. But Obi-Wan did not confide.

He never does, Anakin thought. How can we get closer if he keeps all of his thoughts to himself?

He had to speak or he would burst. Anakin stopped and turned around. "You never tell me what you're thinking," he said.

Obi-Wan stopped. "You should be careful when you use words like

'never' and 'always,' Padawan," he said. "Things are rarely so absolute.

You should be more precise. Clarity of mind is important for a Jedi."

Another lesson. Must there be so many? "Yes, Master." Anakin turned and continued up the mountain. He had gone only a few meters when he realized that Obi-Wan had never addressed what he'd said.

That's because he knows it's true. He had perfect communication with Qui-Gon, and he knows he can never achieve that with me.

He had been right all the along, this exercise was a waste of time.

The trail rose higher, and the temperature began to drop. The sun stilled warmed them, so they did not need their thermal capes. But above, Anakin could see the snowy peaks, and he knew that if they kept climbing at the rate, they would encounter snow by dusk.

Anakin felt shivers on the back of his neck. But it wasn't the temperature. Something was wrong. He trusted the feeling. The Force was like a net, closing around him. The trees seemed to hang over the trail, menacing them. The sky seemed lower.

We're being watched.

And whoever it was, it wasn't another Jedi.

Anakin glanced at Obi-Wan. He did not move his head, only his eyes, so that if someone were watching they would not see the wordless communication. Obi-Wan's gaze told him everything he needed to know. He felt the presence of someone.

Obi-Wan stopped, and Anakin did the same. "We should split up," he said in a tone loud enough to carry but not too loud to be obvious. "We're getting nowhere. I'll head back, and you continue ahead."

"Yes, Master." Anakin knew that Obi-Wan moved back down the trail, and Anakin continued on. He did not feel fear or alarm. He felt ready for whatever would come.

He reached out to the Force beyond the trail, beyond his immediate surroundings. He took in the planet in a way he was learning to do.

There was darkness here, but the feeling was confused. He could not pinpoint why or how the force was affected. That was the trouble, Anakin thought ruefully. He could access the Force easily. Interpreting it was another matter. At such times he fully realized why he was still a Padawan, and not a Jedi.

He was on a switchback trail now that hugged the mountain as it rose. As Anakin turned a corner, the trail behind him would disappear.

The rocks rose steeply on his left and a sheer drop was on his right. If he met whoever was following him, the battle would be tricky. And how would Obi-Wan manage to set up an ambush on this kind of terrain?

Anakin was busy thinking these thoughts when he turned the next corner and saw the flash of a weapon. It was held by a young woman in a gray cloak that blended with the rocks.

"Don't come any farther," she said in a clear voice. "I promise you, I know how to use this. And it's aimed straight at your heart."

Chapter Five

Anakin waited. The Force was around him, rising up from the ground beneath his feet and the force below. It was not strong in the girl.

Anakin guessed she was close to his age. She was afraid, he suddenly knew. He felt her fear ripple out and touch him, as clearly as if she had pout out a hand.

And he felt something else - his Master was near. Obi-Wan was above him. He needed to keep the girl's attention on him.

"Why do you want to shoot me?" he asked in a reasonable tone.

"Do not try to trick me," she said. "I know you've been following me. I know you killed my friend and my teacher." Now her voice wobbled slightly. "I won't let you kill me too."

Anakin saw a blur above. It was his Master, leaping down from the sheer cliff above.

Obi-Wan dropped behind the girl and disarmed her in a move so fast she did not have time to turn or even take a breath.

Obi-Wan tossed the weapon to Anakin.

"You know how to use a hydrospanner?" Anakin asked in disbelief.

"I didn't have a real weapon," she said in a small voice.

"Were you threatening to kill me, or fix my speeder?" Anakin asked.

He couldn't believe he had been fooled by a hydrospanner. What kind of Jedi was he?

In answer, the girl suddenly whirled and tried to throw herself down the sheer drop. Obi-Wan had anticipated the move and simply reached out with one hand and stopped her.

"That's not a solution," he said. "We're not going to hurt you.

Maybe we can even help you."

Anakin took a few steps closer. "What happened? What do you mean, somebody killed your friends?"

The girl pulled her cloak around her. Her hood fell back, and waves of long blond hair spilled down her back.

"My name is Floria," she said. "I'm from the planet Aaeton, only half-day's journey from here. Young people from my planet often go on survival camping trips on Ragoon-6 when we reach fourteen years of age.

We have a special allowance from the Senate because we gave the elders of Ragoon refuge when the

handed the planet over to the senate. My group arrived yesterday. I was separated from them. We were on a hike and I got lost." Floria's eyes suddenly filled with tears. "When I returned . . . I

. . . the ship . . ."

"Go on," Obi-Wan prompted.

She swallowed. "Was completely burned," she said in a whisper. "I knew we were supposed to meet back there for evening meal. I am afraid my friends and my teacher were in it. Someone blew it up."

"You're sure they were inside?"

She twisted her hands together. "How can I be sure of anything?"

Everything was smoke and ash and fire. Maybe they escaped. Maybe they are lost. I've been searching ever since. But lately I am positive that someone has been following me. They were keeping just out of sight."

"More than one being?" Obi-Wan asked.

"I - I'm not sure," Floria stammered. "I don't know what's wrong. I just know that something is. And I'm all alone!"

So I was right about the darkness in the Force, Anakin thought.

Something is wrong on this planet.

"Dry your tears," Anakin said gently. "You're not alone. We will help you."

"Who are you?" she asked. "And why would you help me?"

"Because we can," Obi-Wan said. "Now, the first thing we do is examine your ship."

The ship was just as Floria had described it - a charred hulk.

"Stay here with her," Obi-Wan told Anakin. He disappeared inside the remains of the ship.

He emerged a few minutes later, his face streaked with ash. "There are no remains of beings aboard," he said.

Floria closed her eyes in relief for a moment. "Thank you for looking."

"This is a small cruiser," Anakin said, looking at the ship. "It's for travel within a planetary atmosphere. How did you get here from Aaeton?"

"We have a space cruiser in orbit," Floria explained. "We're supposed to rendezvous with them in three hours. But I have no way to contact them to tell them we won't be there." She brightened. "Can you take me? I can tell them what happened, and they'll send a rescue party down."

"Of course," Obi-Wan said. "We'll have to hike to our cruiser, but it's not far."

"Thank you," Floria said. "I feel certain now that my friends are alive. But they could be in danger. We must find them."

Obi-Wan drew Anakin aside. "Something dark is present on this planet. Can you feel it?"

Anakin nodded. "Yes, Master. But it is unclear."

"There seems to be different energies operating," Obi-Wan said. "It is unclear to me, too. We must be on guard." He frowned. "I have been thinking about Wren."

"What about him?" Anakin asked.

"The clues we have been following . . . something is wrong. They are too easy, and they lead us into danger. Maybe Wren isn't the one leaving them." Obi-Wan gazed up at the mountain. "Something might have happened to him."

Chapter Six

You never tell me what you're thinking.

Why hadn't he answered his Padawan? Instead, he had corrected him.

Obi-Wan's mind churned, and his heart felt heavy. He did not know why he had deflected Anakin's feelings, but he knew he had been deeply unfair to his Padawan.

Anakin could speak so easily of his feelings. He often spoke without thinking, often spilled out exactly what was in his heart. It was behavior that was not like a Jedi.

And I correct him. Is that right?

Obi-Wan knew why Anakin was this way. It was because of Shmi.

Anakin's mother had given him a great gift. She had given him an open heart. His feelings were deep and spontaneous. That was a good thing. But they sometimes led him to act too fast, to make quick judgments.

He is the opposite of me, Obi-Wan thought. It has always been difficult for me to speak what is in my heart.

Anakin had been wrong to say he never told him anything. Obi-Wan only held back what he thought Anakin did not need to know, just as Qui-Gon had done with him. Obi-Wan had begun to suspect that Wren's clues were not right, but he felt it was better for Anakin to discover this on his own. He could see that Anakin's eagerness to find Wren was clouding his judgment. Perhaps Anakin was being less careful because he was not on a mission, but an exercise.

These were things it was not proper for a Master to share with his Padawan. Yet Anakin wanted Obi-Wan to share everything.

Sighing, Obi-Wan led the way back to their ship. He would have to think of a way to bring up what had happened. He knew he had hurt Anakin's feelings.

Obi-Wan knew the terrain by now and led them down the mountain and across rocky hills and meadows so they wouldn't have to double back, which would have cost them time. Within two hours they were hiking across the meadow toward the cliff face where Wren had docked the ship.

"Don't worry," Anakin said reassuringly to Floria. "We have a comm unit aboard the ship, so - Master. Look at that. It's beautiful . . ."

Anakin frowned, sensing something was wrong.

Obi-Wan saw the fine blue mist heading for them. "Anakin, move!"

Anakin's reflexes were perfect. Without thinking, he leaped to one side as Obi-Wan vaulted toward

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