

Volition: Crossing Paths

by

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“I’m leaving the Jedi temple,” Tagge shouted as he stormed into the sleeping chambers he shared with Airrek.

As younglings, neither boy had many possessions to speak of though they managed to keep their quarters unkempt. Airrek sat cross-legged on his pallet, his attention focused on several mechanical bits laid out before him. A deep crease formed in the center of his young forehead as he tried to see the lightsaber hilt’s components as one whole piece. His eyes sparkled as he gazed at the blue crystal held lightly between his thumb and forefinger. Tagge’s round face was flushed red like a balloon. He jumped reflexively as Tagge stormed in and the crystal fell from his small fingers to lay in a jumble with the other pieces.

Tagge’s red-rimmed eyes swam in tears and he sobbed silently as he flung himself onto his sleeping pallet. He buried his face in the crook of his elbow as he clenched his teeth and fought back another sob. He could feel the fabric of his sleeve growing damp as he failed to hold back his tears. He clenched his jaw so tightly he heard his teeth scrape together and made sure he didn’t snuffle loudly through his nose.

Airrek swung his legs over the side of his sleeping pallet and pushed himself to land lightly on the floor. At eight years, old Airrek was small enough that he dropped down from his sleeping pallet. They would share this room into their adulthood, giving them plenty of time to grow into their surroundings. Each time Airrek leapt down from his bed he was silently grateful that he wasn’t in the soggy, dirty alleys of lower Coruscant. He moved silently on his small bare feet as he held his hands out before him and looked over at Tagge.

“There is no emotion, there is peace,” Airrek said in a loud whisper as a glossy eyed look swept over his face. Tagge knew the Jedi Code when he heard it. He also knew the sound of Airrek’s humor trying to sneak up on him. “There is no ignorance, there is knowledge. There is no passion, there is serenity.”

With each word, Airrek’s voice fell into a monotone pattern and he seemed to chant the words as though they had no meaning.

“There is no padawan, there is a bantha brain,” Tagge said quickly as he pulled his pillow out from under his head and flung it into Airrek’s slack face. Airrek’s hand lifted and caught the pillow in mid-flight. His eyes widened and a smile exploded across his face.

“Did. You. See. That?” he said, staring at the pillow. “With this one, strong the force is,” he said in a poor imitation of Master Yoda’s own backward speech.

“Ooooooh,” Tagge groaned. He sat up and swung his legs over the side, letting his feet dangle inches from the floor. “That’s exactly what’s wrong here!”

“This?” Airrek asked as he cast a dubious expression toward the pillow in his hand.

“No, nerf herder, not that.”

“Oh.”

Airrek could hear the pain in Tagge’s words. He just didn’t know how to react. All he could do was look down at the pillow in his hand. Tagge’s glance moved from the pillow he had thrown at Airrek down to his own feet. His boots still looked new. He hadn’t even been a youngling long enough to break in his boots. Granted, he had only gotten these boots recently as he had outgrown his last pair. That wasn’t the point. They looked new. They looked like the boots of someone who didn’t know what they were doing. Tagge sucked in one quick breath as a hot tear dropped out of his eye and crashed onto his cheek.

“I don’t have the Force sensitivity of a potato.”

Airrek let the pillow fall to the floor. His expression went blank.

“What’s a potato,” he asked cautiously.

Tagge stared back at Airrek. How could he not know what a potato was? It wasn’t even the important detail as far as Tagge was concerned.

“A potato is... We used to grow them on Alderaan. It’s like a vegetable... Don’t focus on the wrong detail. It’s not important.”

“Are they Force vegetables,” Airrek asked with a smirk.

Tagge leapt off his bed and landed right in front of Airrek’s smiling face.

“Are you trying to make me angry,” Tagge asked him. “You wouldn’t like me when I’m angry.”

“Naw,” Airrek said, “just trying to get you off that bed.”

“You nerf...”

“Tagge Obas?” Another voice came in from outside the room and cut off Tagge’s retort. It was a low and quiet voice, full of compassion and conviction. Now it was Tagge who turned his slack faced expression on. He turned and looked up at Jedi Master Qui Gon Jinn. The Jedi Master who first brought Tagge to the temple.

“Yes Master Qui Gon,” Tagge answered immediately.

“Tagge, you seem upset. Tell me what’s wrong.”

“I can’t be a Jedi,” Tagge answered as he felt his eyes stinging with tears again.

“I see,” Qui Gon Jinn answered him. “And why is it that you can not be a Jedi?”

“My midichlorian count must be low,” he answered quietly. “The Force is not strong with me.”

Qui Gonn slowly sank to one knee and reached out to take Tagge’s small shoulders into his large hands. The Jedi master seemed to take his time kneeling down, which gave Tagge time to control his tears in front of the taller man. He ducked his face down to make eye contact with Tagge who was looking at his boots again. Master Qui Gon kept his long hair tied back behind his head allowing Tagge to look directly into his eyes. Once Tagge met his gaze, Qui Gonn smiled.

“Now I know that’s not true. If your midichlorian count were low, I wouldn’t have been able to feel how angry and hurt you are. And I did, Tagge. I felt you even though I was in the High Council Chambers. If you didn’t have any force ability, I would not have felt your feelings so sharply from so far away.”

“The High Council chambers,” he gasped. Tagge swallowed the lump in his throat. “Then Master Yoda…”

“Master Yoda knows that you are a special youngling. The same as I do.” He locked eyes with Tagge and nodded his head slightly. “It’s true Tagge. You are special. So that’s not the reason you cannot be a Jedi. Would you like me to tell you why you can not be a Jedi?”

Airrek had taken a few steps back when Master Qui Gonn arrived. Now he tried not to breathe too loudly as he listened to the words the Jedi Master was speaking. Airrek had seen Master Qui Gonn in the temple before. Sometimes, he saw him in one of the great meeting halls, a time or two in the archives and once he had walked past the great Jedi master in the hallway. He had also listened to all his exploits as told by Tagge, how seemed to believe himself the masters personal chronicler. Tagge seemed to memorize the stories as quickly as they came into the archives. Airrek had never been so close to Master Qui Gonn before. It was like the room was filled with quiet, calming power. Like sinking into a warm bath.

“It is because you, unlike our friend Airrek here, have not yet decided to take the path of the Jedi.” Tagge drew a breath to protest and then noted that Master Qui Gonn wasn’t finished speaking. “I know you think you have but search your feelings Tagge. You still cling to memories of your family on Alderaan. And that is normal. You were almost too old for entry when the council found you. You had already established an emotional bond with them. I still remember going to pick you up. You were completely unafraid. And incredibly curious. I sensed then that you could be a great Jedi.

“It is your attachment to your family that holds you back.”

Tagge’s eyes stung the moment he heard those words. He didn’t bother to contradict Master Qui Gonn.

“You feel guilty because you left them. If you cannot move beyond that guilt, you will not be the Jedi they hoped you would be. Yes, Tagge. They were proud of you. They wanted you to become a Jedi. And your mother, although she had never seen a Jedi with her own eyes, made Jedi robes for you.”

Tagge’s heart hesitated. Could he believe this? To his younglings way of understanding, Master Qui Gon's word was beyond contestation. It must be true. They hadn’t felt abandoned by their only son. His father harbored no resentment at losing his heir. Tagge’s mind seemed to grow warmer and the sensation traveled out through this body.

“She made...”

“Using your father as reference, she fashioned together what she understood to be the clothing of a Jedi knight. It was her hope that you would wear them one day.”

“The council would never allow it. Would they?”

“No,” Qui Gon Jinn answered, “They would not.”

Tagge released his breath and tried not to look disappointed.

“Which is why I did not inform them. I decided that I would give them to you when you had need of them. I think that time is now.” He reached into a small satchel hanging at his side. He pulled out a parcel of coarsely woven material and handed it to Tagge. “Your family knows that you are a Jedi, Tagge Obas. They expect you to fill these robes.”

Tagge forgot to breath as he reached out and took the bundle in both of his small hands. He held it close to him and imagined he could smell the plains of Alderaan again. Alderaan. Where his family lived. Where they would always live. Content in the knowledge that they were a part of the Jedi tradition. Regretting nothing. Alderaan would always be there, even if Tagge Obas was not.

31 BBY

The entire craft was jostled a bit as it left the landing platform. Tagge opened his eyes and looked around the cargo hold at his companions. It wasn’t any more a glamorous ship than it was a warship. They had needed a transport. The cargo freighter was there. Inconspicuous. And it wasn’t likely that any other Jedi would go looking for this particular transport anyway. It was an older freighter used primarily for mercy missions delivering food and medical supplies. Far smaller than the newer ships in the temple, this

freighter was literally collecting dust in the back corners of the docking level. The ship's cargo hold wasn't a cavern but offered plenty of room to Tagge and his friends as they settled in for the journey.

Nibor was crouched down working on one of the four astromech droids on board. His dark hair was trimmed short save for the padawan braid, which hung from behind his right ear. A bright red tattoo started above his left eye and continued down over his cheek. It had been his idea to link all four droids into the navcom. The droids themselves looked like a horror show attraction crafted for the amusement of some repugnant Hutt gangster. One R4 unit was missing its entire left leg and seemed to be propped up against the rear wall. Another R5 unit stood seemingly unaware that it was missing its front covering panel. Wires literally spilled out of its cylindrical body and pooled on the floor. Another unfortunate R2 unit was missing its entire dome assembly, like some ghastly, headless droid specter. These were all entirely cosmetic problems. The circuitry in the droids was functioning and that was what mattered. The droids constantly plotted out hyperspace coordinates for the navcom to randomly choose. Tagge and Nibor had decided that a minimum of twenty hyperspace jumps would be necessary to throw off anyone who might decide to follow them. The random course settings would allow them to leave no logical path by which they could be tracked. It wasn't the fastest way to the planet of Plomeria and it obviously wasn't the shortest, but it was the only way to ensure that they could make it there. He wasn't going to just let Nawe go.

Not far from Nibor was Dechas. Dechas was taller than Nibor and more inclined to athletic pursuits than the electronic studies of his friend. The tribe Dechas had belonged to had been a more aggressive one. Dechas' size seemed to speak well of their breeding habits. The two padawans were known as "The Brothers" though they were not truly related. They both came from the planet Solmura. Solmurans were known to be nomadic and preferred to travel in tribes. Solmurans were also known to be mildly telepathic. Family units did exist in their society but more importance was placed upon the tribe as a whole. Within these tribes, each member felt a telepathic bond grow with each other member of the tribe.

Nibor and Dechas were from separate tribes and were certainly not the first Solmurans in the Jedi order. They were, however, the first two Solmurans to enter the order at the same time. Rarely were two force sensitive Solmurans born so closely together. Without their tribal bond, they had sought out each other out instinctively. Dechas, being a bit older, had arrived first. His time had been unremarkable and he had been a quiet solitary youngling until Nibor arrived. They found one another quickly. Dechas was feeling cut off and alone without his tribe around him and his telepathic link with Nibor had allowed the younger Solmuran to enter the temple society with ease. After they found one another, Dechas became more confident and also developed quite a sense of humor. Nibor was clearly more focused after he had bonded with a new tribesman. As a unit, The Brothers are nothing short of awe inspiring. They feel the constant close presence of one another at all times thus allowing them to remain calm and reasoning at all times. When action is needed, they will not hesitate. They know where to be and what to do to

complement the others efforts. Add their Jedi training to their bond and even the high council is watching their progress closely.

Airrek was seated nearby holding his lightsaber hilt and checking the power level readouts again. Tagge watched as he blew some nonexistent speck out of the activator switch. He made a slight adjustment to the control for the power output to the blade. It was unusual to watch any of his fellow padawans set their lightsabers to anything beyond training power levels. To watch Airrek slowly set it to it's full, and deadly, power output sent a small shiver of uncertainty down Tagge's spine.

"You don't seriously think that you'll be using that do you," called Dechas. He had just fastened his blue vest on over the rest of his smugglers disguise. Only Tagge wore his Jedi robes, the robes his mother had made, on this mission. "I mean, I know we'd all be real upset if you hurt yourself."

"I'm going to need it just to make sure you don't get hurt, old friend," Airrek replied, returning a grin to counter Dechas' goofy smirk. "I know we'd all hate it if you were impaled on your own lightsaber."

"None of us will be needing to draw our lightsabers today," Tagge said quietly. "We're going to pick up a friend, not start a fight that will lead to a galaxy wide scandal for the Jedi Order. What kind of Jedi would we be without our lives in our own hands? Airrek carries his lightsaber, as do we all, because it is his life."

The cargo freighter had floated to the nearest exit and as they left the Jedi Temples docking bay, Pho Sun sent more power into the primary drives.

39BBY

Airrek was lying on the floor, staring up at the ceiling of the gymnasium. Tears of pain leaked from the corners of his eyes as he tried to put himself into a healing trance. The searing pain across his ribs wouldn't relent and he couldn't focus. Tagge's lightsaber had slid across the ribs on the right side of his chest. He let out a breath and winced as his ribs lanced fire through his body.

Tagge knelt beside him, his eyes wide with surprise and concern. He'd fenced with Tagge so many times over the years... nothing like this had ever happened. While he rarely bested Tagge, he did always manage to protect himself. Ever since the day that practice sabers had been given to them, he and Tagge had been sparring with one another. This was the first time in three years that Tagge's blade had actually penetrated his defenses. He watched as Tagge's eyes moved back and forth, staring in horror at the long burn.

Airrek had been born near the surface of the planet of Coruscant. Down there in the dark, dank sewers of the Republic, Airrek scratched out his life. When he had been discovered by the temple he was more than four years old. This child had survived amongst the vermin and castaway lifeforms that lived in those depths. It was a rare connection to the

force that had kept him alive. It was primal, raw. Airrek used the force instinctive as an protective measure. At that young age, Airrek already knew how to hide his presence. Hide himself even from the Jedi. Once he was detected, it took nearly three weeks to locate him. He had learned how to mask himself within the force.

As a youngling, he was one of the most energetic and intelligent. His laugh was well known up and down the halls of the temple. And he always excelled expectations when ever a new force ability was being learned. His only deficiency was in his aggression. Airrek was always to last to push an attack or to exploit a weakness. It was rumored that Airrek could become one of the great peacemakers of his time. His ready smile, easy laugh, patient gaze and intuitive force sensitivity made him easy to like. Airrek was a natural debater and he was rarely ever forced to concede.

“I knew it was a bad idea to turn up the power outputs,” said a voice outside the door.

Nawe stepped into Airrek’s field of vision. It wasn’t often that Airrek was forced to look up at Nawe. He tended to hang on the idea that he was fractionally taller than she was. The faint green markings on her face were difficult to see as he looked up at her. Her bright red hair fell from her shoulders as she looked down at the ugly burn. She knelt opposite from Tagge and set a hand on Airrek’s shoulder. She looked into Airrek’s eyes and offered him a gentle smile.

Airrek looked up at her as he heard her gentle voice. “Hello Airrek.”

“Hey Nawe,” Airrek whispered, “Is it just me or does something in here smell like roast gundark?”

Nawe laughed in spite of herself.

“Tagge Obas. I hope you’re proud of yourself. This is the exact reason that younglings aren’t supposed to practice with lightsabers at that power setting. What were you trying to prove? We all know Airrek’s no match for you.”

“I don’t know that,” Airrek piped in quickly.

“Nawe, you can haul me in front of the Masters Council yourself if you like. Right now, Airrek could use some help. Criticizing me isn’t going to get it done. Please, Nawe. Help.”

“I don’t know what to do, Tagge.”

“What about a medical droid,” Airrek asked from the floor.

“No!” cried Tagge and Nawe at once.

“They’ll kick me out of the order,” Tagge said.

“I’ll be in trouble for not telling anyone what you were doing,” said Nawe over him.

Airrek laughed up at them and winced. Any movement seemed to pull at the long burn. He couldn’t see it but was sure it would be dark red and blistered. It hurt badly enough that he didn’t need to look at it. Airrek rolled his eyes back and vowed to himself to avoid any more lightsabers swinging his way.

“I’m real sorry that my pain is such an source of trouble for you two,” he said as he closed his eyes and squirmed under a new wave of pain.

“Nawe...”

“Tagge, what do you want me to do? I only just became a padawan. My master hasn’t really gotten into the finer points of battle field medicine you know!”

“We both know your better than that Nawe. I need you. Airrek needs you.”

She looked into Tagge’s eyes and felt the pleading gaze he gave her cutting through her defenses. She let out a slow breath and looked back down at Airrek. He was pale and starting to sport a sheen of cold sweat. She laid her left hand down on his forehead and brushed back his hair gently before settling her palm against his skin. She set her right hand over his heart and took a deep breath.

Airrek felt it like a warm glow in the back of his mind. A feeling of reassurance and calm. He could feel Nawe’s presence make its way slowly through his body. He started to breath easier as he felt a gentle presence near his burned skin and ribs. Then Nawe stopped and looked down at Airrek. He opened his eyes and looked up into hers. They did not speak. They merely looked into one another’s eyes as their breathing and heartbeats slowed to match one another.

Then Nawe nodded to him with a gentle smile. He grinned up at her and shut his eyes. Nawe pushed the force gently from herself into Airrek. Together, they used the force to remind Airrek’s body of how it had been. The blisters sank and disappeared. The skin faded to pink and then into a puffy, wrinkled scar. Once healed, Airrek sank into a sleep that Nawe helped him find before removing herself from their link.

Tagge reached across Airrek’s body and put a hand on Nawe’s shoulder.

“Thank you. Thank you Nawe. You’re a good friend.”

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Tagge looked across the hold and gave a nod toward Airrek. There was a shiver of pseudomotion as the ship passed through the corona of Coruscant’s atmosphere and then jumped into hyperspace with a quick jerk. Airrek came back to the present. He looked

across the hold at Rheena. She was seated cross-legged on the floor with her eyes closed. Her breathing was slow and calm. Airrek knew that wasn't encouraging.

Rheena was from a family of miners. She had been found on a small, dirty moon. Her father and mother were lean with hunger, yet; their frames were defined by tight muscles earned after years of relentless manual labor. She had grown into a formidable woman. She wore her blond hair long but always kept it tied back or braided. She was tall enough that only Dechas and Nibor did not have to look up at her. Now she was dressed in the simple robes of a merchant. Nothing about her attire showed off her muscled form. Her time in training with Master Windu had forged her into formidable opponent. Master Windu had not taken Rheena on as his padawan, rather, he had taken it upon himself to augment her lightsaber training in personal tutoring sessions. Their training hadn't focused on attack but her defenses were starting to seem unbreakable. So unlike they had been not so long ago, before her first mission.

36BBY

Rheena's green blade flashed and hummed through the air. She launched quick swings, sudden jabs and spinning attacks with the grace and speed of a Mon Calamaarian opera. Yet, each time her green blade sizzled through the air toward its target, a brilliant blue blade met it and stopped each strike. Her hair, growing damp with sweat, was starting to stick to her. One drop of sweat ran down her forehead and hung from her right eyebrow. With a quick puff of air she blew it away as she stepped back and looked at her opponent.

Tagge was sweating as well, but not breathing as hard as she was. And he was smiling. Every time their blades sparked together, he met her eyes and smiled and grinned and once... he winked. In their last attack, she could tell that he had been trying new techniques. Like he wasn't trying nearly as hard as she was.

"Is this how you saved that Neimoidian Ambassador, Droid Killer? Did those battle droids move this slowly?"

Droid Killer was a nickname earned by Rheena on a rescue mission. A group of Neimoidians were trapped aboard their own control ship by malfunctioning battle droids. A master and two knights were assigned and Rheena accompanied them. The Jedi Order did not view this as a particularly dangerous outing as far as the rescue team was concerned. Master Windu had been augmenting Rheena's lightsaber training with his own defensive techniques. It was he who had suggested she go on the rescue as well. The random blaster fire from thousands of battle droids would more than help her develop her defensive skills. When the mission was complete all of the Neimoidians were safely removed from the control ship, all of the Jedi returned safely to the temple and Rheena had established a new distinction. She had single handedly destroyed more droids on this mission than any other Jedi had destroyed on any other single mission. A dubious distinction that certain of her companions were unwilling to forget.

"Oh give it a rest will you," she panted. "You're the only one who still calls me Droid Killer you know."

She leapt into the air and swung her saber down at his head. He smiled and brought his weapon up to protect himself. As she fell, she pushed with the force, both to slow her descent and push herself back slightly. Tagge hesitated as he sensed her new move and stepped back. Rheena's mid-air counter-clockwise spin air changed the direction of her attack. Now her blade swung up from below his defense and up toward Tagge's chest. Tagge pivoted back on his right foot, seeming to glide into an clockwise arcing swing of his blade aimed at Rheena's back. Rheena dropped to the floor and rolled herself into a ball. She rolled forward and as her feet touched the gymnasium floor she straightened her legs, launching herself forward. She twirled and spun in the air to land on her feet facing Tagge from across the room.

“Having trouble, Droid killer?”

Rheena and Tagge both turned at the sound of Nawe's voice. She stood in the doorway, a huge grin lighting her face. Her bright red hair pooled down to her shoulders and as she walked into the room her deep brown robe swirled and spun around her ankles. The heavy skirts she wore flowed around her ankles as her boot steps echoed through the room. Nawe always managed to look completely at home in her Jedi robes

“You'll never overcome him like that you know. Your no match for him,” Nawe said to Rheena.

“Well then... be a good padawan and help me out,” replied Rheena.

Nawe's grin got bigger as Rheena reminded her that she alone of the three of them was apprenticed to a master. She let her robe slide off her shoulders and she called the hilt of her lightsaber into her outstretched hand. The green blade burst into life the moment the hilt met her palm. She leapt into the fencing ring toward Tagge, who wore an identical grin on his own face. He pushed with the force as he leapt toward her. Their blades clashed together as they passed one another before landing on opposite sides of the ring. He always loved dueling with Nawe.

Tagge preferred a two handed style as opposed to Nawe's single-handed form. Tagge used hard slashing swings of the blade and large, swooping attacks. These were almost always countered by Nawe's quick and efficient saber repartee. Her blade moved ceaselessly as she wove deadly patterns in the air with the humming lightsaber in her hand. Tagge had figured out that the only way to truly combat Nawe was to stop her lightsaber from spinning. A trick he had accomplished before. Once. But Rheena hadn't been there that time.

Tagge swung from his left shoulder and was met midway by a similar attack from Nawe. Nawe did not let her blade stop though. Rather, she let it bounce off of Tagge's blade and swept into a series of attacks. Tagge quickly found that rather than stopping Nawe's attack, he was now retreating from it. A smirk started to grow on Tagge's lips when a flicker in the force warned him to block from the rear.

Rheena's green blade clashed against Tagge's with an electric growl. Just that quickly, she and Nawe interwove their attacks. Tagge spun and skipped, feinted, blocked and occasionally turned to run. The girls turned to wink at each other as they rushed in opposite directions and then attacked Tagge from both sides simultaneously. Rheena was sure that Tagge didn't know that she and Nawe had planned for this to happen. She wanted to see if what Nawe told her was true.

Tagge's eyes flicked between his two friends and then a broad grin split his face. He stepped back with one foot, raised his lightsaber before him in both hands and slowly shut his eyes. Rheena and Nawe struck as one. Rheena's eyes grew wider as she watched Tagge block each strike they launched at him. He never opened his eyes. Nawe had told her that Tagge was learning to turn himself completely to the will of the force but it was one thing to be told about his efforts. It was quite another to watch as Tagge blindly spun and twirled as his lightsaber slashed through the air to block their attacks again and again.

31BBY

Another flicker of pseudo motion signaled that new hyperspace coordinates were being set and followed. The idea for linking the astromechs together to create random coordinates couldn't have come from any other padawan than Nibor. His ability to work with droids was a matter of amused wonder for many of the temple's Jedi masters. It was not unusual to see a padawan begin to form bonds with living things through the force. Nibor's connection to droids was a bit more novel.

Nibor remembered that long ago day in the Jedi temple's hangar bay. Master Nitro met with the younglings here to instruct them in piloting skills. Nibor tried to take the classes seriously but piloting didn't really interest him. He was so much more fascinated by the droids that locked into their sockets aboard the Jedi fighters. He glanced over the heads of the other younglings and found the familiar face of Tagge Obas. Tagge's eyes were glazed over and he was clearly not thinking about anything in the hangar bay.

34BBY

Master Nitro stood before them. He wasn't as tall as someone like Qui Gon Jinn, but his was an imposing presence all the same. His bald head, dark complexion and short trimmed goatee seemed to radiate the power within him. He looked out over the little faces peering up at him. They weren't so much looking up at him as they were looking at the starfighter behind him.

"You younglings listen well. The time is coming when you will become padawans. Was a master to take you on as their padawan, you would be going out into the galaxy with them. To battle injustice. To end tyranny. To do anything... so long as it involves a lightsaber! I know that it is difficult to set lightsaber dreams aside. They look pretty. They glow."

A few of the younglings giggled at Master Nitro's joke.

“Not all of your missions will require that you use this,” Master Nitaro held his lightsaber hilt up in his left hand. “Many of them will require that you know how to use this,” now he held up a hydrosponder in his right hand. “It is vital to your training as a Jedi that you learn these essential ship maintenance and piloting skills. Without transport, the Jedi are not of much use to the rest of the galaxy. The proper care of your ship and the use of the force will work together to make you a better Jedi.

“You can use the force to create a symbiotic relationship with your droid,” Master Nitaro arched an eyebrow as Airrek stifled a laugh too late. “You find something amusing about a symbiotic relationship with your astromech droid, young Airrek? I would imagine that with your time down in the depths of Coruscant, you would better appreciate the role these droids play in our everyday life. This relationship already exists; you need only to allow the force to illuminate it for you. When you and an astromech droid are in your ship, your continued existences are inextricably bound together. One cannot continue to exist without the other.

“How many of you can make hyperspace jump calculations while piloting your ship?”

He paused and scanned his gaze across the little faces before him.

“Yet this is a very simple task for an R5, R2 or R4 unit. And for other droids as well. In a pinch, you might need a protocol droid to interface with your navcom. Do not make the mistake of assuming that you can allow your droid to pilot itself, Tagge Obas.”

Tagge’s gaze refocused on Master Nitaro as his cheeks turned pink. Airrek snorted quietly and Tagge aimed a kick at his ankle.

“You would do well to pay attention, young Jedi. You see my students, Tagge may speak very fluently with his lightsaber in hand, but were I to drop him in deep space in a broken ship with a twittering astromech at his side, you would find that he would need to listen to young Nibor instead. You could wave a lightsaber at that problem as long as you like, it would never solve this dilemma.

“There is more to being a Jedi than action and fighting. You young Jedi should look to your fellow padawans Nibor and Pho Sun. Both of these padawans have shown minimal interest in lightsaber forms and combat. Instead, Nibor is on his way to pioneering a new way of interacting with our droid counter parts and Pho Sun’s piloting has already attracted the attention of Master Plo Koon. Do not doubt that one day these skills will be important to your work as Jedi.”

31BBY

Nibor looked up from the droid he was fidgeting with. He looked over his shoulder and met Dechas’ gaze. Nibor winked causing his tattoo to scrunch together. It was a simple red rectangle but it was enough to tell any Solmuran what tribe he belonged to. Dechas always felt like that tattoo added intensity to Nibor’s stare. Then again, the intensity

could have come from their first mission. Unlike this rescue, the council had chosen The Brothers for that mission. They hadn't needed to volunteer. It had seemed so exciting to them. The entire temple was excited to see how The Brothers would perform in the field.

32BBY

A simple rescue mission. Those had been the words Ki Adi Mundi had used. They would be assisting Master Condon. A Jedi knight had been looking for pirates when his ship's primary drive failed. The knight had managed to land on a nearby planet after he had signaled the temple. His distress call had been received two hours before. Now the Solmurans were stepping into a rescue vessel alongside a Jedi master. After they were all strapped in, the pilot turned back to look at his passengers.

"We'll try to make this a smooth ride for the heroes." Pho Sun said with a mischievous glint in his eye.

"Pho Sun," exclaimed Dechas.

"This is unexpected," replied Nibor.

"You think you're the only padawans that get to go on missions now?"

"That will do," said Master Condon. Master Condon was a well-known lightsaber fencing master. Being neither overly large nor noticeably smaller than normal, his nondescript frame easily hid the power it contained within. To tell the truth, Master Condon was nearly as excited about this mission as The Brothers. To be the first Jedi master to see them in action was a great honor. He secretly hoped that he could persuade the high council to allow him to take both of them on as his padawan learners. It was unusual for a master to have more than one padawan but no more unusual than The Brothers themselves.

"It is time for Pho Sun to demonstrate his skill as a pilot just as you padawans will be demonstrating your skills as rescuers. While it is important to keep your spirits light on a mission, do keep in mind that there is a Jedi knight stranded out there and waiting for our help."

Pho Sun turned back to the controls and the ship lifted off immediately. Two minutes later, they were out of the atmosphere and into hyperspace. Activity seemed to slow to a crawl in the temple. Nearly every youngling, padawan, knight and master was eager to hear how The Brothers would carry out their mission. None of them could have guessed what would happen.

Finding the Jedi was easy, his ship's locator signal was strong and Pho Sun set the rescue ship down. He couldn't land near the ship do to the poor landscape but did manage to find a flat piece of land with in 50 meters of the stranded Jedi. Nibor and Dechas checked their lightsabers once more before affixing them to their belts. Master Condon slipped

open the hatch and the three Jedi went out to retrieve their comrade. Instead, they found the pirates.

Somehow, the force had led the knight to land his damaged craft on the same moon the pirates he had been seeking were using as a base of operations. They had been watching the Jedi while he awaited his rescuers. They kept still. They knew the power the Jedi were reputed to control. It was not until the three newcomers arrived that they moved. Twenty of them stood up as one and opened fire with their blaster cannons. The Brothers ignited their lightsabers in unison as the Jedi they were meant to rescue fell under the barrage of blaster bolts. Master Condon was already deflecting the pirates fire as Nibor and Dechas stood back to back. Then they started to parry the bolts coming their way. Master Condon was parrying bolts easily but didn't have any skill in sending the bolts back at other targets. He had been instructing students in fencing forms for so long that he hadn't worked on any other defensive skills. When he could, he looked to The Brothers and learned from them.

They moved in unison, perfect symmetry. Their lightsabers moved elegantly through the air as they stepped and pivoted around one another. Nothing got through to them. Bolts were deflected and used to dispatch one pirate after another. It wasn't enough. The pirates were still coming. In spite of the number of fallen pirates, more and more were coming toward the Jedi. The Brothers were defending themselves well but there did not appear to be an end to their trials. The pirates would eventually reach them; hell-bent on establishing the reputation they would receive after they defeated the legendary Jedi knights.

Tagge was running down a corridor in the Jedi temple, his robes swirling behind him. The hallway he was in ended in a t-junction ahead and as he leaned to the right, Rheena came from the left hand hallway and ran beside him.

“Did you feel that,” she gasped.

Tagge spun his head to look at her. His long padawan braid swung out to hit him in the chin as he shot Rheena an insolent look. They kept running. Of course, he had felt it. No mere tremor, whatever they had both sensed through the force, it had been powerful. And left them both feeling cold. Neither of them wanted to think that it had anything to do with The Brothers but what else could it be?

Tagge slid to a stop in the room he still shared with Airrek. Rheena nearly collided with him as Airrek and Nawe looked up. From the inquisitive looks on their faces, neither of them knew what was happening either. Where Airrek looked concerned though, Nawe looked irritated.

“Why won't someone tell us what's happening,” she spat.

“Have you heard anything,” Airrek asked.

“Nothing,” Tagge answered as he caught his breath.

“Do you think it was them?”

“I don’t see how it could be anything else, Rheena,” Nawe answered. “What else are we all paying attention to? Just another misguided idea from the so-called High Council.”

“Nawe, what are you talking about,” asked Airrek.

“Don’t you see? Our friends are dead. Murdered. That’s what we all felt. Their lives ended out there just so the council could see what happened.”

“Nawe, I know your upset, but listen to what are you saying,” asked Tagge.

“Tagge, grow up. We’re just padawans to them. Not real Jedi. They were afraid of the power Nibor and Dechas shared together so the first chance they got, they sent them on a mission they knew was deadly. They knew it was dangerous and sent The Brothers out to be slaughtered before they could become a threat to the order.”

“Are we talking about the same high council here,” asked Rheena with a sideways glance toward Airrek.

“Nawe, we’re all worried...”

“Don’t condescend to me, Tagge!”

Before Tagge could respond to her, Master Hagid’zu stepped into the room. The barrel chested Jedi wasn’t large enough to dominate the doorway. He didn’t need to. He moved with a silent grace that belied his size. Master Hagid’zu’s physical strength was formidable as a force of it’s own. Always a peaceful man, Master Hagid’zu was known for his ability to neutralize without drawing his lightsaber. He was a gentle soul who knew when to use a heavy hand. As his padawan, Tagge drew a sense of pride from the friendship his master shared with his fellow gray master Qui Gon Jinn. Even under the cover of his beard, it was easy to see the frown on his face. Hagid’zu stood there looking at them and to Tagge’s eyes, his master looked very tired.

“Master Hagid’zu, can you tell us what’s happening,” asked Rheena.

“We felt a... a disturbance in the force,” Airrek said.

“A disturbance,” blurted out Nawe. “That was more than a disturbance.”

“Indeed,” started Master Hagid’zu, “It was more than that. The rescue mission that your friends were sent on has failed.” Every eye in the room fell to the floor. “Your friends

Nibor and Dechas are alive. What you felt was the death of a Jedi knight followed by the death of Master Condon.”

“Master...” began Airrek but he could not finish.

“Someone killed a Jedi knight and a Jedi master,” Tagge asked.

“Unfortunately, Jedi are not immortal Tagge. It is true. They were ambushed and though two Jedi fell this day, two others proved themselves to be more than padawans. I have not seen the footage yet, but Pho Sun did manage to get some images of the defense.”

“Is Pho Sun...” asked Rheena.

“Still alive,” Hagid’zu answered with a hint of a smile, “and his efforts shall be remembered in the Jedi archives. As will those of Nibor and Dechas. The Brothers were doing well indeed but they were substantially outnumbered. Though the transports onboard camera records their valiant mutual defensive lightsaber work through an amazing channeling of the force, they could never maintain such a defense without relief. That relief came from young Pho Sun.

“Commanding nothing more than an unarmed transport vessel, Pho Sun knew he was the only hope those padawans had. Even now the ship is being analyzed and it’s onboard computers memory files are being recorded. Pho Sun was able to pilot that ship directly above Nibor and Dechas and once he was in position, he maneuvered the ship into a tight starboard circle. Spinning faster and faster he lifted the nose of his vessel and used his primary directional thrusters to incinerate every pirate nearby. The remaining pirates were quickly dissuaded from approaching, giving Pho Sun time to retrieve the two padawans, each of them carrying their fallen brethren.

“You are right to be stunned, my young padawan.” Master Hagid’zu said to Tagge. “Only an exceptionally clear connection to the force prevented Pho Sun from crashing his own vessel without incinerating the Brothers. Mark my words you four, those padawans will soon be knights. In these increasingly dark times, Jedi like them will prove themselves again and again. Just you watch.”

31BBY

Pho Sun found himself remembering that mission now. As he looked over his shoulder, he met Tagge’s calm gaze. Tagge inclined his head slightly and Pho Sun looked around the hold. Rheena had opened her eyes and was stretching her neck. Airrek had finished the adjustments to his lightsaber and hidden it away in his bounty hunter disguise. Nibor and Dechas were sitting on metal bench affixed to the rear wall. He looked around the hold and did not see a group of padawans on an unauthorized adventure in a stolen ship. Pho Sun looked back and saw an extraordinary group of Jedi united in the unstoppable goal of rescuing an errant friend. He met Tagge’s gaze once again and gave a slight nod of his own. Tagge would make sure they brought Nawe home.

3 DAYS AGO

“I’ve managed to track her to a system just beyond the outer rim.”

“Do you know which system,” asked Dechas.

“I believe it is the Plomerian system.”

“You believe. What does that mean.” Now Nibor was asking questions. After all, it would be mostly up to he and Dechas, as the only members of the team that had seen real combat, to devise a method to get them all to their destination without being caught by any one of the hundreds of Jedi masters in the temple.

Rheena was sitting beside Tagge at a booth in a Coruscanti bar far from the temple. She was already wearing her merchant’s disguise. Each of them would don a disguise for this rescue. Nibor was also dressed as a simple merchant. Nibor was going in as a smuggler. Only Tagge would be wearing his Jedi robes. After all, he wouldn’t be able to hide his presence from her. Rheena was looking at Tagge intently. Just as The Brothers were while they all waited for Tagge to reply. He looked like he was going to choke on the words in his throat. Finally, Rheena spoke up.

“Just before she disappeared, she mentioned the Verses of Dawn.”

“Oh,” was all Nibor said.

“So... she’s gone to the dark side then,” Dechas replied matter of factly. “Who knows what the Dark Side has taught her regarding stealth and hiding. Do you really think that once a Jedi has crossed to the Dark Side...”

“You don’t know that,” blurted Tagge. “Just because she was studying texts forbidden to padawans by the high council, doesn’t make her a Sith.” He looked around at them in disbelief. “We don’t know anything about the Verses of Dawn, why she was looking into forbidden texts or her intentions. We just know that she’s in trouble. I know she’s in trouble and I am going to help her.

“I just won’t be able to do it by myself.”

“I can get us that far I think,” started Nibor. “There are four astromechs waiting to be scrapped that I can cross-link. That should allow us to create multiple random jump coordinates on the fly. With the right pilot, it would take master Yoda to track us down. Let’s just hope that our absence isn’t enough to attract his attention.”

“They won’t be missed?”

“Not likely. Each one is missing some components. They’ll be worthless until I can slice them all together.”

“Then we’re going to need Pho Sun,” replied Dechas. “He’s got some experience in the area of Jedi rescues after all. He’s also more likely to be able to get us a ship. With all the time he spends with Master Plo Koon and Master Nitro, he hardly even needs flight clearance anymore. That will give us another pair of eyes once we get there as well.”

“Then you won’t mind another pair of eyes watching your back, I’m guessing.”

They all turned to see Airrek standing beside the table. Once again he had managed to conceal himself from not just one, but four of his fellow Jedi. He was dressed in the outlandish garb of a rookie bounty hunter. The colors were too bright and he seemed to be sprouting useless buckles. This was truly a child of the depths of Coruscant, born and bred in the technological wasteland that lay beneath the gleaming towers of the world city. He could keep himself alive indefinitely but he could hardly dress himself

“Aren’t you supposed to be meditating,” asked Rheena.

“Listen Airrek,…”

“Save it Tagge. Don’t pretend like you could hide this from me. I’m not that stupid. Nawe has always been there for me. There isn’t one blasted thing that is going to keep me from being there for her now.”

Tagge met Airrek’s stare and smiled. Then he looked across the table at Nibor and Dechas. He looked at his fellow Jedi. He looked at his friends. Friends brought together by the will of the force for one purpose. His friends shimmered as his eyes filled with tears.

“Alright then, let’s go bring Nawe home.”

2 HOURS AGO

Tagge realized he’d been holding his breath. He exhaled slowly through his nostrils as he took a long look around the cargo hold. He was surrounded by Jedi, surrounded by friends, all of them in direct defiance of the High Council. What fate awaited them back on Coruscant? Did it matter? Tagge realized as he sat there that even if he were expelled from the Jedi order it didn’t matter. All that mattered was making sure Nawe was safe. He couldn’t be sure if it was his own anxiety that drove him or if he really did feel the Dark Side of the force closing in around her.

Dechas, Nibor, Pho Sun, Rheena, Airrek. Not a single one of them had become a Jedi knight yet. After this, they might never have that honor. None of them cared either. This wasn’t about obedience. This wasn’t about self control. This was about not letting go. Nawe had lost her way. They would help her find it again. They would not fail. Tagge felt a small grin on his lips that was mirrored by each face looking back at his.

“Plomeria coming up,” Pho Son called out, “Hang on to something cause we’re going in.”

