The Care and Feeding Of A Bondmate by Anne Higgins

Summary: During the trip from Dagobah to Coruscant, Qui-Gon reflects on Obi-Wan's protective nature.
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Author's Notes: Warnings: While I do use Xanatos, memory says I'm not quite following the events (or at least the timing) of his turning, but Bonding has always negated the events, if not the characters, from the Jedi Apprentice books, so what the heck.

Of more import, this is self-edited. I promised it up and available days ago, but that was before Real Life got nasty. I didn't want to delay even more. My apologies for the inevitable mistakes within.

Spoilers: The Bonding series and murky details of the first two Jedi Apprentice books. Very murky.

Series: Bonding Through the Years
Notes: This is more of an interlude than a story, a bridge between 'Bed Rest' and the next story. I hope it provides some of the reactions many of you mentioned you wanted to see, plus some added insight into the Obi-Wan of this universe.

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I. Journey Home

"Ow!" Qui-Gon Jinn yelped, then gave serious thought to dropping the stick-wielding little troll in his arms on his ancient green butt. "Master!"

Yoda glared back, his walking stick held in his hand in such a manner that it was obvious he was considering giving his former Padawan a second clunk on the head. "Put someone to sleep who wishes it not, you should not!"

"If 'someone' wasn't so damned stubborn, I wouldn't have to," he snapped back.

"Overprotective Padawan is. Know my limits I do."

Qui-Gon snorted. "Know them you might; respect them you don't."

Yoda's ears twitched as they always did when Qui-Gon resorted to mimicking him. However, the words were also ones Yoda had used against him many times in the past making them very hard to argue against should his former Master hope to resort to them again. Yoda sighed. "Work there is to be done," he protested.

"Yes, my Master," Qui-Gon answered, settling Yoda on the short bunk custom-made for the small Jedi. "But none of it can be done until we reach Coruscant. Is it not best that you rest and arrive refreshed?" With a light, caressing touch, he stroked Yoda's ears, something he knew Yoda found soothing.

"Rested I did. Need more I do not," he protested, but his eyes were already drooping.

"Master, do not allow principle and irritation to override good sense. You drained yourself to dangerous levels during the battle." True, the small wizened face looked green once more instead of the pale yellow that had prompted Qui-Gon to send Yoda into a Force-induced sleep, but he could feel the exhaustion clinging to Yoda through their old training-bond. "You need to rest."

"Always nagging Padawan is. Respect his elder's wishes he should, but humor him I shall."
Qui-Gon smiled and pressed a light kiss to the wrinkled forehead. "Thank you, my Master."

Yoda fell asleep before he could respond.

Qui-Gon sighed. //One down, one to go.//

//Do not start with me, Quigee.//

Qui-Gon rolled his eyes and started back towards the flight deck of the small craft, though not as small as it could have been. Fortunately Yoda had opted to journey to Dagobah in the transport he'd purchased in the days when he had an 'over-grown' Padawan accompanying him versus something more exclusively Yoda-sized. Things were wide enough and high enough that he didn't bang into one wall or ceiling after another, but nothing was what anyone his size would have termed spacious. //You need more sleep as well, Imp.//

//Someone has to fly this thing.//

A smile tugged at the corners of Qui-Gon's mouth. He was not the greatest of pilots, but he could manage. Not that he had to. He reached the cockpit as Obi-Wan Kenobi made the jump to hyperspace. "I am far from the pilot you are, my love, but, as I recall, if you set that control marked 'auto pilot,' you will have time to rest for a few hours."

Grey green eyes regarded him with a cool well-practiced stare. "I am fine."

Qui-Gon shook his head. What masochistic streak had saddled him with a stubborn Master and an even more obstinate bondmate?

//I am not obstinate.//

//Of course not.// Opting for the direct approach, he simply reached around Obi-Wan and scooped him up into his arms.

"Put me down!" his bondmate demanded, but was wise enough not to struggle and risk an encounter with one of the all too close bulkheads.

"Of course, beloved. Just as soon as I get you to your bunk," Qui-Gon answered serenely. Some times it really did pay off to be bigger and stronger.

Obi-Wan glared at him. It was amazing how similar the boy could be to the green troll. "You are a bully."

"Indeed. But you left out the important qualifier."

An 'I'm waiting' look answered him.

"I'm a selfish bully, and I want you and my Master well."

That quelled Obi-Wan's glare. A little. "Neither of us is sick."

"Only if you don't consider exhaustion a health issue." He stole a quick kiss. "And don't even try to tell me you aren't tired, imp, I can feel it."

Obi-Wan pouted for the rest of the short trip back to the sleeping compartment. He rallied as Qui-Gon lowered him onto the bunk that had once been his own. His glance shifted to the sleeping Yoda, then he
chose to speak with is mind instead of his voice, //You should sleep, too.//

Qui-Gon smiled. Yoda and Obi-Wan had borne the brunt of the battle with Palpatine. His bondmate had physically fought the Dark Lord, while his Master had channeled the energies of Palpatine's death throes to save the planet Dagobah as well as the three of them. The few hours sleep Obi-Wan had forced on him shortly after the battle had been more than enough for Qui-Gon to recover. //Do you sense I am tired?//

Obi-Wan studied him for a moment, the a scowl crossed his beautiful face. //No.//

He couldn't help overhearing the echoes of 'It's not fair.' He kissed Obi-Wan and settled down on the broad bunk beside him. //What isn't fair?//

//You're always saving me; always looking after me. Sometimes I feel so damned useless.//

Qui-Gon stared at him.

//What?//

//You must be joking.//

//Do you sense that I'm joking, Quigee?//

No, he had to admit that he didn't, but that did not make the notion any less absurd. He told himself to remember that Obi-Wan always got unreasonable and crabby when he was tired –

//I do not.//

– and pulled the sweet-tempered, sunny-spirited, always cheerful –

//Don't overdo it.//

– brat into his arms.

//I thought you weren't sleepy.// he muttered, but quickly wrapped his limbs around Qui-Gon to prevent any escape, his head coming to rest against Qui-Gon's chest.

//I'm not, but I see no reason why that should prevent me from holding you.//

//Oh. Well, if you'd said that in the first place. ...//

Qui-Gon smiled and began to gently rub Obi-Wan's back, lulling him to sleep with something less imperative than a Force command. //Sleep, beloved. Recover your strength.// It took no longer for Obi-Wan to drift off than it had Yoda, but this time Qui-Gon didn't leave well enough alone. This time, he did add a Force command. //Dream, my love. Dream and remember.//

II. Something, Anything - 21 Years Ago

Obi-Wan was bored, bored, bored, bored. He'd played with all the toys that interested him. Twice. He'd finished his meditations – he hated those, but at least it had been something to do ... sort of – and his lessons had been completed hours ago. That left playing with his agemates, but they were all so ... young.
Obi-Wan knew that at four he was far from old himself, and he could laugh and play with the best of them, but sometimes they were too darned ... what was that word Quigee had used? Oh, yes. Immature. They were too darned immature. He wanted to talk and play with his bondmate, not a bunch of kids. But Quigee was off on yet another mission.

A heavy sigh shuddered through his body. Just his luck that his bondmate was the best Jedi ever and everyone always wanted Quigee's help. Of course, that's why he had Quigee's permission to call to him any time he wanted, but Obi-Wan tried not to do that when he knew his bondmate was busy doing something exciting. If he weren't he would have been talking to Obi-Wan telling him how boring those negotiation things were going. So he should play. Yes, he should play. But ... there was one other thing he could do.

Long ago, so long that Obi-Wan could not remember when it had happened, he had found Quigee's memory of what his mind had felt like before Obi-Wan was born and they had become bondmates. By echoing that memory, Obi-Wan was able to slip into Quigee's mind and 'see' what was happening to his bondmate without Quigee knowing. Easy. He did it all the time. Sometimes the things he saw scared him, made him afraid for Quigee, but his need to be with his bondmate was stronger than the fear, so he had never given himself away. Nor had he been silly enough to do it when he was supposed to be doing something else and get himself caught.

Play with his agemates or look in on Quigee? He smiled, thought until he had 'hidden' himself inside the no-Obi-Wan memory, then reached out for his bondmate. He frowned, surprised. Quigee was bored, then why? ... No, not bored. Tired. Very tired and trying to concentrate on important stuff.

Obi-Wan broke the contact. He tried very hard to hide his upset, but he wasn't as good at shielding his feelings as he was at hiding and, //Imp??//

//Yes, Quigee?//

//What's wrong??//

//Nothing.// No, he would know that wasn't true. //I just miss you.//

//As I miss you, my imp.// The Force wrapped itself around Obi-Wan and hugged him. //Shall I tell you a story??//

Obi-Wan wanted to cry. His Quigee was so tired, yet he was looking after Obi-Wan. Sometimes, Obi-Wan really, really, really hated being such a baby. //No, I'm okay.// he answered, his need to soothe Quigee strong enough to allow him to shield the truth. //Can tell me one tomorrow.//

//Tomorrow? Not tonight??//

Obi-Wan frowned. //You need to go to bed early tonight.//

He felt the love that always accompanied the Jedi Master's softest of smiles. //Yes, my imp, but only if you promise to call to me if you need me.//

//I promise. Bye, Quigee.//

He was hugged, a kiss pressed to his forehead, then, //Tomorrow, my Obi-Wan.//

A small feeling of loss, like the prick of a pin, touched Obi-Wan as the full mental contact faded, but he was used to that, and he had something to do now. Another thing he'd learned how to do was tap into the training bond Quigee shared with his former Master, while at the same time shielding the conversation from
his bondmate. Although he thought that much might be due to Yoda's help. //Master Yoda?/

//Yes, young one?//

//May I come see you?//

//Yes, inform Creche Master I will that you may.//

//Thank you.//

He glanced towards where Master N'bara was working with some of the new Initiates. Her comlink pinged, she answered it, spoke a moment, then she sighed in ... what was the word? ... resi ... resignation. "Obi-Wan," she said.

"Yes, Master?"

She gave him a long look. While always kind to him, he knew she didn't like how often he went off on his own. He'd heard her arguing with Quigee about it once, but he was belonged more to Quigee than to the Jedi and that made him different from the other kids. Not better. Just different. Even Obi-Wan knew that so it puzzled him as to why she couldn't seem to figure it out. It wasn't as if he ever misbehaved – that would embarrass Quigee and Obi-Wan didn't like upsetting him – or wasn't doing well with his studies, but her voice held the usual disapproving sound to it when she said, "Master Yoda wishes to see you in his quarters."

A few of the other Initiates eyes' widened, but only the ones who were new to this creche. Everyone else was used to it. "Thank you, Master."

He hurried out the door and made his way through the Temple. Other kids his age were not allowed to wander the halls alone – they got lost in all the corridors – but he knew the way and no one told him to go back to the creche. He might be a baby at times, but he had his bondmate's familiarity with the Temple to guide him and never got lost.

The door to Yoda's quarters opened before he could even sound the chime. "Come in, come in," the small Master told him. "Not visited me in over a week you have. Neglected I am."

Obi-Wan giggled and gave Yoda a hug. A real one. Not a Force one. He couldn't do that yet. It was one of the reasons he was here.

"Made tea I have," Yoda said once the hug ended.

Tea? Yuck. "Thank you, Master," he said remembering his manners, even if he did hate the stuff.

A chuckle answered him. "Juice there is for you."

He smiled and his 'thank you' was more genuine. Juice and tea in hand, the two of them settled in the common room, drinking for a time before Yoda said, "Troubled you are, young one. Sense it I can."

Obi-Wan nodded. "I need to talk to you about Qui-Gon." Once he'd figured out that long 'i' sound, Quigee had become Obi-Wan's special name for his bondmate, something he called him only when they were alone together. When anyone else was around he called him 'Master Qui-Gon' as he was supposed to, but Yoda had told him the title was not necessary when he was alone with his Master's Master.

"Well he is. Sense otherwise I do not."
"He's tired. Very tried." The kind of tired that made it hard to sleep.

"Expected that is. Life of a Jedi is often such."

Yes, Obi-Wan knew that. "But ... when he's far away and I feel like that, he holds me and tells me a story. It makes me feel good enough to sleep."

"Bondmate he is. Expected that is also."

"But I can't do it for him!" The words were almost a shout. He blushed and dropped his eyes.

"Years of training such Force touch requires. When do it you can, do it you will."

Years. Tears began to sting in Obi-Wan's eyes. "He takes care of me. I want to take care of him, too."

Yoda nodded, his look one of understanding, but his words were not what Obi-Wan wanted to hear, "What you want, time it will take. No hope for change in that."

The tears started to fall. "Please, Master Yoda. I need to do something, anything."

"Hmm. Dry eyes you must. Hold him you cannot, but other things you can do."

Qui-Gon smiled his thanks to his pilot, picked up his pack, then started down the shuttle ramp. Home. Every time he'd thought the Temple could never look better to him, another mission where everything went wrong would come along and prove otherwise.

Relief turned to joy as a small blur of motion erupted from the door he approached. A moment later, he caught hold of Obi-Wan and swung him up into his arms. "Mmm, my imp, it is so good to see you," he said, giving the child a big hug.

Obi-Wan hugged back, then gave Qui-Gon a kiss on the cheek. "Welcome home, Quigee," he said very softly, the little imp's way of keeping the nickname secret. He appreciated that as he had no desire to have something spoken with such affection used as teasing fodder from his own agemates.

He kissed Obi-Wan's forehead, the gesture seeming no less real than when he did so with the Force, but more satisfying as it appeased his eyes as well as his sense of touch. "Oh, I missed you, my Obi-Wan."

The small arms tightened around his neck, and he made his way into the Temple. He went straight to his quarters. He'd given his reports to the Council via hololink and any further questions they might have could wait until after he'd spent some time with his bondmate. One of many concessions their unique bond had compelled the Jedi to make. While it was easy to take the view when he was benefitting, he couldn't help but think that keeping the Council off balance was good for them.

A faint spicy scent greeted him when the doors to his quarters opened. His eyebrow arched. "Obi-Wan?"

The boy was positively beaming. "I thought you might like a hot bath."

His eyebrow rose even higher. Obi-Wan normally wanted all his attention, wanted to be played with and told all the details of the mission. A long post-mission soak in the tub had become a thing of the past. "Wouldn't you rather go play in the gardens?" Hoverball or something equally taxing. Ah, the energy of youth.
Obi-Wan shook his head, then tugged at Qui-Gon's robe. "Bath tonight. Gardens tomorrow."

It was a risk. Tomorrow could well mean a new mission. That was why he'd always been so adamant about spending his first night back with Obi-Wan. More than once, it had proven to be their only time together. He searched his bondmate's mind, but found only determination to get Qui-Gon into the tub and no regret at the potential loss of playtime. He gave Obi-Wan another kiss on the forehead. "Thank you, imp. A quick bath would be most welcome."

Obi-Wan squirmed out of his arms, then went to work on the fasteners of his boots. He gave Qui-Gon quite an affronted look when he tried to help, so he relented and allowed Obi-Wan to do most of the work of undressing him. Not at all an easy task given the differences in their heights, but Obi-Wan did it quickly and efficiently. Too much so. Something was going on, but he could see no harm in it.

A few moments later, Qui-Gon sank into a tub full of hot water and his favorite scented oil. Pure bliss, he decided, a happy moan escaping his lips. He heard Obi-Wan settle on the broad tile rim next to his head, then small hands began to pour water over his head, wetting his hair, but never coming near his eyes. Equal care was taken when shampoo was added into the mix.

Obi-Wan washed and rinsed Qui-Gon's hair, scrubbed his back, then simply sat with him, while in his soft, small voice, he caught Qui-Gon up on all the Temple gossip – or at least as much of it as a child of his age could know.

The water began to cool, and Qui-Gon opened his eyes, considering getting out of the tub, when he saw an irresistible sight – Obi-Wan had taken off his own boots and his tender toes were within striking distance. Smirking, his hand darted out and tickled.

Obi-Wan jerked his foot back, giggling. A moment later the foot came back into Qui-Gon's peripheral vision, then the small toes wiggled in challenge. He laughed and launched a second attack. It was no doubt inevitable that it degenerated from there. Soon a laughing Obi-Wan was tumbling into the tub with him and an all out tickle war was waged that left a good half of the bath's contents on the floor. And Qui-Gon couldn't possibly have cared less.

The bath had relaxed him, the laughter and playing had re-energized him, so it was with a light easy step that he whisked both of them out of the refresher and into dry clothes. But when he started to dry his hair, Obi-Wan said, "No, let me do it."

Again his eyebrow arched, but if his imp was in the mood to indulge him, who was he to spoil things? He gave Obi-Wan the towel, then let the boy lead him over to a chair. "You sit on the floor," he said, kneeling in the chair.

Qui-Gon obeyed. He smiled happily as Obi-Wan dried his hair with a gentle touch, then to his surprise, the boy began to comb out his hair. No pulling, tangles were patiently dealt with, and when the job was done, Obi-Wan began to braid his hair.

While enjoying the attention, Qui-Gon's puzzlement returned. Obi-Wan was very mature for his age – the consequence of being in almost constant mental conversation with an adult – but, so far, that heightened maturity had not spilled over into the physical. He really should be too clumsy to do this sort of thing, but he did it to perfection.

When he'd finished, Qui-Gon rose, picked him up, then resettled him on his lap as he himself sat in the chair. "Thank you, my imp," he said, giving him yet another hug and kiss. "You must have worked very hard to learn how to do that."
Obi-Wan nodded. "Master Yoda said you liked having your hair played with."

Qui-Gon smiled. He should have known his Master was behind this. "And what else has he been saying?"

Obi-Wan shrugged. "He's been giving me lessons."

"Lessons? What sort of lessons?"

"He called them Lessons on the Care and Feeding of a Bondmate."

That made him laugh. Now it all made sense right up to and including the bedtime stories Obi-Wan had insisted on telling Qui-Gon during his mission. "Obi-Wan, you don't have to do these things for me."

Obi-Wan hugged him. "I want to. I want to make you feel warm and safe, too."

A lump formed in Qui-Gon's throat, and he had to swallow before he could speak again. "You do, my imp. Always."

III. Journey Home 2

Beautiful eyes opened and regarded Qui-Gon with the sort of look that made it obvious he knew where the dream had come from. //I braided your hair and let you relax. That is hardly the same thing as rescuing me from certain death.//

Qui-Gon's lips descended on the sleep softened mouth. //My comfort was more important to you than your need to run and play. A brave, daring thing for a four-year old, my love.//

Obi-Wan sighed. //Your standards are too low, beloved. Poor showing though it was, what I did at seven is far more what I had in mind.//

Qui-Gon shivered and pulled Obi-Wan even closer. //What you did at seven cost me ten years of my life.//

IV. His Bondmate, Not His Child - 18 Years Ago

//Obi-Wan, run!/ //

Obi-Wan obeyed, the sound of blaster fire and lightsabers nipping at his heels as he lunged for the cover of a nearby building. His obedience ended there. He knew run meant 'and keep running', but he was going nowhere until he knew his Qui-Gon was safe.

The attack had been as sudden as it had been unexpected. Qui-Gon had been assigned as the Jedi representative to the wedding of the Supreme Chancellor's daughter. That meant a trip to her homeworld of Carsi IV and a week long party suitable for attendance by all ages. Qui-Gon had seen no reason not to bring Obi-Wan along, and Obi-Wan had caught the stray thought of hoping a fun trip would help his bondmate and his Padawan become friends. Something that was not a high priority with either Obi-Wan or Xanatos. Friendly indifference was the most they'd ever managed or wanted.

As he peered from his hiding place, Obi-Wan's feelings towards Qui-Gon's Padawan were far from even
that. With rising fury he noticed Xanatos make a move that left his Master unprotected, then again. The third
time it was Xanatos who paid the price.

He stepped too far away from Qui-Gon, leaving the Jedi Master's back uncovered, but his own as well as he
deflected an incoming laser blast. His angle was off, the bolt striking the ground, not the man who fired it,
and the small explosion sent a hail of rocks flying. One of them clipped Xanatos in the temple. He staggered,
then dropped to the ground.

Obi-Wan reacted without thinking. He raced from his hiding place, leapt over Xanatos' body and called the
other boy's lightsaber to his own hand. He was not fool enough to think himself even a match for Xanatos'
grace, but he had the determination to protect Qui-Gon burning in his veins. Each time a bolt hurtled toward
that broad, beloved back, he deflected it. His movements were stiff for a Jedi, the lightsaber almost jerking
from position to position, but it got to where it needed to be. Nothing else mattered.

So caught up in his need to defend was he that it took several seconds for it to penetrate his awareness that
the attack had stopped. Cautious, he reached out with the Force and found no conscious minds left to
threaten them, then he heard Qui-Gon's lightsaber power down.

"Are you all right, Padaw–"

He looked up to see Qui-Gon had turned and was staring at him with wide eyes and a pale face. "Obi-
Wan?"

A touch to a button powered down the borrowed weapon, and he dropped it on the ground near Xanatos'
hand. The Padawan moaned and reached for it. Too late to do any good.

Qui-Gon was in automatic mode. He tended to his Padawan, got him to the Healers and stayed by his side
until they chased him away with reassurances that the boy would be fine, that he merely needed a few hours
in a healing sleep before he could return to the festivities. He met with the security forces who had
assurances of their own – perfectly safe, all actions of a fringe group trying to prevent the marriage by killing
off the guests, all in custody or dead now, nothing to worry about. But he was worried. Very worried.

He went to his room, sank into his meditation pose, then set himself to the task of trying to deal with the
terror gripping his heart. His light, his love, his soul, his Obi-Wan had ... fought to protect him. It was very
strange to feel so much regret at that, but to turn and see a warrior instead of a child. ... He'd honestly not
recognized Obi-Wan for a moment. 'Oh, my imp, what has happened to you?'

//Nothing that did not need to happen.//

He opened his eyes and found Obi-Wan sitting in front of him, their knees not quite touching. When had his
giggling little imp turned into this boy of lean muscle and sharp angles? When had innocence given way to a
miniature Jedi? "How long?" he asked, unable to voice more.

Obi-Wan did him the courtesy of not feigning misunderstanding. "Since I was five."

Five. An Initiate did not even build a training lightsaber until he was eight, let alone learn how to use it.
"Five."

Obi-Wan nodded.

"Yoda taught you." He'd murder the little troll when they got home.
Another nod. "And you."

"Me?"

"I watched you train Xanatos whenever I could."

Qui-Gon cursed. For years he had known that somehow Obi-Wan could slip past his shields no matter how hard he tried to block him out. He'd gone to his Master for help with the matter, but Yoda had insisted he do nothing, that Obi-Wan needed knowledge more than protection. Qui-Gon had reluctantly agreed and had focused on teaching Obi-Wan the value of privacy. His missions were fair targets for a mind invasion. His affairs were not. Now, the folly of listening to gnomes sat before him. "I ... don't want you to grow up this quickly. You're supposed to be a child."

Obi-Wan crawled into his lap and snuggled up against him. Lips brushed his jaw. "Yes, but first I am the bondmate of Qui-Gon Jinn. I will not allow you to be hurt. It ..." He gave Qui-Gon a sheepish smile. "It hurts too much."

Given the fear and pain in his own heart, Qui-Gon could well understand that. He tightened his grip on the boy, but not as young a one as he'd thought. He would do what he could to prevent Obi-Wan from having to use a lightsaber in defense again until he was a true Padawan, but would it ever hurt less to see his Obi-Wan in danger than it had this morning? Somehow he knew the answer was no. "I could forbid you to do this again."

"No, you cannot."

Surprise kept anger at bay. "What?"

"Do bondmates normally forbid one another?"

"No, but you are a child."

Obi-Wan nodded. "But not your child. You told me that it must be so when you wouldn't let me live with you. Has this changed?"

He shook his head. He hated it when his words came back to haunt him, but his desire to have Obi-Wan be who he would be instead of who Qui-Gon wanted him to be had not changed.

"It hurt me that you could stand to send me away, but I understood that it was important to you even though I did not understand why. Will you do less for me now, my Qui-Gon?" Obi-Wan studied him with those large, beautiful eyes. "I know it hurts you and scares you, but can you understand that learning to protect you is important to me and accept?"

Qui-Gon felt dizzy. It was like having his Master sitting in his lap giving him a lecture. Wisdom that seemed too great to be contained in a body so small. A child's body, but the bond had given him a much older mind. He probed deeply, trying – desperately – to find the uncertainty of a child in need of guidance in this matter, but found only determination and a fierce protective love that left him staggered by its intensity. He hugged Obi-Wan tightly. "If I asked you to stop training until you were older, would you do it?"

Misery flooded through Obi-Wan. "Yes."

"Then I will not ask it of you."

Obi-Wan hugged him back.
"On two conditions."

That earned him something between a cautious stare and a glower. "What?"

"One, you must not 'haunt' Xanatos' sessions. That is his time with me, you must respect that."

A pout took form. "All right."

"Two, you will spend an hour with me each day I am on Coruscant sparring. If you must learn before your time, I will teach you."

Wonder stole across the young face, then joy. The hug that followed was so tight Qui-Gon found it difficult to breath. "I love you, Quigee," the soft voice whispered in his ear.

"Then guard your own life as well as mine, my imp," he whispered back. "For mine would be worth little without you to light my soul."

"I promise."

It would have to be enough.

V. Journey Home 3

Qui-Gon glared at Obi-Wan. //I got my first grey hair that day, brat.//

//How fortunate it makes you look so incredibly sexy,// came the unrepentant answer.

He would have goosed him with the Force if he wasn't enjoying cuddling the impossible imp so much. In fact ... //Obi-Wan?//

//Yes?//

//You don't seem very tired anymore.//

Obi-Wan sighed. //Is that your way of telling me 'I told you so'?//

Well, yes. The brief nap had seemed to revitalize him, but ... //Not exclusively. I am not tired either.//

Never slow to follow his moods, Obi-Wan glanced toward the sleeping Yoda. //But. ...//

Qui-Gon smiled and touched a control to the right of their bunk. An opaque wall of black energy flared into life, completely surrounding them. No longer needing to fear waking his Master, he used his voice, not his thoughts, to say, "A privacy shield. Master Yoda had it installed when I was an adolescent subject to ... interesting dreams."

A grin spread across Obi-Wan's face. "In that case, perhaps we could do something about the fact that neither of us is tired."

Privacy shield aside, neither could completely forget that Yoda slept only a few feet away, so their coupling was lazy, loving, almost silent with nothing but a soft gasp from each to mark their climaxes. It was precisely
what they'd both needed after the fury of emotion and activity of the last two days.

As he always did the moment he could move, Obi-Wan pushed Qui-Gon over onto his back, then nestled against his chest. It was strange having his heartbeat used as a security blanket Obi-Wan seemed destined to never outgrow, but it never failed to warm Qui-Gon.

In truth, Obi-Wan's weight against him was his own chosen form of comfort. His shield against all that would harm him. He always craved it, but on occasion he needed it with a depth that amazed him. He felt the memory stir of such a time when Obi-Wan's body against him while they slept in this very bunk had been all that had kept him from a crushing despair that had almost been his undoing. Felt the memory and shielded it tightly. The last thing he wanted to do was remind Obi-Wan of that.

VI. Xanatos Turns - 14 Years Ago

Obi-Wan's slight frown vanished into a smile of triumph as the solution to the problem occurred to him. He filled in the answer and hope stirred. Over halfway through his final astrophysics test and he had a strong chance of not completely humiliating himself. He might even –

A wave of emotion crashed through him – a cold, heartbroken horror that made him want to cry out in an agony of despair. He was on his feet and out the door of the classroom in an instant. Test, his teacher, consequences, everything forgotten as he broke into the best Force-enhanced run a boy of eleven could manage. He reached the Council Room within minutes and as heedless of protocol as he had been in the classroom, he burst through the doors.

Twelve startled Jedi gaped at him, but he sought only Yoda's eyes. "Qui-Gon," he gasped. "I have to get to Qui-Gon. Now."

An order, not a request. He could have been drummed out of the Jedi for such an insult to the Council, but Yoda rose from his chair. "My ship we shall take."

Obi-Wan nodded, turned and ran for the landing pad. He'd finished the pre-flight by the time Yoda settled into the co-pilot's seat. The boy had them in hyperspace before it occurred to him that he'd not asked permission to fly the ship. He'd not asked permission to do a lot of things. He looked at Yoda with wide eyes.

"In matters of Qui-Gon your judgement I trust. Heavily shielded from me he is."

Obi-Wan nodded, silently cursing the day he had allowed Qui-Gon to pry out of him how he got past his bondmate's mental shields for he'd obviously found a way to prevent him from doing so. "He's shielded himself from me as well." Qui-Gon had never done that before and it frightened him almost more than the emotions that had hit him moments before the shield went up. "He's hurt ... not injured, but in so much pain." He wanted to lash out, purge some of his frustration, but nothing but a Jedi Master and needed controls were within reach. His head sank into his hands. "I need to be with him."

A small hand touched his shoulder. "Be with him soon you shall."

Soon. It was an eight hour flight to Telos. Eight hours for him to wait and wonder what had happened to Qui-Gon and why that Sith be damned Xanatos had failed to protect him yet again.

Obi-Wan landed the ship on a battle torn world – Qui-Gon's mission to Xanatos' home world had not been a
successful one. That much was clear with a single glance, but failure did not explain the pain. More than once he had needed to cheer his bondmate up after an unsuccessful mission, so he knew that aching regret well. It didn't even come close to what Obi-Wan had sensed this time.

He all but stuffed Yoda into the backpack carrier, settled its weight onto his own back, then zipped out of the ship. Qui-Gon could shield himself all he liked – he could not keep his location from Obi-Wan.

Cursing the distance from the remains of the spaceport to the city center, he had to fight to keep himself centered on where he was versus where he wanted to be, but Qui-Gon would not thank him if a careless step got Obi-Wan and Master Yoda killed. All the signs were that the fighting was over. There were no sounds of battle and the survivors moved through debris cluttered streets and damaged buildings with an air of stunned acceptance versus fear of further violence.

His sense of Qui-Gon led him to one of the less damaged buildings, and when he entered a guard ordered him to stop. It seemed he stood in the lobby of what was now the government's headquarters.

A green hand waved over his shoulder. "Let us pass you will. To the Jedi the boy must go."

The guard nodded, then clipped some sort of badge to Obi-Wan's tunic. "Eighteenth floor."

Obi-Wan nodded, but pressed the button for 22, not 18. Where ever Qui-Gon was supposed to be, he was on 22. The ride upward seemed to take as long as the flight to the planet, but finally the doors opened. Down one hall, turn to the right, ten feet more, then through one last door.

Qui-Gon stood at a window staring out at the city, his profile showing a face both pale and drawn.

"Quigee," he whispered, not caring that anyone might hear.

The weary head lifted, then the body turned. "Obi-Wan?"

He ran, launched himself up and around Qui-Gon, his legs fastening around the man's waist, his arms around his neck. Holding on with all his might, he sent wave after wave of his love through their bond, crumbling Qui-Gon's shields with his nearness and the intensity of the onslaught.

The pain flooded back into his mind, and he embraced it even as he worked to soothe it.

Qui-Gon's body trembled, then he sank slowly to his knees, neither his grip on Obi-Wan, nor Obi-Wan's on his faltering. Tears never came -- as far as Obi-Wan knew, Qui-Gon did not cry -- but the shaking intensified, all while waves of despair, failure and self-loathing bombarded their bond. Obi-Wan answered it all with unconditional love. Distantly, he noticed Yoda's mind echoing his own efforts, the green hand stroking Qui-Gon's hair, but he could also sense the ancient Master's curiosity, his need to know and understand what had happened.

Obi-Wan's managed to tighten his grip on Qui-Gon. Nothing mattered to Obi-Wan beyond his bondmate, and he would protect him from this pain, from the universe and, if it came to that, from Master Yoda.

There was no longer a reason to stay on Telos. The fighting had ended, the clean up nothing the locals couldn't handle. Obi-Wan had said nothing as Yoda had first suggested, then ordered a return to Coruscant.

Yoda had chosen to pilot his ship home, leaving the care of Qui-Gon to Obi-Wan. He accepted the responsibility as the right it was and all but bullied his bondmate into his bunk. He'd then climbed in after him. Now, Obi-Wan lay curled around Qui-Gon's sleeping form, his head resting on the Jedi Master's chest.
By concentrating on the music of his bondmate's heartbeat, he managed to keep some hold on the calm he needed to project to Qui-Gon. But for the first time in his life, Obi-Wan felt raw hatred. It took every ounce of will he had to prevent his thoughts from dwelling on innumerable ways to hunt Xanatos down and kill him.

Qui-Gon stirred in his sleep, the first sign of yet another nightmare. Obi-Wan soothed him, mimicking what Qui-Gon had always done for him. How could he have ever looked forward to a time when he could do the same for Qui-Gon? In his stupidity he'd never considered that more than the skill was needed for this act of loving comfort. The nightmares were needed as well.

//I love you,// he projected into the dream. //All is well. I am here. All is well.//

The nightmare faded away before it could take hold, but Qui-Gon's arms tightened around him. So many layers of pain dwelled within the body he rested against, Obi-Wan knew it would be a very long time before Qui-Gon was himself again.

Once more anger and hatred twisted through Obi-Wan's belly. Qui-Gon had cared deeply for Xanatos, had been proud of him. For his Padawan to embrace the Dark Side had been devastating enough, but Xanatos had compounded his crime by attacking Qui-Gon and had done his best to kill him. Obi-Wan did not need to imagine the pain Qui-Gon had experienced as he pulled his lightsaber to defend himself – he had felt it.

With something akin to regret, he sent the hate into the Force. He must let it go. He knew that. But he also knew he would never forget the feel of it. Xanatos had escaped because Qui-Gon had been unable to strike a death blow. Someday, it would be Obi-Wan's lightsaber that would end the traitor's miserable existence. He would not hate, he would not give into anger, but he would see Xanatos dead. That much he promised himself.

The Jedi Temple of Coruscant. The absolute last place in the universe Qui-Gon wished to ever see again yet there it was looming ever larger before the small ship. The Temple full of Jedi who would soon know of his failure, the quarters with the second bedroom full of Xanatos' Force signature and his things, and worst of all the expectation that he continue to do his duty, despite his shattered confidence.

No, he definitely had no desire to set foot in that structure again, but the ship was landing, the exit ramp lowering. Obi-Wan's embrace tightened. His imp had seemed to take root in his lap, and he could find no cause for complaint. He'd always loved Obi-Wan, always known he needed him, but he'd not understood the depths of that need until. ... He sighed and managed to meet Yoda's gaze. "Master, I need a few minutes."

"Time you have. Report to the Council from me it can come."

For now. Sooner or later he would have to face them, but, by the Force, he could not do it now. "Thank you, my Master."

He felt his Master's Force signature caress his cheek, then Yoda retrieved his walking stick and disembarked, leaving Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan alone. How amazing that his world seemed so full.

They sat in silence for a long time, then Qui-Gon sighed. "I am ready." It was more truth than lie. He had no great desire to surrender his hold on Obi-Wan, who returned the sentiment by settling his legs around Qui-Gon's waist as he stood.

No one stared at them, no one questioned, but then no one knew yet. Qui-Gon gave it three hours at the most after Yoda briefed the Council before the news was all through the Temple. He'd failed. Failed in one
of the most tragic ways a Jedi Master could. He'd lost an apprentice to the Dark Side.

He'd barely framed the thought when the steady stream of loving acceptance coming from Obi-Wan increased. To his surprise, Qui-Gon found a smile. A small one, but a smile nonetheless. He returned the love pulse, grateful to find something beyond self-pity and need within himself. //The Force granted me a great gift when it sent you tumbling into my life, my Obi-Wan.//

Pleasure at his words joined the love flowing from Obi-Wan, but the boy did not speak, and Qui-Gon sensed he did not know what to say. Another small smile. So wise, so loving, but it some ways his beloved imp remained a child. //The feeling is there, my Obi-Wan. You need not struggle to put words to it.//

His cheek was kissed and then ... then they were standing in front of his quarters. For Obi-Wan's sake he managed not to tremble as he opened the door, but it took every ounce of will he possessed to step through it. Inside he found ... not the slightest trace of Xanatos.

The few things his former Padawan had displayed in their common room were gone. No, not gone. Replaced. By Obi-Wan's things. Knowing what he would find, he went straight to Xanatos' bedroom and discovered it too had been transformed. Even the Force signature had changed.

Where once there had been Xanatos there was ... Bant. Reeft. And Garen Muln. One by one he identified the Force signatures of Obi-Wan's friends. It was as if Xanatos had never existed ... but how did three Initiates ... ah, beneath it all, hidden within the signatures of the children he found Mace Windu. His former best friend, the lover lost to the bond fate had forged between Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan, and a man who, thank the Force, had worked through that pain enough to slowly become his friend once more. Mace had helped them.

"His things are in Temple storage should you wish to see them," Obi-Wan said, "but this is my room now." He did not add 'as it always should have been,' not even in his thoughts, but Qui-Gon heard it all the same. He knew he'd done the right thing by insisting otherwise, but now it was time for Obi-Wan to come home.

"Yes, my imp, your room." Until the day they were ready for their room.

And so it went from there. Every time despair closed in, Obi-Wan was there with his shining love to soothe him, heal him. It gave him the strength to stay in the Temple and not lose himself in mission after mission. He even managed to wage a successful battle of wills with the formidable Master Phen, who wanted to fail Obi-Wan in astrophysics for the effrontery of walking out in the middle of an exam. Never mind that Obi-Wan had gotten all the answers up to that point correct, never mind that he had saved the sanity and soul of a broken Jedi Master, never mind anything but protocol. Such unreasonable injustice a marvelous balm for his maverick soul, he'd argued with the stiff-necked fool until he'd not only withdrawn the threat of failure, but had passed Obi-Wan with honors.

Obi-Wan fought just as fiercely for him when hindsight and investigation made it obvious that Qui-Gon's training-bond with Xanatos had been inadequate. When he'd tried to shoulder the blame, when the Council - sans Mace and Yoda who were seen as having a conflict of interest -- had tried to censure him, Obi-Wan had thrown a fit. He'd insisted that Xanatos was a black-hearted son of a corridor ghoul who would have turned had Master Yoda himself been his Master, and that if Qui-Gon was to be punished for that in the guise of something their bond had done, then Obi-Wan had to be included. Unwilling to pursue the matter in the face of such youthful passion, the Council had relented, although the quiet suggestion had been made that Qui-Gon not take another Padawan for a year or two.

In a way it was a punishment Obi-Wan shared with him, for he was old enough now to become Qui-Gon's Padawan. Not that Qui-Gon's confidence had healed enough for it to come to that. He needed time, and
Obi-Wan was content to give it to him.

Qui-Gon spent the next few months teaching various classes, but most of life revolved around Obi-Wan, doing what they'd always done – sparring, working with Force manipulation, meditation and finding the time for the occasional game of hoverball.

Then he was declared fit for another mission. When he emerged from his bedroom trying to concentrate on the confidence the Council had shown in him instead of the icy pit in his stomach at leaving Obi-Wan, he found the boy standing in the common room, his own pack shouldered and ready to go. They stared at each other for a long time, then he nodded and Obi-Wan fell into step one pace behind him and to the left as they made their way to the landing pad.

VII. Arrival on Coruscant

Qui-Gon smiled at the ceiling. Two years had passed before Obi-Wan had officially become his Padawan, but in all that time, not once did he go on a mission without him. The Council had not been pleased, but only Obi-Wan's age had prevented him from claiming the right to accompany his bondmate before then. With the formal claim made, and in the absence of any reason he could not go – he was far more formidable than Padawans several years older – it had not been denied.

That reality had put a most surreal edge on things when Yoda had tried to prevent Obi-Wan from the title of Padawan. He'd even sensed the thought within his Master to stop Obi-Wan from going on any further missions. All to protect Qui-Gon from a vision every damned Jedi in the galaxy seemed to have had of his death on Naboo. Except for himself. And he'd been right to ignore them. Obi-Wan had saved him, and he knew Obi-Wan would be a glorious Jedi Knight.

"In your completely unbiased opinion, of course."

"Of course," Qui-Gon answered automatically, then frowned. //How much of that did you pick up on?"

Obi-Wan shifted upward, then kissed him. "I always know when you are thinking of Xanatos, my love. There is a small hurt that persists inside you when you do."

And he could never hide his pain from his vigilant Obi-Wan. "I can't help but notice that you aren't yelling." Even a hint of Xanatos' continued existence, let alone their inability to capture him, tended to rankle Obi-Wan.

"Right now, I'm too happy to be alive to throw a fit. I'll do it later," he answered, moving to settle back against Qui-Gon's chest, then cursed as the companel beeped the warning that they were five minutes from emerging from hyperspace.

Happy to be alive? No doubt, but also worried about what the near future would bring. "It seems we are home."

Obi-Wan nodded as he pulled on his clothes. He stole another kiss, then deactivated the privacy shield and headed for the flight deck.

Qui-Gon dressed, then knelt beside Yoda's bunk. "Master?" he whispered. Slowly he coaxed Yoda out of his deep sleep. A deep enough one that Qui-Gon pulled the carrier out from beneath the bed.

"Need that you do not. Walk I can." The voice was gruff and hoarse with sleep.
"Need to you do not," he chided, helping Yoda sit up.

Yoda frowned. "Impertinent you always were. Mock me you should not."

Qui-Gon planted a kiss on his forehead. "Mock you I never do. Tease you I always will."

"Hmpf. What think will all if carry me you do?"

"They will think that your fool Padawan has gotten himself hurt again," he answered, for while it always looked like he carried Yoda, more often than not in the past, it had been the Force energy pulsing from the small form on his back that had given him the strength to take a single step. "After all, my Master, I am the one who is supposed to be dead."

"Hmpf. Charm a Jawa you could."

Qui-Gon smiled and helped Yoda into the carrier. A sense of stillness reached him despite the inertia dampers, telling him they'd landed as he settled his Master on his back.

When the three Jedi stepped onto the landing pad, they stopped and stared at the Temple. It looked so ... normal. Yet too much death had touched it for anything to ever be the same again. The thought sent a coldness through him, and he drew Obi-Wan close, focusing on the warmth of him. His salvation. Always. //You saved me, you know.//

//What? When?//

//Every time I felt too tired to go on. Every time this life threatened to choke the light from my soul. I'd have turned into some bitter old man long ago without you.// He smiled. //You're my hero, Obi-Wan. You always have been.//

He felt Obi-Wan's mental snort, but it was cut off as the truth of Qui-Gon's words traveled through their bond. //Really?//

//Yes. I've had to rescue you more often from physical peril, but you are the savior of my soul, my love. Never doubt that.//

Obi-Wan took his hand in his. //You are my strength, my Qui-Gon.//

//As you are mine.//

//I fear we will need much of it in the days to come.//

Qui-Gon nodded, then lifted Obi-Wan's hand up and kissed it. //We will do what me must. But we will do it together.//

//Always.//

Hand in hand, with Yoda safely in their care, the two Jedi entered the Temple.

-the end-
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