

Life-Force by Xanthe



<http://www.xanthe.org/life-force/>

Story Notes:

For Sergeeva

Graphic by RAC

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I've never done a proper crossover story before but it seemed like a fun idea. I was thinking about whether there was anybody in Cult!Universe who really deserved **my** Walter, and I came up with this guy. Well, he's smart, sensible, sane, spiritually sound, and not bad looking either ;) More importantly, following a great personal tragedy, he's also **available**. An Assistant Director could do worse...

Yes, I know it's absurd, but when has **that** ever stopped a fanfic writer? I must say this crossover thing was great to try. Whether it worked or not is another matter, but it sure as hell was fun. Hopefully it will cause mirth for being silly, if nothing else :-). You should be grateful really - the other person on my list for Walter was Captain Janeway...

Cheerful apologies for getting anything in the Star Wars universe wrong. I'm not completely well versed in its many

and intricate mysteries... Oh, and this wasn't beta'd, so mistakes undoubtedly abound. **Warning:** This one's a bit sappy. I was in that kind of mood.

For more graphics, hop down to the bottom of the page and see the pics Sergeeva made :-). They're wonderful!

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The planet of Irudan was nothing but a giant dustbowl. Nothing grew here, and the only movement was the wild flurrying of the light, grainy soil as the wind ripped through it. Obi-Wan landed his small ship somewhat clumsily, thinking wistfully that Anakin had made a much better landing on their last trip here. There was no space-port on this world, nothing but one old hut, wherein lived the strange Azhari woman - the last representative of her race, or so she claimed. Obi-Wan wasn't so sure. He sensed she didn't lie, but then again, neither did she speak the whole truth.

Obi-Wan covered his face with the corner of his robe, lowered the ramp, and walked out into the dust storm. He ran towards the hut, and found the door open, and the woman waiting for him.

"Obi-Wan." She didn't seem surprised to see him. He felt she should be. It had surprised him that he had decided to return to this place.

"Azhari." He bowed. He thought it strange that she chose to call herself by the name of her race, and he wondered again at the mystery of her people. She smiled at him, her deep grey eyes calm and clear. "You were expecting me." It was a statement rather than a question.

"Yes, Obi-Wan. You have not been at peace since you found me here last year. I knew you would return. Here, let me take your cloak."

"At peace..." Obi-Wan mused, handing her his cloak, and crouching for a moment beside her fire. "No, Honored Azhari, I think that it has been many years since I knew peace."

"Agreed." Azhari hung up his cloak, and poured him a glass of water from a large pitcher. Obi-Wan had no idea where she found food and water on this arid desert. How did she manage to survive on such an inhospitable world? He had asked her this question once, and she had merely smiled, and replied that the Azhari were a resourceful people.

They were silent for a long while. Obi-Wan gazed into the fire, and Azhari gazed at Obi-Wan. After many long hours, the woman spoke.

"You have come here seeking the Gate."

Obi-Wan hesitated. Was that why he was here? Objectively he knew that it was, that it had to be, but why? He had so much in this universe - the fellowship of his Jedi comrades, the friendship of his brilliant young padawan, and yet...

"You miss him still." Azhari murmured.

Obi-Wan looked up, startled. "How did you...?" He began, then shook his head. "He was my everything. I find I miss him more, not less with each day that passes."

"I understand. It was thus with me, when my people died." Azhari said, her clear, deep voice, echoing like a mellow flute in the small hut.

"To lose a whole race..." Obi-Wan could not begin to conceive of her loss.

"To lose one, or many...grief is grief." Azhari shook her head.

"It's been seven years." Obi-Wan got to his feet angrily. "I'm a Jedi - I should be able to move beyond my own feelings."

"You can, and you do. From what I see, you do very well, Master Kenobi." Azhari told him.

Her blonde hair shone in the firelight. She wasn't beautiful, but there was an ageless, timeless quality to her. He couldn't begin to guess how old she was. She had, he sensed, always been here, always this age, since the universe began, and she would always be here, unchanging, until it ended. It was a mystery he could not hope to understand.

"You and Qui-Gon were pair bonded, a fusion of flesh and spirit so deep as to form one being. No wonder you still mourn his loss, Obi-Wan," she murmured softly.

"Yes." Obi-Wan plucked sadly at the hem of his tunic, remembering his master, the feel of the other man's long hair beneath his fingers, and the exquisite sensation of his master's lean, powerful body moving against his as they made love. He could hear Qui-Gon's voice whispering to him in the privacy of their rooms, speaking of a love more true than either of them had ever hoped to know.

"You're lonely." Azhari gently stroked his hair, and he looked up into her eyes and saw himself reflected in them - lost and sad.

"Yes. People tell me there will be others, that I'm young, that I should look for someone else, but..."

"Nobody is like Qui-Gon," she finished for him.

"How could they be?" He asked in despair. "He was a good man, the best. How could I ever find another with a heart as noble and true?"

"Ah." Azhari held his head between her pale fingers, and he trembled at the power of the force within her. This was not his force though, nor any power he knew or understood - it was something utterly different, completely alien, and it made him feel dizzy. "There are many worlds out there, Obi-Wan. Many times, many places, and many people. I'm sure there must be one person with as good a heart as your lost love."

He knew she was mocking him, although her tone was gentle. "Maybe." Obi-Wan didn't want to hear her words.

"I seem to recall also that Master Jinn was an obstinate man, and headstrong. Wilful and sometimes lacking in the proper attention to his masters," she murmured, a wry smile playing around her lips.

Obi-Wan looked up angrily, then had to laugh. "I agree he wasn't perfect," he acknowledged, "but I loved him."

"And can you truly find no purpose in your life since he died?" She asked him. "What of your padawan?"

"Anakin? He's very much his own person. At his age I followed my master around like a puppy, but Anakin can't wait to be free of me."

"That's not true," Azhari reprimanded gently. "He is a free spirit that one." Her eyes became dreamy for a moment, and she gazed into space for several seconds. "Someone will tame him," she murmured, stoking the fire, "but it will not be you, Obi-Wan."

"I wouldn't want to!" Obi-Wan retorted. "That isn't the Jedi way."

"No." Azhari gave a sad smile. "Where is your young apprentice now?"

"Visiting his friend, the Queen Amidala." Obi-Wan shrugged. "It does us both good to have a few weeks apart each year, and he always goes eagerly enough."

"I see - and you are at a loose end." Azhari observed.

"I want my own destiny!" Obi-Wan cried. "I agreed to train Anakin because my master laid an oath upon me, but the boy doesn't need me any more. Master Yoda could finish his training. I need, I want...to find myself again."

"And you thought to use the Gate to do that?" Azhari asked. Obi-Wan looked up. Had he been that transparent? "I warned you when you were here before - the Gate is not to be used lightly." Azhari's voice was firm. "Many of those who go, never return."

There was silence for a moment, then Obi-Wan looked up and said what was in his heart.

"I'm not sure that I want to return."

Azhari shook her head. "I'm not convinced, Master Kenobi. Those who use the Gate out of grief, or to escape their sorrows, rarely find what they seek. Sorrow and grief go with you, wherever you journey."

"Please..." Obi-Wan was surprised by the force of his plea. "I'll take my chances, Azhari, but please, please let me go."

"The Gate has been here since the beginning of time, and will be here until the end - and beyond." Azhari said the words as if intoning a prayer. "I could not sanction its misuse. Only the pure of heart may pass through."

"You find me lacking?" Obi-Wan asked.

"No." Azhari shrugged. "Listen to me though, Obi-Wan. This galaxy is a huge place - there is so much in the here and now that you haven't explored. Why do you think that you would fare better throwing yourself into the unknown? I have no control over your destination - you could literally end up anywhere."

"I know." Obi-Wan assured her.

"And **anywhen**," she emphasised.

His eyes widened, and he knew that she saw what he had tried to keep secret since his arrival - the hope he had kept in his heart since he and Anakin had discovered this planet and its mysterious Gateway months ago.

"Oh, Obi-Wan! It is unlikely you'll find your master in the past!" Azhari exclaimed, her gray eyes glowing in distress.

"But I can feel it!" Obi-Wan got up excitedly, and paced around. "Before I came into Qui-Gon's life there were decades when he was alone. I could find him then, when he was young. We could be together in the past, as we cannot be in the present."

"Obi-Wan." Azhari raised her hand. "It's not likely, my dear."

"But worth a try," Obi-Wan insisted stubbornly.

"To give up your life here, to abandon your oath, and your padawan, and chase a hope borne out of grief and loneliness?" Azhari chided gently.

"Yes!" Obi-Wan exclaimed. "You do not know what Qui-Gon meant to me!"

"I think I do."

"And you said before - that if someone is truly pure of heart, if they go through the Gate full of hope for what they will find there, then their deepest wish might be granted them!"

"I have heard oftentimes that people find this is not what they thought it might be," Azhari told him, looking at him keenly. "Give this up, Obi-Wan. Return to Coruscant, to your padawan, and your friends. Learn to be happy with what you have, and stop chasing after ghosts."

Obi-Wan shook his head and they locked gazes for what felt like an eternity. Finally she broke the eye contact, and chuckled ruefully. "I see that Master Jinn was not the only one who is headstrong," she murmured.

"Does that mean you'll help me?" He asked her.

"No," she replied. "Will that stop you?" She inquired.

He thought about it for a moment. "No," he answered.

She nodded. "Farewell then, Obi-Wan. I will keep a watch for your return, and pray that you may find whatever you seek on your journey."

"Thank you." He stood, and bowed before her, then looked around uncertainly.

"There is no great secret." She shrugged, handing him his cloak. "I will give you no aid, but neither will I stop you." She held open the door to the hut, and he gave her a determined smile, raised his hood, then stepped out into the howling dust-storm.

Obi-Wan staggered across the plain towards the rock that marked the Gateway. There was no altar here, no statues, no temple - nothing to show that this was a place of such immense power and purpose. The keeper of this sacred place held the mysteries of the universe in her hand, and yet she lived alone in a tiny hut, condemned to spend an eternity on this ravaged world.

Obi-Wan stopped beside the rock, and knelt in the dust. He tried to clear his mind, to ignore the swirling dirt, and to bring himself to a state of purity. After several long minutes, he found himself calm in purpose and intent. He held the wish of his heart deep within, and asked the blessing of the Guardians of this place as he stepped across the sacred portal. Then he stood, took one step forward...and disappeared.

Azhari stood in the doorway of her hut, and watched the young man go. She offered up a prayer as he passed between the portals of time and space. Of the many travelers she had seen, she held him dearest in her heart. She had never seen one more good and true, more deserving of seeing his hopes realised. And yet...Azhari crouched down and scooped up a handful of sand, then watched as it trickled through her fingers.

"It is unlikely that he will find what he seeks," a voice said.

"I know," she smiled at the unseen speaker, "but he might find something else." *Or someone else...*

"We must be hopeful."

"Is it fated?" Azhari asked.

"It is **always** fated," the voice replied. "Whether for good or ill, remains to be seen."

Azhari nodded, then turned back to her hut, and her lonely vigil, and waited to see if her traveller would return.

There was a screech that rent the air, as if the fabric of time itself had been torn, and then he was thrown forward, onto something hard and unyielding. Obi-Wan felt a pain rip through his leg, and then he was knocked backwards, onto the hard ground, hitting his head. He lay there for a moment, winded, unable to take in the images that assaulted his senses.

"Are you all right?" A pair of anxious brown eyes filled his vision, flashing their concern from behind a pair of spectacles. "I'm sorry. I didn't see you...where did you come from? You just seemed to appear out of nowhere. Shit, are you okay?"

The man crouched down beside him. He was dressed in strange clothing, which barely concealed his solid, muscled form. Obi-Wan nodded, feeling nauseous, and unable to focus. "I..." He began, then his vision blurred, and he started to sway. "My leg..." he whispered. The big man nodded, and began rolling back his trouser leg.

"There's some blood - it's a nasty gash, but not serious," the man told him. His large hands brushed against Obi-Wan's head, and fingered the bump there. His fingers were surprisingly gentle, and soft, like big cat's paws. "It's not too bad, just a bruise, but you might have a concussion. I think I should take you to the hospital. Are you able to walk? It'd be quicker than calling for the paramedics, and besides...I kind of feel responsible for you seeing as it was my car you walked into," the man said.

Obi-Wan managed a weak smile. He was all at sea in this place, on this world, in this time, wherever and **whenever** it was, but this man was offering him kindness, and he needed a friend right now.

"Thank-you," he whispered. "This hospital...is it a place of healing?"

"Uh, you could call it that," the man replied, looking puzzled.

"I would...is it necessary that I go there?" Obi-Wan asked.

"I think so, yes," the stranger replied firmly, in the tone of one used to being obeyed. Obi-Wan nodded, and his head protested the movement.

The big man pulled him up, and half-walked, half-carried him to the vehicle that had knocked Obi-Wan down, helping him to sit inside, and fastening a cord around him to keep him safe. Obi-Wan leaned back in the seat and felt his head lolling to one side, as if he had no control over it.

"I'm Walter Skinner. What's your name?" His new friend asked. Obi-Wan had to think about it for several seconds.

"O...B...en...o...b" He whispered, clutching onto the cord as the vehicle began to spin.

"Sorry - I didn't catch that. Was it...Ben?" Walter Skinner leaned towards him, frowning. Obi-Wan gave him a faint smile, and then lost consciousness.

Obi-Wan awoke to find himself lying on a bed. A woman was leaning over him.

"Ben? Are you awake? I'm just going to clean up your leg wound. Hold tight - this might sting a little."

Obi-Wan closed his eyes, and concentrated on helping his body to heal. He had suffered far worse injuries in his time, and he guessed that the journey through the Gateway had caused a large part of the disorientation he was currently experiencing. "I've put a couple of stitches in it, and a dressing. You'll need to have the stitches out in a few days," the woman told him. He nodded, although he wasn't entirely sure what she meant. Had she been mending his clothes? He sat up, slowly, and glanced around, searching for the man who had taken care of him, and brought him here.

"Walter Skinner. Where is he?" He asked the lady in white. She smiled, and nodded her head towards the door.

"He's waiting outside. He was a bit concerned when you blacked out."

"Please - I would like to thank him," Obi-Wan told her. She smiled again, and nodded. A few seconds later, the door opened and the big man walked in. He looked awkward.

"I'm sorry about this, Ben. I really didn't see you. You seemed to appear from nowhere," Skinner said.

"Please - the fault was mine." Obi-Wan inclined his head.

Skinner looked surprised. "You don't want to make a big deal out of this? Claim on the insurance?" He asked.

Obi-Wan struggled with these concepts for a moment, then gave up. "I bear no ill will. As I said - the fault was mine. I am sorry for having inconvenienced you on your journey, and I'm grateful for your kindness," Obi-Wan told the other man sincerely.

Skinner shook his head, as if slightly stunned.

"Well, I'm glad you're okay," he muttered. "Look, the doctor says you can leave. Can I give you a ride somewhere?"

Obi-Wan shook his head. "I...have nowhere to go," he murmured.

Skinner frowned. "You're dressed strangely, but you don't exactly look like a homeless guy," he observed. "Ben, I hope you don't mind, but when you were unconscious, I went through your pockets looking for some ID. You don't have any - you don't have any cash either. Is there anyone I can contact who'll be worried about you?"

"Worried about me?" Obi-Wan echoed, a feeling of desolation sweeping through him. He suddenly realised that he was alone here, and injured, in a strange place and time. Yet his own foolishness had led him down this path, and he was a Jedi - the sense of adventure ran

strong in him. Somehow he knew he'd survive, even if he had to learn new skills in order to do so in this strange world. "No," he answered at last, unable to keep the sadness out of his voice. "There is nobody. I'm not...I'm not from this place."

Skinner laughed. "Well, I figured that out from your accent. You're from England right?"

"England?" Obi-Wan echoed. "No, that's not my home planet."

Skinner rocked back on his heels, looking slightly exasperated, and Obi-Wan wondered what he had said that was wrong. "You're sounding like Mulder on one of his bad days," he muttered.

"Mulder?"

"A colleague." Skinner said brusquely, but his face had clouded over, as if the subject of this Mulder caused him some distress. "Do you at least have a change of clothing?" He gestured at Obi-Wan's torn pants.

"Regretfully, no." Obi-Wan sighed. "I was ill-equipped for the journey I took, and now, I fear, I'm suffering the consequences."

"Well, look...I probably have some old sweat pants that will fit you, and then I could take you to a shelter, get you some help from the authorities." Skinner said, then he clamped his jaw shut tightly, as if regretting the offer.

"I would be most grateful," Obi-Wan told him sincerely. He sensed that this man didn't find it easy to trust, so his offer of aid wasn't easy for him. He wondered what had happened in this man's life, to cause him to be in so torn about offering hospitality.

Skinner turned abruptly on his heel, and Obi-Wan ran to catch up with him. Skinner's long, dark coat flapped around his ankles as he strode ahead - he was a tall man, Obi-Wan only came up to his shoulders. Qui-Gon had been tall... Obi-Wan fought back the memories of walking beside his master, Qui-Gon's cloak billowing out around him. They were comfortable, familiar memories, and Obi-Wan felt the pain of his loss stabbing deep inside him. He didn't know where this place was, but he sensed that his old master, his one true love, was not here. This was a very different time and place altogether. Azharia had warned him, but he had not listened.

"Too much the impatient one, you are." Master Yoda's familiar admonition echoed in his mind. "Act first, you do. Think later. Learn to consider things more carefully, you must."

Too late, Yoda. Too late...

Obi-Wan stared out on this new world with wonder, as they drove through a city that Walter Skinner called "Washington." Obi-Wan had seen many places and planets in his life, with varying levels of technology, although most had space travel. It soon became clear to

him that the primitive level of technological advancement on this world made space travel an unlikely possibility. His heart sank as he realised that he was even more stuck than he had at first thought. If he disliked this world, and what it offered him, then there was no way to escape to the next world, or the next star system, to start again. Maybe that was the challenge - to be satisfied with just one world, to make the most of it, discover and explore it, to fully get to know it, and the many wonders it would surely contain. Obi-Wan tried, as always, to seek out the future with an open heart. He felt sure that he was here for a reason, whether that reason was clear to him or not. One way or another, he was needed here, and he would do his best to live up to his destiny, whatever it might be.

Walter Skinner lived in a tall building, which reminded him a little of Coruscant, though wrought on a miniature scale. The big man had been silent during the drive, and he looked troubled. Obi-Wan wasn't sure whether it was his presence that bothered Skinner or something else, but he had no wish to cause his new friend any discomfort.

Skinner ushered him into his apartment, and then winced. Obi-Wan surveyed the clutter of empty bottles of alcohol, and discarded socks impassively, although he was somewhat surprised. Walter Skinner's clothing seemed so precise and ordered that he had imagined that his dwelling would be the same. Judging by the other man's reaction, he assumed that was generally the case - and this current state of mess was an aberration.

"Sorry." Skinner muttered gruffly. "I, uh, haven't had time..." He trailed off, strode over to a primitive message-recording device, and retrieved his messages. Obi-Wan wandered over to the balcony, and stepped outside. The cool air felt good against his skin, and beneath him the bright lights of the city twinkled and winked. It wasn't home, but it had its own kind of beauty.

"Here." Skinner stepped out onto the balcony behind him, and handed him a pair of soft grey trousers. He gestured to Obi-Wan's torn, blood-stained pants. "Those should probably be chucked," he said.

"I could wash and mend them," Obi-Wan told him. "If you have needle and thread."

"Well, to be honest..." Skinner hesitated, then ploughed on. "I don't mean to criticise but people don't tend to wear stuff like this on the streets of DC."

"DC?" Obi-Wan frowned.

"Washington." Skinner clarified. "Look, I could dig you out a tee shirt and sweater as well. If you want to take a shower, or a bath, or something..." he trailed off again. Obi-Wan studied him, finding the big man interesting. This was the first time he'd really had a chance to look at his new friend. Skinner was almost bald, with a wide forehead, and expressive dark eyes. There was a depth and sadness to those eyes that Obi-Wan wanted to understand.

"I would like that, thank you." Obi-Wan bowed slightly. "I'm grateful for your kindness." He took the proffered garment and followed Skinner back into the apartment.

The bath soothed away the aches and pains of the day, and allowed Obi-Wan time for meditation and reflection. He examined the wound on his leg, and decided it wasn't serious. The people on this world had sewed it together with thread, which was a primitive practice, but one which worked well enough with this particular kind of injury, although it would undoubtedly leave him with a slight scar.

Obi-Wan allowed the warm water to caress his body, and wash away the grime and sweat. The dust from Irudan had permeated his very pores, and he even found some between his toes and in his ears. It felt good to be clean. He thought about Walter Skinner. The man was uneasy - he didn't like having a stranger in his home, and yet he felt obligated to him because it was his vehicle that had caused Obi-Wan injury.

Obi-Wan allowed his senses to wander...he could sense the force on this world. It was strong, flowing through all living things. Obi-Wan gasped, as an icy sensation washed over him - the dark side was strong here too, and close. Too close. He allowed his mind to reach out and brush that nearest to him, but he was relieved to find that Walter Skinner was not the source of the coldness. The big man had many things on his mind - he was deeply troubled, and he walked on the edge of an abyss, balancing precariously on the treacherous tightrope between the light and dark. Obi-Wan looked deep into the man's soul, and feared for him...then he came to with a start, shivering in the cool bath water.

"Ben!" Skinner was knocking on the door. "Are you okay? You've been in there for a long time."

"I fell asleep," Obi-Wan called, getting up hurriedly. He dried himself, and then dressed in the garments Walter Skinner had left for him. They felt comfortable against his skin, although he missed his familiar clothing, and there was nowhere to keep his light-sabre. He settled for pushing it into the large pocket in his pants, hoping it wouldn't fall out. The pants were far too long for him, and he folded up the hem carefully. He was reminded of a mission many years ago, when circumstances had forced him to wear Qui-Gon's clothing. His master's pants had also been too long. Obi-Wan looked at himself briefly in the mirror, to ensure that he had dressed himself properly in this unfamiliar garb. His hair was still wet, and he looked younger than he liked to think of himself. He was, after all, a fully-fledged Jedi knight with a grown apprentice. There was a dark bruise on his forehead, and his face was pale. He traced his image with his finger, startled by his changed appearance, and wondered how Qui-Gon would have looked in this clothing. It would have fitted him better, with his longer limbs. He touched his wet hair, and remembered how he would comb his master's hair, and play with it, enjoying its scent, freshly washed. Then he pulled himself back to the present. In trying to find a way to get closer to Qui-Gon, he had merely succeeded in pushing himself even further away. It would do him no good to dwell on such thoughts.

Walter Skinner smiled at him as he returned to the living room. It was, Obi-Wan thought, a nice smile, and he wondered why the big man used it so rarely.

"I've made a fresh pot of coffee." Skinner handed him a cup full of a dark, aromatic liquid. Obi-Wan sniffed at it cautiously, and then took a sip. It was strong, and full of stimulants, but frankly, he could do with that right now. Skinner also slapped a loaf of bread and some

cheese on the table. "I don't have much food in the house," he said apologetically. Obi-Wan smiled and shook his head.

"Thank you. You're very kind," he murmured, cutting the bread and taking a bite.

"It's pretty late." Skinner leaned in the kitchen doorway, sipping his coffee. He had discarded his long coat, and removed the strange strip of fabric from around his neck. "I have to be at work early tomorrow. Look..." He hesitated. "I don't want to throw you out, Ben, but I work in a highly sensitive area. I, uh, well, let's just say that the last unsolicited house guest I had caused me some problems."

"I understand," Obi-Wan told him. "You have no obligation to me, Walter Skinner. Besides - I can take care of myself." He gave the other man a confident smile. He had taken care of himself in far worse situations than this, after all.

"Good. Well, I was going to say, you can spend the night in the spare room, as it's so late. Then tomorrow..."

"I'll leave." Obi-Wan assured him.

"You really don't have anywhere to go?" Skinner asked.

"No, Walter Skinner. As I said, I am not from this place, but I will make it my home. In time."

"Walter. Or Skinner. Not Walter Skinner. It sounds...odd." Skinner told him, with a frown that was both amused and puzzled at the same time.

"Walter then." Obi-Wan nodded.

"I never caught your last name."

"Kenobi." Obi-Wan briefly considered enlightening Walter as to his first name as well, then decided against it. Ben was clearly a name the other man was familiar with, and it was a good, plain name.

"Right. Okay, let me show you the spare room."

Obi-Wan slept deeply, but his dreams were dark and intense. He saw his master, seated by a fountain, his hand trailing through the water, and he saw Walter Skinner, seated next to him, surrounded by darkness, the water rising around him. <Help him, Obi-Wan,> Qui-Gon's voice whispered in his mind. <The dark side is marshalling its forces. The battle between dark and light is strong here. Help him...>

<Yes, Master,> he replied, as automatically as always, waking up with a start.

When Skinner came to knock on his door the following morning, Obi-Wan was already dressed.

"I can give you a ride to the homeless shelter and..." Skinner paused, and blinked, as Obi-Wan raised his hand.

"I think it would be better if you stayed here a while longer," Obi-Wan told him.

"I think it would be better if you stayed here a while longer," Skinner repeated, looking bemused.

"My belongings will be safe. There's no need to worry."

"My belongings will be safe. There's no need to worry." Skinner nodded, looking satisfied. He turned to go, then glanced back, his brown eyes still puzzled.

"Go." Obi-Wan said encouragingly. Skinner gave a half smile, then left.

Obi-Wan went downstairs, and glanced around the living room. There were several books, which he flicked through briefly, making a pile of the ones he wished to examine in more detail. Then he glanced at the empty bottles on the coffee table. He picked one up and sniffed at it: alcohol. He wondered what darkness Walter was trying to escape from that he took refuge in the temporary respite of drink. Obi-Wan opened the drawers in Walter's desk. He felt a small amount of guilt, rifling through the man's belongings, but Qui-Gon had instructed him to help, and he couldn't do that if he didn't understand what he was supposed to be doing, and why.

Walter was a tidy man - his papers were all in neat bundles, clearly labelled. Obi-Wan found two photographs, and examined them carefully. One was of a woman - quite a beauty too. She was smiling, her eyes full of love. Turning it over, Obi-Wan read the writing on the back: Sharon, July 1989. The other photograph seemed to have been taken without the knowledge of the two people in it - a woman and a man. They were standing side by side, clearly arguing, and yet Obi-Wan could tell, even from the photograph, that the two shared a deep bond. He frowned, wondering who they were, and what they meant to Walter - they were too old to be the other man's children.

Obi-Wan found a primitive device that he guessed functioned as some kind of information resource. He turned it on, and quickly accessed a basic network that linked Walter's machines to others on this planet. He explored as fast as the machine would allow and then sat back with a sigh.

"Well at least you know where you are, Obi-Wan, if not when," he murmured to himself. "Not that it's any use to you. You're about as far from home as can be."

This galaxy was at the opposite end of the universe to his own. It would take even the fastest of the Republic's ships over a million light years to journey to the planet Earth, which was where he was now stranded. Obi-Wan fought down the fear that rose inside him.

"Fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate, hate leads to the Dark Side," he intoned, calming himself. He sat for a moment, puzzling the huge distances involved in his dislocation to this small, uncharted reach of the universe, but his mind refused to process the information. He

sent his thoughts out, searching for someone, **anyone** that he knew, looking for Anakin's bright, shining, mental signature, and for Master Yoda's deceptively light resonance, but found nothing. Somehow he knew, deep inside, that they were long dead, and whatever part they had played in the history of the universe, was now buried under the weight of time. He was about to give up his search, when he sensed something else...Azharis still lived. Her distinctive mental echo was still there, chiming like an undercurrent beneath the many clamouring voices he could hear. He couldn't speak to her, but he drew comfort from knowing that she was there.

When Walter returned home, he stopped in the doorway looking surprised.

"You've cleaned the place up," he commented, surveying the tidy apartment. The bottles had all been placed in one of the sacks Obi-Wan had found in a cupboard beneath the sink, and the whole place had been cleaned with various implements he had discovered. It had taken him a while to figure them all out, but he was pretty pleased with the job he'd done.

Obi-Wan smiled. "You've been very kind to me. It is not the custom of my people to take without offering something in return, however small."

"Your people...I just love the way you talk!" Walter exclaimed, shaking his head wryly and shrugging his coat off. "Is that dinner I smell?"

"Yes. Despite your words last night, I found some food in your cupboards. I'm not a great cook, but I hope you'll find my efforts appetising." Obi-Wan grinned, remembering Qui-Gon's admonition on one of their early missions, that if he was going to be his padawan, he'd have to damn well learn how **not** to poison his master. Many of the items in Walter's cupboards had been unfamiliar to him, but he'd proceeded by a method of trial and error and was satisfied with the result. He set the dish down in front of Skinner, and ladled some of the broth into a bowl for him, watching the other man. Walter seemed to sense the scrutiny, lifted the spoon cautiously to his lips, and took a sip.

"Hmm...banana, ginger, and...macaroni...Interesting." Walter said neutrally.

"But nice?" Obi-Wan picked up his own spoon, and began to eat.

"Actually...yes." Walter sounded surprised. "I've been wondering about you, Ben," he said, glancing up. His dark brown gaze seemed to lance straight into Obi-Wan's soul, as if searching for something.

"You mean, who am I? Where do I come from? And why the hell did you agree to let me stay here?" Obi-Wan offered, with a grin.

"Something like that, yes." Walter broke off a piece of bread, and dipped it in the broth.

"Well, I'm a traveller..."

"And what do you do for a living?" Walter interrupted.

"I suppose that you could say I'm a teacher." Obi-Wan chose his words carefully. "I've lived in many places, and seen many things."

"Hmm, that doesn't tell me much." Walter snorted.

"My master always said that I could talk for hours without saying anything when I tried." Obi-Wan laughed.

"Your master?" Walter raised an eyebrow.

"My...tutor?" Obi-Wan suggested. "His name was Qui-Gon. He was a good man."

"Was? He's dead?"

"Yes." Obi-Wan looked straight into Walter's eyes, and knew that his expression made it clear how much saying that one word hurt him. Walter grunted, and looked away. "Your turn now. Tell me about yourself," Obi-Wan urged.

"I'm 47 years old, I work for the FBI..." Walter paused, looking at Obi-Wan keenly, as if that information required some reaction.

"Ah." Obi-Wan said. "And who is Sharon?"

There was silence for a moment, then Walter got up.

"You've been going through my belongings. I want you to leave," he said, his whole body shaking, although whether in anger or distress, Obi-Wan couldn't tell.

"I'm sorry. I found her photograph. She's very beautiful," he whispered.

"Was beautiful. **Was**. She's dead." Skinner snapped savagely. "The only damn woman I ever loved, and she's dead. I killed her."

"I don't believe that," Obi-Wan said softly.

Skinner leaned over the table, his body solid, and overwhelming, and fixed Obi-Wan with a cold, deadly gaze. Another man might have flinched, but Obi-Wan merely held Skinner's gaze with his own cool, steady look, searching the other man's face for the truth.

"Believe it." Skinner hissed. "She died because of me, and my work - because of Mulder and his damn crusade, a crusade that'll get us all damn well killed in the end."

"Tell me." Obi-Wan said, his calm leeching the sting from Skinner's angry words.

Skinner hesitated, then stepped back. "No. I told you to go."

"I can't leave yet. My work here isn't done," Obi-Wan told him.

"Oh, what the fuck are you? Some kind of angel sent here to do good deeds?" Skinner sneered.

"No, I came through a Gate in time and space, from a galaxy far, far away. My real name is Obi-Wan, and I'm a Jedi knight." Obi-Wan waited impassively to see what the reaction to **that** piece of news would be.

Skinner rocked back on his heels, and shook his head. "Is it me?" he asked the heavens despairingly. "Do I attract wackos obsessed by little green men? Isn't life on this earth complicated enough without inventing new galaxies, and a host of extra-terrestrial crazies hell bent on taking over the planet?"

Obi-Wan laughed. He couldn't stop himself. Walter looked so comical, standing there, his wide forehead creased into a puzzled frown, his arms open wide as if in supplication.

"I'm sorry. It must sound far-fetched to you. Please, tell me, who else amuses you with such tales?" He asked.

"Mulder." Skinner winced. He was about to say something else, when there was a knock at the door.

Obi-Wan noticed that Skinner drew his weapon as he went to answer it. He didn't know much about this world, or its customs, but all the same, the gesture seemed strange to him. He watched as Skinner opened the door.

"I've been expecting you." Skinner murmured to the unseen visitor.

"Good. I hope that means you've got what I asked for," the man replied. Obi-Wan froze. He had never heard that voice before, but he recognised the dark side in all its forms. "Well, aren't you going to let me in?" The voice asked mockingly. "Or do I have to insist?"

"Be my guest, Krycek." Skinner opened the door, and admitted a handsome, slender man, with sharp green eyes. The newcomer took one look at Obi-Wan, and stiffened. Some ancient instinct arose in both of them, as dark and light met, and silently declared its allegiance and intent.

"Well, what have we here?" Krycek murmured, slinking stealthily across the room to stand in front of him. Obi-Wan's hand went to the light-sabre in his pocket, and rested there.

"Leave him out of this - he has nothing to do with it," Skinner snapped. Krycek ignored him, his eyes never leaving those of the Jedi knight.

"Oh, but I think he does." Krycek hissed.

Obi-Wan didn't say a word, but his eyes spoke for him. He never allowed his gaze to drop, and he left the intruder in no doubt as to who and what he was. Finally Krycek's face crumpled into something resembling a snarl.

"Do you have what I asked for, Skinner?" He demanded, turning back to the big man. Obi-Wan watched Skinner's face, wondering what deal could possibly exist between these two, and hoping that Skinner was not somehow entangled with the dark purpose this man worked towards. Skinner's reluctance was almost tangible, as he reached into his briefcase, drew out a parcel, and handed it to Krycek.

"Thank you. You'll be hearing from me." Krycek took the parcel, and as he did so, Obi-Wan noticed that he wore a prosthetic arm. He felt time stand still, and an old evil, and one yet not come to pass merged in that moment, causing a shiver of foreboding to run up his spine.

Krycek patted Skinner on the cheek, a humiliation that the big man bore with a resigned and desperate stoicism. "I'll let myself out. I'll leave you and your... **boyfriend**," the dark haired man sneered that word, "to enjoy your little tryst."

Skinner's roar of sheer rage echoed in Obi-Wan's ears, and the big man slammed the door shut after his unwelcome guest.

"I'm sorry." Skinner spat. "You shouldn't have been involved in that."

"But I am." Obi-Wan shrugged. "I think I was sent here for that purpose."

"Don't start all that crap again," Skinner snapped irritably, pacing the room like a caged tiger.

Obi-Wan sat cross-legged on the floor, and surveyed him for several minutes.

"I don't need to warn you of the danger you're in," Obi-Wan said at last. "That man, Krycek, has been seduced by the dark side of the force."

"The dark side? What the hell is **that** supposed to mean?" Skinner growled.

Obi-Wan considered the matter for a moment, then got up, and placed his hands gently on Skinner's shoulders. At first the big man stiffened, and Obi-Wan wondered if he was going to strike, then he calmed down, as the Jedi poured a sense of calm reassurance into the light touch.

"The force is all around you, in every living thing - with some it is stronger than others, but we can all feel it." Obi-Wan said softly, moving his fingers gently over Skinner's tautly muscled back, softly caressing him. "In my galaxy we can train to become Jedi knights, and learn how to observe the rules of the light side of the force, in order to maintain harmony with ourselves, and the universe around us." He walked around the big man, his fingers still lightly touching those tense shoulders. "However, there are those who are seduced by the dark side of the force - and they are a warning to all of us." He looked up into Skinner's dark eyes, and gently touched the front of his shoulders, his fingers sending sparks of healing, calming power deep into Skinner's body. "Krycek, has gone over to the dark side, and you, Walter...you are a pawn between light and dark, moved back and forth between them for a purpose you do not even fully comprehend."

"Yes." Walter moved his shoulders, rolling them back, and closed his eyes helplessly for a moment. When he opened them again, they were bleak with despair. "I'm doing my best to fight him, the only way I know how," he admitted. "But that means playing a waiting game, and..."

"You're not very good at that," Obi-Wan supplied with a wry smile. "You're more of a man of action, Walter."

"Yes." Skinner looked into his eyes, and shook his head. "I don't understand you, Ben," he whispered.

"I know." Obi-Wan nodded. "I'm not entirely sure that matters," he replied. "The question is - do you trust me?"

Skinner thought about it for a moment, then finally, hesitantly, he nodded. "Yes. God knows why, but for some reason I do."

"Good. Then that is enough, for now," Obi-Wan murmured. "A word of warning though, Walter. Krycek is not the sum of your problems. There are always two - a master and an apprentice. Which is he? Do you know?"

"Oh yeah." Skinner gave a wry shake of his head. "Krycek's the...apprentice." He inclined his head in Obi-Wan's direction at the use of the unfamiliar word in this context.

"And the master?" Obi-Wan watched Walter keenly.

"I don't know his name. I'm not sure anybody does." Skinner shrugged. "He's a mean SOB though. I don't know what he wants, or even what he expects to achieve, but I do know he's evil. The bastard gives me the creeps whenever I see him."

"That's because the force is strong in you, Walter." Obi-Wan laid his hand over Skinner's heart, and the big man started in surprise as Obi-Wan amplified the force he felt flowing through him, making it beat strongly in time to Skinner's heart, until the thrumming sound filled the room with its roar. "You recognise it in others. That's why you seek to protect this...Mulder. I expect the force is strong in him as well."

"Yes," Skinner whispered. Then he moved, unexpectedly, and took Obi-Wan's face between his hands, holding him too tight. "Who **are** you?" He asked, his eyes searching for an answer. Obi-Wan could have easily broken the grip, but found himself caught up in that sweeping gaze. He felt known, **seen** in a way he had not experienced since...since Qui-Gonn died.

"I told you," he said softly. "My name is Obi-Wan Kenobi, I'm a Jedi knight. I come from a galaxy on the other side of the universe..."

"Yes, but who **are** you?" Skinner interrupted him. Obi-Wan felt the other man's soul reach out and envelop him, and he gave himself up to that dark eyed gaze.

"I'm Ben," he whispered. *The name you gave me...*

Obi-Wan slept fitfully that night, disturbed by his encounter with Skinner. He tried to meditate, to calm himself, but when he slept, his dreams were jumbled, and disturbed. He saw Qui-Gon fighting Krycek, watched the dark haired man wielding a light-sabre like an expert, and then saw the flash of the sword as it pierced his Master's heart. He let out a cry, feeling the hopelessness, having to watch, unable to help. He saw his master wrap himself in his cloak, and run down a dark winding corridor. He ran after him, his breath catching in his throat. When he finally caught up with him, he almost wept with relief, and placed a hand on the other man's shoulder. Qui-Gonn turned, and removed his hood - to reveal that he was Walter Skinner. Obi-Wan woke up, the cry still echoing on his lips. A light snapped on, and Skinner loomed over him.

"Ben? Are you okay? You were screaming your head off?"

"I'm fine." Obi-Wan sat up, feeling his heart beating too fast. Skinner was dressed only in a pair of shorts, and it was impossible not to notice some of the fine scars on his torso. "I'm sorry I disturbed you," Obi-Wan murmured.

"No need. After 'Nam I woke up screaming every night for 3 years." Skinner told him with a wry shrug. "Sometimes I still do," he confided, flushing.

"'Nam?" Obi-Wan questioned.

Skinner hesitated. "I never know whether you're kidding me with all this far away galaxy crap, but I guess I'll take you at face value for now. You don't seem to mean any harm by it. I was in a war in Vietnam. I was 18. It, uh, had a big effect on me."

"Yes. I understand." Obi-Wan nodded, suspecting that Skinner's admission was a huge understatement. "You had to kill?"

"Yes - or be killed." Skinner shrugged.

"It's the same for me," Obi-Wan told him.

"That's what you were dreaming about? A war?" Skinner asked him.

"No." Obi-Wan considered it for a moment. "I dreamed about Qui-Gon."

"Your master?"

"And my lover - my bonded mate," Obi-Wan said with a nod. Skinner froze, looking uncomfortable, and Obi-Wan wondered what he had said that could have caused offence.

"Okay, this just keeps getting more and more way out," Skinner muttered at last. "Forgive me, Ben, I'm sure you mean well, but it's one weird revelation after another right now, and I'm not sure I can handle any more." He got up, passed a weary, disbelieving hand over his

forehead, and left the room. Obi-Wan stared after him in surprise. What on earth had he said that could have confused and upset the other man in this way?

Skinner was already gone when he got up the next day. Obi-Wan settled down to meditate but his thoughts were interrupted by an angry knock on the door. He opened it, to admit a man he recognised from the photograph in Walter's desk - a man who at this moment in time was hopping mad. Obi-Wan knew instinctively that this was Mulder. The force ran through him so powerfully that it was almost visible, and yet it was unchannelled, and uncontrolled - which was hardly surprising on a world without Jedi masters to teach the talented.

"Who the hell are you, and where's Skinner?" Mulder demanded rudely.

"I am Ben, and Walter isn't here," Obi-Wan replied calmly. "Would you like coffee?"

"No, I damn well wouldn't. You just give him a message for me, will you?" Mulder snapped.

"That will depend on the message," Obi-Wan said, pouring a cup of coffee for himself.

"What the hell is **that** supposed to mean?" Mulder demanded.

"It means that there are some messages that should be given in person. I would not presume to pass such a message onto Walter," Obi-Wan replied, unruffled by Mulder's petulance.

"Well you just tell him this - tell him that I know he's working for that smoking bastard, and that I know he's been spying on me. He asked me once if we're done, and you can tell him from me, that we are now. We are. We're done. Through." Mulder finished with a vicious shake of his head.

"Is that any way to speak to your master, Mulder?" Obi-Wan inquired.

"My master? What are you talking about? You're not my master."

"No, I'm not, but Walter is."

Mulder stopped pacing, and stood, with his hands on his hips, looking utterly confused.

"Now what the hell is **that** supposed to mean? Listen, Ben, whoever you are, whatever kinky games you get up to with Skinner are your affair, but he sure as hell isn't my master."

"Of course he is." Obi-Wan shrugged. "I will give him your message, Mulder, but I'd advise you to search your heart. Walter isn't your enemy. You must know that."

"No, I don't know that. And I don't damn well know you," Mulder said pointedly. "Just give him the message."

"Very well." Obi-Wan agreed. "A word of advice though, Mulder." He put a firm hand on Mulder's neck, and squeezed. Mulder went still, like a stunned rabbit, his will utterly

overwhelmed by Obi-Wan's power. "Trust your instincts," Obi-Wan told the other man. "You know Walter would never willingly betray you." Mulder opened his mouth, and tried to say something, but the force of Obi-Wan's tightly controlled will was too much for him, and he only managed a choking gasp. Obi-Wan smiled at him sweetly, and escorted him to the door, still holding his neck tightly in his grasp.

"You have great gifts, but much to learn," he told Mulder with a regretful sigh, "and you should have had the coffee. It's nice. I'm getting quite a taste for it." He opened the door, and shooed Mulder out as if he were an unwanted kitten. Mulder gaped at him for a moment, then, with a puzzled look, turned on his heel and left.

Skinner returned earlier than Obi-Wan had expected - and he wasn't alone. Trailing along behind him was a boy, about the same age as Anakin had been when they'd found him - or a little older.

"This is Gibson Praise," Skinner told him tersely. "He's...oh god, it's too complicated to explain. He's going to be staying here for a while."

"He means that Krycek has asked him to keep me out of the way for a few hours," Gibson said, walking over to Obi-Wan, and looking him straight in the eye. "You're different." Gibson stated.

"So are you." Obi-Wan replied, looking down at the boy, and sensing that the force was greatly disrupted around him - so badly disrupted as to be almost something else. "Something was done to you," he said.

"Yes." Gibson shrugged, seating himself on the couch. "And to you?" He asked.

"No." Obi-Wan managed a faint smile.

"You're appalled by me." Gibson told him, without embarrassment.

"No, I'm appalled by what's been done to you. And sorry." Obi-Wan reached out a finger to touch Gibson's scarred head, and imparted the gesture with as much healing as he possessed. Healing had never been his strong subject at the Temple, but he sensed this boy was in need of it, and longed to help him in some way.

Gibson moved his head away. "It's too late for me."

"I don't believe that." Obi-Wan looked up at Walter. "What was done to him?" He asked.

"I don't know." Skinner shook his head wearily. Obi-Wan felt anger and grief for both these people - both victims of the dark side of the force in ways he could not comprehend.

"I have a message for you." Obi-Wan drew Skinner away from the couch to speak to him privately. "From your padawan."

"My what?" Skinner frowned.

"Your apprentice," Obi-Wan supplied. "Mulder," he added, and the light finally dawned.

"Mulder? My apprentice!" Skinner snorted.

"Yes." Obi-Wan nodded. "Of course he is."

"Don't let him hear you say that!" Skinner gave a grim chuckle.

"I already did." Obi-Wan smiled. "I'm surprised you don't see it. The force is strong in both of you. You have learned to control it within yourself to a degree, through experience and some hard lessons, but Mulder's talent is prodigious - and wild. You've tried to teach him patience, and the value of knowledge and training."

"Well, yes, in a manner of speaking." Skinner mused.

"Well then, these were lessons I learned from my master, and he from his master before him." Obi-Wan told him. "I was the apprentice, as Mulder is to you."

"And his message?" Skinner pressed, glancing at Gibson.

"Was hasty and ill thought out. I said something similar to my own master once, in anger and self-pity. It still grieves me."

"What did Mulder say?" Skinner's face had assumed a hard mask, as if to protect himself from the pain he saw coming a mile away.

"He said that he was aware that you are working for the "smoking bastard", and that you and he are through."

Obi-Wan watched as Skinner's jaw tightened, and the lines around his eyes seemed to deepen with sadness, combined with anger.

"It was inevitable." Skinner shrugged, after several long minutes during which the Jedi knight saw him struggling with a kaleidoscope of emotions. It was a fascinating sight, and Obi-Wan was intrigued by the array of feelings that Skinner revealed only through a twitching of the nerve in his neck, the slight movement of his jaw, and the intense charcoal depths of his eyes.

"Can't you tell him the truth - whatever it may be?" Obi-Wan asked, placing a hand on Skinner's shoulder.

"No." Skinner looked up, his tone firm. "This is the only way to protect him."

"I understand." Obi-Wan nodded. He returned to the couch, to give Skinner some time alone.

Obi-Wan found it necessary to keep a firm clamp on his thoughts in the presence of Gibson Praise. He guessed that the boy's talents had arisen more by physical intervention, than by

any naturally arising power of the force within him, but the end result was much the same. It wasn't too late for him though - Obi-Wan was sure of that. In time, with a good master, he could learn to control the power within him, and to use it for good. In the wrong hands though...Obi-Wan shuddered. In the wrong hands it was almost inevitable that the boy would turn to the dark side, and Obi-Wan didn't like to think of the chaos that would be wreaked on this unsuspecting world if a boy as talented as this one were to be turned. The fate of the whole world depended on this damaged child. It was terrifying.

There was a knock on the door shortly after midnight, and Krycek appeared.

"He's come for me," Gibson told Obi-Wan.

"You don't want to go with him, do you?" Obi-Wan asked.

"I don't care any more." Gibson shrugged.

"After all that's been done to you, I don't blame you."

"You though...you're not like any of the others. I...maybe I could stay with you." Gibson bit on his lip.

"Do you trust me?" Obi-Wan asked. Gibson nodded, thoughtfully. <Good. Maybe one day I can deserve that trust,> Obi-Wan said silently. Gibson looked at him in surprise. <Forgive me for now?> He asked.

<Yes.> The boy nodded again, and limped over to where Krycek stood, waiting.

Skinner handed over the boy with even more strain showing in his face than had been evident the previous evening. Krycek smiled a triumphant, evil smile, and Obi-Wan watched as the anger and hatred rose inside the big man, until it almost spilled over, and threatened to disrupt his tightly controlled façade. As soon as Krycek had gone, taking Gibson with him, Skinner slammed his fist into the wall, pounding it hard, over and over again.

"That isn't the way," Obi-Wan told him softly. "Anger, and hatred, cloud your mind. You need to be at peace in order to see the way forward."

Skinner looked at him, and laughed out loud - a bitter, ironic sound. "I told Scully something similar once. I know the truth of what you're saying, Ben, but there are times when it just hurts too much."

"Yes. I know. When Qui-Gon was killed...I pursued his killer, Darth Maul, with vengeance in my heart. I could feel the power of the dark side in that moment."

"Did you kill him?" Skinner's dark eyes were curious, and sympathetic.

"Darth Maul? Yes. I cut him in two." Obi-Wan said with some degree of satisfaction but no great sense of pride.

"Good." Skinner grunted. "Don't get me wrong - I'm not a great believer in people taking justice into their own hands, but there are times when natural justice just seems...fitting."

"I agree." Obi-Wan saw the deep sense of dejection in the other man, and wished he could help him in some way.

"Look, Ben, I need to get away," Skinner said. He strode up to his bedroom, and slung some clothes into a bag. Obi-Wan followed him.

"You want to come to a decision - about what to do?" He predicted.

"Yes." Skinner paused for a moment. "Not that I exactly have a lot of options," he muttered. Obi-Wan felt a wave of anxiety at those words. "I would like to come with you," he said quickly.

"I'd prefer to be alone." Skinner snapped.

"And I would prefer that you were not," Obi-Wan replied forcefully.

Skinner looked up in surprise. "Ben, this is my life. Butt out. Or are you going to pull that weird mind trick on me again?" Obi-Wan looked at him in surprise. "Yeah, I figured that one out," Skinner said. "Trust me - the last person I left on their own in my apartment was Krycek - and that turned out very badly. There's no way I'd have agreed to leaving you here alone. I've been trying to figure out why I did, and all I can think of is that thing you did with your hand."

"Like this." Obi-Wan waved his hand in the air. "Come with me, Ben, I need your help."

Skinner looked at him for a moment, his eyes glazing over. He opened his mouth, then closed it again. "Nice try," he said, with a snort. "But I think I'm getting the hang of this force of yours."

"I think that maybe you are," Obi-Wan said with a smile. "I said the force was strong with you. You would have made a fine Jedi knight, Walter."

"Yeah. Right." Skinner finished packing. "You can stay here, Ben. I know you don't have anywhere else to go."

"On the contrary, I'm coming with you," Obi-Wan said insistently. "No mind tricks." He held out his hands. "But you need a friend right now, Walter, and I'm going to make sure that's me. I don't care what you've done in the past, I'm here to see you don't make an...irrevocable mistake in the future."

"You think I'm going to kill myself?" Skinner paused in the doorway.

"Are you saying it isn't on your list of options?" Obi-Wan demanded.

Skinner put his bag down, and ran a hand over his head. "Okay," he said at last, wearily. "It's on the list. I just need time and space to think it through. You can come - but if I decide it's for the best, I need you to honour that, and not try and stop me."

Obi-Wan thought about it for a moment then nodded. "Agreed," he said.

This world, this "Earth" was so very beautiful, Obi-Wan thought, as Skinner drove them through the mountains in his jeep. It was a long drive, and Obi-Wan was surprised when they stopped in the middle of nowhere, somewhere deep in the hills.

"We have to walk it from here," Skinner told him. "I hope you're fit."

"I am." Obi-Wan suppressed a smile. Apart from his healing leg, he suspected he was a good deal fitter than most people he had encountered thus far on this planet - including Walter, who had clearly been allowing his health to suffer recently, if those bottles of alcohol were anything to judge by.

Skinner handed him a pack, which Obi-Wan shouldered without complaint, and then he strode off. Obi-Wan followed him. It was a nice day, the sun was shining, and the scenery was spectacular. Obi-Wan couldn't help humming. Despite the bleakness of their situation, there was always something to appreciate, and the beauty of his surroundings seeped into his weary heart. He watched Walter move in front of him, with all the pent-up aggression of a tiger searching for prey. His muscles were bunched tight, and his movements were sharp and staccato, not free flowing and easy. Obi-Wan longed to place a hand on the other man's shoulder, to smile into his eyes and soothe him, as he used to with his master when the weight of his burdens grew too heavy.

"You always know the right things to say, my padawan." Qui-Gon would smile, and allow himself to be distracted, even if just for a moment. Obi-Wan enjoyed making his master relax, taking the other man's face between his hands, and soothing his brow with kisses. Qui-Gon had always been a driven man. He found it hard to switch off - and Obi-Wan always knew a way past his defences. He wished he knew such a way with Walter. The other man had removed his sweater, and was now only wearing a black vest, tucked into blue denim jeans, with sturdy walking boots on his feet. His neck and shoulders glistened with sweat, and there was something about the raw grace of his stance that made Obi-Wan stop short. Skinner wasn't like Qui-Gon - his master had walked with the flowing ease of a Jedi knight, and yet...walking behind him, watching him, Obi-Wan had, for a moment, experienced a sense of *deja-vu*. Trust your instincts, he had told Mulder, and his instincts told him that being with this man felt right. Obi-Wan felt as if he had been struck by some great revelation. He was unable to move, and instead just kept watching as Walter walked, his long legs eating up the ground. Finally the big man turned, a frown of concern creasing his wide forehead.

"Ben? Was I going too fast? Is your leg hurting you?" Walter asked.

"No. I was...nothing."

Obi-Wan gazed into those quizzical brown eyes for a long moment, wondering what was happening. He had been so sure that he had been sent to this world in order to assist these people in the battle between the dark and light sides of the force that was clearly brewing here. He hadn't expected to find another person to love as much as he had loved his old master. His heart quickened, and he clung to the memory of Qui-Gon, unwilling to relinquish it even after all these years.

The sun glanced through the trees, surrounding Walter in a glowing halo, and Obi-Wan took a sharp intake of breath. Standing behind Walter, with one hand on his shoulder, stood Qui-Gon. His master was smiling, and looked younger and happier than Obi-Wan could ever remember seeing him. Obi-Wan blinked, and the vision was gone, as quickly as it had arrived.

"Ben? What's the matter? You look like you just saw a ghost." Walter said, starting to climb back down towards him.

"Maybe I did." Obi-Wan managed a faint smile.

He resumed walking, stealing little glances at Walter as he went. Was this really why he had been sent here? To meet this man? To fall in love again? Could anybody really take Qui-Gon's place? And if so, could it possibly be this grim, tense man, who was at this moment contemplating suicide as the solution to problems so dark and twisted that Obi-Wan could hardly begin to understand them? He heard the unsteady beat of Walter's heart, and sensed the fear and anger inside him. He was so close to the dark side, and yet fought it so hard. Obi-Wan had a sudden mental image of this big man, lying on his side in a cage, his arms and feet bound, while he continued to roar his outrage, his defiance, even in the face of his captivity.

"I'll set you free," he whispered.

"What's that?" Skinner turned to look down at him.

"We'll find a solution to your problem - together," Obi-Wan told him. "I believe that's why I'm here."

Skinner opened his mouth, then closed it again, and shook his head wryly. "You know, Ben, I wouldn't be surprised if you believed that," he said.

Obi-Wan grinned, and was rewarded by the ghost of a smile that tugged at Walter's lips.

They pressed on through the hills, passed through a ridge of rocky scree, and arrived on the other side, beside a wide, glistening lake, that shone like a circle of pure silver.

"Walter...this is beautiful." Obi-Wan exclaimed, loosening his pack, and running down to the water's edge. He knelt beside it, and ran his fingers through the cool, almost glacial water.

"Yeah. It's kind of a secret place." Skinner grunted. "I trust you not to tell anyone," he muttered. Obi-Wan suppressed a smile.

"Do we camp here?" He asked.

Skinner nodded. "I know it's basic, but it makes me feel free - no buildings, just me and the sky. I can think out here. If you want to go back, then be my guest."

"I've camped out before, Walter. I'm sure I'll survive." Obi-Wan grinned. "Now, that water looks pretty good. Time for a swim, I think." He stripped off his clothing and dived headfirst into the lake, his body tingling as the icy water enveloped him. It felt so good to be able to stretch his limbs, to kick and shout, beneath the bright blue sky. Walter grinned at him, making a campfire. Obi-Wan wanted the big man to join him in the water, but sensed a resistance from him, so he didn't invite him in. Finally, feeling cleansed after the long, sweaty walk, he pulled himself out of the lake, and quickly got dressed to warm himself up. Skinner had dinner cooking over the fire when he returned to their small camp, and the sun was already fading. They ate in companionable silence, watching the magnificent sunset casting crimson rays over the water.

"Did you bring Sharon up here?" Obi-Wan asked, sensing Walter's melancholy.

"Yeah." Skinner shrugged. "She was always a country girl at heart. She never got the hang of the big city - power dressing, politicking, all that crap. My career kept me in DC, but I should have seen that Sharon wasn't really happy there. We grew apart..." His voice faded.

"And you're more of a chameleon? At home in the city, **and** in the wilderness?" Obi-Wan asked.

"I'm not sure. Sometimes my job makes me feel...cramped," Skinner admitted. "I'm locked up in a room all day, sitting behind my big desk, and I get restless. I need to get out, stretch my legs."

"Qui-Gon was the same. He hated to be still - he always had to be on the move." Obi-Wan smiled. "He was the sort of man who made things happen, whether for good or ill."

"Sounds like Mulder." Skinner commented with a grunt. "He could never leave things alone either."

Obi-Wan laughed out loud. "There are similarities, yes. Mulder - why does he think you've betrayed him?"

"Because I have?" Skinner's tone was lightly ironic, but there was no mistaking the savage bite of his jaw as he said the words.

"In order to save him from some greater harm?" Obi-Wan probed.

"I tell myself that." Skinner sighed, and stretched, his long body. "Or maybe because I'm too afraid to die."

"I don't believe that." Obi-Wan watched Skinner absently rub his shoulders, as if trying to loosen a tight ache. "Truly." Obi-Wan leaned forward, so the fire illuminated his face. "I see many things in you, Walter, but I don't see a coward."

Skinner looked at him for a long moment, then gave a brief, haunted smile that tugged at Obi-Wan's heart.

"Thank you, Ben. You're a good person," he muttered, in the embarrassed tone of one unused to receiving praise. He rolled his neck again.

"Here. Your shoulders are stiff. Let me." Obi-Wan stood up and went to kneel behind Walter, his firm, strong hands soon finding the deep tension knots in the other man's shoulders. He loved the feel of Skinner's taut muscles beneath his fingers, and the way the fire cast an orange glow over his tanned flesh. "I have some salve I use on injuries. If you take off your shirt, I could rub it into your back," Obi-Wan told the big man, reaching into his pack to retrieve the salve. Skinner hesitated for a moment, then did as he was told, removing the vest top to reveal his muscled torso, covered in fine curls of wiry hair. Obi-Wan felt his mouth go dry - a sensation he remembered experiencing for the first time on a freighter en route to Coruscant after a long, exhausting mission. He and Qui-Gon had just finished eating, and his master had placed the bowl to one side, and asked him if there was dessert, because if there was, perhaps it should wait until "after." When he had naively asked "after what?" Qui-Gon had groaned, and covered his mouth with his own, and Obi-Wan's knees had given way so Qui-Gon had been forced to swing him up into his arms, and carry him to bed that first time - a fact he never let Obi-Wan forget.

Obi-Wan straddled Skinner's body, and warmed the salve between his hands, then smoothed it onto the other man's broad back. He lost himself in the moment, in the feel of Skinner's flesh beneath his fingers, and the scent of the man - the dried sweat from the afternoon's walk still clung to him. Obi-Wan kneaded the flesh, his fingers dancing their homage to his new found love, wondering if the other man was oblivious to the chemistry between them, that sent sparks through his fingertips.

Finally he knelt to one side, and Skinner rolled over.

"Thanks. That was good." Walter told him, his voice deep and gruff.

"You're welcome." Obi-Wan wiped his hands on the grass. Skinner was sitting, his face dappled by the dying embers of the fire, and he looked so lost that Obi-Wan couldn't stop himself. He found himself moving forward, and his lips touched against Skinner's for one brief second. The other man froze, but didn't pull away. Obi-Wan drew back.

"Ben..." Skinner cleared his throat. "I'm, uh...look, I'm not gay."

Obi-Wan considered this for a moment, trying to look at it from all angles to see its relevance. Finally he gave up with a sigh.

"You certainly don't have much to be cheerful about right now, Walter..." he began.

Skinner gave him a quizzical look. "What the hell...?" Then he burst out laughing. "Ben, you're a constant source of delight. I don't know if you're making all this stuff up, but what the hell - it's made me laugh and I didn't think anything could do that right now. What I meant is...there's only ever been women for me. Do you understand?"

Obi-Wan shook his head. "There have been women for me too," he said.

"Hmm, but then you decided you were gay, and you took up with this Qui-Gon who meant so much to you," Skinner commented.

"Qui-Gon and I were bonded - from the soul." Obi-Wan stumbled with this conversation, feeling sure they were coming from two such different viewpoints that there couldn't be any common understanding. "I loved the person, Walter," he said, the light finally dawning. "That isn't the way of your people? You love the gender, not the person?" He asked.

"Yes. I mean, no. I mean..." Skinner floundered. "Shit, Ben, you make it sound like there's something wrong with that," he exclaimed at last.

"Not wrong..." Obi-Wan mused. "Just very different to what I'm used to. Where I come from it just isn't relevant - a soul bond doesn't take age or gender into account, it just...is. Nobody thinks anything of it. I can see that your society doesn't approve of such bonds?"

"Well, we're more enlightened than we used to be." Skinner gave a wry smile. "But I don't think we've gone quite as far as you people. Hell, Ben, you've even got me believing these delusions of yours now!" He smiled ruefully.

"Not delusions, Walter." Obi-Wan sighed. "We're very real, I can assure you. Or at least we were once, a long time ago. When I left my galaxy, I did so hoping to find Qui-Gon, in a different time. Instead I found you. I don't believe such things happen by chance."

"Ah, you believe in fate?" Skinner's gaze was dark and intense in the firelight.

"In destiny - yes." Obi-Wan nodded.

"Destiny." Skinner shook his head. "I don't believe in that crap. All I can say is that you must have really pissed someone off if your destiny is to get involved in my problems. I'm on the last bus to nowhere, Ben. There's no future for me."

"I don't believe that." Obi-Wan told him.

"You're always damn well saying that!" Skinner snapped. "What the hell **do** you believe then, Ben?"

"I believe in you." Obi-Wan shrugged. He got up and rolled out his blanket, and then lay down, and pulled it around him. He lay awake for a long time, watching as Walter stared morosely into the fire. Then, when the big man thought Obi-Wan was asleep, he turned to stare at him. Obi-Wan closed his eyes, and feigned sleep, but he was aware, through his

closed eyelids of that intense scrutiny, combined with something else - an emotion - regret maybe?

It was almost dawn when Obi-Wan was awakened by the intruders. He opened his eyes blearily, and tried to scramble to his feet, only to find his arms pinned roughly behind his back. He shook his head, coming to his full level of alertness in time to see Walter being savagely punched in the gut by two unknown assailants. One was holding the big man, while the other laid into him. Obi-Wan let out a wordless cry of distress, and then kicked out at the two men holding him, landing a graceful blow to the legs of one, which freed his arms to easily dispose of the other. He glanced at his bag - his light-sabre was in there, and he needed it.

"Run!" Walter shouted. His face was bleeding, and he was struggling with his captors. "It's me they want, Ben, just go." Walter commanded.

Obi-Wan shook his head. "Your fight, is my fight, Walter," he said, jumping high in the air and landing with unerring accuracy on top of the man standing in front of Skinner. The man gave a startled cry of surprise, and raised his fist, but was far too slow against a Jedi. Obi-Wan drop-kicked him to the ground with no great effort, then turned his attention to the fourth man. The man hesitated, then flung Walter forward, and drew a gun. Obi-Wan stopped.

"Not so fucking fast now, are you?" The man gave a vicious grin, and waved the gun at Obi-Wan, who glanced again at his pack. He could see his light-sabre peeping from the top, and he closed his eyes, and concentrated. Walter gaped in surprise as the light-sabre suddenly zipped through the air, landing unerringly in Obi-Wan's outstretched hand. Obi-Wan activated it, which drew a hiss from the man holding the gun.

"A big flashlight? What the hell use is **that**?" the man growled.

Obi-Wan smiled. "You're about to find out," he replied, advancing on their attacker. The man hesitated, then lifted the gun higher, aimed deliberately at Obi-Wan's chest, and fired.

"Ben!" Walter ran forward, but Obi-Wan had easily deflected the bullet. He continued his slow advance, and their attacker was looking distinctly nervous now. He emptied his entire magazine straight at Obi-Wan from point blank range. Obi-Wan dismissed each bullet with a disdainful flourish of his wrist, and kept advancing. Finally, the man raised his gun, and charged at Obi-Wan, aiming to hit him across the side of the face with the weapon. Obi-Wan flashed the light-sabre through the air, and the man howled in pain, huddling over his bloodied wrist and gazing at his severed hand in disbelief.

"Take your comrades with you, and return to your master." Obi-Wan told him, picking up the hand and tucking it tidily in the man's jacket pocket. He waved his light-sabre at the other men, and they scrambled past him hastily, helping their stricken comrade to his feet, and hurrying him away. When he was sure they had gone, Obi-Wan deactivated his light-sabre, and ran to Walter's side.

"Walter? Hold still." Obi-Wan ran to the lake, and dipped his shirt in the cool water, then returned to the big man, and gently wiped the blood from his face.

"Ben - what the hell was that thing...and how did you make it...?" Walter's dark eyes were wide with astonishment.

"I told you, Walter - I'm from a different time and place. I have some special...talents." Obi-Wan smiled, softly caressing the side of Walter's face. "Here, lean back - let me check your ribs." He ran his fingers carefully over Skinner's torso, and the other man hissed in pain, and stopped his fingers with a big hand, holding them tight.

"Ben - thanks," he said, his tone sincere. "I owe you. You risked your life for me."

"I was protecting someone I care about." Obi-Wan replied, finishing his examination and finding Skinner bruised, but otherwise not greatly hurt. He noted the flush of confusion that rose to Skinner's face, and smiled. "There's no obligation, Walter. You're a good man. It's easy to care about you. You cared about me when we had barely met. I haven't forgotten your kindness in taking me to the hospital, and then into your home. I was merely repaying the debt."

"Ben." Skinner cleared his throat. "I think...I can hardly believe I'm saying this, but hell, I always told Mulder I'd believe him if he could show me the evidence, and you sure as hell showed me something just now....I think I believe your story." He said it as it were a great admission, and maybe, for this man, it was.

"Thank you, Walter." Obi-Wan grinned.

"Mulder is going to be so pissed." Skinner returned the grin. "If anyone deserved to meet ET, it was him, not me. And you sure as hell know how to fight," Skinner grimaced. "They took me by surprise. I should have known that bastard Krycek would have me followed."

"Those men...?"

"Were sent to remind me who I belong to, and who I should have checked in with before disappearing to my little hideaway. Yeah." Skinner's eyes registered his anger at having his movements so curtailed.

"An object lesson." Obi-Wan sighed. He got to his feet, and helped Skinner up. "Here. I can tell you're fascinated by this." He placed the light-sabre carefully in Skinner's hand, then activated it on its lowest setting. Skinner almost dropped it in surprise, but then clenched his fist hard around it. "It's okay - even if it touches you it won't do more than burn - it's not set for anything higher," Obi-Wan informed him. "Don't squeeze it like that - just hold it loosely." He stood behind the big man, and placed his arms around him, and his hands over Skinner's big paws. "Now close your eyes," he instructed. Skinner hesitated, then did as he was told. "Now feel the force flowing through you..." Obi-Wan concentrated, finding the jumbled eddies of the force inside Skinner. "Imagine that you're a conduit, Walter. You do not control the force, but neither does it control you - it's a thing of harmony. You can channel it, but first you need to trust yourself, to feel the force sweep through you. Focus..." He slowed his breathing and felt Walter do the same, until they were in synch, and then he felt a great sense of peace wash over the other man.

"I can feel it..." Skinner said in an awe-struck tone.

"That's right. Don't do anything...just allow yourself to be..." Obi-Wan whispered. He savoured the moment, his cheek pressed against Walter's, his body pressed tight against the other man's back, his hands covering Walter's hands. Then he moved back, and picked up a rock from beside the lake. "Now, keep your eyes closed, Walter, and act on instinct..." He threw the rock towards the big man, and Skinner hesitated, then sliced the sabre through the air, cutting the stone in two with a clean swipe. He opened his eyes and looked down in disbelief at the shattered rock.

"I did that?" He asked, his face widening into a grin.

"Yes, Walter." Obi-Wan laughed. "I told you, the force is strong with you."

"I thought you said this "force" is in everybody." Skinner frowned.

"It is, but in some it is like the faint whisper of a heartbeat, and in others it is much louder - like a drum. On this world, its power is mostly locked up - unfocused. Your people have no Jedi teachers, and you don't know how to get in touch with the force. You...there is something that happened to you that makes you different. Sometimes those who have experienced some profound event find they are able to access the power of the force. Is this true of you?"

Skinner thought about it for a moment, then nodded. "I've been declared technically dead on two separate occasions. After each one, I...felt different." He shrugged. "It scared me. I didn't like to examine it more closely."

"Ah." Obi-Wan smiled. "One day, Walter, you will. I hope when that day comes, you will allow me to take the journey with you - as your guide." Then he burst out laughing.

"What?" Skinner asked with a confused frown. "What's so funny?"

"For a man who doesn't believe in destiny, did it never strike you as strange that you have cheated death not once, but twice? I would have said, Walter, that there is still something very specific that you have to do. Why else would they keep sending you back?"

"Ben, you're so crazy you make Mulder look sane." Skinner laughed.

"Mulder." Obi-Wan sighed. "He also keeps avoiding his destiny."

"Which is?" Skinner raised an eyebrow.

Obi-Wan smiled, and shook his head. "I'm hungry. I think we missed breakfast," he said mildly.

After breakfast, Obi-Wan took another swim. He felt wild, and free, slipping through the water like a fish. He was pleased when Walter finally stripped off his clothing, and joined him in the cold lake. The dark bruises on the other man's torso were livid on his golden flesh

as he walked naked towards the water's edge. Obi-Wan watched, wanting to tear his eyes away, but too transfixed by those long limbs. He loved the way Skinner's muscles moved beneath his skin, as the sunlight beat down on his bald head, as if anointing him with its blessing. If Obi-Wan felt like a fish, then Skinner was like a sea lion, his bald head bulldozing through the water, pugnacious and graceful at one and the same time.

"Sharon used to love it in here." Skinner said, emerging beside Obi-Wan, the water lacing his eyelashes, making him seem very young, and curiously innocent.

"It's cold, but so refreshing." Obi-Wan agreed. "The scars on your chest...?"

"From the war. And later, the FBI." Skinner replied.

"I saw the warrior in you, the moment we first met." Obi-Wan smiled. "Qui-Gon had a similar soul."

"What did he look like?" Skinner dived under the surface of the water, eating up the distance with strong strokes of his arms, to resurface behind Obi-Wan.

"Tall, slender...handsome." Obi-Wan grinned.

"When she'd finished her swim, Sharon used to lie out naked in the sun to dry off, and I'd comb her wet hair. She had long hair," Skinner remembered.

"As did Qui-Gon." Obi-Wan recalled. "How long since Sharon died?"

"Nearly three years," Skinner replied. "And Qui-Gon?"

"Seven years. Has there been another for you since then?"

"No." Skinner shivered. "It's cold - time to dry off." He pulled himself out of the water, and went to lie down in the sun. Obi-Wan joined him. "You?" Skinner asked.

"Since Qui-Gon died? No. Nobody else." Obi-Wan shook his head.

"Seven years is a long time to be lonely." Skinner mused.

"As is three." Obi-Wan shrugged. "There was never anybody to compare with Qui-Gon, and I thought there never could be again. Until now." Obi-Wan looked straight into Skinner's dark eyes, and the big man flushed, and dropped his gaze.

"Ben, there have been times...when I've felt attracted...that is...I had to fight it. It was disapproved of, but that doesn't mean I didn't want to...I mean..."

"The taboo is strong among your people, Walter. I understand that." Obi-Wan shrugged. "Your friendship is enough. I don't ask for any more."

"I do."

Obi-Wan looked up to find Walter gazing at him uncertainly, his eyes confused - part desire, part fear reflected in their charcoal depths.

Obi-Wan reached out a careful hand, and gently stroked the side of Skinner's face. The other man closed his eyes, and Obi-Wan deposited a tender kiss on his lips. Skinner didn't move, but his lips parted a little, and, thus encouraged, Obi-Wan dipped his head forward again, and kissed the other man with greater passion. Skinner's mouth opened under his, and his big hands came up, and tangled in Obi-Wan's hair. Obi-Wan's fingers played over Skinner's naked head, learning its curves and contours.

"I guess we both have to get used to missing hair." Skinner said, with a wry smile, as the kiss finished.

"I'm not unhappy with the difference. I do not look for you to be Qui-Gon," Obi-Wan replied, pressing his lips against Skinner's head. "And I think I could find **this**," he kissed the naked scalp again, "to be quite as arousing as the feel of Qui-Gon's hair beneath my fingers."

"You speak as if we have time together." Skinner shook his head sadly, his hand drawing Obi-Wan's lithe body close, so that the Jedi could feel the hardness of the big man's erection against his thigh.

"One thing I learned from the loss of Qui-Gon, is that you must make the most of however long you have with someone you love," Obi-Wan murmured.

He traced gentle lips over Skinner's bruised ribs, then ended his caress at the other man's hard, broad cock, sliding his mouth over the crown, and taking it within him, warming the flesh with his tongue. Skinner moaned and rocked forward, and Obi-Wan released him, and returned to his mouth for another deep kiss, that left the Jedi breathless, his head spinning. If anything could have convinced him that he had found someone who could mean as much to him as his lost love, it was the power of that kiss. Skinner seemed to gain confidence from the embrace, and he wrapped Obi-Wan in his muscled arms. The big man devoured the Jedi master with his mouth, his large body covering the slighter man, making him moan, as they thrust against each other, flesh warming flesh, naked under the blue sky and the hot rays of the sun.

Obi-Wan surrendered to those caresses, and cried out as Skinner took his hard cock in his hand, and thumbed it along its entire length. When he was on the verge of coming, he stopped Walter, with a smile.

"Lie down. I want to explore you," he whispered. Skinner looked uncertain, so Obi-Wan touched his lips with his own, in a brief, reassuring kiss.

"Trust me, Walter," he whispered. Skinner nodded, and did as instructed, and Obi-Wan straddled the big man's back, and sucked a trail down his spine. He inspected the grey fringe of hair around Skinner's head, and the fleshy lobes of his ears, then licked his way down one solid, muscled arm, turned, and did the same to the other, going up, until he was at the neck again, tickling it with his tongue. He continued down, ending at Skinner's taut, golden buttocks, and dipped his nose a little way inside the other man's crack, before thrusting his

tongue inside, making Skinner moan out loud. Obi-Wan made no comparisons between his new love, and the old. Skinner's body was as pleasing to him as Qui-Gon's had been, and he took his time enjoying the new sensations, loving the feel of sunlight on naked flesh, and skin against skin. Finally he turned Walter over, and reached for the salve in his bag.

"I want you inside me. Hush." He placed a finger over Skinner's lips. "Let me do this." He rubbed the salve on his hands, and then used the slippery stuff to anoint Skinner's cock, sliding the hard length between his fingers, until it glistened, upright and proud in his palm. Then he turned his attention to his own body. Sitting astride Skinner, he pushed his lubricated fingers inside himself, opening himself up, his tongue wetting his lips as he looked down on the man he was preparing himself for, in anticipation. Skinner seemed to find the preparation intensely arousing, and his cock hardened even more, and he reached out and grasped Obi-Wan's penis, caressing it with a firm touch that made the younger man shiver on the brink of coming. Finally, he was ready. He positioned himself over Skinner, and looked down into the other man's dark eyes, then carefully lowered himself onto him, parting his own flesh, so that Skinner's hard length could slip into him easily. Skinner's hips bucked up to meet him, and clenched tightly around him, as Obi-Wan moved rhythmically on top of him. His body exploded into a series of delicious ripples of pure pleasure as Skinner filled him. He felt the other man's hands clutch his thighs, warm and sweaty against his flesh, and smiled down on his lover. Skinner smiled back - the first truly relaxed, genuine smile that Obi-Wan had ever seen on the other man. For a moment they were both caught up in the intensity of their coupling, and then Skinner came inside him with a shout of release, and Obi-Wan looked up to the sky, the sweat running down his face.

Obi-Wan stayed straddling his lover for a long time, his hands resting on Skinner's chest as he felt the other man's cock soften inside him. Skinner was smiling, and he reached up and pushed a lock of sweaty hair from Obi-Wan's forehead.

"You looked as if you really enjoyed that," Skinner murmured.

"Didn't you?" Obi-Wan teased.

"Oh yeah." Skinner chuckled. "But you..." he gestured with his hand, and wrapped it around Obi-Wan's still hard cock, but Obi-Wan stopped him.

"We could do this another way, if you wish to," he suggested. Skinner hesitated, then nodded.

"Trust me." Obi-Wan kissed him firmly on the lips, then moved back. He pressed Skinner's legs open, and applied more salve to his fingers, then gently inserted them inside the other man, rubbing softly. Skinner was tight, and his muscles clenched hard around Obi-Wan's fingers.

"Relax." Obi-Wan ran his free hand over Skinner's thigh, gently caressing him, and fraction, by fraction, the tension left the other man's body. Obi-Wan leaned forwards and bestowed a kiss on Skinner's balls, licking them, and softly caressing his inner thigh. Skinner's whole body opened up beneath him, and Obi-Wan carefully inserted another finger, and then

another searching for the spot that he knew would send Skinner into a tidal wave of ecstasy. He found it, and Skinner gasped out loud, his whole body convulsing. Obi-Wan smiled, and calmed him with more soothing strokes along his thigh. "Are you ready, Walter?" He asked, removing his fingers from inside the big man's body, and coaxing his own erection back into full hardness. Skinner nodded, and Obi-Wan took his face between his hands, and kissed him again. Then he lifted Skinner's hips, and eased himself inside. For a moment, Skinner panicked, and Obi-Wan soothed him again, gently running his hands over the big man's body. Finally, when Skinner nodded to him, he resumed his gentle thrusting, until he was buried to the hilt in his lover's willing warmth. He angled his thrust with precision, and Skinner gasped, and clutched his thighs in surprise.

"Good?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Shit...yes. Damn good." Skinner put his head back, the muscles in his neck straining as his body exploded with the pleasure of Obi-Wan's hard cock rubbing his prostate. "Harder..."

Skinner pulled Obi-Wan's thighs again, bucking up to meet Obi-Wan's thrusts, over and over again, until the Jedi couldn't hold on any more, and he came with a satisfied sigh.

Obi-Wan withdrew, and threw himself down beside Skinner, enveloped the big man in his arms, and kissed him, pressing his head against his chest. They lay there, panting, for a long time, as the sun lulled them into a pleasant, relaxed doze.

It was evening when Obi-Wan awoke. He was covered in a blanket, and he could see the last rays of the sun casting a crimson glow over the lake. There was no sign of Skinner. Obi-Wan got up, and went to the lake to clean himself, before dressing quickly to ward off the chilly night air.

He wandered along the lake a little way, until he found the big man seated on a large, flat rock, looking out into nothing, his expression sad. Skinner looked up, but didn't speak. Instead he reached out a hand, and pulled Obi-Wan up in front of him, nestling him between his legs. Then he lifted the blanket he was wrapped in, and held Obi-Wan close, snuggling them both within it. Obi-Wan sat with his back pressed against Skinner's chest, the big man's arms clasped tight around his shoulders, his lover's chin resting on Obi-Wan's head, and they were silent for a long time. Then Skinner cleared his throat.

"You've made your decision." Obi-Wan pre-empted him.

"Yes." Skinner whispered, his breath tickling Obi-Wan's ear.

"It's the wrong one." Obi-Wan stated.

"How did you...? Never mind." Skinner chuckled. "I think I owe you an explanation, Ben. You've never asked for one, but I think you deserve one."

Obi-Wan made no reply, just sank back deeper into the warm depths of his lover's arms.

"Krycek has infected me with some kind of nano-technology. If I don't do as he says, then he can just press a switch and I become ill. Or worse. He made me die once before, then brought me back to life," Skinner said. Obi-Wan nodded, and heard Skinner take a deep breath before continuing. "I'm going along with him for now, because I'm no use to Mulder dead. Mulder has so many enemies. I'm the only friend he has in a position of any power in the FBI. Without me to protect him..." Skinner trailed off.

"Have you told Mulder about this?" Obi-Wan asked.

"No." Skinner said softly. "If he knew, he'd go after Krycek."

"And you don't think he could win?" Obi-Wan looked up. "There comes a time when the master has to let the apprentice go, Walter."

"I know, but...Mulder has so many battles to fight. I don't want him fighting mine," Skinner told him. "I suppose that...protecting him has become a way of life for me. I thought that I could use Krycek as he was using me...that I could use him to find out more information about the Consortium, and their plans, but it's not that simple."

"I understand." Obi-Wan nodded. "But Walter - if you kill yourself, your death won't count for anything."

"At least I won't be a pawn in someone else's game any more - a pawn they use to get at Mulder, and destroy him." Skinner snapped.

"No - but if you must die, why not do so because you've defied them?" Obi-Wan said. He got up, and turned to face Skinner, kneeling between the big man's legs, and looking at him intently. "Walter - I think I was sent to this world to find you, but also to help change things here. This battle is stuck, and it needs someone to alter the pieces, to look at the board in a different way. You, and your apprentice, are integral to the fight between the light and dark sides of the force in this world. I know that you would die before you went over to the dark side, but give your death meaning, Walter. Use it to fight the evil that threatens this world."

"How?" Skinner frowned, and Obi-Wan took his face between his hands, and kissed him on the lips.

"Trust me," he said.

Obi-Wan sat on the couch, with one arm curled negligently around Skinner's shoulders, as the big man sat cross-legged on the floor in front of him. The Jedi had changed back into his tunic, and pants, which had made Skinner raise a questioning eyebrow.

"If we are to face ordeals, I would rather do so in my own clothes." Obi-Wan told him.

They had been back in DC for a few hours, and Obi-Wan was stunned by the change in Skinner's whole demeanour. The idea of action, of fighting back, had liberated his lover, and

Skinner had spent the entire journey home whistling, talking, and generally behaving in a more animated way than Obi-Wan would have believed possible. He tried not to compare Skinner with Qui-Gon, but there were certain similarities that made him smile. Both were men who preferred to be doing, rather than sitting on the sidelines, whatever problems that led them into. Qui-Gon always hated to be still - only years of rigorous Jedi training had worked to at least make his pursuit of his quests less frenetic than they otherwise would have been. Skinner was also a thinker - and prone to dark doubts, but like Qui-Gon he rose to whatever the occasion required.

"How long do you think we'll have to wait?" Obi-Wan asked, his fingers combing through the small fringe of hair at the back of Skinner's neck.

"Not very long." Skinner shrugged. "I'll imagine that Krycek is hopping mad. My guess is that he's just itching to get around here and pull me back into line."

"He'll know you're back?"

"Yeah." Skinner sighed. "He'll know."

He was right. Krycek showed up at the door a few hours later. Obi-Wan stood back as Skinner let him into the apartment, and locked the door firmly behind the dark haired man. Krycek looked at Obi-Wan, then back to Skinner.

"It seems your boyfriend is less of a pansy than he looks," he remarked. Obi-Wan had no idea what a pansy was, but guessed that he wasn't being complimented.

"Would you care to take a seat, Mr. Krycek." Obi-Wan gestured to a chair.

"No. I'm not stopping. I'm just here to give him," he nodded at Skinner, "a painful little reminder about who pulls his strings." He reached into his pocket and took out a small box. Obi-Wan held out his hand, and the box sprang out of Krycek's grasp, and into his own. Obi-Wan drew his light sabre, threw the box into the air, then sliced it through. It gave a sizzling moan, then the lights winked out.

"What the fuck...?" Krycek looked at Skinner who shrugged.

"My **boyfriend** is a man of many talents," the big man grinned.

"You're dead, Skinner. Do you think that's the only control box?" Krycek hissed.

"No, but I suspect it's the only one you carry around with you." Skinner drew a gun, put a big hand on Krycek's shoulder and pressed him down into a chair. Then he retrieved a pair of handcuffs from his pocket, and fastened Krycek's good hand to the other man's own ankle, effectively hobbling him. "What the hell are you playing at?" Krycek demanded. "You are **so** dead, Skinner."

"I know. Liberating, isn't it?" Skinner grinned.

"We want information from you." Obi-Wan walked over to Krycek, and looked deep into those green eyes. They widened for a moment, as if in recognition of Obi-Wan's power, and then narrowed.

"You can go to hell." Krycek spat. Obi-Wan ignored him.

"You've already seen what this can do." He raised the light-sabre. "I'm going to give you another demonstration." He brought the sabre down on Krycek's prosthetic, severing it from his body. Krycek's head snapped up, his eyes wide in panic as he smelled the burning plastic. "The good thing about this weapon is..." Obi-Wan smiled, "that it cauterises as it cuts. So...when I cut off your **other** arm, it's most unlikely that you'll bleed to death. This means that you'll still be alive to give us the information we require. Of course, if you refuse, I'm happy to move on to your legs."

Krycek's green eyes spat an angry fire. "If you want me to tell you how to cure **him**," he nodded at Skinner, "forget it. There isn't a cure, and I don't have the key to the main control box."

"I understand that. I suspect that only your master has that. Walter accepts that a cure is unlikely - that isn't the purpose of our questioning," Obi-Wan told him. "We want to know the location of the boy, Gibson Praise."

"Gibson?" Krycek looked startled. "What the hell do you want with him?"

"That's not important," Skinner said. He crossed his arms over his chest, and leaned against the wall. "I'd advise you to tell him, though, Krycek. He's very...determined when he wants to be." He flashed a private grin at Obi-Wan who returned it.

Krycek thought about it for a moment, then gave in, and spat out the information they required.

"This isn't the end of it though, Skinner," he growled. "This is just one battle in a big war. I haven't finished with you yet."

"Understood." Skinner nodded. Obi-Wan handed him the rope, and gag, and then picked up his cloak and went to the door. "Where are you going?" Skinner asked, as he began tying Krycek.

"I think that we are going to need help," Obi-Wan replied, opening the door. He thought about it for a moment, then turned. "Perhaps you could give me an address?" He asked.

Obi-Wan enjoyed his journey to Alexandria. Skinner's vehicle was slow, primitive, and basic, but he survived the little expedition without coming to any harm. He abandoned the jeep outside Mulder's apartment block, located Mulder's door without any difficulty, and knocked on it.

"Who is it?" A voice called.

"Ben." Obi-Wan replied, sensing that he was being watched through the key-hole device in the centre of the door.

"Skinner's weird friend?" Mulder opened the door and allowed him in, standing back cautiously so that Obi-Wan couldn't get hold of his neck again.

"I'll come straight to the point." Obi-Wan said, observing Mulder's defensive body language. "We need your help."

"We?" Mulder frowned.

"Walter is planning on rescuing the boy, Gibson, and we require your assistance." Obi-Wan said, his eyes never leaving Mulder's.

"Yeah, right. My trap-o-meter is just about wailing its head off right now." Mulder told him sourly. "For a start - I don't even know you, Ben. Secondly, I don't trust Skinner, and thirdly, this is so damn obvious. You could give me **some** credit for having even basic intelligence."

"I would - except for the fact that you don't seem to have the first clue about the game that's being played here," Obi-Wan snapped.

"Don't I? Enlighten me, then." Mulder gestured extravagantly. Obi-Wan moved so fast, that Mulder blinked, and the Jedi was suddenly in front of him, his eyes burning searing holes in Mulder's soul.

"This is your moment, Mulder - the one you were born for. All your life you've been pursuing your destiny and the irony is, that now it's upon you, you don't even recognise it." Mulder's eyes widened, but Obi-Wan held him still by the force of his will alone. "Skinner is giving up his life for you. That's a sacrifice he's prepared to make. I intend to make sure it's not one he makes in vain. I'm asking you to make a similar sacrifice."

"What?" Mulder croaked, his eyes still transfixed by Obi-Wan's sharp, all-seeing gaze.

"You're on a quest - you must give it up. Walter has told me that you're searching for your sister. I can understand the need to find one who is loved, and lost, all too well." Obi-Wan sighed. "However, it is only a small part of a larger picture. Finding your sister isn't your destiny. Taking Gibson Praise as your apprentice, is."

"What?" This time the word was full of shocked lack of comprehension.

"The boy is the key to the light and the dark sides of the force that battle for control of this world. Whoever trains him, and brings him to the fullness of his power, will win that battle. Gibson's talents far outshine yours, or those of anyone else on this world. Your task, Mulder, your only one task, your destiny, is to take care of that child, to make him your apprentice. He is already badly damaged - if he stays in the power of the dark side for much longer he will be irrevocably turned. Then it will be too late. For you, for your sister, for this whole world." Obi-Wan released the mental hold he had on Mulder, and the man took several deep breaths.

"Who the hell are you?" Mulder demanded, as soon as he could speak coherently again.

"I'm what you've been looking for, Mulder," Obi-Wan informed him. "I'm a..." he paused, remembering something Skinner had said to him, "little green man," he finished with a smile.

Mulder stared at him, and Obi-Wan sensed the battle he was fighting inside.

"I know - it's not easy to give up something you've devoted your whole life to," he said gently, "but your sacrifice is no more than is being asked of your master. In fact it's considerably less."

"I don't understand - what danger is Skinner in?" Mulder asked, and Obi-Wan softened, sensing the other man's genuine concern. He briefly explained about the nanocytes, and Mulder rocked back on his heels, a wordless "oh" forming on his lips.

"The stupid bastard." Mulder buried his face in his hands. "I should have known they'd try to get to me through Skinner again. They've tried it before - several times. Shit. Why didn't he tell me?" He demanded.

"He thought he was protecting you." Obi-Wan shrugged. "He also thought you'd go after Krycek if you knew."

"He's damn right I will. I'll..." Mulder strode towards the door, but Obi-Wan's Jedi reflexes got him there first.

"Do nothing," he said, closing the door firmly, and standing in front of it, as if on guard. "I've already told you your task, Mulder. You have to give all this up - your life here, your work, your quest, and make sure that you keep Gibson safe for the time yet to come."

"I..." Mulder searched Obi-Wan's face as if looking for answers.

"Trust - it isn't easy," Obi-Wan said softly. "We all have our particular faults, Mulder, and this is yours. With me, it was patience. Master Yoda was always warning me about it. I learned, but it was hard, very hard." He shook his head. "With Qui-Gon it was obstinacy, with Walter it's his secrecy - his need to bear things alone, and with you it's trust."

"Why **should** I trust you?" Mulder asked. "You come here spouting all this new age crap. Why should I believe you?"

"Don't trust me - trust your instincts," Obi-Wan told him. "Learn to listen to them, Mulder." He placed a hand over the other man's heart, and amplified the force beating there, as he had with Skinner. Mulder looked at him, his eyes incredulous. "I know it's hard to sever the ties with the master," Obi-Wan said gently. "But it's time, Mulder. It's more than time. You are of age - destiny demands that you move on, and take an apprentice of your own."

Obi-Wan could sense the battle in Mulder's heart, and hoped the other man was equal to it. He was sure he **was** - Skinner wouldn't be prepared to risk and suffer so much for his apprentice if he were not worthy.

"All right." Mulder came to his decision. "I don't know who the hell you are, Ben, but you've convinced me."

"Good." Obi-Wan gave a little bow. "Then come with me. We have much to accomplish, and little time."

With some judicious use of Obi-Wan's little "mind-trick" as Skinner called it, it was easy enough for the three men to gain access to the place where Gibson was being kept. Once inside, Mulder led the way down the corridor with a jaunty confidence.

"Follow me," he whispered, beckoning. "I've broken in here before."

Obi-Wan glanced at Walter, who winced.

"It's a hobby of his," he sighed.

Obi-Wan grimaced. "My own padawan is similarly resourceful," he commiserated. "Trying, isn't it?"

"That's the polite term for it," Skinner grinned.

"Gibson is being held in the west wing." Obi-Wan informed Mulder, catching up with him.

"How do you know that?" Mulder demanded.

"He just told me," Obi-Wan replied.

"What?" Mulder glanced at Skinner, who shrugged.

"That seems to be your standard response." Obi-Wan observed.

"What?" Mulder grinned.

They had to pass through 2 time-delayed doors made of some kind of perspex material to reach the west wing.

"Last time I was here, Frohike and Langly hacked into the computer system and over-rode the mechanism," Mulder informed Obi-Wan. "Any smart ideas up your sleeve?" He asked hopefully.

"Where is the computer system? I might be able to do something similar," Obi-Wan said. Mulder led the way to a secure room, and Obi-Wan easily talked them past the guards.

"I wish I could do that," Mulder murmured wistfully.

"You could, if you tried." Obi-Wan shrugged.

Mulder's eyes lit up. "Will you show me?"

"Yes. Later." Obi-Wan sat down at the console, and accessed the computer. It was so technologically primitive as to be almost like using an abacus. He played for a few seconds, and soon located the door mechanisms, jamming the frequency on "open." They set off again, and within minutes found the area where Gibson was being held. Obi-Wan talked them past the guards again, and they soon had the boy. Gibson looked at Mulder warily.

"He says I'm to be your apprentice," he stated.

"Yeah, you drew the short straw," Mulder replied.

"Is that okay with you, Gibson?" Skinner asked. The boy thought about it for a moment, then nodded.

"I don't like these people. They've hurt me. **He** is scared though. He doesn't know if he'll live up to your expectations." He pointed at Mulder.

"Thanks, kid." Mulder sighed, ushering the boy out of the door. Gibson walked with a limp, and physically his body was a wreck. It angered Obi-Wan to see the damage these people had wrought upon the child with their endless experiments.

<No more,> he told Gibson. The boy stared at him blankly, and for a while Obi-Wan wondered if he was even beyond caring. Then he gave a shy smile.

<No more,> he replied.

Gibson slowed them down, and somebody must have seen them on the security cameras, because suddenly an alarm sounded.

"Run!" Skinner commanded, pushing Obi-Wan and Mulder ahead of him. He picked Gibson up, and tucked him bodily under one arm. Obi-Wan went ahead, drawing his light-sabre. Security guards appeared in front of him, and he raised the sabre, and deflected their bullets, while Mulder looked on in amazement. The FBI agent glanced behind them, and let out a hoarse shout as he saw the guards appear behind Skinner. He began to run back, and was halfway there when the doors closed, trapping Obi-Wan down one end of the corridor, and the rest of them at the other end. Obi-Wan dispatched the guards on his side of the perspex door, then ran back towards the others. They had slowed to a halt, and Skinner placed his body between the guards and Gibson and Mulder, as the security team approached, their weapons raised. Obi-Wan had a moment of déjà vu as he stood, helpless, separated from his bonded mate, watching as his lover died.

He slammed his light-sabre into the perspex door, but it was clearly made from a substance alien in origin - certainly far beyond the level of technology he had so far witnessed on this world. The sabre made a dent, and he adjusted the setting, and pushed it through again. He could slice a hole for himself, given time, but he didn't have any time. A thought occurred to

Obi-Wan, and he thrust the sabre at the door one last time, making a crack large enough to pass it through.

"Walter - take it," he hissed, handing the big man the sabre through the hole in the door. Skinner grabbed it, then hesitated.

"Ben - I don't think I can..." he began.

"Don't think. Feel." Obi-Wan told him, with an encouraging smile. "Use your instincts. Feel the force flowing through you...channel it...remember what I taught you."

Skinner nodded grimly, and turned to face the approaching guards.

"Stand back," he warned Mulder, and the agent bit on his lip, and pulled Gibson into the corner, protecting his body with his own. Skinner carried on walking, waving the light-sabre in the air, and the guards hesitated - then one of them raised his weapon and fired. Obi-Wan felt time stand still, and he hardly dared breathe. He felt Skinner muster his will, and then saw the light-sabre move as if it flowed from his lover's arm, like part of his own body. The bullet was easily deflected, and Skinner kept on walking. More bursts of gunfire followed, but Skinner's concentration didn't waver as he engaged the enemy in battle. He thrust the sabre into the chest of one, and the man screamed. The others didn't hang around, but turned and fled. Skinner turned back, the expression on his face one of calm intent. He strode back down the corridor, his long legs covering the ground, and Obi-Wan found that he could breathe again. He had a sudden image of Qui-Gon, pacing with his own long strides, and then it faded, to be replaced by this new image, of a new love.

It took Skinner a few minutes to hack them a hole through the door, and then they began to run once more. The guards were in disarray, and it was Mulder who led them down the side corridor, and out of a fire exit, into the street. They ran back to the car, and Skinner drove them away as fast as possible. They stopped at Skinner's apartment to collect the passports and paperwork Skinner had arranged for Mulder and Gibson earlier, and to bundle Krycek into the car, then they set off again for the safe house Skinner had organised.

"What about him?" Mulder asked when they got there, pointing at the bound, gagged Krycek. "Will you kill him?" He looked at Obi-Wan.

"A Jedi doesn't take a life unless there is no other option - and he never kills in anger. That leads to the dark side," Obi-Wan intoned.

"Does he always talk like this?" Mulder asked Skinner.

The big man grinned. "Yeah. You get used to it, and after a while you actually start to enjoy it. It's endearing. It's what makes Ben, Ben." He put his hands on the Jedi's shoulders, and smiled a wide, beaming smile. Obi-Wan basked in the moment, enjoying both that, and Mulder's look of surprise. "As for Krycek," Skinner continued, "well, I believe he's a known felon. I've already made arrangements to hand him over to the DOD to face trial."

Obi-Wan managed to teach Mulder a few simple skills - enough to ensure that the agent had at least a fair chance of keeping ahead of the game during the difficult years ahead.

"Good luck, Mulder. Take good care of your padawan." Obi-Wan said, as Mulder and Gibson prepared to leave.

"My...? Oh, right. I will." Mulder nodded.

"Teach him well," Obi-Wan instructed.

"Ben - what about my partner, Scully. Would it be safe for me to involve her in all this?" Mulder asked.

Obi-Wan shrugged. "Nothing is **safe**, Mulder, but you must use all the people on the light side that you can find. It isn't just **your** battle. This battle is one you fight on behalf of all your people. If you can find any to aid you, then you must learn to accept their help - and to trust them." Obi-Wan added meaningfully. Mulder took a deep breath, and nodded, understanding the message. He turned to Skinner, and held out his hand, then pulled the big man into a bear hug.

"I guess this is goodbye. Ben told me - you know..." He bit on his lip. Skinner gave Obi-Wan a severe frown, and the Jedi sighed, expecting they would have a long discussion about that later. "I suppose I've screwed up your life," Mulder said softly.

"Nah - you made it more exciting." Skinner shrugged. "I'm a big boy, Mulder. I made my own decisions."

"What happens to you now?" Mulder looked from Obi-Wan to Skinner, and back again.

"Now, I suppose I wait for them to take their revenge," Skinner replied, his tone low, and gentle, belying the enormity of what he was saying.

"I feel I should stay. You shouldn't face this alone..." Mulder began. Obi-Wan stepped up and stood beside his lover.

"He won't be alone, Mulder," he assured the other man. Mulder looked from one to the other, then nodded, accepting that truth.

"Just make it all worthwhile, Mulder," Skinner said, squeezing Mulder's hand again, his dark eyes intense.

"I will, and...thanks. For all of it." Mulder swallowed hard, then nodded at them both, before putting an arm around Gibson's shoulder, and ushering him out of the door.

"You told Mulder?" Skinner glanced at Obi-Wan once they were alone.

"Um, yes." Obi-Wan sighed. "It was the only way I could think of making him trust me."

"I see." Skinner advanced on him, and Obi-Wan looked at him anxiously.

"Now look, Walter, I..." He began, backing away but Skinner caught him up in a firm embrace, and kissed him soundly. The big man's fingers tangled in Obi-Wan's clothing, removing it with passionate haste.

"If I don't have long, I **really** want to enjoy myself." Skinner grinned. Obi-Wan laughed, and allowed the big man to wrestle him to the ground. Skinner held Obi-Wan's arms above his head, and dipped his head for a long, claiming kiss.

Sometime later, as they both lay nose to nose, butt naked, their limbs entangled together, Obi-Wan dropped his bombshell.

"You know, I've been thinking about your predicament, Walter, and I have a suggestion."

"Hmm?" Skinner opened his eyes, and Obi-Wan gently stroked the side of his face.

"I think I know a way for you to live," Obi-Wan whispered.

Skinner sat up. "Now he tells me." He looked at Obi-Wan in disbelief.

"I had my mouth full before." Obi-Wan reminded him with a sly look.

Skinner growled, and pulled the other man close. "Tell me," he demanded.

"Your devotion to your padawan impressed me," Obi-Wan mused. "I...I realise I haven't yet fulfilled my duty to my own padawan. He doesn't have the skills yet, to stand by himself, however confident he is." Obi-Wan shook his head ruefully. Anakin was over-confident in his view. "Walter - I have to go back," Obi-Wan turned and looked into Skinner's eyes, "and I want you to come with me."

"Go back?" Skinner repeated incredulously. "I didn't realise that you could."

"I'm not sure that I can either." Obi-Wan shrugged. "But I can try. If it's possible - would you come with me?"

Skinner sat up, and started to pull his clothing back on. "What place is there for me in your world, Ben?" He asked. "Could you train me to be a Jedi?"

"No. You're too old for that, Walter." Obi-Wan shook his head.

"Then what use am I? What use would I be in your world?" Skinner asked in despair. "Listen, Ben, here I know what I am, and what I can do - I have a use. In your galaxy, I'm nothing."

"Not to me. To me you're everything." Obi-Wan pulled Skinner around to face him. "You're not the sum of your power and authority in this world, Walter, you're so much more than that. You're so many things that you haven't discovered yet. If you stay here, the dark side

will surely take its revenge on you. If you come with me, you have a chance to live. Choose life, Walter," he urged. "Choose me."

Skinner looked at him, his big hands absently rubbing Obi-Wan's bare shoulders. "This is all so new to me. You've brought so many changes into my life. I can't keep up," he murmured. "I need time. I need air." He turned on his heel, and walked out the door.

Obi-Wan washed and dressed, feeling a weary tide of sadness inside him. To find Walter, and then to lose him, was almost as painful as losing Qui-Gon. True, he had known that it might come to this, from the beginning of his friendship with the big man, but even so, that didn't make it any easier. Seeing Walter with Mulder had intensified his need to go home, to be with Anakin again, and to fulfil his vow to Qui-Gon that he would train the boy. He knew in his heart that his task wasn't over yet. Obi-Wan retrieved his cloak, and put it on, then fastened his light sabre to his belt. He wandered outside, and found Walter staring at the night sky.

"Do you know which star is yours?" Walter asked.

"You can't see it from here. It's too far away," Obi-Wan told him. "Walter, I'll stay here with you until..." he trailed off.

"But you want to get back - to your apprentice."

"I made you a promise. You won't die alone." Obi-Wan threaded his arm around his lover's waist.

"Ben, I'm sorry. Clinging to what's familiar is just what I do," Walter sighed. "Knowing you has been so good..." He paused, bit on his lip. "But I guess I'm more afraid of the unknown than I am of death. Go." He pressed his lips to Ben's forehead. "With my blessing."

"No." Obi-Wan shook his head. "I'll stay until..."

"I don't want you to watch me die." Skinner interrupted him. "I've been there before - it isn't a pretty sight, believe me."

"That doesn't..." Obi-Wan began to protest.

"I mean it. Just go." Skinner kissed Obi-Wan on the lips. "I'm not very good at long goodbyes, or all this...you know...talk. Sharon used to despair of me."

"Qui-Gon said I talked enough for both of us when I got going." Obi-Wan grinned. "Come with me to the Gateway, Walter. Do that much at least."

"All right." Skinner nodded.

They spent their last night together, making love with a passionate frenzy that gave way to a tender languor, a haze of kisses and caresses - neither one of them wanting the love-making to end. At dawn they returned to the street in Washington where Obi-Wan had crashed into

Skinner's car. Obi-Wan could see the faint, shimmering disruption in the force, where the Gateway flickered, and felt a pang of regret - if it hadn't been here, he could have stayed, without a guilty conscience.

"Please. Reconsider." He turned, his eyes beseeching. "There are so many places in my galaxy, so many worlds, so much to explore. You're a clever man, Walter, and you have that warrior's soul that first made me love you. There would be a place for a man such as you anywhere you went."

Skinner hesitated, his eyes plagued by doubt. "You're asking me to leave everything I know behind." He shook his head.

"And embrace something new." Obi-Wan held out his hand, stepping close to the Gateway. "Choose life, Walter. Please." There was a moment of agonised fear in Skinner's eyes, and then it faded, to be replaced by a grim resolution. He reached out, and took Obi-Wan's hand, and Obi-Wan smiled so hard he thought he'd split his face in two. He took one step, then two, and felt Walter's lean, solid thigh at his side, his lover's tall body matching his own, step for step, and Obi-Wan felt at peace for the first time since Qui-Gonn had died. He cleared his mind, focused his thoughts on the dusty plains of Irudan, and then, with Walter by his side, they stepped together over the threshold.

Azharia stood in the doorway to her hut, waiting. It would be today, she sensed that much, although she wasn't sure when. She stood there for a long time, the dusty wind billowing through her hair, and a sudden flurry obscured her vision for a moment. When it cleared, she saw Obi-Wan's familiar brown cloak, and she stepped forward, then hesitated. Beside him, stood the one her dead people had whispered about. She looked at them, as they walked across the plain towards her, their footsteps perfectly synchronised as if they belonged at each other's side.

"Welcome, Obi-Wan." Azharia pulled him into a hug, and then released him, and looked at the big, solemn man at his side. "It would seem that I was right - Qui-Gon is not the only man with a good heart in this universe."

"Are you always right?" Obi-Wan teased.

"Generally speaking, yes." Azharia laughed.

"Azharia, this is Walter." Obi-Wan said, and the big man held out his hand to her. She looked at it for a moment, then guessed the greeting, and took it between her hands, warming the large paw with her fingers, her mind floating hazily.

"I'm pleased to meet you, ma'am." Walter said, in a deep, sensuous voice.

Azharia smiled at him. "Yes, he'll do very well, Obi-Wan," she murmured. "Very well indeed."

Azharia ushered them both into her hut, and poured them a drink. She placed her hands on Walter's shoulders, and he looked up at her. "It's new - but you'll grow accustomed to it," she told him, sending him as much reassurance as she could. He gave an uncertain smile, and Obi-Wan reached for his lover, and kissed him. "There's no taboo here, Walter," Obi-Wan said. "We can be openly affectionate."

"I'm not sure it's in my nature." Walter admitted wryly.

"We'll see." Obi-Wan grinned. "Azharia, did you know where I was? Where the Gateway led me to?"

The blonde woman nodded. "I felt your presence, Obi-Wan - a look way in the future, and many galaxies away. I'm glad you found a way back."

"I worried about Anakin," Obi-Wan admitted. Azharia nodded, and her eyes lost their focus for a second. "What do you see?" Obi-Wan asked.

"I see you, and Walter, living a long, and happy life together. I see many troubles - but not between the two of you. He'll help you through a difficult destiny, Obi-Wan, and he'll die in your arms of old age." Walter looked stunned by this revelation. "It's all right." Azharia soothed him. "You've already performed the most dangerous part of your destiny, Walter, and performed it well. Now you can enjoy the rewards."

"And Ben? I mean...Obi-Wan?" Walter asked. "What about him?"

"He won't live long after you. A few years," was all Azharia would say. "Enough of the future - you have the present now." She looked at Obi-Wan. "You're lucky - you found what you went looking for."

"I went looking for Qui-Gon," Obi-Wan replied, puzzled. He knelt down beside the fire, and rested his head against Walter's knees.

"No," Azharia smiled at both of them, enjoying the look that passed between them, seeing their lives stretch ahead of them, full of love. "You went searching for something you'd lost - and now you've found it," she said softly.

THE END

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