Shadows in Starlight

by Vathara

Summary

What if Obi-Wan found more than the tractor beam's location in the Death Star files?

Notes

Rurouni Kenshin, Star Wars, and the concept of Shadow Jedi don't belong to me. Nor does the "Force as duct tape" analogy. ;) The following story uses many bits and pieces of the Expanded Universe; there are other Force-users in the universe besides Jedi and Sith, and some Jedi, padawans, and younglings did, in fact, escape the Emperor's agents. This AUs a tiny bit of Revenge of the Sith, but only really takes off from canon inside the Death Star during ANH. Because I'm a shameless Obi fan. G

There are no guarantees.
From the viewpoint of fear,
None are strong enough.
From the viewpoint of love,
None are necessary. - Anonymous

See the end of the work for more notes
Chapter 1

Years before the Rebellion dared to steal plans to a weapon whispered of as the Death Star, in the rim-world star system known as the Yamato Isles, there arose a dark warrior called Hitokiri Battousai.

An amber blade from the shadows, he killed sentients like a demon, slashing away the remnants of the old Republic. The Empire took hold in his wake, welcomed for a time by people weary of the corruption and self-absorption that focused the attention of the Senate and the Jedi Knights on wealthy planets like Coruscant, ignoring the powers grinding lesser worlds like Yamato, Albion, and Tatooine into poverty and despair.

But at the height of the Empire's triumph... Battousai vanished.

And with the flow of years, became no more than another chilling legend of the Dark Side.

Now, with the Imperial Senate dissolved by Emperor Palpatine, and rumors of Princess Leia Organa's exposure as a Rebel spy just beginning to reach the distant Yamato spaceport of Tokyo...

...this story begins.

I've got to do this. Kamiya Kaoru rubbed her palms dry on her tan haori, stepping out into the foggy Tokyo streets. She ignored the whispering bites of mist-midges along her wrists and neck; her small earnings as a martial arts instructor were still enough to purchase hashima, the raw herbs that warded off Miasma Fever.

And if she didn't find the man she sought, there would be more deaths than Miasma tonight.

Hira-chan and Satou-kun say I shouldn't do this. They say I might as well just turn and work for the Imperials. They say every Guard and stormtrooper the killer takes out is one less the Alliance has to face on missions. But these aren't missions. They're murder!

I've got to do this. If he is the Hitokiri Battousai, the Force assassin... There isn't anyone else.

Kaoru swallowed back fear, indulging in one moment of self-pity. It wasn't fair. It just wasn't fair. She wasn't a Knight. She wasn't even really a padawan. Though her mother had been, and she'd passed along as much as she could, before-

Don't think about it. Remember what you're here to do. There is no emotion; there is peace.

A shaky peace, a far cry from what she could reach with meditation, but she'd take it. Kaoru drew in one slow breath, released it. Another. And another. She felt the Force trickling into her grasp, dissolving fear into calm.

There is no ignorance; there is knowledge.

Or there would be knowledge. Just as soon as she found-

Kaoru's head snapped up. What was that?

It was like a whisper, ruffling the hair of her ponytail. The barest shadow of a ripple in the Force. A
flutter along the hairs of her arms, like a ghostly butterfly's wing. Hardly even there.

It was the best lead she'd had in weeks.

She bolted around the corner, heading for the ripple, student's saber alight and glowing azure. "Hitokiri Battousai!"

Small. Slight. Long scarlet hair bound at the nape of his neck, a few darker strands fluttering against the cross-shaped scar on his cheek as he turned to face her. Travel dust had darkened his red gi and turned his hakama pale tan, settling even on the slim, familiar metal cylinder at his belt.

Lightsaber, scar, almost invisible in the Force - it's him! I can feel it.

"For two months, you have murdered at will. Now it ends!"

Violet eyes went wide. "Oro?"

Force guiding her, she leapt.

What happened next was... embarrassing.

Her blade hummed through suddenly empty air. She blinked, turned, readied herself-

Crash!

Grip on her saber loosening in shock, Kaoru stared. Do Dark Lords of the Sith trip?

"Itai..." Groaning, the redhead sat up in the wreckage of empty amberwood boxes, rubbering the back of his head.

"This... is the Hitokiri Battousai?" Kaoru said uncertainly, flicking off her saber.

"Nope." The red-haired man smiled at her; surprisingly sweet, even as it flashed canines whose length had Kaoru swiftly revising her assessment from Yamatoan human to Yamatoan, mostly human. He leaned back against the weathered wooden wall of a warehouse, brushing a few yellow splinters off his gi. "This one is but a rurouni."

A wandering swordsman, Kaoru translated, surprised. Not so much by the title; most of her father's people adored blades, despising blasters as off-world cowardice, not suited for settling disputes between warriors or clans. Certainly not that he was speaking Yamatogo; despite the Empire's best efforts, most people outside the spaceport just refused to learn Basic. But she'd rarely seen a Fireryo-blooded human willing to walk into a city where pure Fireryo clans lived, with all their ancient pride....

And she'd never heard an accent so old before.

Pale fingers picked more splinters out of red hair, wincing as a few strands caught in jagged edges. "After just arriving in town, how can a murder be my fault?"

"Then explain this!" Kaoru snatched the lightsaber from his belt, activating it in a hiss of amethyst energy. "No one out this late should be carrying a-"

The pitch caught her ear; lower, less powerful than it should be. Incredulous, she touched the blade tip to the wall above his shoulder. Pressed gingerly, then harder.

Wood darkened, slowly scorching. But did not cut.
"...A student's blade?"

"How many people could one kill with this?" he shrugged.

"...Not many," Kaoru admitted. *But he's the one. I know it. Battousai was an assassin who used the Force, and he's the only stranger I've felt the Force even twitch around since the murders started.*

*But if he was a Sith... wouldn't he have killed me by now?*

And the Sith lived for power. For hate. There was no way a Dark Lord would be picking splinters out of his clothes in an alley, covered with travel dust, patiently waiting for her to give back his blade.

*He's got to be just a sensitive. Like Dr. Gensai's granddaughters.*

There were no shortage of those on Yamato; one reason her mother had bolted here in the first place, following rumors of a planet beyond the Old Republic's borders where the Force was known as *ki*, and any skilled swordsman might have it.

*Don't be a needle in a haystack,* Kaoru remembered her mother's soft, wry voice. *Jedi tried that - and learned too late that haystacks burn, and all the Empire has to do is sift the ashes. Be a needle in a needle-stack.*

Yamato was still just a border world, after all; so long as the spaceport ran and trade flowed, the Empire had neither the inclination nor the resources to waste destroying it. Still, Imperials tended to stick together and be very, very twitchy when they did venture beyond Tokyo. Hard to have an efficient crackdown on rebellious activity when half the people you were gunning for would somehow be elsewhere when you kicked in their front door...

Blaster fire split the night, accompanied by frantic whistles. "The Guard!" Kaoru tossed the amethyst blade up, bolting toward the fight.

"Ah - hey - oro-!"

She activated her saber, too worried to realize she'd never heard the rurouni's blade hit the ground.

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*I hate this port. I hate these people. I hate this whole stinking planet!*

The graying Imperial sergeant fell back with what was left of his Guard patrol, pieces of slower patrolmen's ears and fingers sizzling on the ground. Blood dripped off the tall assassin's vibro-blade, bright as the glare of eyes from the dark helm. "You are all too weak!" the murderer growled.

*So strong - he must be the legend,* the sergeant thought, panic-stricken. *Which means we're finished. What can we do against one of the Dark Lords-?*

A shape of tan and azure leapt past him.

*The Kamiya girl!*

He'd seen her before; who hadn't? Running into their patrols every night for the past two weeks, fiercely unafraid of Imperial curfew, searching for the killer who claimed to use her family's sword-style. But she was a girl, barely seventeen; of age by this backwater planet's standards, but
not by Imperial law! She didn't truly think she could-

Her glowing saber cracked against the killer's side; she skidded to a stop, spinning to face her enemy.

Bleeding.

Smirking, the killer advanced, backing the wounded swordswoman against a house wall.

*She's going to die. And there's nothing we can do to save her-*

A red blur swept under the killer's blow, snatching the girl in a rush of displaced air.

*What in space? No one moves that fast!*

A small, redheaded Yamato youth halted yards away, a dazed Kamiya in his arms. Met the killer's eyes.

"Feh!" The murderer's wild gaze broke away from calm violet; swept the patrol, freezing them in place. "I am Hitokiri Battousai! Master of Kamiya Kasshin Ryu! And you cannot stop me!"

The shadows swallowed him.

Trembling, the Imperials gathered together, picking up their wounded comrades. Breathing hard, their leader turned toward Kamiya and her strange acquaintance, determined to get to the bottom of this once and for all-

They were gone.

*Small redhead, Yamato swordsman's outfit, worn as if he's been traveling a while, the sergeant noted on his datapad, preparing to send out a Be On the Look-out to every guard and troopers' station in Tokyo. Extremely fast, distinctive cross-shaped scar on his left cheek...*

The sergeant stopped. Stared at what he'd written. Paled.

It couldn't be. They'd *seen* the killer. With a helmet and veil, of course, so no one could see the scar of legend, but-

*The cross-shaped scar.*

But the stories said Battousai was two and a half *meters* tall, with eyes that glowed like fire and-

*Hair like flame.*

But above all, Battousai was a *Dark Lord*, not a boy, who moved and slew-

*Fast as the wind.*

It just couldn't be!

Swallowing dryly, the sergeant canceled the BOLO before it was sent. If the redhead was just a sword-student of Kamiya's, he wouldn't be hard to find. If not....

*Uramura's going to want to hear about this!*
Near the former location of Alderaan

Hands shook with chill and pure exhaustion, as a worn figure curled into a forgotten corner of the Death Star and made himself small. Too close. Sithspawn, but that was too close.

There were shouts. Blaster fire. A bone-rattling thrum of engines, as Solo's rattletrap Falcon took the opening and bolted for freedom.

He wanted to hear none of it. After all, his life depended on the hordes of very angry stormtroopers thinking of this as just one more bit of empty corridor - and an empty corridor didn't hear.

It didn't hear, and it certainly didn't feel. Not hope that the children made it clear. Not fear for their safety. Not a dark, terrifying rage at the billions of lives snuffed out like candles, simply so Grand Moff Tarkin could exult in his own power.

There is no death, there is the Force.

Known, heart and soul. But the rage made it almost untouchable. How could the man have done this? How could he?

A black boot trampling an empty brown robe halted. Turned.

An empty niche. That's all. Cold, empty metal, just like the rest of this station....

Growling like metal torn apart, a black glove snatched up a fallen lightsaber and stalked away.

And after it had gone, a figure that was certainly not empty metal moved out of the niche, still shivering.

But rage or no rage, old habits of survival were whispering awake once more. Shelter. Water. Warmth. Food.

The map of the station still lingered in his mind, and he nodded absently. There was a place. Not far from here. So long as he was careful, and quiet, he should make it.

And if I'm not... better to step into the path of a blast. I can't be caught. Not now.

Not with the Dark Side so very close.

Don't think. Don't feel. Just move. One step at a time.

You can change the universe, if you take it one step at a time.

Yamato

"Itai..." Wincing as she woke, Kaoru sat up, trying to piece together pain and sunlight and the unmistakable fact that someone had laid her out on her own futon. My gi is missing!
Or - not. Haori and gi were both resting beside her, blood washed away, cuts in the upper arm mended with fine black thread. Just as the flesh wound from the vibro-blade had been poulticed with something that smelled green and minty and a lot like Dr. Gensai's herbal simples, then gently wrapped in plain bandages.

Someone... took care of me?

Someone took my gi off!

Well. Her chest had been properly wrapped for fighting, so it wasn't as if-

Kaoru fought back a blush. Smack, don't smack; decisions, decisions....

Calm. The way of the Jedi was... calm. Not bashing helpful strangers over the head just because they'd stepped between her and her deadly foe.

Strangers? Kaoru drew in a sharp breath. The rurouni!

"No, no; I don't think we need that much," a gentle voice protested outside, trying to make itself heard over Ayame and Suzume's laughter.

Splash!

"...Oro."

Throwing on her gi, Kaoru hurried out to the engawa. The children! He- I-

"Ohayo, Kaoru-dono." A somewhat soup-dampened redhead smiled up at her, fishing a long radish out of the simmering cauldron. Three-year-old Ayame was wrinkling up her nose at various spices, yellow child's yukata dotted with bits of radish leaf, while her younger sister Suzume was gnawing on a purple carrot. "Your sisters told me it would be all right to borrow your garden for breakfast."

"They're not my sisters!" Kaoru drew in a lung-full of air to protest further, something along the lines of shouldn't be talking to strangers, don't know where he's been, not like picking up a kitten-

Space, that smells good!

Dr. Gensai's familiar presence approached, sandals soft on the path. "Did someone say breakfast?"

"Hmm... well done." Kneeling beside his patient, the elderly doctor re-wrapped Kaoru's bandages. "You've had some combat medic training?"

"This one has been on the road quite some time," Himura Kenshin smiled easily as he sat some feet away, drawing innocence around him like a cloak to hide from Dr. Gensai Ogumi's probing gaze. The man might not be ki-sensitive, unlike his young granddaughters, but time's wisdom had taught Gensai to look deeper into a soul than Kaoru might yet realize existed. "When many use vibro-blades at harvest, accidents happen."

The doctor rolled dark eyes. "You don't need to tell me about that, young man. Why, just last month during the garran fishing... they've had a good run this year, but you wouldn't know that from the way the crews go after each other on shore! One night, I had to patch up-

"Right there!" Kaoru's fist hit the tatami with a muffled thud. "He was right there, and I almost had
Kenshin hid a sigh. "Forgive this one, Kaoru-dono, but he almost had you."

She stiffened.

"A swordsman must be honest about his foe's skill and his own," Kenshin said frankly. "Surely you must know what would happen, should you face him again."

"He's right, Kaoru-chan," Gensai said soberly. "Why can't you leave this to the Guard? I know your school is suffering, but they will catch him."

"When?" Kaoru blazed. "A month from now? A year? Guards hunt down threats to the Empire first, you know that; as long as there are Rebels on Yamato, the rest of us just have to take our chances with murderers. And even if they were willing to go after him - he's Battousai. How can Imperial Guards fight the power of the Dark Side?"

How, indeed?

"It has to be me," Kaoru said, almost soundlessly. "I have to stop him."

Why you? Kenshin wondered. Assistant Master, your plaque in the dojo says. Though you do know of ki; I feel its flow around you. An odd flow, unlike any other he'd felt on this planet, drawn so heavily from the Light Side it felt pale. You have avoided the darkness in your own heart. Should you meet a true master of Darkness - I fear for you. You are not ready.

And you know it.

"Kaoru, I know your parents believed in... responsibilities," Gensai said, almost casually. "But you have one to your students as well. And those who may be your students, when they're old enough. Aggravating the authorities won't help anyone-" His glance fell on Kenshin. "Rurouni, do you mind? Call me a suspicious old grandfather, but Ayame and Suzume are being awfully quiet out there...."

Kenshin took the hint and headed outside, allowing himself to be pounced on by laughing little girls. Such bright little ki. So quick to throw open their hearts to a gentle smile, uncaring of scars or saber-callused hands.

I would I could lose myself, playing with you.

It wasn't hard, using ki to enhance your senses. Hearing, especially.

"Kaoru, you have to stop this," Gensai said soberly. "We can't all be out in the woods like Saigo-san-" 

Saigo Takamori, Kenshin concluded, tickling girlish ribs. Leader of the last doomed rebellion on this planet. So. I seek out rumors of a killer... and land amongst rebels instead.

"-We need people in the port. People like you; like me. Places like this."

Any rebellion needs medical help. And a small dojo can host travelers, or "students" who train on an irregular basis, Kenshin thought. The perfect excuse for people to be where the Imperials believe they shouldn't.

"You can't draw Imperial attention," Gensai finished. "You of all people."
Kaoru's footfalls paced the floor, agitated. "I can't let a Sith keep killing!"

*Sith?* Kenshin faltered in his ribbon tug-of-war with Ayame, landing facedown on sweet-blooming catmint. Yamato knew those who touched dark ki as sorcerers, ninja, hitokiri. The only people who called the users of the Dark Side *Sith* were-

"You're not a Knight, Kaoru!"


*Impossible!* *She's too young. Some padawans made it here, yes, that I well know - but she couldn't have even been born when Vader began his hunt. And one cannot fake that accent. She's of Yamato-*

A Yamato with an off-worlder's blue eyes. Who carried a student's saber. Like his own.

Well, not quite like his own. His had been constructed here, by his own two hands, as so many of the ancient sword-styles still taught. Hers - someone had reworked the outer casing to *seem* Yamato, but the sheen of it whispered of an off-world alloy.

*Some padawans made it here.* Kenshin let Suzume pin his ankles, thinking hard. *If one did, and passed on the teachings of Coruscant....* His hunt had suddenly taken on more urgency.

"Then if you can't wait for Sanosuke and Katsuhiro to get back into port, at least stay in tonight," Gensai pleaded. "Just for one night. So you can use a healing trance, and mend that arm."

"...You're right," Kaoru admitted at last. "I will."

Footfalls approached the engawa. "Well, I should be going," Dr. Gensai said pleasantly, walking out onto the shaded porch. "The clinic won't run itself, after all." He stepped down into his sandals, tying them on with slow deliberation. "Come along, children."

Small hands released Kenshin, hurrying after their grandfather. "Bye!"

"Bye, Rurouni-niisan!"

"Older brother?" Kenshin said under his breath.

"They're young." Kaoru smiled, then started. "Oh no! Maekawa-sensei!"

"Your teacher?" Kenshin said, deliberately clueless. Let her believe he hadn't looked over her dojo wall. "Hai, he must be late-"

"He's not late!" A small fist crashed onto his head with surprising force. "He's in his dojo!"

"Oro..." Eyes unfocused, Kenshin wobbled.

"I promised I'd help teach his students this afternoon, and I said I wouldn't go out tonight - that's the whole day! And I already told the Guard last night, and they wouldn't listen, which means I've got to go looking myself, and I couldn't last night because of that *stupid* Imperial decree on closing the gates after curfew, as if the smugglers in town hadn't carved out half a dozen other ways to leave the port-"
"Looking?" Kenshin rubbed the lump on his head.

"I've been asking some of my friends if they'd heard anything strange... There's a dojo - well, more like an ex-dojo - on the outskirts of next town over. 'Kiheikan.' An ex-samurai took it over about two months ago. A giant of a man, almost as tall as a Wookie." Blue eyes narrowed. "There aren't that many men on Yamato that tall, and skilled with swords. But I have no proof, so the Guard will do nothing... are you going somewhere?"

"Forgive, but this one must," Kenshin bowed. "You look as if you wish to meditate, and this one would be an unwelcome distraction." A very pointed, laser-edged unwelcome; inexperienced she might be, but to linger near a student of Jedi ways while she was in trance and sensitive to the slightest ripple of ki about her... he was not in the habit of taking foolish risks.

*Stop laughing at me, Shishou.*

"And this one has an errand to run. Excuse me." He bowed once more, and made a swift exit.

*Kiheikan dojo in the neighboring town,* Kenshin thought, moving through the crowded streets at a steady, ground-eating pace. Yamato natives laughed and argued in the streets, meeting, buying, selling, or just strolling to watch their fellow sentients at work and play. Off-world traders stalked or slunk with more urgency; most human, a few aliens, almost all accompanied by protocol droids or shifty-looking translators as they met, made deals, and occasionally blasted each other. A comely Fireryo female walked into a teahouse in full silken-blue kimono, butterfly-bright obi tied behind her, silver-and-black hair trailing over her shoulders and steel-ribbed fan properly before her face. A squad of stormtroopers tromped by, white helmets searching those they passed for any sign of nervousness or guilt. Kenshin ignored them, vanishing into the throng with a twist of will.

*No wonder there was nothing to find in Tokyo...*

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*Leaving the former Alderaan system*

Showered, reasonably hidden, and nestled into the warmth of some bedding filched out of the automatic dryers, a tired man lowered his empty drink-pack. *Amazing, how much attention people don't pay to just who walks through an Imperial mess hall.*

He hadn't taken any more chances than he had to; just a quick in and out to load up on the least perishable goods he could find during shift change, when the milling crowds themselves would cover one more busy soul in a filched informal uniform. He'd rather have rations, but given that rations were generally reserved for on-world use, they were kept in with other on-world supplies, such as blasters, and so, ironically, far more well-guarded than the mess hall.

This would do for now. In a few days... well, he'd see if he had a better plan by then. Right now, all he knew for certain was that he did not want to come in contact with armed guards. Not with the darkness still so close.

Though - and here dwelled further irony - that darkness was likely keeping him alive. If An- if Vader were still searching, he would be searching for light. Not another choking shroud of anger.

So much anger.
"Trust your feelings, Padawan. Even now." A blue glow shimmered into a familiar hawk nose; a wry, gently amused smile. "Just don't let them rule you."

The living man shook his head, unwilling to meet the spirit's warm gaze. "Anger is unbefitting a-"

"Anyone would be angry after what you've seen, my padawan." The spirit seemed to lean against a bulkhead, brown-robed arms crossed. "Even Yoda."

"I should go to him," the tired man breathed. "He'll be so disappointed."

"Go to Dagobah as you are now, and you will be lost," the tall spirit said sternly. "The Darkness there hides Master Yoda, but it weighs on his spirit, and even more on his body. Strong as his race are, I fear even he will not outlast it many more years." His voice softened. "No, little one. Trust in the Living Force. You know where you need to go."

The younger man couldn't suppress a tired sigh. "I know. The children-"

"Or perhaps you don't." The spirit gave him a look askance. "Think, Padawan. Why should the Emperor need to resort to such deception to find the Rebel base? It should shine like a beacon in the Force...."

"Unless there is Darkness to hide it there, as well." The living man kneaded his brows. "I can't just leave them, Master."

"No. Not yet. But you won't be able to stay." The ghostly voice lowered. "You need healing, little one. In a safer place than the middle of a revolt." A quiet laugh. "Somewhat safer, anyway."

"A backwater Outer Rim world no one's ever heard of. I wouldn't exactly call that safer."

"So you did find it." A broad smile. "I hoped you would."

"The bounty hunter's report to Grand Moff Tarkin?" A reluctant nod. "But it was so old, Master. On the list to be deleted. It can't possibly be important now-"

A ghostly brow arched.

"Attachments are forbidden," the living man muttered.

A quiet chuckle. "The entire Order was an attachment, even if none of us admitted it." A translucent hand rested on his shoulder. "Go, little one. I won't say you'll like all of what you find - but you may find more than you dared hope for."

The Force shifted, and he was gone.

Alone again in the dim-lit storage closet, the fugitive regarded the small data-crystal he'd palmed before this whole mess started, full of information most in the Death Star would consider trivial, or irrelevant. Such as the location of the tractor beam controls... and a decade-old report dragged up by an impulse, when he'd typed in the name of one left behind when he was barely a toddler. "Owen."

"Grand Moff Tarkin: CoreSec records of the individual you seek lead to a little-known system mostly frequented by smugglers, near the Ison Trade Corridor...."
Stars spangled Yamato's night sky like scattered flamegems, shining down on a dojo that had definitely seen better days.

"Hello."

Wind rustled the trees, blowing away the few mist-midges that would venture out on this clear a night.

"Hello."

And a small, travel-worn swordsman stood just outside the bamboo gate, hands folded inside the sleeves of his red gi as he waited for a response.

"Hello. Hello. Hello-"

"Spirits of space - shut up!" The gate slid open, shoved aside by an agitated, dark-haired ronin in a patterned gray kimono, toothpick clenched between his left teeth. "Who the hell are you?"

Kenshin kept his gaze innocent, guileless. "Is the sensei-?"

"Master Hiruma is out!" The ronin sneered down at him. "Come back later!"

"Ah, so his name is Master Hiruma," Kenshin nodded.

Brown eyes creased, confused. "You didn't know-?"

A faint, wry smile touched Kenshin's face. So her suspicions were right after all. Kaoru-dono is either lucky, or better trained than I thought. "This one thought his name was... 'Murderer Battousai'."

The man bit through his toothpick.

"What's up, Nishiwaki?" Footsteps, from the shadows and the dojo inside. "Who's the runt?"

At least two dozen, Kenshin saw and sensed. All ronin. All angry. Armed with staves, knives, the odd stick of heavy wood....

And swords. A host of swords. Most vibro-blades, but one or two hissed with silver and green energy. Lightsabers.

"Not even a runt," Nishiwaki grinned. "Get rid of it."

Hidden by darkness, violet eyes gleamed blue as steel.

I took too long!

Dragging his prisoner, Kenshin raced through the night, avoiding Guard patrols with casual ease.
A wall loomed before him, easily twenty feet of plascrete; he drew on ki to clear it and land in Tokyo proper, never breaking stride.

The man in his grip whimpered.

"Quiet," Kenshin ordered, controlling his contempt for one who'd planned to profit by death. His mind was already racing ahead to a glow of the Light Side, now ringed by darkness and hate. He could feel fear, so much fear; even as a terrified mind tried to find the calm and peace that would let it grasp bright power.

*She will not touch the darkness. Even to save her own life. Jedi to the last.*

Kenshin moved through the space where bamboo should have been, barely registering that Kaoru's visitors had left the gate open.

*Don't let me be too late. Please-*

"Mastery and death!" Hiruma Gohei's rough voice sneered inside the dojo. Darkness swirled through the man's ki; fed by blood and hungry for more. "That is what a sword is for!"

*She's alive.*

Gohei laughed, thick and triumphant. "Who wants to be the first to taste this chickadee's flesh?"

Coldly, Kenshin set Nishiwaki down. Inclined his head toward the screen.

Shuddering, the ronin opened it.

Darkness hesitated inside, surprised. "Nishiwaki?"

"I'm... sorry, boss..." White-faced, Nishiwaki collapsed.

Expressionless, Kenshin stood in the doorway, taking in the startled mob facing him. *No bruises. No broken bones. She didn't get one blow in against them.* Even a fully-trained Jedi would have had difficulty facing down three dozen ronin, but he would have expected some injuries.

*One soot mark on Gohei's left glove. Lightsaber... there, in the corner. Casing's damaged.* Ki swirled unbidden around him, the Light Side trying to help its student by blazing the scene into his mind.

*Swaggering at the front of his men, Gohei breaches the peace of the dojo. Cracked cup of tea discarded at her side, Kaoru rises from her meditation, arm half-healed; trying, as Jedi ever try, to negotiate.*

*Gohei slashes down, laughing.*

*Kaoru blocks, strikes - only to have her blade caught by a gloved hand; ametrine leather, like Gohei's cuirass, chestnut gleaming with hints of green and violet. The tanned skin of a wily Yamato forest-dweller, usually only seen in samurai gear, and rarely if ever exported off-planet.*

*Ametrine resists even a true lightsaber's blow. Kaoru's blade barely sears it.*

*Gohei yanks the saber from her weaker grip, deactivating it with one slash of his vibro-blade, and tosses it away like a used tissue. The murderer switches his blade to his left hand, using his right to snatch Kaoru into the air. Holds her, speaking of blood and darkness, eyes lingering on her bound chest with a fire of tainted lust...*
Blue eyes met his, fear pierced with surprise. "Rurouni...!"

"Forgive my lateness." Kenshin stepped onto the polished floor, sandals barely stirring the dust brought in by so many unwashed feet. "He told me everything."

Everything, babbling in the night as they ran. From Hiruma's first glimpse of a young dojo-master speaking with known rebels, to hatching the plan to murder innocents and Imperials alike, driving off Kaoru's students and turning both Empire and neighbors against her. A plan they'd meant to finish tonight, slaying her and claiming her dojo as reward for killing a rebel spy.

_Poised here, on the edge of Tokyo, this dojo is perfectly placed. For a rebel... or a trader in degradation, dealing in flesh, and drugs, and misery. They would make this land a pit of darkness._

_And whether they know it or not, killing her would choke the light here as sure as if they were Sith._

"You again," Gohei growled. "You here to talk about the 'swords that give life', too?"

"...No," Kenshin said softly.

Kaoru flinched.

"A lightsaber is a weapon," the rurouni said evenly, eyes lowered, stepping forward with a slow, measured pace. "Call it ki, or the Force; call the user hitokiri, samurai, Sith, Jedi... the art of swordsmanship is learning how to kill."

Confusion roiled through bloodlust. At the edges of the crowd, where Gohei couldn't see, Kenshin sensed men drawing back.

"She has never bloodied her hands," the rurouni went on. "To dare to wield a sword - to _protect_, and never kill - that is sweet and innocent talk even the most gentle Jedi would not have believed."

Gohei's sneer bared ivory teeth. "Rurouni...." Kaoru whispered.

"But in the face of such selfish darkness," Kenshin looked up, and smiled, "I much prefer the hope for light of Kaoru-dono's sweet and innocent talk, that I do."

Blue eyes widened.

"If this one had but one wish..." _Careful now. Keep moving slowly. Keep them off balance._ "It would only be that the best of her ways became the truth of the universe once more."

Yes; now the whispers were beginning.

"...What the hell's he talking about?..."

"...Jedi?..."

"...No way; those child-stealers never came here!..."

"...Vader killed 'em all, anyway... one good thing the Empire did...."

"He's boring me, boys!" Gohei turned back to his captive, leering. "Kill him."

Tears glimmered in Kaoru's eyes. "Rurouni, please - run!"

Kenshin's hand lowered near his saber. "This one would prefer not to hurt any more people this
night. Anyone who does not wish to visit the hospital, please leave. Now."

"Nobody's gonna get hurt!" A ronin snickered as the mob swarmed closer. "Somebody's gonna get dead!"

As you wish.

Calm within him, Kenshin charged.

"So fast!"

As if from a distance, Kaoru felt her captor's grip on her collar slacken with surprise. Vibro-blades had whined, plunged forward-

And the lightsaber snapped into the rurouni's hand, singing to life. Not violet. Blazing, steely blue.

Four leaped at him. Four fell back as if blasted by a whirlwind, vibro-blades a ringing fall of alloy pieces.

That's not a student's blade!

Red blurred through the mob of ronin, scarlet hair flying, violet eyes set and angry. Blades and bodies flew.

"Sorcery!" Gohei gasped.

Not sorcery; speed! Kaoru realized. She called on what little Force Sight she'd managed to train, and blinked back tears at the blaze of power. Speed of sword and body; speed at reading the flow of the Force, of seeing what-would-be before it is, so he's always one step ahead of them....

The speed of a Jedi!

The ronin were down, weapons shattered and useless. The redhead stood with his back to the two left standing, lightsaber humming in his left hand, breath slowing. "Oh. One thing...."

I can get loose, Kaoru realized, gingerly easing her gi out of gloved fingers. If Gohei stays distracted just a minute more-

The rurouni turned toward them, violet eyes narrowed, glinting with hints of blue steel. "Hitokiri Battousai doesn't use Kamiya Kasshin Ryu, or whatever you've pieced together from true sword-masters. He uses an ancient style, born when a Jedi of the Old Republic was first lost on our planet in the Sengoku era... Hiten Mitsurugi Ryu." The lightsaber glowed, a finger's breadth from the redhead's shoulder as he watched them. "Did ki not restrain the blade's power, the body count would increase tenfold."

Shock hit Kaoru like a stunbolt. No.

The man who'd saved her life. The gentle soul who'd cooked her breakfast, played with Ayame and Suzume, bound her wounds...

...Who'd believed in her....

A tear fell from her eyes. "You... are the Hitokiri Battousai?"
"Ha!" Gohei threw her aside; Kaoru winced, feeling the impact reopen her slashed arm. "I thought you were just some rag-tag wanderer last night. Not even worth fighting. Too bad!"

"Indeed," the redhead said evenly. "Unlike you, this one doesn't care for violence. If only I had faced you earlier."

"You're confident - or just vain." Gohei's lips curled as he glanced toward the groaning bodies on the floor. "No one's dead! Whatever you're using, it can't be a lightsaber."

*But it is*, Kaoru knew, fingers almost touching a shard of slashed vibro-blade. *Mother said once - there was a crèche story about an old Jedi technique. A legend, lost centuries ago... a way to use the Force to cushion the strike, so a master could slash through armor, but do no more damage to a living soul than a student's blade.*

"I am the only Battousai!" Vibro-blade humming, Gohei struck down.

Battousai was gone.

"*Over here.*"

Listening to her feelings, Kaoru looked up a fraction of a second before Gohei; gaze catching the moment that the swordsman reached the top of a twenty-foot leap, and came hurtling back down.

And for one heart-stopping instant, both eyes and blade gleamed amber.

Striking his armored shoulder like a thunderbolt, the lightsaber drove Gohei head-first through her dojo floor.

"I have no love of the name *Battousai*," the rurouni said into the sudden silence, switching off his blade. "But I can't allow the likes of you to wear it."

*I could run*, Kaoru thought, struggling to her feet. *I could call Sano's contacts, tell them I caught the assassin the Rebellion's sought for years; he's got to be exhausted after that, enough of us could take him. I could-*

"Forgive this one, Kaoru-dono." Violet met her gaze with a gentle, sad smile. "I did not mean to lie, but... it is usually better if some things are not known."

*Not known? But - he was honored by the Empire! Some of them still call him a hero-*

"Farewell." With another old-fashioned, formal bow, he turned to go. Ten feet from the door.

"W-wait...." Kaoru managed.

Five feet.

"Y-you-"

Three.

"You jerk!"

He froze.

Kaoru held a hand against her reddening bandage, trying to tell herself it was only the pain bringing tears to her eyes. "Do you think you can tear up my dojo, leave me with a lightsaber I might not be
able to fix, and just walk away?"

"Um..." Was it her imagination, or was the man actually starting to sweat?

"You told me I couldn't face him," Kaoru said sharply. "You were right. And he wasn't - wasn't even a Sith...." Oh space, but that hurt. She'd tried, oh she'd tried. But I don't know enough. I just don't. "You say you believe in what the Kasshin style's trying to do. Help me."

"This one's help would not be good for you," the rurouni said, hand on the sliding door. "Not you, nor any Jedi. This one is... not of the Light, but of Shadow. Now and always. You know who I am-
"

"I don't care who you used to be!"

Violet went wide. "Oro?"

She brandished sliced blade-alloy almost under his nose. "This! The gentle blow. The technique you can use only if you don't want to kill!"

Speechless, he watched her cast it aside.

"I don't know how you fell into the Darkness, and I don't care," Kaoru said fiercely. "You got out. I'm not asking Battousai to stay! I'm asking you, the rurouni, to...."

The wanderer. No.

She whirled away, heart aching. "Forget it! If you want to go-
"

A soft step of sandal.

"But... you could at least tell me your name," Kaoru said, trying to sound strong past the sudden lump in her throat. "Your real name, not the Sith assassin's-

The door rattled closed.

Gone.

"Kenshin."

Wha-? Kaoru whirled.

"Himura Kenshin." The rurouni leaned slightly against the junction of wall and door, a shy smile on his face. "That is my name... today."

He's....

"This one has been wandering a long time. It could be that the currents of time will set this one adrift again, soon... but perhaps you would not mind my intrusion. For a little while."

Kaoru swallowed back tears. He's staying. Another Force-user. Someone who understands me. Even if it's just for a little while-

A groan from the floor caught her attention. "Um...."

Mischief glimmered in his gaze as Kenshin retrieved her lightsaber, offering his own in its stead. "If Kaoru-dono allowed this one to sit quietly elsewhere - perhaps in a storeroom? - it would be
quite easy to com the Guard, this one would think."

Kaoru took the Yamato-crafted lightsaber with reluctance. "I've never handled a full-power blade." She thumbed the switch to ignite - and blinked at a blade once again violet and innocent.

"There is a certain twist of will and ki that shifts the blade's strength," Kenshin said matter-of-factly. "You will not trigger it by accident, that you will not."

"Stellar!" Kaoru breathed. And blushed. "Um-

"It is technology. Not Light, or Dark, or Shadow. One would have no qualms teaching that." Bowing, he headed for her storehouse.

"Wait a minute!"

Halfway out the door, he stopped. "Oro?"

"If you were fighting when the Empire took power - just how old are you?" He can't be forty! He barely looks older than I am! Though her mother had said that masters strong in the Force could live a long, long time....

"How old, indeed." Thoughtfully, Kenshin started counting on his fingers.

"You don't even know your own age?!"

For the first time since she'd met him, Kenshin grinned.

Nearing Yavin

The fugitive rubbed absently at the data-crystal in his pocket, mulling over the report's scant facts yet again as he made his roundabout way through busy corridors to the shuttle pilots' locker room. Outer Rim world, the bounty hunter had written of the place his quarry had gone to ground. Few imports, some small-scale luxury exports, mostly to Zeltros; kinu cloth, erotic woodblock prints, various medicinal herbs and intoxicants, others. Contacted by the Republic less than a century ago, yet archaeological evidence indicates it may have been settled over three thousand years ago, in the wake of the War of the Star Forge.

Or as certain dwellers on Coruscant would have put it, in the wake of the Second Sith War. One of the first Jedi Purges in recorded history, if his memory of the Archives was right; a slaughter of Force-sensitives that had shaken him to read, even as he'd so blithely assured himself nothing like it could ever happen again....

And then had come Palpatine.

Don't think about it.

Better to think of the pair who had been the main archaeologists gathering that evidence; a Corellian woman named Sain, identified in CorSec's reports as ship-married to one Mori, who'd put his ancestry on record as mongrel, born in space somewhere on the Trade Spine, who cares?
Sain and Mori-

No. Don't think of that name.

Reading between the lines, they'd spent decades on that little backwater world, excavating on one of its great grasslands. Long enough to have two sons; the older named Owen, the younger....

He shook his head, catching sight of his own wry smile in a corridor panel whose mirror-bright gloss grumbled that cleaning it - with a dental brush, no less - had been a punishment detail. A smile no longer hidden by a beard, given the clean-shaven militants he was hiding among... nor by the Force-cast illusion of age.

That illusion had been necessary for another Owen, to allow its wearer as close to the boy he guarded as he'd been allowed to come. Fringers knew how harsh life was on their untamed worlds. It would never do to spend near two decades among them and seem untouched by time.

Yet he had been. Force alone knew why.

The Living Force, most likely; taking a cruel revenge for all those times he'd ignored his Master's pleas to heed it, in favor of the Unifying Force, and the Council's will. A Council that had wished to wait, negotiate, and follow its visions; visions that had been fatally clouded by the darkness, when acting might have saved them-

*Might have,* he reminded himself. *Palpatine fooled us all. And the Force does not take revenge. You are needed, so you live.*

Still. It was a particular flavor of hell, to wake each day and know his people - his family - were gone; and unlike Yoda, he did not even have the hope of time bearing him after them.

Yet if this report were accurate, some of his original family might yet live.

*If,* he reminded himself sternly. *We were - Owen was orphaned well over half a century ago, on the planet. And that's all the report found.* The bounty hunter might well have meant to dig deeper, but an Imperial Security addendum stated his corpse had been delivered back to the Tokyo spaceport in thirty-seven news-flimsy bundles, and if the Grand Moff cared to know something Security could not find for him, would he be so thoughtful as to hire someone who had better sense than to bandy about the word *Jedi?* Yamatoans apparently tended to carry vibro-blades, stalk in angry mobs, and froth at the mouth at the very mention of the so-called child-stealers like a pack of rabid *vornskr.*

*And this is supposed to be a quieter place, Master?*

Well. Given it looked as though they might be heading to Yavin IV, where the Massassi Temple still held Dark traces of the ancient Sith Lord Exar Kun - yes, a few raving mobs *would* be easier to handle.

*Later,* he told himself firmly. *Right now - I'm calm enough to think, so I'd better get to it. Fast.*

The children had escaped, after all - which had been the entire point of distracting Vader. For him. But *not* for them. So far as that young firebrand Leia was concerned, his sacrifice had been utterly and only for the Rebellion, so that the Death Star plans could finally make it into Alliance hands.

*So like her mother.*

And if the plans had made it - which, given the *Falcon* hadn't shaken itself to pieces in hyperspace, they should have by now - one of two outcomes could happen. Either there was no weakness to be
found, and the Rebellion would be evacuating Yavin IV with every rattletrap excuse for a ship they could find-

Or there was. Which meant the denizens of this station were about to get a sudden, and likely fatal, surprise.

Either way, he had to get off this metal rock.

Because I am calming down, he thought wryly. Oh, the anger was still there, just as it had been decades before, after he'd seen his own master cut down by a Sith saber. But it was manageable now. Mostly. And the calmer I am, the more Light drifts in about me in this Dark-haunted station... and the more likely it is Vader will land on me with a whole battalion of troopers.

He only hoped he was calm enough to carry out his plan. He was sick of death... and the Dark Side was still far too close for comfort.

Release the fear, he told himself gently as he stepped through the door into the locker room, reaching out with his feelings once more to be certain he'd timed it right, and there was only one straggler left behind. After all, if all goes well, you'll be saving his life.

Not that he's going to thank you for it....

"On your way to your station?"

Lieutenant Per Latten nearly banged his head on the bottom of his locker shelf at the sudden, strange voice. Granted, there were too many people on board for anyone to know them all, but so far as he was aware, Coruscant natives weren't usually trusted enough in the Imperial Forces to gain high rank, much less be posted to a secret project like this one! And that was definitely a Coruscanti accent, even if it did seem sand-papered at the edges by time on the rougher worlds of Huttspase.

Relax, Per, the pilot told himself, hunting around for the last bits of his gear. Yeah, we had those crazy Rebels running around here a few shifts back, but they're long gone. Nobody would make it into this section who wasn't authorized. "Aren't we all?" he grumbled. "Don't see what the point is; if we handle this place the way we did Alderaan, they're not going to need shuttles going down...." He shivered.

"You didn't like what happened."

"Space, no!" He'd heard some of the bridge crew boasting in the mess a while back. It gave him chills. "I mean, I know they were building these secret weapons bases in the capital - but Stars' End, isn't that what infantry's for?" He took his hand out of his locker just long enough to wave a warning finger. "You didn't hear that from me." Come on, come on, clip-light- Ah! There!


"Lie?" Last bits of gear in hand and pockets, Per backed out of his locker and swung it closed with a handy elbow. "Listen, I don't know where you were posted last, buddy, but word of warning? Moff Tarkin doesn't let sedition like that slide. So unless you want to get shipped off to Kessel-"

"You don't need to worry about it." The stranger smiled wryly at him, hand making a small, odd
gesture. "Believe me, Kessel would be the last place they'd send me."

"I don't need to worry about it," Per said blankly. Which... part of him registered was odd. After all, the stranger's auburn hair was cut short, but not regulation-length, quite. The ship maintenance uniform fit, but loosely; since when were Imperial soldiers underweight? And the eyes... those oddly compelling, sea-blue eyes....

Too old for the face. Old in the way the most experienced instructors back at the Academy had been old; haunted by death and horror their innocent cadets could never imagine.

"You're a little worried about something inside your craft," the stranger went on, eyes holding his, "and since there will be time before launch, you asked me to look it over."

"I asked you to look it over...."

"We're old friends who haven't seen each other in a while."

"Old friends...?"

"You have a stronger will than you know," the stranger mused, crossing the distance between them. "I'm Ben. And you are?"

"Per Latten," the pilot said dazedly. Absently, he knew he really should be reaching for a blaster. Or at least his survival knife. "Wait - what are you-?"

"This shouldn't hurt," Ben said softly, pressing light fingers against his temples. "I hope."

The world faded.

Easy, young man. I don't mean you harm, you can feel that. Which means you truly don't need those alarms going off in your head, hmm? So let me mute them, only for a little while... Well, well. Luck seems to run with you sometimes, does it? Just as well I'm taking you out of this. Vader's temper cannot be good of late, and sooner or later he would sense that little flicker within you....

Per blinked, oddly convinced he'd missed something important. "Ben, what-?"

"I said, we have to get moving before your commander notices we're later than usual," the ragged maintenance tech repeated patiently. "What have I told you about jet juice the night before a mission?"

"Hey! Not my fault they decided to call an emergency...."

Bickering amicably, Per followed his old friend through the bustle to the shuttle hangar. Of all the luck; to run into Ben, here? And what timing! He'd really wanted to get that odd little flutter in the starboard sensor controls looked at before the next on-world mission.

Still. He couldn't help the nagging feeling that he was missing something....

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Tokyo
"Another day, another bribed customs official," Sagara Sanosuke grinned, knocking at Kaoru's gate. Just in case. Never knew when a stray bokken might come sailing nose-ward out of a dojo, especially when it was this dojo. The smuggler re-balanced his pack of various off-world goodies on his shoulder; Kaoru might not approve of flouting Imperial law just because, but she didn't object to him spreading a little goodwill in the neighborhood. Especially when goodwill came in the form of medicines, thermal capes, and scrounged bits of inner-world tech. "Sure you're not gonna come in for lunch?"

Tsukioka Katsuhiro gave him a wry, dour look; about as close to smiling as Katsu ever got. Already his fellow smuggler had the slightly distant look which meant Katsu was working out how to transform the bits of rumor, fact, Rebel and Imperial propaganda they'd picked up on their run into the next issue of the Meiji Inter-world Dispatch. "Do I look suicidal?"

"You just say that 'cause the last soup turned you green."

Katsu didn't bother denying it. "See you back at the Sekihoutai." He paused. "I hope."

"Coward," Sano grumbled, opening the gate to saunter inside. "So it's burned. And off-spiced. And too bland on top of that. It's still food."

Weird. The air sure didn't smell like burnt rice. More like the green growing things from Kaoru's garden, and a clean scent of- laundry soap?

Slush. Smush. Splash.

Huh. Gensai run short on bandages, or something? Sano wondered. Kaoru's not usually washing stuff at this hour of day. "Hey, K-"

Washtub. Gi and yukata in the wash. Small, slight figure bent over and scrubbing.

Only the long hair tied back in a kendo ponytail was red, not blue-black.

Suspicion thrummed through Sano's veins. That's it, they must have caught her, I told her not to get mixed up with Saigo's people! "Who the hell are you?"

"One is a rurouni." The young man didn't look up, voice light and cheerful. "Are you looking for Kaoru-dono?"

Gwahuh? Sano thought intelligently. Red hair means off-worlder, but - samurai outfit, even if it saw better days years ago - and if that accent's not straight out of some hole in the backwoods that's never even seen a speeder, I'll eat a motivator. What the hell-?

Wait. Is that hair two shades of red?

Subtle, but there; swathes of lighter red strands, broken up by thinner strokes of darker crimson, giving the whole a fiery life he'd never seen on an off-world head. And that ever-so-faint hint of gold to pale skin....

I'll be damned. Fireryo blood, but not Fireryo. Meaning somebody way back married out into humans, and never had a chance to marry back in... real backwoods samurai. Where the hell did Kaoru dig you up?

"Sano!" The troublemaker herself hurried out of the dojo, sweaty and happy and-

"You got hurt!" Sano stopped just on the first step up, oddly conscious of the rurouni's raised brow.
"This?" Kaoru waved a hand near the bandage bulking up her sleeve. "It's all right, really. It was days ago, I should really be taking it off today... We got him!"

_Him? Him who?_ Sano wondered. Then smacked himself. Who, indeed. Who else would Kaoru risk taking a knife to catch? "We?"

"Oh, right... Sagara Sanosuke, this is Himura Kenshin." Kaoru smiled at the redhead. "He's staying here for a while."

"He's what?" Pure, big-brother type protective instinct had Sano whirling on the little guy, suds and all, hand closing on the grip of his blaster-

And missing.

The familiar weapon was no longer in his thigh holster, but instead floating in mid-air between them, muzzle pointing safely at the ground.

_Kuso! Samurai, all right, Sano realized. Old school, no less. Didn't know any of 'em still risked coming into Tokyo - those damn stormtroopers tend to shoot first and ask questions of the smoldering wreck later when somebody shows off _ki_. Well, I've seen that trick before-

His blaster shivered a little, and- clicked apart.

Standing, Kenshin caught the pieces in cupped hands, careful not to get soap on the blaster's inner workings. "Dangerous, these are."

Sano blinked. Twice. _Hell. I haven't seen that one before._

The redhead set the disassembled blaster on the engawa, regarding Sano with a calm gaze. "Has this one done something to offend, Sagara-san?" A hint of pure mischief glimmered in violet. "Or was Customs unusually efficient today?"

"How did-" Sano cut the words off, glaring down at the smaller man. Blaster, tough boots for stalking the soil of a hundred other planets, black jacket with a defiant white _aku_ on the back - even Sano would admit it was pretty obvious he was a spacer. And granted, the line between independent trader and smuggler got redrawn every time local Impies took it into their head to tax something else. But for this little _ki_-strong _twerp_ of a samurai to assume a sweet young miss like Jou-chan was automatically mixed up with a smuggler - well, it grated. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Definite mischief in violet, as the redhead gestured at the tied-back sleeves of his red gi. "One would think that would be obvious, that one would."

"Samurai don't do laundry," Sano said flatly.

"Sano!" Kaoru hissed.

"It's all right, Kaoru-dono; that it is. Those who hold to honorable names among our people are rarely found in the humbler tasks, so many of them being drawn into the vast dance of politics that now rules our world. But this one is only a _rurouni_, whose skill for dealing with the great and powerful is frail and clumsy as a noodle-maker granted a sushi knife. So one must get by the best one can, that one does." Bowing slightly, he turned back toward the tub.
"He's got to be kidding," Sano said in a flat undertone, stepping near enough to Kaoru that casual ears wouldn't catch it. "Nobody that good is just wandering around doing odd jobs." He bent a scowl on the young dojo-master, dropping his voice even lower. "Damn it, if Saigo's foisted him off on you to spy around here-"

"He's... not with Saigo." The blue gaze shifted guiltily away from his.

*Kaoru can't lie worth a damn, Sano thought wryly. Which means he really isn't with that Rebel lunatic. But something's up with this guy. "Jou-chan. What's going on?" Replaying a bit of their conversation in his head, he frowned. "And what do you mean, we caught him? Why'd a guy like this risk helping you out with an assassin like Battousai?"

"He wasn't Battousai."

"Yeah, right; like that kid would know?" Sano said skeptically. "Which reminds me; Katsu and I did some poking, and you'd better have a talk to some of your contacts. Most of the guys who ever saw the assassin didn't survive to make a report, but rumor has it he worked straight for Katsuza Kogorou - not just killing people, but as a bodyguard. And Katsuza had plenty of meets with Okubo and Saigo before the Impies took over and he croaked. Okubo's a damn lost cause, but Saigo ought to be able to get you a better description than Wookie-tall, blood-red hair, and a cross-shaped scar-"

*Oh. Hell.*

Sano didn't think; just moved.

His punch hit air; suds sloshed, absent their stirrer. Sano didn't take the time to swear, just turned and swung again, where a blur of red had been-

"One has no wish to fight you."

Almost in the tub, Sano took a second to regroup, studying the rurouni with fresh eyes. Small, yes; but under the damp gi, wiry as Kaoru herself. Red hair. Cross-shaped scar on his left cheek, white slashes just touched with Fireryo silver, like snow in moonlight. A well-used lightsaber clipped to his obi, built in a style even Sano could see was far older than any other blade in Tokyo.

And for all his young looks, violet eyes were deep and ancient as twilight.

Sano swallowed dryly, determined not to let the shiver down his spine be visible. "Hitokiri Battousai."

"That name died on the field of Toba Fushimi," the redhead said levelly. "This one is only a rurouni, adrift in the winds of time."

"Name, maybe," Sano shrugged. "But I hear Takamori's got a reward on your head. With or without the rest of you attached-"

Mind carefully blank of intent, Sano moved.

*Over Yavin IV*
"Son of a Hutt-" Per Latten banged three dials in succession, gripping the shuttle controls tight as the magnetic field tried to throw them right back through the Death Star's hull. With or without a docking bay there to catch them. "What the hell are we doing out here?" Vaguely he recalled blasters, yelled orders, taking off just before a flight of TIE fighters-

_I took off. Without orders?_

But Ben had made it sound like a _really good_ idea... even as he'd blanched in the copilot's chair, and muttered something about flying being for droids.

_Oh, space. The commander's gonna kill me!_

Assuming the Rebels didn't do it first. How many X-wings were there up here, anyway?

Something blew off their upper port side, and Per flinched. One less, looked like.

Well. He was in the dogfight, like it or not. Technically he ought to join his fellow pilots and kick Rebel jets all over what was about to be left of this system.

"_Weapons bases on Alderaan. The planet of peace. Make the lie big enough, and anyone will believe it._"

But... his commanding officers had said....

A tower blew on the Death Star's surface, and Per automatically rolled them out of the trajectory of flung debris, hands setting a course for Anywhere But Here. _Hell with it - this is a shuttle, not a fighter! I'm getting out of here!_

Now if he could only figure out how he'd gotten out here in the first place-

"_Use the Force, Luke...._"

_Say what?_

_"Let go, Luke...."_

That voice. That same Coruscanti accent that had caught him in the locker room; that had _held_ part of him, in a way he couldn't describe; a hold that was only now loosening from his mind as the voice reached out to... somewhere else.

"Luke... trust your feelings."

Per stared at the worn, thin stranger in the copilot's seat, suddenly aware he'd never seen this man before today. "What in blazes are you?"

Blue-green eyes blinked; cleared, giving him a wry glance. "I suggest we vacate this part of space, Pilot Latten. Things are about to get _very_ interesting."

"No way." Per said flatly, turning the controls for home base. "I don't know who you are, or how you did that, but anybody who turns as green as you did just blasting off is _not_ flying this ship without me-"

Which was about when a whole asteroid belt seemed to fall on his head.
"How many fingers am I holding up?"

Leaning back against the engawa step, Sano blinked, taking in the light fragrance of jasmine and soap that hung around Kaoru's worried blue eyes. "Tuwoo... tree...?"

Kaoru groaned. "Wait right here, I'm going to get Dr. Gensai-"

"Nuh-uh." Sano blinked again, trying to sort out just why Jou-chan sounded worried and exasperated all at once. That was his line....

At least, that **had** been his line, before some jerk with a grudge had pounded him good with a planet-sized meat tenderizer. Now, how had somebody snuck that up on him?

Red blew in the wind in the corner of his eye; a slight, violet-eyed figure bowing humbly. "One will find him for you, Kaoru-dono."

Red hair, Sano registered. Red gi. Red that could be an unseen blur when it felt like it. "You... stay **right there**."

"Oro?"

**Translation: I'm an innocent, gullible backwoods type who doesn't even know which end of a lightsaber has the switch on it,** Sano thought wryly. **Yeah, right.**

More of the fight was filtering back now. Such as it was. Some samurai could read thoughts, so he **hadn't** thought. Just let trained muscles do what they had to, kicking and punching and doing his level best to grind the little bastard into a red pile of mush.

And not one punch had landed. None had even come close.

Himura had just been a feather-leaf in the wind, a paper's-width away from every blow. Empty-handed, he'd let Sano chase him around the courtyard half a minute, then **vanished** - to swoop down out of the sun with an activated violet blade that hit like the durasteel bar from Hell.

Sano had shaken that off, barely; stalked after the redhead with murder in his eyes-

Only to have his breath blasted from his lungs by the little swordsman's rapid-strike, pounding ribs, organs, and what felt like every square inch of his torso like a mustang dragonmount with a frenzy-weed hangover.

**Ow.**

He'd still stood after that, shaking, glaring, ready to give it one last shot....

Which was when Himura had switched off the lightsaber. Clipped it back to his obi. Given his opponent a **look**, the way Captain Sagara had when a much younger Sano had pulled a little kid's stubbornness over good sense-

Sano winced now, and rubbed his aching jaw. **Ki or not - who'd have thought a little guy like that could punch so hard?**
Kaoru growled something under her breath, obviously restraining an impulse to add her own lump to his collection. "Scorch it, Sano; you're hurt! You need a-

"Why?" Sano bit out. Why are you here? Why's Kaoru defending you?

Why didn't you kill me?

"Do you remember life under the Shogunate, Sano-san?" Deep in violet eyes, steel-blue flickered. "Under the Republic, who allowed the Shogunate to rule this world, as it had for centuries? For such, they said, was the will of the people... or at least, of the people they believed mattered."

Sano bristled. "I heard about it-

"But you do not know."

"Space, no! I wasn't even born when-

"When the Supreme Councilor became Emperor, and those on this planet such as Okubo, Katsura, and Saigo, who had invoked his name for almost a decade before and during the Clone Wars as they fought to bring freedom to those not samurai, finally destroyed the Shogunate." A wry wisp of a smile. "To install an Empire in its stead."

"Whoa... wait a...." Sano swung his head toward Kaoru, looking for the denial in her eyes. There wasn't any.

It can't be true. "But... the Republic believed in freedom!"

"Many in the Republic believed in it," Kenshin agreed, dipping his head. "Yet if they had truly believed their own ideals, why did they not let the Separatists go, and only fight to defend those planets who did not wish to be forced to join them?"

"How should I know?" Sano growled. "I'm not a fricking intergalactic historian-

"Ignore the galaxy." Steel slipped into that gentle voice. "Learn of Yamato. Where the Republic allowed the Shogunate to rule, because that was the government who held power when their traders found us. A government where justice was bought by birth and power; where those of your blood would never have the right to bear a family name. A government that allowed murder, corruption, slavery...."

"Oh, like that's any different from the Empire?" Sano blazed.

A slight, red nod. "Indeed."

And that hit harder than any punch.

He's saying... but I know Rebels, they're like Kaoru. A little idealistic, maybe, but they just want something better than what we've got now. And the Imperialists - they can't have been like that....

Except Saigo had been an Imperialist. And now he was a Rebel. And before his untimely death, Katsura had been helping him.

But they just can't have been! Because if they were, that would mean Battousai is like Kaoru, and that would mean-

Samurai, ninja, hitokiri, sorcerers - ki-users were ki-users. Legend said some were gentle and kind
so long as they lived, yet evil and pain might push anyone over the edge. And most ironic of all, legend said, it was usually the gentlest hearts who fell into the deepest darkness.

_Kaoru_

"One does not say," Himura went on softly, "that what we... what I did, was right. It was not. Yet we tried. We _tried_ to create freedom from slavery. Equality where there had only been power. Justice where we saw only lies. _That_ revolution has not ended."

_Say what?_

"It is true that twenty years ago the fighting stopped, and a new order was installed. Yet those of us who desire a better world still find ourselves trapped in a galaxy where the weak are exploited." Himura's hands spread, open and empty. "And whether it will be a year, or ten, or an eternity before a true Revolution is complete, none can say. For now, this one can only wander, using this blade to protect those who are in need. A small thing, that it is; done by one unworthy of the peace you have found in your own heart, aiding the Rebellion. Yet it is the only way this one can atone for those lives taken by the Revolution. Lives taken by... Hitokiri Battousai."

_Peace? Star's End, I'm not peaceful - I'm ticked as hell! Kaoru's the one who's peaceful, and she drives me right up the wall worrying... and an assassin, atone? Yeah, right. And I've got a nice piece of marsh to sell-_ Sano sneaked a glance at Kaoru. Who gave him a raised, impatient brow in return.

_Sithspit. He's telling the truth?_

Great. _Now_ what should he do? It'd be one thing to let a guy with a story like that just walk on by on the road, or in a busy port - but this guy was staying with Kaoru! Talk about your living examples of what _not_ to do with ki-

_And maybe that's just what she needs, _Sano realized. _She's the swords expert, you're not. She's got Maekawa to show her some of what she should do; maybe she needs to see some of what you don't do, and why. Don't the formal sword-styles do something like that for people who want to make master? Trials, or something._

_Okay, Kaoru. I still think you need your head examined more than I do - but you want him, you got him._ Sano fixed a glare on the redhead. "Words are cheap."

A red brow went up.

"If Kaoru's not turning you in, I'm not going to," Sano said flatly. "But if you say you're not him any more - you stick around and _prove_ it."

"Oro?"

"You heard me." Slow and painful, Sano got to his feet. "You say you're not like those other Imperialists? Fine. I want to see it. So don't you go wandering off again without my permission... Kenshin."

"Come on, come on, we've got to get going." Katsu muttered under his breath, batting away a late-night mist-midge as he ran the last of the _Sekihoutai's_ pre-flight checks. "I don't care if she does feed you for free; it's not worth two weeks of food poisoning..."
"Hey, Katsu!"

The dour smuggler dropped down onto the entrance ramp, taking a quick glance around the shadowed hangar before he went eye to eye with his partner. His bruised partner. "One day. I leave you alone in port one day."

Sano grinned, walking in just a little stiffer than usual. The regular port rats probably hadn't noticed a thing. "You should see the other guy."

Katsu tried not to roll his eyes. "I know, Sano, I know...."

"No, really; you should see the other guy." Sano's smile turned serious as he held his hand out palm-down, roughly chest-high. "Little redhead, only about this tall... Who's she?"

Katsu turned in time to catch a glimpse of long dark hair as Takani Megumi vanished back into the shadows of the Sekihoutai. "Pay-as-you-go passenger."

"Katsu!"

"Not like that!" Katsu defended himself. "Come on, Sano, you know me better than that." Though stars knew, there had been some hungry times when even that trade had looked a little tempting. Better hungry than without a soul. "She says she's a medic. Where we're going, they could probably use one."

Sano frowned, taking in the fact that nearly all of their stuff had already been stored back onboard. "And where are we going?"

"Oh, here, there...." Ask when we're in space, Katsu's shrug said plainly. "Deal's good, cargo should be just about here - only sticking point is, we've got to get it moving tonight."

Sano crossed his arms. "And the cargo is...?"

Katsu stepped near enough to whisper in his ear, then leaned back and raised a dark brow. From the look of him, Sano didn't know whether to gulp or drool first. "Sweet. But - us?"

"Making friends in the area pays off," Katsu smirked. Not that Sano helped out around Kaoru's neighborhood with good PR in mind. For such a tough fighter, his partner had a surprising soft spot for those not quite able to claw their way into prosperity. But heck, if it dropped a decent chunk of change like this into their laps, Katsu wasn't about to let the opportunity slip through his fingers.

Sano grinned back, then turned serious, glancing toward the hangar entrance. "That them?"

"Our client's orders are-" The Sekihoutai could pass inspections, even without a bribe; but an Imperial visit at this time of night wouldn't be just an inspection.

"Better be." The Sekihoutai could pass inspections, even without a bribe; but an Imperial visit at this time of night wouldn't be just an inspection.

Nope. Not Imperials. Not a glimpse of white armor to be seen; just a pair of too-carefully dressed in dark casual clothing local guys, escorting a repulsorlift loaded with sealed crates. Katsu frowned at that, but Sano beat him to it. "Break it open," the tall fighter growled.

The shorter of the guys shook his head. "Your client's orders are-"

"Our client hired us because he knows we're good, and he knows we don't cheat," Sano stated. "We don't take on cargo blind. Period."

"These are delicate," the handler objected. "We're paying a great deal."
"For your cargo to get there in one piece," Katsu said coldly. "And it won't, if some Imp sympathizer has slipped in a beacon, will it?" He listened to a breath of their silence, and nodded. "Come on, Sano. Sooner we break these open, the sooner we can send these gentlemen on their way."

The mortified expressions on the go-betweens' faces as Sano grabbed a pry-bar was funny; almost as funny as their outright shock when Katsu donned protective gloves to handle the delicate merchandise. *Idiots. How do you think we got a reputation for making solid deliveries?* Sano pried; he sorted, folded, and pointed to things for Sano to run the scanner over, so as not to risk getting grime on the gloves. Their client had good reason to want precautions taken with this kind of cargo. *How'd Saigo even get near this stuff? Either he's got a major in with the merchants here, or there are more sympathizers away from Tokyo than I thought.*

"Good," Katsu declared at last, taking off his gloves as Sano tamped the last lid back down. "Tell your boss we should have it there within his timeframe." If everything went well. Then again, if everything didn't go well, he and Sano would likely spend the rest of their lives in the spice mines of Kessel. The Empire was so touchy about untaxed luxuries.

Which, to be honest, was one of the main reasons he was doing this. Stick a needle in the Empire's eye and make a profit? Nothing better than that.

*Nothing that doesn't involve shooting the white-armored bastards,* Katsu thought darkly, loading crates on board. *But Sano's got this hang-up about shooting people who haven't tried to shoot him first.* "So a little guy beat you up?" Katsu asked, trying to get his mind off all-too-tempting violence. "Did you turn him over to the medical center for attempted suicide?"

Sano grinned darkly. "I doubt they could hold him."

Katsu raised an intrigued brow. Sano was an optimist, but not a fool. His partner knew full well the kind of resources Tokyo's Imperial Medical Center had at its disposal; resources that included force fields, a standing stormtrooper guard, and sedatives that could knock out a flight of storm-dragons. "Oh?"

"You're not going to believe this, but-" Sano tensed.

"Oh, hell. "Where?" Katsu murmured.

"Dunno."

That was enough to send chills down Katsu's spine. Maybe Captain Sagara hadn't had time to give his young charges more than scattered bits of samurai training before he'd been executed, but it was enough for Sano's hunches to be right more often than not. "Nothing out here we can't launch without," Katsu muttered grimly. "Let's go-"

*Whirr- thwack!*

*Ninja dart,* Katsu realized, catching a glimpse of the spiral-carved lump that had embedded itself in Sano's quick-drawn blaster. Only a glimpse; Sano was firing back at shadows as Katsu bolted inside for the bridge-

Firing the engines, he felt the entrance hatch thump closed. Sano's curses floated before him as the *Sekihoutai* snarled awake, eager to fly. "Katsu, get us out of here!"

*What the frack do you think I'm doing?* Their ship lifted light as a lion-tooth puff, turning on its axis to bolt out through the hangar opening.
Sano stumbled into the bridge as the ship shivered a bit; Katsu's usual takeoff performance for the Imperial spaceport authority, meant to convince them that while the Sekihoutai might be space-worthy, it was nowhere near nimble enough to be a smuggler. "Vape me!"

Katsu took his eyes off the controls long enough to get a good look at the dart still stuck in Sano's blaster, and nearly swallowed his tongue. "That's-

"Kyoto-style onmitsu work, or I'm a Bothan," Sano said grimly. "Who the frack is Takani Megumi?"

"Um..." You mean, this wasn't about Saigo?

Though it still could be, no matter what Sano's hunches might be saying. Sure, the Empire would have first dibs on anyone associated with the Rebel. If they knew about it. But Saigo had ticked off his share of people on the shadier side of the law, too. The kind of people who might hire ninjas.

But Saigo wasn't onboard to ask questions of, and Takani was.

Shaking his head, Sano punched in the coordinates Katsu had pulled up for their first jump. "Soon as we're in hyperspace, you, me, and her are going to talk."

Yavin IV

"Mmph...."

Setting his burden down on the night-chill stone of the Massassi Temple's enormous steps, the weary fugitive patted the bound Imperial on the shoulder with a wry grin. "A word to the wise, Pilot Latten. Just because a man doesn't like to fly - doesn't mean he can't."

"Mmph!"

"I am sorry about the gag. But someone should find you here. Very quickly, I imagine."

"Mmph mrr m-mm." Per blinked up at the plasteel glow of Yavin IV's twilight; as close as this place got to night while it faced the pale orange giant of Yavin Prime, true darkness would not come until Yavin Prime eclipsed the sun. "Mrgh?"

There was a truly lost note in that mutter; the fugitive glanced up to see the first thin trickle of shooting stars. "Yes, I imagine that was the station. Let's hope the rest of the pieces aren't much bigger, or we'll all have a bit of trouble heading our way." He stepped back, and gave the man a formal bow. "I thank you for my life, Per Latten. Remember that you chose to spare life rather than take it. And the Force will be with you. Always." A second bow, and he faded into the night.

Quite literally, from Per's point of view.

A risk, to use the Force so close to the shadows here, the tired man knew, retracing his way past alert Rebel sentries into the jungle once more. So close to the children.

But the youngsters were quite busy throwing a party to match anything in the wake of the Naboo incident, if that bright warmth from the Temple was any indication. Even if that frail bond he
seemed to have with Luke held true, the young man should have no more sense of his presence than a ghostly, approving touch on his shoulder.

Which was as it should be.

*Even if the bond has formed - I cannot take a padawan. Not now. So much anger within me... I cannot risk tainting our last hope. I can't-*

*I can't betray Anakin that way.*

He made it back to the shuttle, through the little deadfalls and tripwires he'd set up half on instinct, and up the steps into the entry hatch-

Which was about when his knees gave out, and he barely caught himself on the edge of the entryway.

*Water, you fool. Just because you're not being baked dry in a desert, doesn't mean you can't boil to death here without it.*

Space, his grasp of the Force truly was rusty. A few hours without water, even in the day's heat, shouldn't have drained him so.

He made it to the tiny galley, drinking deep of deliciously cool liquid. Leaned his head against a glass, and ruefully realized it'd been far more than a few hours. There had been the time to land and camouflage the shuttle, the time setting defensive traps, the time sneaking to and from the Temple the first time so he'd know where to leave Per to be found - there seemed to be a particularly cranky species of foot-long rodents on this planet with a taste for meat and no qualms about it being human. He'd *had* to find a spot that the guard patrol would walk through within a quarter-hour, or risk leaving the pilot to a fate far worse than a clean death in space. As it was, he'd carefully nicked Per's bonds just before he'd left; by this time the pilot was either in Rebel hands or free in the jungle and living at his own risk.

Top all that off with the time needed for his tense return with the cranky pilot....

*Idiot. You know better than this.*

It'd just been so very long since he'd operated under wartime conditions. He'd forgotten how to pace himself; how to hold back just a little energy no matter how bad the emergency seemed, because there would always be another worse one behind it.

*I'm not fit for war. Not yet.*

But whether he was fit or not wouldn't matter; not if Mon Mothma knew he was alive. She'd been a friend, yes - but she was a politician first, with all their keen grip on power and determination to gain more. Allow her to know he yet lived, and he'd be a talisman, an idea to be invoked; one of the great generals of the Clone Wars, reappeared to guide the Rebellion in its darkest hour....

*No. Clinging to the past is what destroyed the Republic in the first place. To lead the Rebellion, Mon Mothma has had to abandon what she was; to become a Rebel, rather than a Senator. If I allow her to cling to what I was - the great general, the Negotiator - then the old pattern will repeat. And the Rebels will be as doomed as the Jedi.*

"Possibly not quite that doomed," a familiar voice said softly. "But you are right, my padawan. That path might seem better lit to start, yet it could lead into still greater shadows."
The tired man raised a ginger brow. "Are you determined to just pop in and out as you like, Master?"

The translucent figure in Jedi robes laughed softly. "Allow the dead their amusements, my little one."

"There is no death, there is the Force."

A ghostly grin. "So there is." The tall spirit leaned back against the galley wall, eyeing his green-smeared Imperial informals. "And while it might not allow me to give you the clearest advice-"

"It never does," his former apprentice muttered.

"-It does allow me to listen." Intrigued brows rose. "So what have you decided to do?"

Rummaging through the galley stores to pull out a packed meal, the fugitive shook his head. "At the moment, I only know what I can't do. This beast of a vessel may have a decent hyperdrive, but without coordinates to Yamato, I can't simply take off. Not to mention the spaceport on that planet, or any other, would have rather pointed questions regarding my registration. A pity I don't have a smuggler's skills to change it...."

His ghostly companion listened, silent as a breeze.

"Solo would know," the living man said slowly. "Or he'd know those who would know. And while approaching that young scoundrel might be dangerous - Chewbacca knows my scent, and I do not need Luke asking questions - if one smuggler is working with the Rebellion, others may be as well-"

The ghost was gone.

"Thank you, Master." A worn smile touched his face. "That just might work."

The very finest of tremblings in his bones warned him, and he bolted for the shuttle's viewers. Tiny pieces of space station streaking down as shooting stars were nothing to worry about, but that felt like something much larger.

It's a ship.

Not as large or - ahem - custom-fitted as the *Falcon*; rather on the small side of tramp-freighter size. In fact, it rather looked like-

The fugitive blinked, and rubbed his eyes, feeling a sudden, odd leap of delight. Rounded rear hull, traces of a broad red stripe from port to starboard, visible turbolasers and likely a concealed repeating blaster for evacuations under fire... *It's a Rim-Healer ship!*

At least, it had been; the outer hull was a bit battered, and the inside might well have had its emergency medical equipment yanked out for more cargo space. But under it all was still one of the small, fast vessels oddballs in the Jedi Medical Corps had used to travel between dust-scrabble colonies, bringing a bare level of medical aid to those who would otherwise have had none.

*Very odd folk, indeed,* he recalled, shaking his head. Still, they were good folk. No few Knights and Masters had traveled with them, from time to time; especially when a group of healers might be allowed to pass where formal negotiators would not.

"*Were* good folk," he reminded himself grimly. "I doubt its current owners acquired it legally."
Which would make them smugglers - and so precisely the type of people he needed to see.

Force. Logic. He suppressed a very childish urge to roll his eyes. I do detest it, sometimes.

Detest it or not, they appeared to be coming down all but on top of him.

"That's it, lady," Sano crooned to the Sekihoutai as he set her down. "Gentle, gentle..."

Her landing gear kissed the ground, and Sanosuke started the shutdown. "Oi! Megitsune! How you holding up back there?"

"Don't call me Foxy, Rooster-head!"

"Well, keep your eyes peeled," Sano shot back, grinning; he much preferred this sharp-tongued, harassed healer side of Megumi to the tall, dark-haired ghost of a woman who'd tried to stay out of his sight after takeoff, not even coming out for a glimpse during their short visit to trade on Zeltros. Though his grin dimmed a little as he walked away from the controls and heard Katsuhiko's weak snarls; so far the sick co-pilot had cursed fate, onmitsu, and the Miasma in general, and now he was starting on the Empire in particular. "Might want to keep that down, Katsu. There's a Lambda T-4a sitting out there; so far they haven't pointed any blasters our way and I'd like 'em not to start."

"A what?" Megumi poked her head out of the small infirmary that had been left after he and Katsu had rigged temporary bulkheads to increase the Sekihoutai's cargo space.

"Shuttle," Katsu said, gray and feverish under a pile of blankets on the infirmary bed. "We're not... in line with the fixed cannons, right?"

"Do I look like an idiot?"

Katsu glared.

"All right, all right... no. And I didn't exactly point any of ours too close to them, either; they might be tied in with our contacts, here." Though Sano kind of doubted it. Not with the Imperial-gray paint job the scanners had picked up. But Katsu was stressed out enough at the moment, what with the Fever flaring up now, and hey, there was a lot of wreckage in Yavin IV's near-space, which kind of implied any Imperials in the general vicinity might still be in shock. Not to mention, whoever was over there hadn't taken any shots at them yet, right? "I was going to go say hi."

Katsu levered himself up long enough to shake his head, long dark hair limp with sweat. "We've got a cargo to deliver-"

"And we will," Sano cut him off. "You haven't lost that much time. I'm just going to drop by, figure out who they are, then take the cargo to the rendezvous. Relax." He shrugged at Megumi. "Come on, Fox-lady. Let's get you a cup of chamidori so lazybones in there can swear at all doctors without you hearing." He waited until they'd closed the hatch and taken a good few steps away to ask, "So how is he, really?"

"Not good," the young doctor said flatly. "How could you take off without a full stock of hashima? You know anyone who's had the Fever can relapse fast-"

"You know, I kind of remember dodging a whole slew of ninjas back there. While we were still loading up?" Sano crossed his arms, raising one eyebrow. "You want to talk about that?"
Biting her red lips, Megumi looked away.

"I didn't think so." Sano sighed. "Look - we've still got enough to knock it out once, but not twice. So keep him on the fever-reducers, keep him quiet, and I'll go get the deals done. Then we can dose him and jump straight for home, okay?"

"So the money comes first," she muttered.

"You think I like that?" Sano bit out. "We live on our reputation, Takani. Skip out on this deal, we may not get any others; not the kind anybody sane wants to take, anyway. You want to try this traveling doctor idea of yours? Then you don't want us having to take... really illegitimate cargo."

As in drugs. Or slaves.

_I'd starve first. Katsu, though - sometimes I don't know about Katsu. He's a good guy, but... there's always a shadow in him._

"So!" Sano dusted off his hands. "If I'm not back here in an hour, tell Katsu, okay?"

"Don't worry, I'm sure he'll notice me screaming," Megumi deadpanned.

Chuckling, Sano opened the ramp and headed into the jungle night. _Whoof. Hot as a Tokyo summer out here._ An odd, twilight kind of night, dark enough that he was glad he'd brought the clip-light... and then doubly glad, as he stepped carefully around a hidden snare. _Not bad. Not bad at all. Didn't think they taught Imperials that kind of thing at the Academy._ "Oi! Anybody alive in there?"

"Hello there."

Sano played the light up the shuttle ramp, careful not to shine it into the ginger-haired man's eyes. No need to threaten the guy. Yet. Hmm... somewhat grimy Imperial castoffs, reddish hair a bit longer than soldier-standard, and a very tired look on that pale, desert-worn face.

Not to mention a relaxed, ready stance that all but shouted swordsman. Though there wasn't a vibro-blade or lightsaber in sight.

_Huh._ Sano added up the details, and relaxed a little. _Either we got a really good Imperial onmitsu here, or he really is an escapee._ Imperial or Rebel, hardly mattered at the moment; either way, the guy probably wasn't going to be quick to call stormtroopers down on anyone's head. Which was all that really mattered. "Sanosuke Sagara," he used the usual Basic ordering of names; weird people, putting self ahead of clan. "And if you don't mind my asking, you'd be-?"

"Obi-Wan-" the swordsman started, then stiffened.

"Furusato... home?"

"Home port," Sano corrected, curious. _Try keeping it simple. "Namae wa?"

"Kenobi Obi-Wan desu..." Blue-green eyes looked at him in sharp surprise.
That's a little kid's accent. Put together with the foreign clan name, and the rest of this mess... Sano let out a soft whistle. "Gentlesir," he said in blunt, polite Basic, "I don't know when your family decided to pull up stakes, and to be honest, I don't really care. Sometime way back, we used to be neighbors. And neighbor to neighbor-" he jerked a thumb in the general direction of the massive stone edifice they were supposed to have landed at, "-there's something really creepy over that way. You want a lift out of here?" The smuggler ran an appreciative eye over the shuttle. Class I hyperdrive, multiple shield generators, reinforced durasteel/carbon fiber hull, five visible blaster cannons, and a cargo capacity of 80 metric tons... oh yeah, this could work. "There's people over there already expecting to cut a deal with me. I bet they'd love to add this to the pot. Probably won't get near what she's worth at a strip-yard, but I'll cut you in for twenty percent of what I get-"

"Sixty percent," Obi-Wan said dryly. "What makes you think I won't go there myself? Or just take off again?"

Darn. He's not as out of it as I thought. "Twenty-five," Sano countered. "If you wanted to see these guys, you'd have been over there already; that hunk of rock isn't easy to miss. And no offense, but if you're not running on fuel cell flickers and pure sword-swinger stubborn, I'm a Takeo monkey."

"Fifty," came the thoughtful counter-offer. "I'm not carrying a sword."


"Forty-five." Curiosity flicked in that sea-green gaze at the word samurai, but Obi-Wan set it aside. For now. "Why should you be safer than I am, if there truly is something... malevolent, in that direction?"

"Thirty, and I throw in a free trip off this steam-bath to someplace with decent weather," Sano said firmly. "And I'm going to be very quiet going over there. Nothing personal. Just business. You - no offense, but you look like if you weren't so damn tired, you'd be trying to carve up something that didn't move fast enough." He held out a hand, Republic-standard manners. "We got a deal?"

With a quiet ghost of a smile, Obi-Wan shook it. "I believe we do."
"Hnh. Stubborn punk."

Myoujin Yahiko felt blood trickling from his split lip as Gasuke's ki-grip held him dangling above the floor, and took a certain bleak delight in how wet red had already stained the gambling den's pristine mats. All the money in the galaxy can't hide what you are, Tanishi. A rich port rat's still a rat.

But I'm not. Not anymore.

A funny decision for a pickpocket to make, maybe. Nimble fingers and a hint of telekinesis had let him lift credits no one else could touch; he could bring in the monthly fees the yakuza demanded to leave him breathing, and still have enough to get by. Just enough - but a little bit of hunger helped keep him numb. Helped an orphaned ten-year-old not think about what he was doing, and what his mother would say if she were alive to know.

Only - he had an awful, sinking feeling that even if she did know, she would have forgiven him. Just as his last target had, only a few hours ago.

"If he needs this so badly..." Pale hands had pried him out of the ugly girl's grip, pressing the stolen wallet back into his hands. "Young one. Don't get caught next time."

Why, why, why did he have to hear his mother's words from that idiot? That red-headed... smiling... samurai idiot....

"You may look like a child, but it's obvious your soul is mature."

He'd thrown that wallet back like it burned.

So now he was here in a smoky yakuza gambling den, in front of a snickering crowd of thugs and villains, on the wrong end of Gasuke's fists, feet, and ki-choking. Figured.

"Ease up for a minute, Gasuke. Or there won't be anything left to apologize."

Apologize? Yahiko thought grimly, stealing a furtive glance toward where greasy, balding Tanishi gorged himself on cooked kokumotsu and three kinds of marinated meat strips. Like hell. I quit. Either you'll let me live, or you won't. Kissing your feet won't do a thing either way. Rumor on the street had it that Gasuke liked killing best of all when someone did beg....

"Yahiko, you haven't thought this through." Chopsticks picked up a meat strip. "How are you going to live if you quit thieving? Money, not privilege. That's what the Empire runs on. A poor samurai's not a model for proper behavior anymore; he's just poor. A bandit in the making." A slurp. "And as for samurai women... well, it's good for people like me when the pleasure quarter's got enough girls to go around - but I'd bet they'd trade places with you in a heartbeat."
Caught in Gasuke's ki-grip, Yahiko's fists still clenched. "I said, I quit."

The enforcer used his own hands to bash him to the bloody mats; stood over him with a sheathed vibro-blade and a sneer. "You think this is funny, brat? You're lucky to still be breathing! Your father went and got himself killed spreading Shogunate sedition; the stormtroopers should have wiped your whole family out." Gasuke smirked. "Maybe if your mother had come to one of Tanishi-san's teahouses instead of that low-rent dive down by the river, she'd still be alive and working. I wonder if her son's as good-"

As Yahiko's teeth sank into the inside of the enforcer's thigh, he had time for only one thought: Damn. Missed.

Gasuke tore him loose and telekinetically smashed him to the ground, eyes blazing yellow with dark ki as he shrieked. "I'll take you apart, you little-"

The wall screens blasted inward.

Yahiko sat blinking on the mats as a sense of presence stalked over the flattened screens - and the enforcer flattened under them - standing in front of gathered thugs with an unlit lightsaber in his hand. The redhead samurai...?

"It's a raid!" Tanishi snarled, bowl cast aside. "Get the guys-"

"They won't come." Level violet, with just a glint of steel; the gaze caught Tanishi's, held it without a trace of the odd ringing in his head Yahiko associated with ki-manipulation of will. "They weren't going to let me in, so I had them go to sleep for a little while."

Wide-eyed, Yahiko tried not to shiver. Violet eyes, no trace of the yellow that marked true darkness, but the steel-blue gleam in that gaze chilled him to the bone.

:Easy, young one. You know I won't harm you.: 

Yahiko's jaw dropped at the light, gentle laugh in his mind. Was that - but no way, samurai with that kind of power just didn't go near the spaceport-!

:And where could we be more needed, Yahiko-kun? But seem frightened now, if you can. Tanishi's will is far too strong for mind tricks, yet it can be bent nonetheless.: 

"Who?" Tanishi croaked.

"I am Himura Kenshin. A rurouni." The redhead's mind might be warm, but his voice was cool as the first autumn gale. "I've come for the dojo master's apprentice."

Say what? Yahiko thought frantically.

:You do wish to leave here in one piece, yes? And walk these streets afterward without a vibro-blade to the back?: 

Well, yeah, but-

The screen crashed off of Gasuke, flung by furious will. "What do you think you are, another samurai fool?" The vibro-blade hummed to life. "I'll kill you both at-"

A blue flash- and there was an enforcer embedded head-first in the ceiling, pieces of vibro-blade clattering to the ground.
"We're talking," Kenshin said levelly, blue lightsaber lit and ready over his shoulder. "Stay there and be quiet for a while."

Yahiko felt the twist of will embedded in those words, and had to hide a grin. Oh, Gasuke was never going to live this one down!

"You seem a reasonable man." Kenshin turned his gaze back to Tanishi. "Show yourself a generous one as well, yes? Release the young one." Ki seemed to gather about him like dry tinder, only waiting for a spark. "It may embarrass you less than the total annihilation of your men...."

Yahiko swallowed, trying to keep his jaw from dropping. Was Tanishi sweating?

"Fine," Tanishi said in a thin voice. "Take him."

"Thank you." Blue light vanished, and Kenshin clipped the saber back to his obi. "Please forgive the intrusion."

And soundless footsteps were heading his way.

Still trying to get to his feet, Yahiko stared up as the rurouni half-crouched, offering a hand. "Are you all right, young one?" Kenshin asked quietly. "You were hard to pinpoint, but after visiting one yakuza group after another...."

One after- Yahiko tried not to let his eyes bug. You mean, you did this more than once?!

But amazement was lost in a sudden blaze of fury, as he slapped that offered hand away and reached:

:No:

The dark ki of rage was held at bay, out of his frantic grip. All he could touch was calm, soothing paleness, like the first deep breath of dawn.

Let me go!

:No. Yahiko, trust me. No.:

"Who told you to help me, huh?" Yahiko bit out. "I could have fought them alone! I could have-" lost myself in darkness and burned the whole rat's nest down....

"Of course." And all trace of steel was gone, lost in a gentle smile that gave the lie to the cross-shaped scar. "This one has underestimated you once again."

And a swordsman's callused hand casually snatched the back of his collar, hoisting him over Kenshin's shoulder as the rurouni headed back out through the hole in the wall. "So as apology, at least allow your wounds to be treated."

The hell he would! If he could just get down.... Are you crazy? You're turning your back on a whole room-full of slime, with Tanishi mad!

A grin seemed to hang in his mind. :They won't follow.: 

"You won't get away!"

Like I said- Yahiko thought dryly.
"No! Let them go!"

**Tanishi?** Yahiko blinked. Used the surprise to find a little calm, and reached out with his senses to the room falling behind Kenshin's unhurried strides.

"Those were the eyes of a hitokiri," Tanishi said thinly. "And not a yakuza hitokiri like Gasuke, who just knows a few tricks with the dark. A real one." Ceramic made a muffled ring on the mat-covered floor, as Tanishi clutched what was left of his meal. "I didn't know there were still men like that."

**Like**- Yahiko blinked, and finally took in the corridor Kenshin was hauling him out of.

The **body-strewn** corridor.

Knives were embedded in the wooden lower half of the wall-panels. Vibro-knives and chains were so much shredded metallic junk strewn down the mats. Two or three blasters were simply pieces scattered around their unconscious users.

All told, he could count an even dozen of Tanishi's guys flattened or groaning or half-through paper wall-panels out cold. Without even looking hard.

"If we start a war with him, it won't be one kid," Tanishi said grimly. "We wouldn't be able to build enough coffins."

Shocked, Yahiko lost his hold on calm, feeling senses snap back to normal with a wince. But not before he heard a familiar measured tramp of feet, a clatter of blasters lowered.

"Hold!" A middle-aged Yamato man in Imperial uniform with glasses and a thin mustache raised a warning hand as Kenshin stopped in the doorway. "Let them pass. The ones we want are inside."

"Sir!" Saluting, the white-armored troops poured in.

**Kenshin, and now the Imps,** Yahiko thought, stunned. **Boy, Tanishi is having a bad day.**

"Himura-san, I presume," the uniformed officer said dryly. "I am Inspector Uramura, head of Tokyo Internal Security. I've been looking for you." A slight smile bent his lips. "And it only took reports of chaos from four gambling dens before I realized you'd likely be here next."

"Oro?"

Yahiko snorted. **Oh stars, it hurts to laugh.**

But he couldn't help it. The idea of the guy who had flattened Gasuke - not to mention whatever else he'd pulled off this night - trying to play innocent for the cops....

**Hee. Hee hee. Ow....**

"Yahiko-kun must see Dr. Gensai," Kenshin said firmly. "And if one is not mistaken, you will be busy for some time. Since you are responding to a call of violent disturbance, and so have rightful cause to arrest anyone displaying illegal weapons in plain view."

"Amazing, how many of those we've found tonight." A touch of humor glimmered behind the glasses. "You're right, of course. Still, I would like to talk to you. In someplace a bit more congenial than headquarters; Kamiya-san's dojo, perhaps? Inspectors are allowed some leeway in questioning... witnesses... and if I had your word you would be there for the interview - well, I'd
have no reason not to let you and the boy go on your way, would I?"

"You have my word I will be there, Uramura-san," Kenshin nodded. "To talk."

Yahiko craned his head back to get a good look at the Inspector's carefully bland expression. *What just happened here?*

But they were moving again, Kenshin's stride eating up the Tokyo night faster than any guy his size should move, somehow not jarring bruises and bumps and one rib that felt just this side of cracked. Almost like lying on a futon stuffed with down....

Yahiko shook himself back awake, angry all over again. "Damn it, *why* did you stop me?"

"Quick and easy power, that darkness is," Kenshin said softly. "And when one's life, or the lives of those one loves, are at stake - well. Only the ki-user can say if the power is worth the cost. But you were not in such peril, Yahiko-kun. Nor was I. Victory would have been ashes in your grip. How could I not stop you?" A gentle sigh. "Are you that troubled by your lack of power, young one?"

"I just want to be stronger!" Yahiko burst out. "Strong enough I don't need your help, strong enough to defend my mother and father's pride on my own."

"Of course," Kenshin murmured, slowing in front of a gate and courtyard that had obviously seen better days. "We're here."

*Here?* Yahiko blinked as Kenshin closed the gate behind them, staring down the path to the small house and dojo. *Where's-*

"There you are!" She was wearing *kote* and a brown haori over a white and blue instructor's outfit instead of a worn yellow flower-patterned kimono, but it was still the ugly black-haired girl from the market. She dusted off her hands as Kenshin set him down and slid the front *shoji* closed behind them. "All beaten up, I should have known... I already spoke to Dr. Gensai, we'll go right over there-

"Yahiko-kun, this is the teacher of Kamiya Kasshin-Ryu, Kamiya Kaoru-dono," Kenshin said cheerfully, patting him on the shoulder. "She'll be your sensei from tonight. In swords... and in ki."

"Whaaaaat?"

Kenshin grinned at the paired expressions of shock. "Teacher and student of one mind already. A good sign for your training."

"He's nuts," Yahiko muttered as Kenshin walked off smiling.

"Uh-huh," Kaoru agreed numbly. "Sword-students, sure, but - I can't take an *apprentice!*"

"Oh yeah?" Yahiko flared. "Why not?"

"W-well, because I'm not... I'm...."

"You're what, ugly?"

"Stop calling me ugly!"
Listening to the chaos break out behind him, Kenshin smiled. For a link that had only formed half a day before, that ki-bond was settling into place quite nicely.

It was how he'd truly been able to find Yahiko in time, after all; following the vague touch of linked-to-Kaoru through the back alleys and yakuza dens until he was close enough to sense the boy's ki signature directly. Not to mention, it had been a major factor in how easily he'd held Yahiko back from that destructive step into darkness; Kaoru's own light had helped hold the anger at bay.

_I wonder how long it will take her to realize her fears are immaterial; she has a padawan, whether she will or no._ Kenshin shook his head. _At least I've already seen Shishou's fits of temper when he realized he couldn't get rid of me... I know the warning signs, I should be safe enough._

_Until she cooks._

Shuddering at the idea, Kenshin turned his thoughts toward the somewhat more comforting problem of Inspector Uramura. An Imperial who knew his name... it couldn't be good.

_I may be drifting again, very soon._

After all, he'd given his word to talk.

Caught - no. Never again.

_Hitokiri Battousai died on the field of Toba Fushimi. He will never rise again._

_I swear it._

---

_Yavin IV_

---

After one peek inside the Sekihoutai's infirmary, Obi-Wan stepped out of the occupant's view. "He's ill?" _It would be my luck to wind up on a plague ship._

"Miasma Fever," the dark-haired doctor shook her head. "It's not catching."

"Oh?" Obi-Wan gave Megumi Takani a searching look. For more reasons than one. _Almond eyes. High cheekbones. Dark hair, almost painfully straight. Are they descendants of Humbarine’s survivors? _Even before the Confederacy had destroyed that planet in the Clone Wars, such exotic faces had been rare. Afterwards... Senator Bana Breimu had done her best, until the Empire rose, but the remnants of her people had become few and scattered. Most had vanished into the Core Worlds, nursing their grief as their culture died without a homeworld to bind it together. _These folk have a homeworld. I can sense it. And their accent - it's something from the Outer Rim, I'm sure of it. _"What is it, precisely?"

"A blood parasite," she answered matter-of-factly. "It's carried by mist midges on our planet. Usually a daily dose of hashima keeps it in check, but somebody didn't pack those herbs in the emergency supplies-" she sniffed the air, and he could all but see storm-clouds gather about her head. "You idiot!"
Curious, Obi-Wan sniffed as well, detecting nothing more than a slightly nutty, spicy scent of some sort of boiled grain dish.

Megumi stalked into the infirmary after it like a hound on the trail, hoisting a yelping Katsuhiro bodily up to drag his bowl out of hiding. "But I'm hungry!" Katsuhiro protested.

"Then you can eat pickled vegetables and fish, you suicidal lump!" She shoved the bowl Obi-Wan's way. Bemused, he took it. Some sort of reddish grain, boiled together with vegetables and spices into a sticky mass; smelled tasty. "Kokumotsu? When you're down with Miasma? Should I just string you up by your toes and leave you for those not-rats to gnaw on?"

"Megumi-san...."

"Pickles! Fish! Fruit! Give me those chopsticks!"

Hiding a smile, Obi-Wan watched Megumi wash every last trace of boiled grain off the odd eating implements, then settle her unhappy patient back down with a new bowl of thin-sliced vegetables. A young doctor, but a good one, he judged. "Why shouldn't he have this?" he asked in a low tone as Megumi stalked back out of the infirmary, offering the bowl.

She waved it off. "You might as well eat that. I've never had a bad case of Miasma, but there's no sense in my taking any chances right now."

Fingers almost in the bowl, Obi-Wan halted. "You said it was a blood parasite."

"It is," Megumi nodded. "But the parasites need certain trace elements to reproduce. Kokumotsu's a native grain; it may be good for people, but it feeds Miasma, too."

"Then why eat it?"

"Not many other grains grow on Yamato," Megumi shrugged. "Believe me, the Empire's tried. Here - I think Sano keeps a few gaijin-style eating things in the galley...."

Yet another detail the bounty hunter left out of his report, Obi-Wan mused as he finished off his bowl in the closet-sized cabin Sano had assigned him to before the smuggler had taken off in a cargo speeder to the Rebel base. A surprise - and yet, not. Outer Rim planets didn't earn that designation by being easy to live on. Tatooine had its endless desert wastes; Yamato might have a gentler climate, if Sano's words were anything to go by, but it evidently had its own hazards.

Fed, warm, safe - and with all the water he reasonably wanted to drink. He set the bowl aside and just breathed.

There is no emotion, there is peace.

The anger was still there when he opened his eyes. The pain, of having to see the one who had been his friend and brother fallen so deeply into the dark....

But it was softened, now. Polished by this unexpected kindness like a jutting boulder by Tatooine's sand-filled winds, so that it slid easily under his mind's hand, instead of catching and tearing.

Like a boulder, or.... Obi-Wan took out a lustrous, milky-hued treasure from the pouch that had never left him, relieved to find its facets still as sharp as the day he'd cut them in his workshop on Tatooine. The krayt dragon pearl was more than just a symbol of bravery and tactfulness that had let him pass mostly unmolested through the Tusken Raiders. From what he'd researched, if he was careful, it could also be used as a lightsaber's base crystal.
And I will need that.

Sobered, one of the few remaining Jedi turned his attention outward once more. Information. He had to have more information. Fortunately, he knew precisely where to get it.

The Sekihoutai's crew had left him in a small cabin with a data terminal, but of course, no access codes.

No ordinary access codes.

If this was a Jedi Medical Corps ship.... Obi-Wan laid one hand against the terminal, reaching delicately in with the Force.

The terminal glowed to life, projecting the small hologram of a determined young woman in Jedi robes, long auburn hair caught back along with her padawan braid, and bright blue eyes dimmed by incredible sorrow.

"My name is Hana Firefinder. If you've found this message, you probably need to hide."

Stars.

"I am - was - padawan to Master Quidel Tenskwatawa. He's - gone now, I felt the bond shatter...." She looked away from the recording camera, obviously fighting back tears.

"We were at a mining colony with Healer Gant and her apprentice Kel Thorne in the wake of a Separatist attack. They were- Master Quidel was helping them stabilize an emergency case in trance while I brought the engines on line so we could evacuate the man to a hospital ship as soon as they got here, and- the comlink, I heard blaster shots, and Master Quidel fighting."

Order 66. Oh, Force, it must have been then. He could feel it as if it were yesterday; the pain, the shock, the sudden sense of all he knew, all he-

Attachment is forbidden.

-All he loved, snuffed out of the universe.

"He ordered me to go. To get help, that something was wrong, he saw all of us in danger...."

We saw the danger. But we couldn't see it in time.

"And then he was gone."

Hana swallowed dryly, fingers clenching and unclenching on her robes. "Now the Temple beacon says run and hide."

We did that, Yoda and I. We gave you at least that much chance. Slim as it was.

"I guess - I guess Master Quidel didn't see it soon enough. Whatever it is. Though I've picked up some news reports about Palpatine, and some Dark Lord that follows in his footsteps."

Vader. My fault....

"So I'm running away."

What?
"Fear leads to the Dark Side, I know it... but I am afraid. I don't know what to do. If Chancellor Palpatine is allied with the Sith... and the Senate voted him control, how can I fight all of them?"

True, so very true; why else had he and Yoda hidden, all these years? And if Jedi Masters could not stand and fight, how could he blame a padawan for fleeing?

"But right now, I don't think anyone knows who I am, or where I am. Which means I can choose where I run.

"So I'm running to Yamato."

Intrigued, Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow. Firefinder, I can't quite remember... but if she was Quidel's padawan, she must have been a stubborn young woman. And she had a plan?

"You've probably never heard of this planet. I wouldn't have either, if Master Quidel hadn't been friends with Watchman Rayen Ulloriaq. They used to trade such long holo-letters... anyway. She worked... worked there undercover, trying to determine why a world with so many Force-sensitives has such an ancient tradition of fearing the Jedi. All I know for sure is that it's someplace I can carry a lightsaber and no one should notice me. And - if the clonetroopers are hunting sensitives, not just Jedi - maybe I can still help. I... I don't want to die alone...." Hugging herself close, she blinked back tears, then reached out to the recorder switch-

A blur of transmission, and the hologram was standing straight again. "My name is Hana Firefinder. If you've found this message, you probably need to hide...."

"End play," Obi-Wan said softly.

He drew in a long breath, let it slowly out. So. And so.

Owen was there, last any information states. And... I was there. Meaning it had to have been Watchman Ulloriaq who had plucked a young Force-sensitive out of whatever Yamato had for orphan's care. Undercover? The Jedi Order must have been curious about this planet, indeed.

As was he. Sanosuke might never have rated high enough for Temple training, but the man was obviously sensitive to the flow of the Force. Megumi felt almost as strong in it; and while Katsuhiro didn't come close to matching either of them, Obi-Wan would have bet the co-pilot's midi-chlorian count was above Galactic average.

Three sensitives on one ship. Why have I never heard of this place?

Unless... Kamino wasn't the only planet that had been wiped from the Jedi Archives. Yoda had said at least a dozen were still missing, and the Clone Wars had taken away the time they should have used to find them all.

"All right, Master," Obi-Wan murmured to empty air. "I can take a hint. Even if comes in company with a blaster bolt."

There was no reason not to go to Yamato, after all. If Sanosuke held to his word on the shuttle, and Obi-Wan believed he would, he'd have the funds to lift off elsewhere any time. Even enough to find the Rebellion again, wherever they ended up going; no matter how they might be celebrating now, they had to know they couldn't stay on this moon for long. Sooner or later, the Empire would catch up with them.

Tired, Obi-Wan leaned back on his bunk, letting his eyes drift closed. I wonder what the children are doing right now....
Han Solo looked over the shimmering white kinu fabric being splayed out by a disbelieving Rebel supply sergeant, and let out a low whistle. "You're like a bad milli-cred, Sagara. Turn up in the weirdest places." Leaning against the storeroom wall, the Corellian smuggler *tsked*. "Cargo like this, and you didn't take it straight to Zeltros?"

"Client said here, so here it goes," Sano shrugged, still stunned from what he'd heard. "To whoever heads up the base commander's wardrobe and ceremonies; there was a name named, but only if they showed up in person... and... I guess they won't... Alderaan is gone? *Really* gone?"

"Flew through the rocks myself," the smuggler said grimly. "One of the kids flying here got the bastards, though. You probably shaped an orbit around the worst of the metal junk."

*Gone. A whole planet.* Sano tried not to shiver. *What's the Empire think they're doing?*

"And just what name got named?" Solo said casually. "If you don't mind my asking."

"Guess it doesn't matter now." Sano shuddered. "Well, there were rumors that Princess Leia Organa had certain sympathies, if you know what I mean."

"Her Highness has quite a reputation." The Corellian smirked. "Sergeant, go get her."

"But Captain Solo-" the stuffy little man protested.

"Tell her she's got a load of white kinu cloth ready and waiting for that big party nobody's supposed to know about, and she can drop that fracking committee meeting for half an hour to come see it."

"I don't think-"

"Shoo." Solo nudged him out into the stone hall. "Don't you know better than to get between a princess and her new wardrobe?" He closed the door on the sergeant's muffled protest. *White* kinu cloth? How in the universe did your client pull that off?"

"He didn't say, I didn't ask." Sano shrugged, uneasy under the older man's eyes. "She's alive?"

"Her Worshipfulness? Oh, definitely. Alive, kicking, blasting... Katsu's not here?"

"Someone's got to stay with the ship," Sano said casually.

"And you couldn't bring her in because...?"

"Bad feeling about this place." The younger man shrugged again. It wasn't as bad now as it had been a few hours ago, not with so much busy purpose in the air, but it was still bad. "Besides, you know Katsu likes some quiet time alone once in a while. And it's not like it was a real heavy cargo. Weapons, some food and medicine, a couple spare parts the people here put out an order for, this stuff..."

"Which has got to be worth as much as the rest of it put together," Han said appreciatively. "Keep your blaster cannons in trim, and don't let on what you're carrying. You're good, kid, but there are pirates out there who are better."

"Yeah, I know," Sano grumbled. He might be tough so far as the Yamato spaceport went, but there were slime-balls out in the galaxy who could make a Hutt shake.
"Looked like there was a note in there, too," Han observed.

"I haven't read it." Physical cargo contents were his business. Personal notes, no.

"White kinu cloth, Solo? You've got to come up with a better story than that-" Breezing through the door, the stern-faced, beautiful brunette Senator Sano had seen on a dozen holo-casts stopped just inside. "And you are?"

Sanosuke sketched a rough bow for her. "Sanosuke Sagara, Princess. Cargo transport."

"Scoundrel," Han supplied with a grin. "Be nice, your Highness. He brought you a present."

"I don't need-" Leia's eyes fell on the moon-white cloth, and her breath caught. "That's impossible."

"That's what I thought," Han nodded. "But I've met Sagara here around and about. He doesn't carry fakes." He winked at Sano. "At least, not without knowing they're fakes."

"Kinu cloth." Leia fingered the soft shimmer, brown eyes wide. "But... this only comes off Zeltros, and it's always colored."

"Actually, Zeltros imports it from us," Sano stuck in. "But you're right. It usually is. 'Cause no Yamato weaver born could bear to let kinu threads go without color... not unless they had to, for mourning shrouds."

But the Empire didn't see white as the color of death. Even when they dressed their stormtroopers in it. Very strange people.

Leia picked up the pink-tinted paper that had nestled in the bolts, unfolding it to reveal inked characters. "I should have called Threepio-"

"Um... I can read that now. If you want," Sano offered. Cleared his mind, and his throat, casting back for the formal language of poetry Captain Sagara had taught him to filter as much meaning as possible into the Basic translation.

"Surely you have had"

"Even a white robe"

"Of a dyeing house."

- Saigo Takamori

Warmth and calculation mingled in brown eyes. "So he says I ask for the impossible?"

Whoa. For someone who'd never been to Yamato, she was quick. "And sometimes, you get it," Sano grinned at her. Caught Solo's considering look, and stepped back. Hey, don't worry. She's not my type. "Nice meeting you, your Highness, but I already asked your people about cargoes back, and I've got to get going."

Not that he was actually taking any return cargo. Not with Katsu sick. But it would have looked weird if he didn't ask - and the last thing he wanted was to draw any more attention while Katsu was sick. The cloth and the shuttle were more than enough.

_Time to get off this rock._
"Is Himura-san in?"

Kaoru felt her pulse quicken, tried not to stare at the all-too-familiar Imperial uniform just inside the dojo gate. Night's shadows still huddled around the courtyard, only grudgingly giving way to dawn. "Inspector Uramura! What a - surprise...."

Behind the glasses, a brow lifted. "He did tell you I would come, didn't he?"

Actually, he'd said something along the lines of, "Don't worry, Kaoru-dono; Uramura-san seems honorable enough to ensure any consequences of the night will fall only on this one." Which made her want to thump him twice over. Yahiko was her apprentice; how could she not take the consequences for rescuing him? "He's... um...."

"Hoping to impose on Kaoru-dono for the use of an inner room, so that we will not needlessly disturb the students coming to train," the redhead himself said from what had seemed only a shadow a moment before.

"How does he do that? "Yes, that's fine, I'll...." Oh, darn it! "Inspector!" Kaoru stood straight, hand not too far from her saber. "I don't know what you want Kenshin for, but he's just a wanderer now! Whatever you do to him, you'll-" Her courage faltered; she hid a shiver, and grabbed it again. "You'll have to do to me first!"

"I'll... take that into consideration, Kamiya-san," Uramura said, startled.

"Right!" Head high, she marched off to lead the way. Now, where can I eavesdrop from?

Tea. A quiet inner room of the house, where it would be near impossible for any of Kamiya's early students to overhear them. And one utterly silent ex-assassin sitting seiza across from him.

Uramura set his teacup down, worried fear might make his hands sweaty enough to drop it. "Himura-san... why are you here?"

"Kaoru-dono invited this one to stay. For a time." Red hair tilted slightly, studying him. "And why would you be here, Uramura-san? Have you come to arrest this one?"

Uramura stifled a shaky laugh. "And make myself such a mess over Kamiya-san's clean floors?"

"You would be doing your sworn duty," the soft voice observed. "One would endeavor never to harm a man for that." Violet looked down. "One would endeavor never to harm anyone again... but still, there are the weak who fall prey to violence, and the weak of heart who deal in pain."

"Hiruma," Uramura stated. "I can understand you felt insulted-"

"Insulted?" A wry, sad smile. "Hitokiri Battousai was a murderer, Uramura-san. One whose victims were more carefully chosen than Hiruma's... but a murderer, still."
How can he say such things? "You were a hero!"

"I was Katsura's sword, until he released me," Himura said precisely. "Now... now this one is only rurouni, adrift on the sea of time. Which does seem to have washed me here, for now," he added. "Unless that would bring trouble to Kaoru-dono?"

"More likely, the other way around," Uramura sighed. "Himura-san... you probably haven't been in town long enough to know, but the Kamiya family is suspected of certain... sympathies. Bad enough Kamiya Hana was from off-world somewhere and taught Basic until she died; Kamiya Koshijirou was always loyal to the Revolution, and that name has kept his daughter from being shunned as a half-breed. But even his death in the Empire's service-

A red brow lifted.

"In the uprising six months ago," Uramura filled in. So she hasn't mentioned it. I wonder why? "He was loyal to the last, but it's only blunted the edge of gossips' tongues. We have no proof, not yet, and I don't plan to act unless I have proof - but this dojo is suspected of fomenting sedition, and aiding and abetting traitors."

"She sought - and found - a murderer who disturbed your peace, Uramura-san. Surely that is not the act of traitor."

Uramura snorted. "The Shogunate would have said as much about the Shinsengumi."

"True."

Blinking, Uramura stared into fathomless violet. "They were enemies of the Revolution!"

"Honorable enemies. In their own way." A shadow of a smile touched Kenshin's face. "She teaches the style her father created. I do not believe she would bring dishonor to his memory."

"Well... I suppose that's true...." Off-world mother or not, Kaoru had been raised samurai. She knew what was proper. What was right.

"And you know who I am, Uramura-san. Would I reside in a nest of sedition, where dissenters plotted to overthrow the rightful government of this planet?"

"Of course not!" Though there was something blurred and off about that statement; as if the inspector couldn't quite put his finger on a thought....

"Then you know you may watch this one, and know nothing is amiss here." Kenshin bowed slightly. "Thank you for your time, Inspector. We will not keep you longer from your duties-

"She's in danger," Uramura blurted out.

Sudden, deadly stillness across the way. "What danger?"

The room was back in focus. Must have been a trick of the light. "She's a friend of Sagara's."

"We have met."

That must have been interesting. "Someone's looking for him. Very seriously."

"Someone who is not official?" Kenshin inquired.

"If the rumors are true, no," the inspector said grimly. "The Sekihoutai left its hangar in even more
of a hurry than usual. By the time the port-master deigned to notify my people there wasn't any
evidence left, but I doubt he would have left some of the supplies he did if someone hadn't been
shooting at him." Uramura's hands clenched on his trousers. "Rumor has it that questions are being
asked about Sagara, and Tsukioka. Someone is searching out their contacts. Who they know. What
their habits are. Where they relax. Who they rely on. And we both know those looking for that sort
of information usually don't plan to use it in a friendly fashion."

"No. They don't."
Uramura felt chill. *What did I say?*

His gaze fell on the man across from him, and the chill turned into sudden, gut-wrenching terror.

"Uramura-san."

*What was I thinking? Hero or not, he's a red-handed killer-*

"Uramura-san," that soft voice repeated, bringing with it a wave of... calm. "Not one hair on my
body wishes to return to the path of a hitokiri. This one is rurouni. Only rurouni." Violet met glassy
brown, gentle as a dawn breeze. "This one is grateful for your warning. But Kaoru-dono is not
helpless, to fall before an assassin's blade. She *is* samurai, and she will protect her school, her
students, and her apprentice." *Her-* Uramura almost dropped his jaw. "She took that little pickpocket as an *apprentice*?"

"He is Tokyo samurai," Kenshin smiled. "He needs only a chance to find the proper path once
more." A shadow passed over his face. "A chance one fears those such as Gasuke may never take-"

"That one won't," Uramura said bluntly. "He was executed this morning."

Shocked violet flicked at him.

"He was a criminal with a high midi-chlorian count, Himura-san. Imperial policy is clear: rogue
Jedi are not to survive."

Knuckles paled. "He was no Jedi!"

"He was arrested under suspicious circumstances, used ki in full view of Imperial witnesses - the
blood test was only a formality." Uramura shook his head. *I thought so. He's been wandering the
lands away from the spaceport, where Imperial officers are few and far between. It's the only way
he could have gone unnoticed this long. "It's the law, Himura-san."

"A law that will slay every child of samurai blood, and no few without it." Violet searched his
gaze. "Uramura-san-"

"Of course, as Okubo-san and the government have determined, no one born and raised on this
planet could *be* a Jedi," the inspector observed. "So there's no point in testing them. Unless they
were, perhaps, a member of a criminal organization, who might well have traveled off-world for
training. Or a Rebel...."

"I see," Kenshin said, almost soundlessly.

*Thank the gods, you do.* "Please be careful, Himura-san," Uramura said formally. "It would be
unfortunate if someone made a... hasty mistake."
A few polite farewells, and Uramura left the dojo, absently side-stepping a cat-eyed Fireryo street rat whose concealing cloak bore traces of old blaster burns. *He'll be careful. I hope.*

*Why do I feel like it won't be enough?*

Slinking past the Imperial, Beshimi disappeared up into one of the trees outside the Kamiya dojo compound. It had taken some time and careful listening, but unlikely as it seemed, the consensus of the street was that if the men who had taken Takani were in trouble, they would come here.

*A broken-down little dojo,* the cat-eyed ninja sneered. *Only fitting for those who would dare to harbor Takeda Kanryuu's little goose-*

The tree branch slipped out from under him.

Undignified - but silent - flailing caught another before he hit the ground. Beshimi hung on for a moment, trying to determine exactly what had happened. A ninja blended into the ki of his surroundings, moving as the branches moved, stepping only when he knew his footing would hold. *He should not* have slipped.

But the trees were quiet now. Frowning, he climbed back up for a view inside the walls....

*Creak.*

What was-

*Spots,* was the next thing the ninja's dazed brain registered as he lurched up to a sitting position on cold, damp ground; flashing lights that experience told Beshimi heralded a mild concussion. He blinked, and blinked again, blurred eyes coming back into focus on a chunk of storm-broken dead branch spotted with his blood. The last threads of wood holding it aloft must have chosen just the right moment to fray completely, gravity doing the rest. What rotten luck!

"There are those who say," a quiet voice interrupted his mental curses, "there is no such thing as luck."

Beshimi jerked himself up to a crouch, staring at the small, redheaded swordsman casually perched atop the dojo fence. Automatically he reached out for his opponent's ki, seeking the measure of the man-

To feel his probe slid aside, like a leaf spun through river backwash. "Who are you?"

"This one is only a rurouni." Red bangs cast violet into shadow. "But one does not think you were invited here; that I don't. And it may well be the trees think so as well; for ki moves through us all, and we hearken to it - or ignore it at our peril."

*A samurai!* Mustering his will, Beshimi vanished.

But the swordsman did not flinch, holding his impossible perch on the fence and listening. "Sagara," he said to what he had to see as empty air, "is not here. One would suggest you ask after him later, in the proper manner, or Kamiya-sensei may well feel herself forced to deal with you. And one thinks she would not be as gentle as the trees, that I do."

*Creak.*
No fool, Beshimi retreated.

Who is this man?

But it scarcely mattered; he saw the bright flash of a ship's sublight drives heading into the port. The silhouette was right; all he had to do was raise the alarm, and the Okashira would have the Sekihoutai surrounded-

Thunk.

As the ground came up and stole his senses, he realized it was the same branch.

Damn samurai....

 Darkness. Hot, painful darkness.

"-Ice-

"-How long?-"

"-Not from Yamato, how-"

Light, cutting in and out with the pressure of worried hands on him, a fear that curled through the Force like smoke. The touch of chill wet cloth against his skin, almost sizzling against the fiery heat.

"-Shouldn't have hit that fast-" Sanosuke. Worried.

"Tokyo Miasma wouldn't have hit that fast!" Megumi snapped. "This is something else, something worse-"


Dying? Obi-Wan struggled to collect himself. Me?

"Hmm... not yet," Qui-Gon's voice murmured in his ears. "But if you don't find help soon...."

"The Imperial hospital-" Megumi started.

"Are you crazy, fox-lady? You can't go near there, and neither can I!" Sanosuke's stride thumped through the room. "Gensai - maybe you can dose him up on sedatives, so he's not throwing things-"

What?

"You've been delirious, my padawan," the spirit shrugged. "Not a good state for any Jedi."

Oh stars... and we were on a ship.

"His grasp on ki is all that's kept him alive this long, Sano. And it wouldn't do any good," the elderly healer said bluntly. "The parasites are all through him. A bacta tank might buy him another week. Or not. He needs... a kind of help that doesn't exist in Tokyo anymore."

"Are you-" Obi-Wan swallowed dryly. "Are you quite sure?"
"Sweet kami, you're awake," Gensai breathed. "Here - drink as much of this as you can manage, it's better drunk than taken in the blood."

A bitter liquid was pressed to his lips. Obi-Wan grimaced, but swallowed; blurry as his sense of others was, Gensai felt only of the wish to help, and the gnawing doubt that anything he might do would be enough. "What- what is-"

"Hashima," Gensai said briskly, helping him lean back against a padded cushion. "Grown near here; not as refined as what you'd get in an Imperial hospital, but it's strong, and it's what we have. From what Megumi-san tells me of the swift onset of your symptoms, and their severity... you have Kanto Plain Miasma. It hasn't killed you yet, but it's trying very hard."

"But... I'm not from...."

"So Megumi told me, Kenobi-san, yet Sanosuke insists you have been on Yamato before. Miasma can hide in your system for decades. You only need to catch it once."

*The universe hates me.* Obi-Wan kept his eyes slits, barely glancing at the clean, quiet room, all painted paper walls and mat-covered floors. Looking too hard made his stomach lurch. "You said... there is another treatment?"

"Well... there has been, in the past," Gensai said reluctantly. "It's considered an ancient superstition - at least around Tokyo. Certainly not something anyone with... Imperial entanglements... would go looking for."

"I assure you, Dr. Gensai, Imperial entanglements are one fate I sincerely wish to avoid," Obi-Wan said in a thin whisper. "And I am more than familiar with how truly useful ancient *superstitions* may be."

"That may well be, young man, but unfortunately I have no idea where to find anyone who might know-"

Obi-Wan tried to lift a brow at that sudden silence. Felt his eyelid barely flicker. "You've thought of something."

Unease moved about Gensai. "I'll have to sedate you."

"You said...."

"Yes. I did. But-" Gensai took his pulse. "You're about to have another attack, very soon. From what little I know, the procedure is - risky. To both sides. If he even knows it, if he's willing to try...."

"Do as you think best, Doctor," Obi-Wan said. Or tried to say; the universe blazed up again, and sanity was lost in the flames.

*:Easy.*

Cool within the fires; like night-deep shade, on a blazing summer day. He fled to it. Clung to it.

*:Easy. Be at peace.*:

He sighed, letting that other approach as near as he wished. He could almost imagine himself back on Coruscant, with a Healer soothing away a fever.
This will hurt.

Darkness swallowed him.

No! I will not fall, I will not-

Don't fight me!

Oh, but he would; he was Jedi, and he would die before he would fall into that Darkness-

You'll kill us both!

For one split second, he hesitated; it was one thing to allow himself to die, another to kill.

And the shadowy other reached within him, linking their Force signatures together with a wisp like gossamer durasteel.

You are dying, Kenobi-san. Fight, and you may kill me - you will kill yourself. And that, I will not allow.

I was asked to aid you. And aid you I will. Even if I must bind your soul with my own. You sense what lies between us; you know what will happen, should you attack me.

It might well be worth it. Bound to a Sith-

Hate is of the Dark Side.: The thought was cool, almost amused. Will you then attack me, Jedi? And become what you... hate?:

...And someone was being entirely too logical for his peace of mind.

You would not attack a medicine. Or a surgical instrument.: A silent sigh. I do not ask that you trust me, or appreciate me, or even feel a moment's kindness. Simply allow me to work, and I will leave you.

And... he wasn't lying. Obi-Wan could feel it.

Now. As I said. This will hurt.

I will not be offended if you scream.

White-faced, Kaoru waited outside Dr. Gensai's clinic, covering Yahiko's ears against the growing shrieks. Wishing there were someone to cover her own-

Sano's hands closed gently on her head, muffling the sounds to near-bearable groans. She glanced up at him, offering a weak, grateful smile. He gave her a shadow of his usual smirk, and drew her closer, like the big brother he'd been for years.

I'm just glad Gensai-san sent Ayame and Suzume away with Tae, Kaoru thought with a shiver. If the two Force-sensitive little girls had had to hear this....

Lucky for us, they won't.

"In my experience," her mother's voice murmured in memory, "there's no such thing as luck."
Kaoru drew in a sharp breath, recalling the grim sound of Dr. Gensai's voice on the comm when he'd asked if they could come over to help. *Did he know what would happen? What's going on in there?*

And how long could they wait here in plain view of the street, when Inspector Uramura had all but said someone criminal was looking for Sano?

Though in a way, the screams were their own frail screen of protection. There were enough curious-but-pretending-not-to-be passers-by in the street to make anyone with more lethal intent far, far too obvious for a killer's comfort.

Kaoru half-closed her eyes, stretching out her feelings. Curious... nervous... watchful....

No hate. No red rage.

*Maybe they're not there. Sano hasn't been on-planet that long, after all; it could take time for word to get around.*

*Or maybe I'm just not good enough....*

*Quit that!* Kaoru told herself fiercely. *Fear leads to the Dark Side. Do the best you can, and trust the Force for the rest. It's worked this far, right?*

Right. She was alive, and Yahiko was settling into the dojo, and Gohei was off the streets for good. Maybe it wasn't perfect, maybe a real Jedi Knight would have done better - but she hadn't done too badly.

She hoped.

It seemed an eternity before the awful sounds stopped, and a pale redhead walked outside.  "Kenshin!" *He's shaking, oh stars....*

"Kaoru... dono." He looked down, but not before she caught a glimpse of something that froze her heart. *No.*

But she'd given him shelter. He'd warned her. She *had* to know.

Deliberately, she stepped close enough to meet that shy gaze, to see-

Amber, fading into steely blue.

*No! "Why?"* Kaoru demanded, catching him in a durasteel hug. Kami, no wonder he was shaking, he was so cold... "Why would you do that? Why would you go back there?"

"There was no other way."

"There's always another way!"

"No. Kaoru-dono - no." Tired eyes met her gaze again, hints of amber flickering out. "Miasma is alive. The person it is killing is alive. One can only live if the other perishes. And the Light... does not lend itself to that. Only the Dark." Callused fingers rested against her cheek. "If it were you so afflicted, I would do so again, and - I would not care that you would hate me, if only you lived...."

Wide-eyed, she froze.

Wordless, he stumbled back. "Forgive... this one is very tired, that I am. Can - may we go home
"Now, Kaoru-dono? Please?"

"Out on your feet and you didn't even get a good drunk out of it," Sano grumbled. "Just not fair being samurai, is it?" One-armed, he scooped up the redhead.

"Sanosuke!"

"Stop being an idiot." Sano marched down the street toward the dojo, deliberately glaring slowpokes out of his way so Kaoru and Yahiko could walk unhindered in his wake. "I've seen Kaoru put people into healing trances. She's a dishrag after." He cleared his throat. "Doesn't sound like that's what you did, but... what did you do, anyway? Hang on, we're almost there."

Kenshin sighed, and let himself be carried. Kaoru bit her lip as she followed them through the dojo gate. *Kenshin took down a whole gang and wasn't tired. What did he do?*

Though maybe she was just worried about that because it was easier than worrying about the woman Sano and Katsu had brought home, currently zonked out on a futon by Katsu's sickbed after keeping both Miasma patients alive long enough to get here.

*Ridiculous,* Kaoru told herself firmly. *I am Jedi. I don't concern myself with outer appearances.* *Even when someone is... tall, and elegant, and pretty... and really, really seems to think Kenshin is adorable.*...

Right. What that vixen Takani Megumi did or didn't think about her redheaded boarder wasn't any of Kaoru's business. What that redhead had done with the Dark Side - that's what she had to worry about.

Sandals and boots off, they gathered inside around a pot of tea. Kenshin cupped his in his hands as if he would soak in every last drop of warmth. "It is... not something which should be mentioned around... authorities."

"Um, duh," Yahiko muttered. "I haven't heard anything like that since the last time Tanishi let some of his guys make an example out of somebody." He gave Kenshin a sidelong look.

"*Izuma-ki* was originally meant for torment and battle, that it was," Kenshin admitted. "Its medicinal applications were only discovered later, by accident."

*Izuma-ki... Force lightning?* Kaoru blanched. *That's a Sith technique! How...?* "You can't use the Dark Side to heal!"

"Healing," Kenshin said levelly, "was not what he needed." Still steel-blue, his gaze sought Yahiko's. "What is Miasma?"

"Um... a kind of bug inside, right?" the youngster ventured. "It eats your blood, and makes you sick."

"Not exactly," Kaoru stepped into the conversation, relieved to have an idea where to start educating her student. "It's a little life-form, related to the algae that grows in kokumotsu fields. Only instead of living in the water, it lives in blood; animals, people, some flyers. A mist-midge bites someone who's infected, the Miasma spawns inside them, then flows back into someone else with another bite. The little Miasma cells look for your blood cells, wiggle inside, and start eating and breeding in another form. Eventually there's too many of them in the blood cell, and it bursts, and the Miasma starts looking for other blood cells to infect."

"These breeding events go in cycles, which is why one ill with Miasma may seem fine, then
deathly ill, then only sick, then deathly ill again," Kenshin nodded. "But if you become ill with Miasma, Yahiko-kun - you must not use the healing trance Kaoru-dono will teach you."

"That's-" Ridiculous, Kaoru almost said. The healing trance drew on the Light Side to strengthen every cell in a Jedi's body-

Oh. Oh, no.

"Miasma... isn't like most illnesses," Kaoru said numbly. "It's not a virus; it's not even a bacteria. It's more related to us, that's how it gets past the body's defenses in the first place. If you put yourself in a healing trance, and Miasma is already breeding...."

"It breeds faster, and one runs a strong risk of dying, even with a gentler strain such as Tokyo Miasma," Kenshin nodded. "There have been many samurai wounded on the battlefield who died not of their injuries, but of the Miasma that bred while they were healing."

"Whoof." Sano shook his head. "And here I thought you samurai types had advantages over the rest of us."

"No more than you do being a pilot, Sano-san," Kenshin smiled wearily. "Ki is a powerful ally, hai - but like all allies, it demands respect, and it has its cost."

Yahiko leaned forward. "But you slammed that Miasma, right? Ow!"

Kaoru put down the training bokken. "You are not learning how to do that, Yahiko!"

"What do you mean, I'm not-"

"Your sensei has said no," Kenshin said bluntly. "And she is correct. Hashima would have been safer. Far safer." He glanced at her. "But there was no more time."

Sano ducked his head. "All right, all right! It goes right in the emergency kit next time, all right? First thing loaded on. He just- I'd already dosed Katsu when he fell down, and he got sick so fast...."

"Hey." Kaoru touched his shoulder. "You got him here, right? I know you, Sano. I know you did the best you could." She gave him a serious look. "Think about what would have happened if he'd just traded with you for some supplies and gone off on his own."

"Ugly way to die," the smuggler shuddered. Straightened, brown eyes alive with pure curiosity. "But what'd you do, Kenshin?"

Kenshin hesitated. Looked at Yahiko. "It is very dangerous."

So what path do you take? Kaoru asked herself, heart pounding. Do you hide the truth, and hope Yahiko never goes looking? Or do you try to get information about the pit, so you don't stumble in by accident? The swordswoman swallowed. Rubbed sweaty palms surreptitiously on her hakama. "I think you'd better tell us. Otherwise... one of us might be tempted to experiment."

Kenshin inclined his head. "Hiten Mitsurugi is very old. My shishou told many tales of its history, and how one practitioner after the next has sought out ways to improve; but at the beginning, he said, it was formed by two. A Jedi of the Old Republic, lost here millennia before the Senate's forces discovered us again... and a Watcher in the Dark, heir to traditions shaped on this world since it was founded by refugees from some long-forgotten war."
A Watcher... a ninja? Kaoru wondered. 'Kaasan said she thought their techniques had Sith origins. Or something like them. Even if they're not always Dark these days- how could a Council-trained Jedi ever trust one enough to work with them?

How could a ninja help create a style that had the gentle blow?

"Izuma-ki is violent, and dangerous, and it kills," Kenshin stated. "But as it can be used to torment, it can also leave victims alive. So. If one is skilled, and careful, and has had demonstrated exactly how to do it, so one can do more damage to Miasma than to the patient - then one can use the Dark Side as a knife, to cut away enough of the illness that the patient may live." Near violet again, his gaze fixed on Yahiko. "It is a cruel knife. It brings suffering. And if one is not very careful, and quick to release the darkness once the task is done... it is addictive, Yahiko-kun. One can do - horrible things."

Yahiko gulped. "Tanishi said you were a hitokiri."

"One was. Years ago." Kenshin bowed his head. "One hopes never to be so again. Ever."

"Did you-" Yahiko swallowed dryly. "Hurt people?"

"Many."

All right, all right - enough gloom and doom! "But it's done now, and you're not calling on the darkness in my dojo," Kaoru said firmly. "Stars, right now it doesn't look like you could even pour the tea without using your hands."

"Perhaps not even with one's hands, Kaoru-dono," Kenshin said ruefully, glancing down as his fingers trembled against his cup. "To call only as much darkness as is needed, only enough - anger - and no more... it costs. One could quite easily sleep right here."

"I think I can pour you into bed," Sano said dryly, standing. "C'mon."

"But the danger-"

"I've been in trouble before, and so has Jou-chan. Katsu may not be up to snuff yet, but between us I think we can handle things long enough for you catch some shut-eye." Sano raised an eyebrow.

Kenshin sighed, and managed a tired smile. "How can one refuse?"

"That's the ticket...."

A few minutes later, and Sano was back, sitting down with a troubled look. "Don't try to go into his room quiet, Jou-chan. In fact, don't go into his room, period. Stand out in the hall and bang something when you want him up. He's curled up around his lightsaber the way some of Captain Sagara's veterans used to be; the real old hands, who went through the worst of the Revolution and came out alive."

"Kenshin wouldn't...." The words died in Yahiko's throat.

Sano sighed. "He wouldn't mean to, kid-"

"I'm not a kid!" Yahiko jumped to his feet. "I'm Myoujin Yahiko! Tokyo samurai!"


Yahiko reddened.
"Like I was saying," Sano went on, "he wouldn't mean to. But he's a dangerous guy. Right, Jou-chan? 'Once you start down the dark path, forever will it dominate your destiny'?

"That's what 'Kaasan said," Kaoru nodded, wondering once again just who her mother had been quoting. It'd sounded weird, even for Basic. "But... she also said that since she'd come here, she'd learned there were people who managed to pull out of the darkness. Not many. But some." And Kenshin's one of them. I hope.

Kaoru straightened her shoulders, setting that thought aside. "So. Whose tail did you step on this time?"

"Believe you me, I'm still trying to figure that out...."

Chapter End Notes

Hashima - "striped leaf".
Hitokiri - "manslayer", assassin.
Izumaki - "spirit lightning".
'Kaasan - Mother.
Kokumotsu - grain, cereal.
Kote - "armor sleeves", also (from Mando'a) "glories"; leather hand-guards.
Seiza - formal sitting stance, sitting on the backs of your heels.
Shishou - Master. Archaic term.
Shoji - outer sliding door-screen.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Quiet. Calm.

*Space, I hurt* everywhere.

Gentle *thumps* against the cushion he was lying on, accompanied by a curiously familiar squeak, and the bright feel of a pair of young Force signatures. "You awake yet?" a very young voice asked.

"Grandpa said don't wake him up!" a slightly older one objected.

"But he feels nice! Like Kaoru-nee-san."

"But Grandpa said no-"

"It's all right," Obi-Wan said wryly, prying his eyes open enough to see two tiny brunettes in flower-print robes tussling at the edge of his odd bed. They hadn't quite crashed into the small table near his bed, where something green and triangular fluttered over itself like a dropped kerchief. "I'm-"

The green triangle moved, and squeaked, and scratched the back of its beaked head with a wing-claw. The other membranous wing was splinted, but emerald eyes blinked at him with interest, not fear.

"I'm awake," Obi-Wan said, stunned. *A young hawk-bat? Here?* "What's that *ataru* doing here?" *And where's the rest of its flock, oh dear...*

*Wait. What did I call it?*

The grasping arms stopped immediately, and brown eyes went wide. "You're not gaijin!"

*Not a foreigner?* He pulled up the sheet covering him, wondering why their words sounded so odd. Almost not like Basic at all.

"But he has sun hair," the younger one objected. "We don't have sun hair."

*Kami-hi? That's not-"

"Ken-nii-san does," her sister pointed out, corralling the chirping hawk-bat before it could flutter off the table. "He said back in the mountains, some people do."

*Big brother Ken. Not Basic. They're not speaking Basic.*

*How is it I can speak it?*

*Understanding* it didn't worry him; he'd understood Megumi and Sano's frantic babble to Gensai before, even half-conscious. He'd traveled the galaxy with Qui-Gon Jinn, after all; and if you survived that, you tended to learn a few things. One of which was how to extend telepathy and a sense of the Force into understanding the spoken language of any sentient... well, more or less. It helped if the speaker were sensitive as well, and even then, a Jedi might miss nuances. Which
could have consequences ranging from the mild to nearly homicidal.

No. Understanding it didn't surprise him. Speaking it - that was bizarre.

"There you are, you little hellions!" A short, elderly man with gray hair opened the paper screen that seemed to serve in place of a door, strode in with a sigh. "Ayame-chan, Suzume-chan, what have I told you about jumping on the patients?"

"Grandpa!"

The doctor caught armfuls of little girls and littler creature, hugging them close before setting them down to bow to his patient. "Forgive the little ones," he said in careful Basic. "They don't always understand when someone might wish to be left alone -"

"It's nothing, Gensai-isha," Obi-Wan said firmly, relieved. He'd thought he'd recognized the man's Force signature, but the way everything still felt battered at the edges, he wouldn't have been sure who it was even if Master Yoda had walked by. "Compared to what I thought I might wake to, being greeted by two well-behaved young ladies and their - pet? - is quite a pleasant surprise." He smiled at the older, whose hair fell loose instead of in orange-beaded pigtails; Ayame, he thought. Brown eyes went wide all over again, and she ducked behind her grandfather.

*Just like the younglings in the Temple, when a Knight they'd never met came back from a mission...* The thought tugged at his emotions, and he reached delicately out with the Force. *Stars. Just like the younglings. They're sensitives!*

"Not pet," Gensai said firmly. "We're only assisting it a time, until that wing heals. And I know two young ladies who should put it back in the rehabilitation cage...."

Giggling a little, they disappeared down the hall.

Gensai watched them go, then stepped inside and drew the screen to. "I've never met anyone from Coruscant who spoke Yamatogo before."

Obi-Wan didn't flinch. "What makes you think-"

"Kenobi-san. Please. Your accent - at least, your accent in Basic - is recognizable to anyone with some Galactic education." The elderly healer smiled wryly. "Not to mention, you didn't scream when you saw the ataru."

"I was tempted," the Jedi admitted dryly. *Hawk-bats? Here? But... they're native to Coruscant!* Possibly the only species left native to that citified planet; using sight and echolocation to migrate through the pipes and lower levels every few months as they searched for heat and granite slugs - or anything else that didn't move fast enough. "A large flock will attack just about anything."

"On Coruscant, perhaps," Gensai admitted. "But as long as we've known them, they tend not to bother humans." Amusement glinted in brown eyes as he knelt down by his patient's futon. "Of course, we don't usually eat them, either."

"That might well influence the matter, yes," Obi-Wan had to smile back, even as he tugged his sheet a bit higher about himself. No wonder he'd thought himself back in the healers' care; someone had rather efficiently stripped him of every stitch of clothing. He could see the remnants now, grimy but neatly folded under the small table; still, he'd prefer a little privacy before he tried to reclaim them. *At least, as much privacy as there is around here, Obi-Wan thought wryly. Translucent paper walls? Whose idea was that?* "Who in the worlds was insane enough to bring them off Coruscant?"
"At a guess? Whoever was insane enough to flee here from Coruscant when Yamato was first settled, millennia ago," Gensai shrugged. "Though from the few legends we have of that time, fleeing was the only sane response. The Jedi and Sith were at war, it's said, and dark forces consumed everything they touched. Even the lives of whole planets...." He shook his head. "Ah, but you don't want to hear an old man spouting fairy tales."

*You'd be surprised,* Obi-Wan thought. But he let it go. If Gensai felt the topic was risky to speak of with strangers, pushing would get him nowhere at lightspeed. *Patience. The way of the Jedi is patience.* "Customs differ from planet to planet, Gensai-isha, but most medics I've met would be asking certain questions right now."

"That you call me Gensai-isha, Kenobi-san, tells me that the first question I would ask may not yet be relevant," Gensai said dryly. "May not yet be... Obi-Wan sat up, meeting Gensai's gaze head-on. *The first question usually is, how do you feel...?*

"Do you know who you are?"

"Well, of course I-" Something in the healer's face stopped him. *Know. He said know, not remember. You're not speaking of amnesia.*

"Short-term memory loss wouldn't be unlikely with the fever you were running, but no," Gensai agreed. "Even among those foreigners who have learned our language, most don't know the honorific for a healer." A gray brow lifted. "Or speak with an accent that might well have come from mountains no off-worlder has ever set foot on."

*An accent?* Obi-Wan replayed the sense of Gensai's words, surprised to recognize not only the meaning, but certain faint impressions he was used to only picking up from Basic, from long nights of listening in Dex's Diner. Gensai's manner of speech was educated, but slangy; *Edokko,* something in him whispered. Most of the other voices he couldn't help but overhear from other private rooms in this clinic had the same pattern; but one passing by out on the street had a quiet, almost circuitous feel to it that same something identified as *Kyotoko, be alert-*

*What are you?* Closing his eyes, he quested within himself for that sense of other. *Who are you?* Not a who, from the feel of it; a ghost of a self, like a shadow passing over a mirror. More - impressions. Afterimages. A lingering, gentle chill, as if ice-damp cloth had pressed against burning fever.

*The Sith!*

No question. It was tied to that place in his mind where the link had been; as if the Dark presence had held him so tightly against itself, impressions still lingered on the clay of his soul. "What did he do to me?"

A cluck of a tongue, as Gensai pressed lightly down on his shoulder. "Kenobi-san. You're still recovering from Miasma and a mild case of skeletal calcification. You should rest-"

*Calcification? You think I'd remember being caught in a power coupling... oh. Blast. "Please." No force behind it; only all the sincerity the Jedi once called the Negotiator could muster. "Gensai-isha. I must know."

"The help you received saved your life," the healer said carefully. "I will not be part of any plot for vengeance-"
"My people don't believe in revenge."

Gensai gave him a very odd look. "No?"

"No. Never." Obi-Wan hesitated. "Justice, yes. We strive for that. But if the intent truly was only to help... please. I only want to know what happened to me."

Gensai sighed, and settled back on his heels. "If there were things being thrown about without hands on the Sekihoutai-

Oh dear. I'd hoped I'd misheard that.

"-and mind you I'm not saying that there were, but if there were... then part of why you feel so odd is the medication you're on."

Oh, not good. Odd was the word for it; once Obi-Wan accounted for the fever and overall feeling of exhaustion, there was still a leftover sense of something... not quite in balance. And just how do I go about asking him what's wrong with me? "Pardon me, but precisely what do your local drugs do to Force-sensitives? And why are you calling those stormtroopers?"

"Most people suffer no noticeable side-effects from hashima," Gensai went on. Thought for a moment, and tapped his chin. "Though there are always a certain small percentage of off-worlders who break down into an irredeemable psychopathic frenzy..."

Obi-Wan choked.

The elderly doctor grinned cheekily at him. "Don't worry. We'd have noticed by now if that was the case. Well," he corrected himself, "I'd have noticed. As would the Guard, the local fire brigades, the undertakers...."

"I believe I get the idea, yes," the Jedi said dryly. "So if I'm not about to become a raving lunatic-?"

"Then you fall into a far more pleasant treatment category," Gensai smiled. "The small but stable percent that find hashima particularly beneficial. Are you looking for a wife?"

He couldn't have heard that right. He simply couldn't have. "...Am I what?" Obi-Wan managed to get out.

"No? Pity. I know a few widows who might- well, that's neither here nor there," Gensai sobered slightly. "A local would know what to expect. As you are not, or at least, haven't been for a very long time...." He hesitated, picking his words like a path through grav-mines. "You may find your emotions to be a bit more volatile than usual."

A chill ran down the Jedi's spine. Volatile emotions... Anakin....

"This is normal. Perfectly normal."

"No, it's not normal! There is no emotion, there is peace-

"Do not be afraid."

Fear leads to the Dark Side. Obi-Wan grabbed onto the edges of his control, willing himself to stillness. Breathe. Be at peace. Listen.

"Just count to ten before you do anything drastic. Count twice, if you have to." Gensai rested a
comforting hand on his shoulder. "The first weeks are the worst. Once you're stable enough, we can drop your dosage. In the meantime, try not to be too hard on yourself. Anyone who cares will forgive a few lapses." He chuckled. "Though I'd stay away from anyone bureaucratic. I hear it's incredibly tempting to watch officers' bootlaces mysteriously tangle each other, but given how they tend to take it out on anyone in the vicinity...."

Obi-Wan blinked. Is he saying local Force-users prank- I really don't want to think about this. "As for the rest of why I feel odd?" he asked pointedly. "You do not get skeletal calcification from drugs." At least none I ever heard about.

"Ah." Gensai sighed. "I don't know precisely how that works, only that it does. Those rare ones who are skilled in the technique... they quiet themselves. They sit by you, much as I am sitting now, and read the flesh and soul of the one they would help."

Obi-Wan could almost remember that, overlain by fever as the image was; the feel of another presence searching his mind and body for illness.

"There are - ties made. So that if the pain drives your soul from your flesh, they have a means to call you back."

He linked with me. Tightly. Like a master preparing to take a padawan through a dangerous meditation.

"And then... it's as if lightning strikes."

Force lightning! Stars, no wonder I hurt... I'm lucky to be alive!

"When the case is as desperate as yours was, the Miasma has to be killed, and killed quickly, if you're to have any hope of survival," Gensai went on. "The tie must remain intact so long as the practitioner is working, for the patient is already weak, and without outside strength to draw on, the pain might kill. And that pain... has to be felt by the practitioner as he works, or he will not know when he is killing Miasma and when he is killing his patient."

Obi-Wan made an effort not to stare. Sith delight in inflicting pain. They don't take it for other people.

Yet if this Dark Side user had done what Gensai was describing-

I would have sensed - not a Sith, but someone in terrible pain. I would have tried to help him. And if I reached out to him as he was trying to hold onto me....

The universe really, really hates me.

But no matter how they'd gotten tangled up in each other, the Dark one had kept his word. The place where the link had been was numb. Tingly, perhaps, and touched with shadows; but no worse than he'd felt after that last encounter with Maul on Tatooine, when he'd wanted so much to kill, yet knew his oath as a Jedi could not take an unarmed life....

Before Owen Lars' blaster bolt had made the moral struggle moot.

"I know off-worlders regard many of our ways as quaint superstitions, but I assure you, to the person who helped you, the pain was quite real. If I'd known how real, I might not have asked." Reaching into his kimono sleeves, Gensai pulled out a small medical computer. "Here. Let me show you how much trouble you're still in."
A parasite, Obi-Wan realized, studying the complex life cycle laid out on the screen. A rather nasty one. "Why wouldn't other medics have found this years ago?"

"It was likely quiescent in your liver, or bone marrow," Gensai said practically. "That's usually where it hides after you've survived an acute crisis. That's where it's retreating right now, in fact. Oh yes, you're still infected," the doctor added at his sharp look. "Miasma is a chronic condition. It can be kept in check with hashima. It will go dormant once you're off-world and no longer have the necessary trace elements in your system. But it's almost impossible to eliminate entirely." A paper sheet followed the computer from the sleeve. "This is the prescription I want you to follow for the next week. After that, you can cut back to the secondary prescription below it; that, you should stay on for a month. Get through those, and you can cut back to the usual prophylactic dose. Though I'd advise you to keep at least one high dose of hashima on your person at all times, in case of relapse. Another physician might assume you had Tokyo Miasma if you showed up ill, and they might not realize their mistake in time."

"There's a difference?" Obi-Wan said warily.

"Oh my, yes, young man. Around Tokyo, Miasma may make one ill, but it rarely kills; we have existed together so long, and use hashima so often, it's simply not to Miasma's advantage to be deadly. But on the Kanto Plain... most of its carriers are animals, not humans. It survives by making those infected as ill as possible, so midges can feed on the poor creature before it's eaten." Gensai shook his head. "All my experience as a doctor tells me this is not the first time you've nearly died of it. But you have no memory of being treated before?"

Using his training, Obi-Wan cast backward in memory; back before the Temple, to faint images of Owen and endless waving grasslands. And - something dark, and confusing. "Purple grass," he said softly. "With an edge of green on the growing tip, catching the dawn like gold. Small, dark grazers - they like us, but they're shy. Tan wings marked with violet riding the noon winds; ataru, stars, I always thought I was mixing that up with Coruscant before. Rocks with symbols... Owen said Mother and Father thought they were important...."

"There are ruins on the more distant part of the Kanto Plain, yes," Gensai agreed, surprised. "You have been there."

"I was very young. Three, possibly four; I'm not sure." The Jedi frowned. "I remember - fear. Pain. Orphan." The Basic word seemed to burn on his tongue.

"Koji, or minashigo?"

"Both, I think. I... I don't know what those mean...."

"That you were lost, and no one was left to claim you." Gensai gripped his shoulder in sympathy. "Yamato is not a friendly world to those without aritu. Is there no one here who can take you in?"

Aritu. Clan, or kin group. I think. Odd word. Almost sounds familiar, but from where? Obi-Wan shook his head. "My... clan was attacked years ago, there are very few of us left." Yoda. Himself. Anakin... oh stars, what he had done to the children...

Not all of them. Not quite all. "Is there," he hesitated, "a central information system on this planet?"

"Several," Gensai said wryly. "Most of which are under Imperial control."

"Details, details," Obi-Wan muttered under his breath.

Gensai chuckled softly. "I think I understand why Sanosuke offered you a lift." His face grew
serious again. "Should I also understand that you do have a relative here, Kenobi-san?"

"It's possible," Obi-Wan admitted. "I came to this world to look, in fact. Though if I'd any idea of
the hazards... well, I might have come anyway." Easy. Easy. Calm. "I had an older brother. Owen
Kenobi. I found a report that he had been traced to Tokyo, years ago."

"Hmm... I'll ask," Gensai said thoughtfully.

"I also had...." Gently. Gently. "A young cousin. A distant cousin. About your height, auburn hair,
blue eyes; very stubborn. She hasn't seen me in - space, decades - but I have a feeling...." He wet
his lips. "Firefinder. Her name was - is - Hana Firefinder."

Silence.

"You know her," Obi-Wan breathed, lunging up to catch the doctor by the shoulders. "Please, if
there is mercy in your heart, please -"

Please, try to be calm."

Weak indeed, Obi-Wan thought grimly, sinking back. Every muscle was trembling. And the sorrow
hanging around Gensai like mist.... "I'm too late."

"It is my burden to inform you that the spirit of Firefinder Hana, who was named to us Kamiya
Hana, passed into the beyond ten years ago," Gensai said, head bowed formally. "In her death, she
saved three young lives, and their families honor her memory at every Feast of the Dead." His gaze
lifted, bright with old sorrow. "It was a scaffolding collapse. The Empire... engineers from off-
world don't truly understand how to build for our earthquakes. She went into the rubble with her
lightsaber, brought as many survivors out as she could before it settled." He sighed. "Koshijirou
never got over it. Not really."

"Who?" A more sobering fact struck home. Ten years for the Empire to tighten its fist. Hana said
she'd be safe carrying it during the Purge, but that recently? "What do you mean, with her
lightsaber? The Empire would have-"

"The Empire," Gensai said bluntly, "knows better than to try and take a lightsaber away from a
samurai. Adopted or not. I grant you Koshijirou may have had to finesse some of the paperwork,
given she had a hard time hiding her accent. But she brought no dishonor on her ie by her actions."

Ie. That feels like house, or... family? "Her ie?" Hope flickered in his breast.

"Koshijirou was Hana's husband," Gensai nodded. I've been the Kamiya family physician since...
oh, before you were born."

I doubt that, Obi-Wan thought wryly. "I'd like to meet him."

"So would I," Gensai said softly. "Even once more." Grimaced, and shook his head. "I'm sorry,
Kenobi-san. He was a dear friend of mine. He died six months ago."

Too late. I'm always too late....

"Would Kaoru know you?"

Obi-Wan didn't have the energy to hide his stare. "Who?"
"Hana's daughter."

*Relationships are forbidden for padawans,* was on the tip of his tongue. But the Jedi caught it. She'd been alone, she'd been lost; who was he to judge Hana for breaking that small part of the Code? "I... No. We've never met."

"But you'd like to?" Gensai smiled. "I think she'd like to meet you, too. And as it happens, my granddaughters and I were going over there for dinner. There's a patient in that dojo I need to check up on. But first--" he looked over exposed skin, and *tch*ed. "Forgive an old doctor for being blunt, young man, but you desperately need a bath."

"Why are they after you?" Kaoru planted her fists on her hips, foreign blue eyes stormy.

Megumi faked a yawn, and turned her attention back to the pot of grain simmering in the rock and sand-lined fire-pit. Kanryuu's mansion had scarlet carpets, elegant platinum carvings, and formal, Imperial-style kitchens, where food cooked with the press of a button. This compound laid claim to no such amenities. Only the classic poor samurai living quarters; small single rooms ornamented with books and a niche for flower arrangements, polished wood floors, thin tatami, and one large main entry room where the family could cook out of the weather and huddle together on the nights when snow fell.

It'd been years since she'd cooked in conditions like this. But she still hadn't quite lost the knack. Kokumotsu was simmering nicely, heading toward the soft stickiness that made it easy to pluck out with chopsticks. Other vegetables and fish waited in small dishes on the side, ready to be cast into the shallow pan next to the pot. Pickles and fruits waited somewhat farther away, to spice the meal or serve as sweet afterthought. One deep sniff, and her mouth watered.

But watered with caution. Burn any of this, and the plain little *tanuki*-girl would jump in and take over the cooking - and from what the frowning smuggler now leaning against the house wall had told her, that could be a fate worse than death.

At least she didn't have to fend off a hungry youngster and cook at the same time. Yahiko had taken over watching Katsu with serious dedication, even if he had grumbled a little. But only a little - given looking in on Katsu meant he could peek in on dear Ken-san, as well.

_Not that he's peeking for that same reason I would be,* Megumi smiled to herself. She'd barely met the man, but a doctor's sense of *ki* let her glimpse the slim, muscled frame tattered cloth tried to hide. That, and the unconscious care of Sano's movements around the redhead, told her more than all the plaques on the dojo wall.

*Kamiya may be a samurai in training. But small and delicate as he looks, that man is samurai - and he knows how to use that lightsaber.*

Which just might buy her enough time to get back off the planet. Maybe.

Megumi gave the Kamiya girl a languid shrug, as if only now catching up to her question. "Not that a little one like you has to worry about it... but sometimes procurers see a woman - human, Fireryo, Zabrak, even one of those odd Twi'lek the companies brought in, they're not fussy *that* way - and just decide they have to have her for their master's teahouses." Megumi shrugged gracefully, casting back her long hair. Not the pampered length of a *tayuu*'s, but elegant enough to make the point - especially against her competition's rough, pulled-back ponytail. "How should I
know why they seem to want me?"

The samurai girl reddened. "They're not procurers, and you know it!"

"Jou-chan's got a point," Sano said soberly. "The guys who pick up people on contract for the brothels don't usually throw ninja darts just 'cause one girl's getting away." He crossed his arms. "Who are we up against?"

Megumi stuck out her tongue.

Kaoru growled.

"Ladies... I grant you I use the term loosely...."

Brown and blue glares fixed on him.

Sano rolled his eyes. "Look, as soon as Katsu's back on his feet, we're going to find out," the smuggler said practically. "You could save us a lot of time and aggravation if you just-" He stopped, staring at Kaoru. "What's wrong?"

Blue eyes were distant, as the samurai girl's head slowly turned toward the outer courtyard. "We have company."

"We do?" Sano said numbly, hand dropping to his blaster. "Hell."

Kaoru rose smoothly, breathing out one shuddering sigh. Blinked, and turned a clear, serious gaze on Megumi. "Don't let Kenshin outside."

"What?" Megumi said blankly, still stirring the grain. If the girl had said that about her bratty little student, she would have understood; the boy was only ten, after all. But exhausted or not, Kenshin was samurai-

"There's Darkness out there," Kaoru said matter-of-factly. "And he's walked too close to it already."

Darkness? Megumi thought, confused. Oh, I'll never understand samurai... killing is killing! Who cares if you enjoy it or not?

"Kaoru, you-"

"I can handle it, Sano," the girl nodded. "I have to." Another deep breath, and her hand rested on the saber by her side. "This is what I am."

"Yeah, well..." Sano pulled his blaster out, checked the muzzle, shoved it back into his holster with a jaundiced look at Kaoru. "Smart pilots don't fly alone."

She smiled back. "Let's go."

"They're insane," Megumi muttered under her breath as the pair slipped on boots and sandals to walk outside. "Absolutely insane."

But then, wasn't that what she'd been looking for? After all, no one sane in Tokyo would go up against-

"Hand over Takani, and no one gets dead!"

-The men who served Takeda Kanryuu.
There is no passion; there is serenity.

Stepping off the engawa to face their foes, Kaoru cupped peace in her heart like a butterfly in her palm; cherished, but remaining of its own free will. Numbers did not matter. The anger, the lust, the greed for blood in these men's eyes - did not matter.


And because they mattered, she would not fear.


"Look, guys, can't we talk about this-" Sano started behind her shoulder.

Her blade was lit and blazing, deflecting a blaster bolt away almost before it had left the barrel. Thank you, mother. Father. Blasters had been almost unknown on Yamato before the Revolution; Kamiya Kasshin had incorporated Koshijirou's hard-learned lessons of survival even before Hana had taught him Shii-Cho and what she remembered of Soresu.

Blasters or not, these men were not Gohei. They were strong, but not giants; they hated, but it was not the crushing, poisonous cloud that had surrounded that murderer. She could endure it. She would.

They were not armored against her; why should they be, against an assistant master known to carry only a student's blade?

Your second mistake, she thought, as screams and bodies flew. I may not cut you. I may not kill you.

But damned if I won't break a few bones!

And... Jou-chan is laying on the smack-down, Sano thought wryly, in the little flickers between shots. His blaster was set to stun, no matter what the dozen or so bad guys were using; if Kaoru had been laying the past few days out straight for him, the dojo had drawn more than enough attention already.

Not that that would have stopped him - but it was Kaoru fighting out there. Kaoru, who didn't believe in killing.

More important - Kaoru, who would feel every death as if it were her own.

Stunning them wouldn't make her falter. He'd seen that before. But if they died - she might flinch.

And in that fury of vibro-blades and blaster-fire, one flinch could kill her.

Smack.

Sano shook out his tingling fist, only now registering that despite her best efforts, four ugly-looking guys with vibro-blades had gotten past Kaoru to the engawa. Well... make that three ugly-looking guys, and one collapsing buddy whose looks could only have been improved by the black
eye. "Hi, guys."

**Whack. Thump. Zap!**

Sano grinned at the falling bodies, breathing just a little fast as he lifted his blaster to find another target. "Bye, guys."

Okay. Half the bad guys down, and more were falling. Jou-chan didn't have a scratch on her. And nobody had gotten past them.

*Why do I still have a bad feeling about this?*

Movement caught his eye; he whirled, somehow knowing it wouldn't be in time-

And the spiral dart halted in front of his face, caught by an unseen hand.

"I may be a stranger here," a precise, familiar voice stated from the open gate, "but I rather think that falls into the category of rude."

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*I'm going to pay for this later,* Obi-Wan thought grimly, letting the dart fall to polished wood. *Force, I still hurt everywhere....*

The bath had helped; even if Gensai had had to give him instructions on how to properly use the primitive local equivalent of the refresher, including the odd - but practical - custom of cleansing oneself outside the tub, before the long soak in clean hot water. Clean clothes, no matter how foreign, had helped as well; they weren't Jedi robes, but the chestnut hakama and leaf-patterned green gi were far closer than other gear he'd had to wear undercover. Even the walk through crowded streets had been somewhat refreshing; the faces might all have the same startling Humbarine cast as the Sekihoutai's crew, but the rise and fall of voices had the pleasant rhythm of a city at peace, trees cast green scents into the avenues, and Ayame and Suzume strayed just enough to distract him, but not far enough to spark real worry. And the casual reaction of passers-by as he darted into the crowd after one or the other had reassured him that Gensai was right: dressed in local garb, with a shading reed hat to conceal his foreign auburn hair, no one looked twice at him.

*I wonder if they'd look twice at Master K'Kruhk. He always did like that hat.*

For a moment, Obi-Wan had fought a sudden urge to laugh, thinking of the shaggy Whiphid Jedi. Reed hat, ragged Jedi robes, wry serenity coupled with a swordsman's slight swagger... fur and tusks aside, he'd blend right in.

*Or would have... no. I do not know he is dead. He's fooled many into thinking so on other occasions, Grievous included. Be open to all possibilities. If any Jedi could outwit the Purge... a planet like this would certainly fit his sense of humor. Hana knew of this world; why not others? Who knows who I might find, simply walking down the street?*

*At least it's not Anakin trying this,* he'd thought as they walked on. *He's too tall.*

*Anakin... never will walk here. Not unless he comes for me.*

Dark thoughts. He'd believed they were only shadowed aftereffects of the Force lightning, Darkness still clinging despite his best efforts to meditate....
Until they'd reached the front of the Kamiya dojo compound, and Gensai had gasped to see a street oddly empty of people. And an open gate.

"Take the children," Obi-Wan had urged in an undertone, hearing the clear discharge of blasters. Feeling a darkness beyond simple evil moving within the walls, and a light burning against it clear and steady as a star. Is that Kaoru? Oh Hana. You may have lost your braid to save your life, but you were a Master after all.

Gensai had given him a dark look he remembered from uncounted other medics: you're going to do something stupid and end up in my infirmary again, aren't you?

But he didn't argue, snatching his granddaughters and hurrying away toward the nearest comm-booth.

Decades ago, Obi-Wan recalled, he likely would have jumped through that gate into the fray, sorting out ally from enemy in the sweep of a lightsaber. But at the moment he didn't have a 'saber, he didn't have a clue... and without actively gathering the Force to support him, he had about as much energy as stranded shock-eel.

I can still bite. But I'll have to make it count.

So he'd slipped inside the gate with all the caution he could muster, watching the flow of the fight to determine who was dangerous, and who was just a temporary annoyance.

The dark-haired girl laying out men with horizontal side-swipes and swift parries was definitely dangerous.

More Shii-Cho than Soresu, though it's not quite either, Obi-Wan had judged. Meant more for dueling than blaster-fighting; she knows what she's doing, but she hasn't deflected a single bolt back on them, yet-

A green stun-bolt fired on the wooden porch, and he'd recognized Sanosuke. The smuggler was in the midst of putting down the last of four opponents, unaware of darkness focused on him - there-

It hadn't taken much of a push to stop the dart. Fortunately.

Yellow with Dark rage, cat-eyes narrowed at him from a shadow in the trees. A shadow that was suddenly - gone.

"Sano!" A shove of her hand and will tripped one opponent; Kaoru battled the remaining trio, the first threads of fear reaching through the Force around her. "Inside - Megumi."

Knowledge. Serenity. Harmony. Obi-Wan drew on it all to move with the grace and speed illness would otherwise deny him, catching one of the last thugs standing with a move straight out of Mos Eisley's darker dives. Ducked a punch, and tossed another with a flowing unarmed kata that left him standing and his foe groaning brokenly. Sano wouldn't be enough to take a Dark Side user; he had to free up the one person with a lightsaber-

The front door-screen tore loose, shoved by a howl of pure, unadulterated rage.

Obi-Wan shuddered from that wave of darkness, but dread only touched him when despair writhed black in its wake. Sanosuke? Why - no....

"Damn you to hell!" Sano snarled, blast after blast punching holes in the walls. "You poison-using... shape-twisting... stay still so I can kill you!"
"Or go, and leave us to mourn our dead," a soft, precise voice carried outside, like a whisper-chill of wind. "She swore she would escape you. One way... or another."

"You haven't heard the last of us, samurai!" A blur of darkness vanished off the roof, disappearing into the twilight.

The last foe broke and ran in the Dark one's wake, dragging one of his more conscious comrades with him. Obi-Wan traded a glance with Kaoru, then raced with her to the main house.

Let those who could flee. The grief inside was far more important.

"Damn it," the smuggler was cursing as they skidded inside, Kaoru barely hopping out of her sandals as she crossed the border into the house. "Damn it, damn it all to hell...."

Obi-Wan drew in a quiet breath. Sano had sheathed his blaster and was now punching a few more holes in the wall. A messy-haired youngster with a wooden practice blade was white-faced in the opening leading to the rest of the house, obviously guarding the still-unconscious Katsu whom Obi-Wan could feel somewhere in the rooms beyond.

He ignored them all, sorrow touching him at the sight of the dark-haired woman discarded on the floor, head cradled in the lap of a small young redhead who shook from pure weariness. The left sleeve of her kimono was cast back, exposing a deep gash from wrist to elbow, made by the long fish-knife discarded on the bloody sand of the fire-pit.

Her chest did not rise. Her wound no longer bled.

Kaoru made a soft, hurt noise, switching off her lightsaber almost without thinking. "Kenshin, no...."

"Is he gone?" the redhead whispered.

"She trusted us," Kaoru said bleakly. "Megumi trusted us, and now she's-"

"Is he gone?" Kenshin repeated, sweat trickling down the side of his face. "One has not... the strength to know...."

"He is," Obi-Wan said firmly, stretching out his own feelings. There was something amiss here, something he'd not felt since-

_The Clone Wars. Could it be?_

"Gensai-isha," Kenshin whispered. "Swiftly."

"He's not going to help!" Sano snarled, splintering another board. "I can't believe you let him get away, why are you just sitting there-"

"Get the doctor. Bandages. Something for a tourniquet," Obi-Wan ordered, dropping down by the redhead's side. "When she starts bleeding again, we'll have to work quickly."

"Right!" Kaoru turned and bolted, hope surging around her again.

"Whoa, whoa - are you trying to tell me Megumi's not...?" Sano couldn't manage the word. "You pulled some kind of samurai mind trick?"

A shadow of a smile touched Kenshin's face. "Only weak minds bend to such tricks, Sano."
"But sometimes, when you can't win, there are alternatives to fighting," Obi-Wan agreed, laying a hand on Megumi's warm cheek. "Let me help you."

A minuscule shake of red hair. "Too risky," Kenshin breathed. "One is - not well practiced in this. Not on others. Megumi's life must be held still; one dares not jar it."

_I imagine not_, Obi-Wan thought, still amazed at what he felt. _Morichro. Or something very like it._

_First a Dark technique. Now a Light one I've not seen since Master Yaddle died. How many Healers are there on this world?_

_And why would anyone teach such a dangerous technique to someone so young? He can't be much older than Kaoru-_

Obi-Wan met that focused violet gaze, and halted mid-thought.

...And _then again, maybe he can._

The body seemed young, yes; possibly eighteen or nineteen by Galactic reckoning, old enough to be an experienced Padawan, not old enough to be Knighted. The face, save for that striking cross-shaped scar, seemed younger still; gentle, fine-boned, with a certain surprising stubbornness that oddly reminded him of... well, a young Jedi Padawan who'd flown to Naboo with Qui-Gon.

But the eyes were deep, full of violet sorrow. And perhaps, one blue glint of hope.

_Who are you? How do you know a child of my Temple's children?_

A wash of worry and concern through the Force; Gensai was there, digging into his doctor's kit to cleanse and seal the long slash. "It's all right, Kenshin, you can let go now, it's all right... kami, Kaoru, pry him loose before we lose him."

Kaoru touched Kenshin's arm, blue eyes troubled. "It's all right, Kenshin." A smile dawned on her face. "We did it."

"We... did." He sagged, slumping to the side as Megumi drew one sudden, gasping breath.

"Let me help you," Obi-Wan said, supporting the limp redhead from the other side as Kaoru helped work him out from under the rousing woman. "I take it you're the other patient Gensai-isha was worried about... what in the worlds did you do to yourself, take on a whole army?"

"Close enough," Gensai grumbled. "I hear the local jail's still stuffed to the gills with Yakuza."

The Jedi frowned. "Yakuza?"

"Think of them as human Hutts," Sanosuke said dryly, ruffling little girls' hair as he looked Obi-Wan up and down. "Huh. You almost blend in."

Kaoru and the boy did swift double-takes; the boy's jaw actually dropped. "No way!"

"Yahiko!" Kaoru scolded him. "I apologize for my student. We're not used to strangers around here, sir...?"

"Kenobi," he answered, after the local manner. "Obi-Wan. And I've rather gotten that impression, yes. I hope you don't mind that Dr. Gensai invited me along; I believe he didn't trust me to stay quietly in his infirmary." He granted her a wry smile, and a shrug. "Which is entirely reasonable. I'm told I'm a very bad patient."
"Yes; I suppose I might as well have all the troublemakers in one place," Gensai said tartly, sealing in blood before it could escape. "You might just cancel each other out."

Obi-Wan choked back a laugh; glanced toward the redhead, and caught a suspicious sparkle in violet eyes. Humor that turned to caution as Kenshin regarded him watching Kaoru.

_I can't blame you, Obi-Wan thought. Two young, partly-trained Force-sensitives, in your care - and here I am, a stranger, strong in the Force, just when they're most at risk from the Dark Side. I'd be cautious of me, too. It's just... she looks so much like Hana._

The hair was different, of course; long and dark, caught back in a hasty ponytail, with no trace of a padawan braid. The build, also, had changed; a little more compact than the girl in the hologram, more in line with the usual frame of the local humans. But he could see Hana in her face, just as he'd seen Anakin in Luke's.

_Space, why can't I stop thinking about him? It's past, it's over - I released those emotions to Force twenty years ago-_!

Yet one mad duel in the heart of the Empire's death machine, and they'd roared back as if the Temple massacre had been yesterday. He felt burned and chilled at once, as if Mustafar's lava had met Hoth's ice inside him; raw and angry and aching. Oh, if only he _had_ been able to reach that moment of peace within the duel, and let Vader strike true. He could be with those he loved even now....

"No."

He glanced up, and did not care if the samurai saw anger in his eyes.

"Whoever you grieve," Kenshin said, near-soundlessly, "they would wish you to live."

Dark humor tugged at Obi-Wan's soul. "There is no death."

"Then if there is not, it is not important, and you could grant us the grace of a few days, _hai_?"

_Violet was fathomless, but troubled. "Only a few days. It is never wise to make hasty decisions when one is tired._"

_But I'm so alone. As he had been since Mustafar. As he had been, all those aching, empty years on Tatooine, one lone Jedi where he had always lived with the presence of thousands. I just... don't want to be alone anymore._

Yet duty came first. And duty said he had some last task to carry out here, for Hana and Owen. Though he did not yet know what.

"Grandpa? Is the pretty lady going to be okay?" Ayame asked, wide-eyed.

"She'll be fine," Kaoru said firmly. "But you can't tell anyone she's here, okay? It has to be a secret. Even from the Guards." She walked to the front entryway, and made an exasperated noise as she looked over the thug-scattered courtyard. "Where _are_ the Guards?"

"I doubt they'll be coming," Gensai said grimly. "When I placed my call, I received the distinct impression that the dispatcher had been instructed to put off responding to any disturbance in the vicinity as long as possible." Checking over the wound sealant one last time before he applied a protective bandage, the doctor gave Megumi a sober look. "I believe we'd all benefit from knowing precisely who has that much influence."
Pale, Megumi bit her lip.

"It can wait," Kenshin said softly.

"Himura-san-" Gensai frowned.

"If Sanosuke would prop up the shoji, we could eat in peace and tranquility, and then deal with - whatever must be dealt with." Kenshin gave the dark-haired woman a kind smile. "After all, we should not let Megumi-dono's hard work be wasted."

One sick smuggler, one brat of an apprentice, one worn-to-the-bone rurouni, and two suicidal strangers, Kaoru ticked off her current problems in her mind, watching Sano scarf up the last stray bits of dinner as everyone else sat back with cups of tea. Katsu was almost asleep in his; Yahiko kept an eye on the copilot between sips, ready to prop him up or lean him down flat. At least the thugs got up and limped out. With a little help from Sano, who'd locked and barred the dojo gate afterwards. If they're part of what Megumi's running from, her problem looks like something that can be thumped. But Kenobi-san....

He looked fine, that was the problem. Worn down, yes, and a little worried about the law, or lack of same, that might decide drop by. But if Kenshin hadn't murmured that quiet warning in her ear, she'd never have guessed he wanted to die.

"There is grief in him, Kaoru-dono. A grief he has never healed; only buried, under honor and duty, so he might finish the task he has set himself.

"But fate has cast him loose from that plan, and now the storm of that grief threatens to drown him. And in the darkness, he cannot see what is a rock bent on tearing him asunder, and what may be a rope thrown out to save.

"If we can draw him into quiet waters, only for a little while... one will not ask this of you, Kaoru-dono. But - one would hope to see that Gensai-isha's work was not in vain."

No mention of his own, the stubborn idiot.

No mention of the worry Kenshin had to be feeling, either; if she could feel the Force flowing through Obi-Wan, Kenshin definitely could. Which meant - well, she wasn't sure what it meant, yet. But any Light Side Force-user might be a potential danger, if they knew who Kenshin had been.

So we see that he doesn't. Kaoru turned a polite look on Dr. Gensai, inviting him to comment further on their unexpected dinner guest.

Gensai cleared his throat. "Kaoru, did your mother ever mention any cousins?"

...Say what? Kaoru thought, stunned.

"Adoptive cousin, I should have said," Obi-Wan said shyly. "I know this is awkward, but... if she is the Hana Firefinder I've been looking for, we were adopted by," a bare instant of hesitation, "guardians from the same clan."

Kaoru stared at him. Guardians? Mother's only legal guardian by Galactic law was-
Oh. Kami. It can't be.

But she lived. She lived, and if she did maybe someone else could have - he looks like the right age, he could have been a padawan. "What clan?" she got out.

"Vornskr." Faint, fragile hope gleamed in aquamarine eyes. "Quidel Tenskwatawa's clan -urk!"

"He is still a bit fragile, Kaoru," Gensai put in, amused.

Reluctantly, Kaoru relaxed her hug. *Master Quidel's youngling clan. And the Temple records were destroyed, the Imperials wouldn't know that!" Welcome home."

"Ah..." Obi-Wan blinked as she stepped back. "This is a bit... sudden."

"Keh." Sano rolled his eyes. "Told you. You're a neighbor." He cracked his knuckles. "Course you know, she's been like my little sister for years, so... let's take it easy and get to know each other better, hmm?"

"Later," Katsu said darkly. "Who's after you, lady?"

"It's not your concern," Megumi said numbly. "Just... take me off-planet, leave me somewhere, anywhere...."

"Is there no one to wait for you, then," Kenshin asked gently, "at your home in Aizu?"

*Aizu?* Kaoru barely kept her jaw from dropping, as Megumi blanched. *Aizu supported the Shogunate... they held out against the Empire for years, before it ground them down."

"This one has wandered far, and encountered many from Aizu," Kenshin went on. "You can't hide that accent, no matter how you try."

*Megumi has an accent?* Kaoru made herself focus on that, rather than the thought of just where Kenshin would have had most of his encounters with Aizu natives. Kyoto might be far from that wild northern province, but it had hosted hordes of Aizu samurai during the Bakumatsu. *She just - well, she didn't sound like Tokyo, that's all I could hear."

"Takani Megumi!" Gensai sat up, eyes bright. "Well, well, young lady! Where have you been all these years?"

"W-well, I..." Words dried in Megumi's throat.

"The Takanis are a clan of doctors," Gensai said, looking over his fellow guests. "Renowned for their skill, their flexibility - they were some of the first to adopt Galactic medicine, after the early traders landed here, at great personal risk - and their compassion." He smiled at the pale woman. "I'm glad to see you alive, young lady. I'd heard that your father had died in one of the insurrections, and your mother and brothers gone missing... that you yourself had reappeared five years ago as a doctor's assistant, only to vanish when he was killed two years later. I feared the worst."

"You were right to," Megumi whispered. "He was working for Takeda Kanryuu."

Kaoru gulped.

Gensai blanched. "No. I knew the man. He wouldn't-"

"He was." Megumi wouldn't raise her eyes. "I... found out when Kanryuu killed him." She
swallowed dryly. "The doctor - belonged to him. Now Kanryuu thinks I belong to him... and I won't go back, I won't-

"You will not," Kenshin said firmly. Glanced at the others. "Takeda Kanryuu?"

"Bad news, Himura," Katsu said darkly. "Very bad."

"Industrialist, has a mansion on the expensive side of Tokyo," Sano nodded that direction. "Powerful guy. Friends in the government, in the underworld... looks like a few ninja on the payroll, too." He started to say something else, changed his mind looking at the two youngsters by Gensai. "We're going to have to be real careful."

"I see," Obi-Wan said thoughtfully. Smiled at the girls. "Well, we should be fine for tonight. How was your day? Do you think the ataru will be ready to leave soon?"

A few minutes of girlish chatter, interspersed by growing yawns, and Gensai was able to carry off his granddaughters back home. Sano did much the same for Katsu in one of her spare rooms; Kaoru could hear the low undertones of a tired argument all the way out in the main room. Megumi hadn't protested when Kaoru gave her a closet-sized room between Yahiko's and Kenshin's, apparently too tired to note the older and younger swordsmen silently trade glances about who was keeping the night's first watch.

:Yahiko takes it first, and that's final.: Kaoru had stated flatly.

:Kaoru-dono:-

:You're tired.: Kaoru stated, feeling the frailty of that contact. :You're sick. You need time to just be. Yahiko can wake you up if something drops in.: Her scowl at her student had said he'd darn well better.

Now she was alone with cups of cool water and a stranger who might be distant kin. At least, as much as any Jedi had kin. "How- how did you find me?"

"Sanosuke would likely say luck," Obi-Wan said ruefully. "I found myself in a bit of a fix on Yavin IV, he almost landed on top of me-"

Kaoru had to laugh. "He wouldn't have. He's a better pilot than that."

"Hmm. Well, in short, I recognized the ship's class, and decided I'd check to see...." The auburn head shook. "I've no idea what I expected to see, truly. It certainly wasn't that." Sea-green eyes sought hers. "Were you aware she left a message?"

"Sanosuke would likely say luck," Obi-Wan said ruefully. "I found myself in a bit of a fix on Yavin IV, he almost landed on top of me-"

Kaoru had to laugh. "He wouldn't have. He's a better pilot than that."

"He wasn't Jedi," Kaoru said softly. "But he was samurai, and he tried to be a decent person. On Yamato, that's about as close as anyone comes."

"Samurai. Ninja. Sensitives scattered all through the city." Obi-awan shook his head. "And I believe Sanosuke called Kenshin a rurouni, earlier. I must admit I'm a bit lost."

Oh, she knew that feeling. Trying to put together bits and pieces from her memories of Mother and
Father; always wondering what a true padawan would know that she didn't. "They probably weren't in the Archives, trust me," Kaoru said wryly. "Oh, great thing to tell him, Kaoru. From the look of him, he probably wasn't more than fourteen when the Temple was destroyed, but he's spent more time in them than you ever will. Even if that was twenty years ago. Never mind, moving on.... "Which is kind of ironic, because from what my mother could figure out, Yamato was settled because of a war only the Jedi remember."

Obi-Wan grew still. "What war?"

"The Second Sith War."

Her fellow Jedi let out a slow breath. "Not good."

"Really not good," Kaoru agreed. Sipped her water, getting her thoughts in order. "Mother wasn't sure, part of this is based off her guesses, part off the work of a few Old Republic archaeologists out on the Kanto Plain - but there are carved memorials out there whose language dates back to about then. Though based on some of the Yamato legends, my mother thought they weren't made during the war, but shortly after it, by Jedi and Sith fleeing the Purge."

"Jedi and Sith?" Obi-Wan pounced.

"Legends say there were things out there eating any Force-sensitives they could catch," Kaoru said grimly. "The survivors had a little more to worry about than which side of the Force those fighting beside them were on. People just ran, and some of them ended up running here. And they hid. For thousands of years. She looked down at her water. Swirled it against the thin ceramic of her cup. "And in that time... they changed."

"Part of that was Yamato. This isn't exactly a safe world, outside the spaceport. But it's safer for sensitives than people who aren't; we have creatures here who hunt by the Force, like the vornskr, and sensitives have a better chance of feeling them coming. Even more than that, we have Miasma. Given you had Kanto Plain, you're probably alive because your midi-chlorian count is high enough for training."

"What?"

"It kills more non-sensitives than sensitives," Kaoru shrugged. "Dr. Gensai could probably give you a better explanation than I could. But Miasma means samurai and ninja children have better odds of living to become adults. So for centuries, they've been encouraged to marry. Or at least have children." She gave him a shy grin. "So - and I know this is a shock to anybody from the Temple, my father told me how 'Kaasan busted up a tavern full of samurai once - don't be surprised if perfect strangers try to get you alone for the night."

Obi-Wan made a choked noise.

"Just don't let it go to three nights straight, or technically, you'll be married."

The poor man looked about to faint. But he cleared his throat, evidently setting that terrifying thought aside. "Samurai and ninja. Jedi and Sith?"

"Mostly," Kaoru agreed, "but it's not that easy. Not every samurai or ninja is Force-sensitive. You're born into those clans; if you don't have the ability to read ki, you just get the physical training. And even among sensitives, I've heard of samurai who lived only to spill blood. Or a few ninja who never hurt anyone; only used their training to spy, and heal, and help negotiate treaties that kept a lot of people from getting hurt. And that doesn't even get into sorcerers, and healers,
"No," Kaoru sighed. "Mother died when I was seven." She still flinched at the memory; the sudden shock of the mind she'd been bound to ever since she could remember, gone in crushing pain. "My father took over my training after that. Kamiya Kasshin Ryu is a Light style. A defensive style. For protecting, not for war."

"Sometimes protecting innocents means one must resort to battle," Obi-Wan said softly. "As you did today."

Kaoru had to smile. "Now you sound like Kenshin."

"Do I?" His answering smile was warm, but sharp with curiosity. "What is a rurouni?"

"A wandering swordsman." Kaoru set down her cup, ticking facts off on her fingers. "Before the Empire took power and declared the hereditary classes were dead - except for the nobles, Force only knows why, nobles hadn't been important on Yamato for centuries, but I guess the Ishin Shishi had to have something for symbols, and Palpatine likes the idea... anyway. Yamatoans, human or otherwise, were mostly born into one of four classes; farmer, samurai, artisan, and merchant. Well, five if you count the river-folk, which is where the Empire's tried to force everyone who's not human... they're outcasts, entertainers, leather-workers; all the professions most people think of as unclean."

"Mostly?" Obi-Wan asked pointedly.

"Force sensitivity turns up all over the place;" Kaoru shrugged. "For centuries, the Shogunate said only samurai were allowed to carry two swords, and if you weren't samurai and didn't have a lot of money or power, you weren't allowed to carry any. Which ninja have always ignored, at least where they won't get caught... there have always been some people who aren't samurai, but can carry a sword. Given that Kenshin calls himself rurouni, not ronin, I guess he's one of those."

"You guess?" Auburn brows climbed. "You trust him."

"I do," Kaoru smiled. "But I don't really know him. Not yet. We met less than a ten-day ago, when he saved my life." She let out a slow breath. "He knows I'm Jedi. Which means he can probably guess you're Jedi. So- so don't be afraid, okay? He won't turn you in."

"A dangerous course to take, if we're discovered," Obi-Wan observed.

"You don't know the half of it," Kaoru sighed. "He helped me find Yahiko - and if people learned he helped a Jedi take an apprentice, he'd really be in trouble." Though not as much as he already is, being... who he is... don't think about that too loud, Kaoru."

"An apprentice." He frowned. "I was worried about this. I've never been through the Trials. I know that. But I am an assistant master of Kamiya Kasshin, Kenobi-san. I'm qualified to teach, and to build my own lightsaber."

"Not that I have, yet. Tousan showed me the crystal meditation, but I've only managed student-level crystals so far. I'm not a master, not yet...."

"But Yahiko needs me."

"The Temple is gone," Kenobi said bleakly. "I cannot fault anyone for attempting to ensure that all
our ways do not perish from the universe. So long as you remember the danger of the Dark Side, as I can sense you have. But you sound as if it's more than Imperial law that would have our redhead friend in jeopardy."

"A lot more," Kaoru said soberly. "I'm not sure why, Mother thought it was because the legends got warped over the years, but people here are sure it's the Jedi who drove our ancestors into hiding. And it didn't help when the rumor got out that the Jedi Watchman for this planet kidnapped a few children for the Temple, decades ago."

"Jedi would never-

Kaoru shook her head. "Watchman Ulloriaq might have. By accident. If she didn't know Yamatoans well - and that can take a long time. Jedi always checked with the parents, right? Unless the children were orphaned, when they might just take a Force-sensitive child?"

"If there were no adult guardians, yes," Obi-Wan admitted.

"Here, your family is your clan," Kaoru stated. "The parents have first claim. Then siblings, aunts and uncles, or grandparents; that's why Dr. Gensai has Ayame and Suzume. Then cousins, or other adults in your clan, or even those of a clan allied by marriage, or just treaty...."

"Oh, Sithspit," the swordsman muttered. "Then - Yahiko-"

"If he's not an orphan, his relatives don't deserve to claim him!" Kaoru said furiously. Calm. Remember calm. "He was with the Yakuza. His mother died under them, because she didn't have anywhere else to go! No one has any claim on him anymore." Breathe. Slow and easy... "It's a matter of record where Kenshin found him. Anyone who might show up would get laughed right out of Tokyo."

Obi-Wan gave her a considering look. "So society can declare a relative's claims null and void."

"If a clan doesn't honor its commitments to a person, those who do honor them have the right to take them in. An obligation to take them in. Clan is your life, here," Kaoru said plainly. "Someone who doesn't have a place - it's a horrible way to live." She made herself brighten. "But if I say you're a cousin, people will believe me. Even if you are gaijin."

His mouth twitched at that, but his eyes stayed level as a blade. "You're putting a great deal of trust in someone you've just met."

"Is there any reason I shouldn't?" Kaoru said boldly. "Why are you here, Kenobi-san?"

He smiled, wry and sad. "I suppose... I have nowhere else to go."

So much sadness. "I know how 'Kaasan got away," Kaoru said softly. "How did you?"

"The sacrifice of a friend," Obi-Wan sighed. "I was riding a dragon-mount along a cliff. I don't know how she knew, I didn't know; but when Order 66 came through and the clone troopers opened fire... she took the blow instead of me. We both fell." Sea-blue eyes were distant. "It was a very long fall."

Kaoru bent her head. "I'm sorry for your friend."

The auburn head shook. "Grief is an attachment."

"Life is an attachment," Kaoru shot back. "Duty is heavier than a mountain, death lighter than a
feather. Samurai live. And love. And grieve. Because we are human, and our duty to others of the clan of sentient beings is to grant them feelings in return for those they have for us. And it's our duty to ourselves, too; if we don't understand why they act in the will of the Force, or don't, how can we hope to resolve anything without violence?"

"That is... a rather unique interpretation of Jedi teachings," Obi-Wan said thoughtfully.

Kaoru blushed. "Um-"

"I think my master would have found it worthy of meditation," he mused. "Days worth, at the very least. I wonder... if the Council had heard that view, would it have helped...?" He sighed. "Likely not. They'd have had to hear it first, and that requires more than simply the presence of ears and an absence of vacuum."

"You met the High Council?" Kaoru said faintly. You just insulted the High Council?

"Hrm? Oh, yes," Obi-Wan gave her a wryly amused smile. "My master was in conflict with them on several occasions. He was strong in the Living Force, you see, and most of those on the Council were stronger in the Unifying Force. As was I, so I could not always see why he disagreed so strongly. But given what I've seen the past years, I wish we had all listened to him."

"Oh, poor Kenshin," Kaoru murmured. "That is... I mean...."

"Jumps in on instinct, solves problems in rather unconventional ways, picks up yet another pathetic lifeform - yes, he does remind me a bit of my master," Obi-Wan agreed ruefully. "If I'd ever imagined my master as a teenager, which I assure you I hadn't, really. Ever."

"Um." Kaoru cleared her throat. I'd better tell him, before he assumes something and somebody gets hurt. "Kenshin's older than he looks."

"Thank goodness. Even early twenties are easier to deal with than teenagers-"

Kaoru blew out a breath. "He's thirty-eight."

Silence. "You are not joking," Obi-Wan said at last.

"He was old enough to fight when the Empire took over here," Kaoru stated, trying not to think about exactly how many facts she was glossing over with the truth. "I think that's why he ended up rurouni. He's... um... kind of wanted by various people."

"Why am I not surprised," Obi-Wan muttered. "Thirty-eight?"

"I checked with Maekawa-sensei; he was a friend of my father's, I'll introduce you to him later. But he says it really does happen, sometimes," Kaoru nodded. "Some of the people back in the mountains, the ones who throw redheads once in a while? There are stories about a redhead samurai woman who landed with the first refugees, and was still fighting strong over three centuries later." Kaoru half-closed her eyes, hunting for Maekawa's exact words. "We don't know her name, not for sure, but her clan was called Sunrider. And Himura - well, the way Kenshin writes it, it means scarlet village. But if the characters changed over time, it could mean sun village."

"Space!" The Jedi looked rattled.

"I know! But it's lucky for him, too, because the people looking for him are looking for somebody - well, older than you are-" Kaoru stopped. "Wait. You know that name?"
"From a class in ancient history, but yes." Obi-Wan settled his hands on his knees, eyes distant as he called lightly on the Force to review his own memories. "Sunriders have been Jedi since... oh, before the First Sith War. Vima Sunrider, I think, is the one I recall as being alive during the Second... and her descendant, Vima-Da-Boda, was among us when the Order was issued. Her fifth-generation descendant," Obi-Wan added, stunned. "Five generations in over three and a half millennia... I can't believe I never calculated that before."

"Urk," Kaoru gulped.

"They're very strong in the Force," Obi-Wan mused. "It would be a good reason not to be worried about Kanryuu." He weighed her in his gaze. "But you are worried."

_I have people depending on me. I have an apprentice to look after. And we just managed to cross one of the nastier guys in Tokyo's shadow economy._ But none of those were what really made her heart sink. "Sano and Katsu, they work around the Empire," Kaoru stated. "I do what I do in spite of it. Kenshin - well, he tries to avoid it where he can, and bluff it where he can't." She studied her guest. "What do you do?"

Obi-Wan was silent for a long moment. "Do you know, I hadn't truly thought about it." Sea-green went distant, choosing each word carefully as a master flower arranger. "I spent most of the years since the fall of the Republic in a rather desolate place, making myself very small and quiet in the Force. I'm desperately out of practice, just when it seems you truly do need Jedi here."

Patient, Kaoru thought, waiting as he thought. She was going to be patient, if she had to beat herself over the head with her own bokken.

"But for all my efforts to hide, the Empire finally caught up with me," he said at last. "I managed to elude them, and I believe they believe I am dead. I could hide again. Bury myself in emptiness once more." Obi-Wan looked up. "But I had forgotten what it felt like to have a lightsaber in my hands. To follow the will of the Force, and stand in defense of the just, and the innocent."

Kaoru let out a relieved breath. Thought a second, and dropped a glance at his weaponless belt.

Obi-Wan cleared his throat awkwardly. "Yes, well... I did say I was out of practice. I lost it in the battle. I'm fortunate that's all I lost," he added grimly. "I've a focus crystal, and I was able to find some few of the components in storage on the _Sekihoutai_ before I became delirious, but-"

"Parts won't be a problem," Kaoru jumped in, relieved. _At least, not if Sano's right about you having a chunk of cash._ Kenshin had helped her search some of the most out-of-the-way spots in Tokyo for the parts she'd needed to repair her training saber - she'd never have thought of talking to kabuki prop makers - but even so, the dojo budget would have no room for luxuries this month. _At least I have a budget. Rurouni have a hard enough time just staying fed. No wonder Kenshin hangs onto his toolkit like grim death._

No, parts wouldn't be a problem. But Dr. Gensai's warnings rang through her head, and she gave Obi-Wan a sober look. "You're not well enough for the meditation yet."

"Kaoru-" he began, nettled.

"You're not," Kaoru insisted. "You almost _died._ If Dr. Gensai hadn't been able to find a healer - you need to rest. Get your strength back." She skewered him with a look. "Unless you've got that Imperial hang-up about being protected by a woman?"

"Jedi are generally above that particular frailty, milady." Humor danced in his gaze; sobered. "So
you know what happened."

"My father always believed that where there is light, there will be darkness," Kaoru said steadily. "And where there is darkness, there is still a little light. It's not good or evil; it's just life."

"The Jedi have always fought the Sith," Obi-Wan objected.

"And here we had to stop fighting if anyone wanted to live," Kaoru stated flatly. "I follow the will of the Force." As well as I can, anyway. "If I sense a disturbance, someone deliberately out to do harm, like that ninja meant to do to Megumi, then I stop them. But if I tried to chase down every ninja in Tokyo who touched the Dark Side, the samurai would kill me." If the Empire didn't beat them to it. "There's a kind of truce here. A balance."

"A balance in the Force?" He started to cross his arms skeptically; stopped, suddenly thoughtful. "Well. My master always said one should cultivate a certain tolerance for local customs."

That's not an answer. But Kaoru nibbled her lip, and deliberately calmed her temper; push too hard now, and he might not even consider trying to live among her people.

"For now, I believe I can tell a certain sensei who has quite definitely not said she might be involved in certain rebellious activities...." The glint of humor was back. "I can be a very heavy sleeper, if need calls for it. After all, I have it on good authority that I am still quite ill, and feverish; there's no telling when I might simply have to drop off for a nap, is there?"

Relieved, Kaoru grinned at him.

Chapter End Notes

For more details on lightsaber forms, see Wookieepedia. Great site!

Ariitu - "aliit"; family, bloodline, clan. Mando'a origin.

Ataru - Form IV lightsaber fighting, Qui-Gon Jinn's - and Yoda's - favored style. Makes extensive use of acrobatic maneuvers often thought physically impossible without the aid of the Force. Users are a "whirlwind of destruction", but may be open to attacks from multiple opponents, and - as Maul painfully demonstrated - can be vulnerable in tight spaces. The "Form of the Hawk-Bat".

Hai - formal yes.

Ie - house, family organization.

Kami - spirits, deities.

Koji - orphan, without parents.

Living Force - deals with emotions, healing, the "now"; "feel, don't think - use your instincts." Qui-Gon Jinn's strengths lay in this direction, while most other Jedi Masters were stronger in the Unifying Force: telekinesis, visions of the past and future, a more rational and long-term use of the Force. Note that all Jedi use both; they simply tend to have more strength in one direction. While the High Council favored the Unifying Force, in fact, neither side does well without the other. Unifying users need a kick to
get them to work in the present (just watch the High Council in the Prequel Trilogy, believe me), while Living Force users can be caught up so much in the now they don't see the cliff they're about to jump off of. Example: Hitokiri Battousai.

Minashigo - without protective affiliation.

Morichro - similar to a Force trance, slowing a being's metabolism, breathing, and heart rate (or equivalents). Unlike a Force trance, Morichro can affect beings other than the Jedi using the technique. Abused, this power can be fatal; the Jedi Council forbade its use, even though Dark Side Force-users were not known for it, since it required the student to master less malevolent uses of the Force first.

Shii-Cho - Form I, taught to all younglings even before they become padawans. Simple, which is its strength; good against both blasters and sword-wielders.

Soresu - Form III fighting; Obi-Wan's favorite in AotC and RotS. The most defensive form, developed to counteract advancing blaster technology throughout the galaxy.

Tanuki - raccoon dog.

Tayuu - high-ranking courtesan.

The encounter of Obi-Wan and a rebuilt Darth Maul was drawn in a comic book, Star Wars: Infinities. Not technically canon EU, but it was neat. :)

Scary as the math is, the Sunrider info is canon EU. Sunriders tend to have strong Force powers, long-lasting youthfulness, and red hair; some suspect Mara Jade is of this lineage. Vima was born in 4,000 BBY, and may have died in the year 3,952 BBY on Katarr, during the Jedi Purge that was the aftermath of the Second Sith war. Her true fate, however, is unknown - and given she was one of the strongest Jedi of her generation, it's possible she escaped. Vima-Da-Boda was born 190 BBY, and, canon, is a sixth generation descendant of Nomi Sunrider (Vima's mother) through Vima; Vima-Da-Boda herself was still alive well into the New Republic era, meeting Leia.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Not so much of a bluff as I might wish, Obi-Wan thought ruefully the next morning, ensconced on a cushion on the back porch with one of Kaoru's books and a cup of cool well water. All I want to do is lie here and ache.

Head, joints, muscles - everything hurt. Though even that wasn't enough to slow down his racing thoughts.

Old Republic archaeologists on the Kanto Plain.

No reason to believe those folk Kaoru had mentioned so casually had been his parents. Yet - no reason to believe they weren't, as well. The time seemed to fit. The bounty hunter's report, his illness, his fragmented memories....

Watchman Ulloriaq.

He could remember images of her, much as he hoped the Force might have granted Leia and Luke memories of Padme; a small woman, not too different in appearance from the locals, with a certain hard edge that spoke of the sort of utter dedication to the Code he'd once thought right and proper. A very unhappy woman, from what little Obi-Wan remembered; as who wouldn't be, with the unmannered youngster he'd been shivering under her gaze and whispering that he wanted his parents, he wanted his ani, please-

Owen, Obi-Wan realized, sunk in the memory. I was asking for Owen. Our parents were gone, I could feel it even if I didn't want to believe it - but he was alive. Somewhere.

Alive, but not important, apparently. In memory Owen might loom tall and strong, but an adult's reflection judged that he likely hadn't been any older than Kaoru was now-

And Kaoru's old enough to look after an apprentice.

Basic didn't have the words. He lapsed into Huttese instead, laying yet another curse on the Council and its hidebound resistance to looking outside Temple walls. "If it's not in the Archives, it doesn't exist." Damn it all-

A leafy rustle brought a scent of spicy green. "That sounds," Kenshin said plainly, "most unpleasant."

Obi-Wan opened his eyes to look at that almost-not-there presence in the Force, studying violet eyes as Kenshin knelt down and took off his shading reed hat. Red sleeves were still tied back, and dirt tinged pale hands; a woven basket of leafy greens, red stems, and a host of plant-things Obi-Wan couldn't identify rested on the porch by the man. "Shouldn't you be resting?"

"The garden needs tending. Which is restful, to this one. And on the matter of rest...." Violet studied him in return. "One is not entirely familiar with your... style's use of techniques, Kenobi-san. Kaoru-dono knows of the healing trance, as most samurai do; one has seen her use it. Do you?"

"Yes." Though for some odd reason, Obi-Wan had found himself reluctant to slip into one. The
"You should not use it for another day." In deliberate view, Kenshin touched callused fingers to the back of the Jedi's hand; a soft skirl of the Force, like a breeze from a shaded glen. "The Miasma is in retreat, but if it were encouraged to grow now, even hashima would be hard-pressed to keep you well."

"Encouraged to-" Obi-Wan cast his mind back to what Gensai had showed him of the parasite's life cycle, and stifled another curse. Damn. That close to being an independent organism, rather than an illness - yes, a trance might well have that effect. "Well. That could be rather less than pleasant."

"Yes."

Obi-Wan let his eyes narrow slightly. "You've seen it."

"Yamato was torn by war even before the Clone Wars began." Kenshin's gaze was elsewhere, peering into mists of memory. "One has seen choices made, when allies or foes were ill and gravely wounded. Sometimes the wrong choice."

"Your master took you onto the field to heal?" For a Jedi it wouldn't have been unusual; once chosen, a padawan went everywhere with his master, even into the thick of battle. But every padawan Obi-Wan had ever known had been trained by Yoda first. Even the youngest Jedi apprentice knew what to do with a lightsaber. *How does it work on this planet?*

"One's training was more in battle than in healing." Kenshin smiled faintly. "One has tried to keep learning." The red head tilted. "And you, Kenobi-san?"

"Obi-Wan," the Jedi said firmly. *I haven't really heard my name said in years. I've... missed it.* "I'm afraid I've never truly been skilled at healing." If I had, that duel on Naboo might have been so different.... No. Qui-Gon's injury was too grave. Wishing it otherwise is self-delusion - and that is of the Dark Side. "Nor... gardening."

Kenshin gave him a skeptical look. "By which one thinks, you have never tried." A slight shrug. "Not that one can blame you for avoiding the attempt. From what one has heard of the Republic's agri-worlds, that is no more gardening than droid-made goods are hand-fired tea ware." Violet darkened. "Perhaps life on Coruscant hardens a soul. But one cannot help but think the Agri-Corps is a fate no one who can feel the joy of ki would seek."

Curiosity and wariness stirred in equal measure; Obi-Wan stilled the one, but let the other have just the slightest of room to move. "How much do you know?"

"Of Jedi?" Kenshin said levelly. "More than most. Less than you, one thinks. Enough to make many one has met uncomfortable, one knows." He settled back on his ankles. "You were tested near birth, or young, and found to have a midi-chlorian count the Order decided was useful. Your guardians, such as the Order knew them to be, were approached and asked to give you up. You were raised on a world that is stifled by a city even the most fervent Edokko would find impossible to bear, among guardians who claimed to know nothing of love, or grief, or the common jealousies and hatreds most sentients suffer. You were trained as the Council saw fit, in war and diplomacy and kami knows what else - and at thirteen your fate was sealed." His voice softened. "One hopes you found joy in it, Obi-Wan. It sounds... empty."
"One who follows the will of the Force is never empty," the Jedi said firmly. Sighed, and acknowledged the younger man's point with a faint, wry smile. "Though for many years it has been lonely. As I suppose it must be for a wandering swordsman."

The very faintest flicker in the Force, like far-off lightning. But Kenshin only smiled. "Yet if one did not wander, Obi-Wan, how would one have met such interesting people?" He shrugged. "One will stay until Takeda's threat is dealt with. Then - well, perhaps then the winds of time will blow again. Who can say?"

Well, you're definitely not saying, my young friend, Obi-Wan thought wryly. You're good, Kenshin, you're very, very good... but while I may be rusty, I am a Master. You are lonely. And somehow, some way, you believe you deserve to be.

A lonely, possibly angry man who'd taken great risks to protect a young woman who all but shone with good intentions. Sithspawn. I've seen how this tale ends.

Or perhaps not. Kenshin might look the age Anakin had been when he'd started that disastrous relationship with Padme, but he most emphatically was not a headstrong padawan determined to get his way no matter what the Code might require. He'd made no oath to the Code or Council, for one thing; and even if he had, Kenshin's thoughts and manner toward the sensei spoke only of a wistful wish for friendship, a breath of not-loneliness. Not the burning obsession that had lurked in his young apprentice.

Though he is good at concealing his thoughts, Obi-Wan noted. And as for the Code....

He is very good at concealing his thoughts, Kenshin thought darkly, watching the Jedi without making it obvious he was watching. For Jedi he undoubtedly was; he could sense the flow of the Living Force about the man like mist, much as it did around Shishou, loosening age's grip to a feather-light clasp.

Near Shishou's age, he must be, Kenshin realized. Which would make him no padawan when the Empire took hold, but a seasoned Knight. And if what I have learned is accurate, all the Knights were at least acquainted, if not friends. Which would mean I-

No. Bury that thought. Bury even its shadow. This was a good man, that was all that mattered. Leave the past as past, and let Kaoru have her joy in the presence of another of her kind. Soon enough he would leave again, and neither of them would need to worry about whom - what - he had been.

"Are there certain oaths samurai uphold? Evidently, Kaoru can pass for what's seen as normal on this planet."

Kenshin blinked back surprise, reflecting on the question. True; that Kenobi should know, if Kaoru meant to claim him as a cousin. Her reputation determined whether her school would live or die, and her kin's behavior would reflect on her. "It is well known that every school carries its own code," the rurouni answered. "If Kamiya Kasshin should happen to have one that was once heard on Coruscant - well, who here would know?"

"Besides you?" Obi-Wan said mildly. "What code does your school have, Kenshin?"

The first principle of Hiten Mitsurugi: the sword swung in my name is wielded to protect the innocents of the world.
Shishou... I failed you so.

But none of that could he tell this man.

He set the pain aside, and shrugged. "Hiten Mitsurugi is very old," Kenshin stated. "The first meditation, is this.


Something flickered in blue-green. "That is--"

"Do not," Kenshin said levelly, "mistake this one for Jedi. One is not. One never could be."

"You don't know that," Obi-Wan said gently.

I know the second meditation, Kenobi-san. And that would send you for your lightsaber, did you have one. "One is only a rurouni, Obi-Wan. No more." He moved to stand-

"Tell me about the war here," came the quiet request. "I sense it is of great importance."

One knee lifted, Kenshin hesitated; gathered up his frustration, acknowledged it with grace, and released it into the flow of ki through them both. "It is." He hesitated. "One cannot claim to be a disinterested observer..."

"In war? No one is." Wry amusement. "Not even a Jedi."

Kenshin sighed. "What do you know of Yamato?"

"Beyond what I've seen within these walls? Not much," Obi-Wan said frankly. "Though any world that hosts such a deadly disease, yet still has people on it with the compassion of Dr. Gensai, milady Kamiya, or even Sagara... it can't be so bad."

"Yes; Sano is a better man than he would like to believe," Kenshin nodded. "Katsu... well, one does not consider him to have ill intent, but while his newsletter brings useful news to Tokyo and beyond, those who serve the Empire on this world read it as well."

"He runs a newsletter?" The tiniest flicker of unease.

"The Meiji Inter-world Dispatch. Kaoru-dono has shown me some past issues." Kenshin inclined his head. "No details of their cargoes, or... passengers... are ever mentioned."

"Good," Obi-Wan breathed. Shook his head. "Smuggler and reporter. I'd hate to be in his boots if the Empire should happen to catch him-" he grinned slightly, "-black-handed."

"One cannot fault their reasoning," Kenshin said dryly. "It was propaganda such as Katsu's that fomented dissent with the Shogunate, and the plodding legalities of the Republic, to begin with. They took advantage of that anger before; they cannot fail to see its danger now." What can I say? How can I make a stranger - a Jedi - understand the desperate struggle here, with no true wrong or right, only ideals on either side that were betrayed by both.

Tell him the truth, baka deshi, memory growled at him. Tell him, and let him decide what he will.
We instruct those who do not feel the will of the Force as we do; we do not control them.

For to control another's will - to make them think as we will - is of the Dark Side. And we are Shadows.

"After the flight to this world, we lost star travel," Kenshin began, casting his mind back to some of Hiko's earliest history lessons. "All of us; humans of various worlds, Zabrak, and Fireryo alike. Some say it was fear; others, deliberate acts by one group of ki-users or another, trying to protect us from the horror that might yet remain among the stars. The reason matters little. We spent the next three millennia as sentients do when they think themselves alone in the universe; warring, making peace with each other, living and dying and contributing to the will of the Force.

"Then, perhaps seven decades ago, we were found again. But not by the Republic.

"Who it was that found us... the names are not important. They were traders, smugglers, out to gain profits laws of the Republic would never allow. With drugs, or slaves - or simply goods taken at the point of a blaster. And while our people did resist them-" Kenshin slanted a glance toward Kenobi, "-one believes you know how fruitless it is to pit only lightsabers against starships."

"Would that I didn't," Obi-Wan said under his breath. "Yet a Jedi Watchman did come here."

"Hai, one did," Kenshin nodded. "But only after the Shogunate had been coerced to sign various... agreements, with those who would exploit our world." He shrugged slightly. "They themselves had always exploited the rest of us, of course; but at least they were our people, who would have to live with the consequences of their actions. They could not take everything. Not if they wished to survive. Yet now they were bound to those who would take what they could, who did not care if they left Yamato a poisoned cinder...."

His hands were shaking. Kenshin closed his eyes a moment and simply breathed, listening to the buzz of hari-choucho visiting flowers, the quiet creak-creak of a kamutobu advertising its garden territory full of juicy insects to any female that might bury eggs in moist dirt.

Ki was alive, and it flowed through him. It had flowed before he came here, and it would flow after he was gone.

My world still lives. That much I have done.

"There were good people in the Shogunate, who appealed to the courts of the Republic," he said at last. "Even, at the last, to the Senate. Or so it is said. The truth is not known. The messengers sent died; suicide, it was believed. Some say, because the appeals were rebuffed. Some say they were merely mired in endless debate, shuffled off, and forgotten, and they could not stand the shame of bringing failure to their Shogun. Some," he cast a sober look at Obi-Wan, "even say that it was the Jedi who made them appear as honor-suicides, for off Yamato, who else carries lightsabers?"

"A Sith," the Jedi said grimly. And sighed. "But the High Council believed they were extinct."

"And so they would not hear us, and would not hear even their own Watchman," Kenshin nodded, recalling Hiko's gruff mentions of secrets confessed by the undercover gaijin he'd gotten drunk with a time or two. "And she, of course, had her own problems, once it was rumored she had stolen a child from his clan-"

"She?" Sea-green pierced him. "You knew her?"

"The tale spread like wildfire, Kenobi-san," Kenshin said evenly. "Before I was born, it was known from Edo to Kyoto and in every hamlet and fisher's hut between. By now I do not doubt it has
crossed the oceans, and is whispered in the ears of misbehaving children even among the snows of Ezo."

Yes. Think of that; of the tales he had heard from the moment he could crawl, whenever sidelong glances had not lingered on the demon's mark of red hair. Of the woman he thought his shishou might have loved, if ever her Code would have allowed that, before rage and despair crumbled her iron soul. Think only of that, and not a grim, too-ancient figure on a Kyoto rooftop, eyes blazing the sickly red of unleashed Darkness....

The past is past. The future is in motion. All we have is now.

And in this now, I must not remember.

So he did not.

"Just what we needed," Obi-Wan murmured. "Even more bad press." He leaned back slightly. "So. There was a Separatist movement here?"

"Impossible," Kenshin shook his head. "We were not part of the Republic; the treaties the Shogunate had been forced to forbade that. No; the Ishin Shishi were a movement to join the Republic. Under Palpatine's enlightened guidance, of course." He couldn't restrain a brief flash of anger at that bitter irony. "And if the Shogunate's treaties made that impossible by Republic law... well, he would never spark revolt against a world's rightful leaders, of course, but if the Shogunate no longer existed...."

"I see." The Jedi frowned. "And you were with these Ishin Shishi."

He knows, fear whispered. Of course he knows, sanity replied. He may be Jedi, but if he's survived this long, he can think.

"Forgive me for being blunt," the Jedi went on, "but if Palpatine knew of you, I'm rather surprised you're still breathing."

"This one never came to his attention." Because even though Katsura had wanted to believe, the Ishin Shishi leader was still a samurai of Yamato, born breathing its politics, its plots, its assassinations. Hitokiri Battousai had been his blade against his enemies - of the Shogunate, and elsewhere.

And against such a power as Palpatine, the best blade was the one no one even suspected existed.

"Which was very fortunate for you, my young friend," Obi-Wan said soberly. "You wouldn't like what would happen if he caught you."

"One has seen the holo-casts of his speech to the Senate, when he was made Emperor," Kenshin said bleakly. "That damage... no power of the Jedi would have warped him so. He has let the Dark Side take him."

"He is Darth Sidious."

For one frozen moment, Kenshin could only think, Oro is not going to cut it.

"Kenshin?" A hand reached out, not quite touching; a warmth in the Force. "Kenshin, breathe."

The rurouni cleared his throat, chills tingling down his spine. "Forgive, but - one had the sudden,
desperate desire to find a very deep hole."

"Been there, tried that," Obi-Wan said lightly. "This isn't a desolate sand-pit on the Outer Rim. The Empire does rule here. How in the galaxy have you been missed this long?"

"The simplest way of all," Kenshin admitted, ducking his head. "When the Empire took control of Tokyo, with Yamagata to lead the stormtroopers and Katsura, Okubo, and Saigo to aid Prince Meiji as he became Imperial governor... I was not here."

"Not on the planet?"

"Not with the Ishin Shishi," Kenshin corrected. "A year before the Clone Wars were ended, there was a battle outside Kyoto. Toba Fushimi. The back of the Shogunate's forces was broken. Any battle beyond then would only have been... only was... needless slaughter." He drew a painful breath. "I told my commander that, and reminded him that I had sworn to be with him only so long as I was needed. So I gave him my lightsaber, and I left."

For a moment, he thought Obi-Wan would choke. "You what?"

"There was only pain in that blade, Kenobi-san. I could not bear to carry it a moment longer." Kenshin shrugged, setting the years and grief away. "One has wandered ever since. Which is not so difficult as one thinks you believe. The Empire rules this planet, yes - but outside Tokyo, very lightly." He lifted a red brow, smiling. "After all, even stormtroopers have their pride. And it is very - damaging - to morale, should your troops be ordered to, oh, search a particular warehouse for illicit goods, only to find themselves repeatedly searching at the other end of town...."

Obi-Wan coughed, the faintest trace of humor glinting in sea-green. "I imagine even Imperial officers would catch on eventually."

"Ah, but many of those same officers are samurai," Kenshin pointed out. "There are not so many among them who are ki-sensitive, it is true; Katsura Kogorou was chief of those, and grief and illness slew him almost a year ago. But there are few who do not have relations with a measure of the ability." He felt his jaw tighten; deliberately relaxed it. "And not even the new power of the nobles, who have never been of samurai blood, or Governor Meiji's... revealed distaste for ancient superstitions... can outweigh the bonds of clan. Not yet."

The Jedi sat a hair straighter. "This dojo's very existence is a rebellion."

"Not quite," Kenshin corrected. "The harsh and strict might name it ranbou, but even they could not call it rouzeki."

He sensed more than saw the confusion on Kenobi's face, and stifled a sigh. Sometimes he forgot how archaic his accent truly was. Shishou had always understood the ancient words that peppered his speech, and a great deal of his time with the Ishin Shishi had been spent among those who lived and worked in Kyoto's Shimabara, where archaic words and turns of phrase were scattered like flamegem spangles, and for much the same reason. Shimabara, Tokyo's own Yoshiwara, the far more mercantile pleasure quarters of Osaka; everywhere, geisha and tayuu modeled their dialect after ladies of the millennia-old nobility, the better to catch the interest of rich customers. Though his had been antique even for Kyoto, heart of sentient settlement on this planet for as long as history could remember. Which - combined with exotic red hair, and a build easily mistaken for a woman's - had drawn its own set of problems.

*Let's not think of how often one has needed a lightsaber,* Kenshin thought wryly. "If the law wished to force the issue, training samurai might be considered ranbou, an act of violence. But as there has
been no order not to train those with the talent, it does not outrage laws and lords."

"I take it outraged lords are rather to be avoided?" Sea-green danced. "Still. It is resistance."

Kenshin inclined his head. "Kamiya Kasshin, Maekawa-sensei's Chuetsu Ryu, some few others within Tokyo's walls; all defy the ways of blaster and starship that Meiji has ordered are to rule Tokyo. They are tolerated, so long as they are humble, and quiet, and never claim to be better than Imperial technology; for in their quest for power in the Empire, the nobles have discovered a love of dueling. Often with bokkens. Sometimes, with vibro-blades." He lifted a red brow. "Some few of them are truly skilled."

Obi-Wan accepted that warning with a thoughtful nod. "So the Empire claims all of the planet, but only holds Tokyo."

"And the allegiance of many outside it, who recall the terrors suffered under the Shogunate, and only see improvement under Meiji," Kenshin said bluntly. "Never forget that, Obi-Wan. For all the Empire's evils, it is better here than it was." His fingers curled; deliberately, he relaxed them. "Yes, there have been rebellions here. There is a rebellion, even now. But the worst of the poison-makers have been driven off this world, the civil war has stopped, and Meiji is young, handsome, and beloved of his people. If there is still slavery, if the courts are swift to punish the low and swifter to release the powerful, if the ancient ways of ki are laughed at and cast aside - most will say, that has nothing to do with them."

"I doubt Megumi would agree." The Jedi frowned. "Not that I fail to believe Katsuhiro, but I'd prefer to have a bit more information than 'very bad guy'. I've asked Dr. Gensai, but... are there any sort of archives in this city? Anything we might access without drawing attention?"

"To the first, yes," Kenshin said plainly. "To the second - one thinks we both need another day's rest, first."

That earned him a narrow-eyed look. "Precisely how do you define not drawing attention?"

Kenshin blinked innocently. "Oro?"

"Dead," Shinomori Aoshi said levelly, perched on a rooftop out of casual view of the Edokko passing below. Not that a twist of ki could not have turned any gaze away from him, obliterating even the thought that he might have been there. But that was no reason to be sloppy.

Especially considering the pair he was following. *Samurai, even if one bears no blade. Samurai who tried to protect Takani...* But as his own teacher had drilled into his head, for those who shaped ki, there was no try.

"Dead and cooling!" Beshimi insisted, once again. "I would not fail you in this, Okashira-"

Aoshi's gaze was emerald ice. "Your eyes can deceive you, Beshimi. You should know that as well as any of us."

The cat-eyed ninja almost protested; pressed thin lips together, and bowed instead. "Okashira. Inform a spy so much the lesser why you doubt him."

"Doubt you, Beshimi? No. It is Takani that I doubt." The tall ninja flicked a glance at the pair now
passing a noodle-maker's stall, careful not to let his gaze linger too long. The one was barely recovered from illness, likely Miasma; the other, too small a ripple in ki to likely have much training. Even so... "If she had simply wished an honorable suicide, she had dozens of opportunities in the past."

"Perhaps, being trapped so close to escape."

"Perhaps," Aoshi nodded slightly. It was possible. After all, she was neither samurai, nor Oniwabanshuu; she had none of the training that hardened mind and soul to living diamond. Victory snatched from her grasp, the threat of Kanryuu's rage - yes, she might have shattered.

And yet....

"Learn more of the Kamiya dojo," Aoshi ordered. "Pass the watch to Han'nya when I return."

"Return?" Beshimi stammered. "From where?"

He was already gone.

_Are you going where I think you are going, samurai? And if so - why?_

No need to ask why the pair were being so circumspect as they approached the Imperial Medical Center. So near to the Governor's palace, traditional samurai garb drew unfriendly eyes at the best of times. Had the smaller samurai not tucked his lightsaber into his sleeve, those eyes would have been lethal.

_They still should be_, Aoshi frowned, ghosting past stormtroopers outside the hospital in the samurai’s wake. _The guards here are good, Security sees to that; they should see he's hidden his weapon._

If they saw him at all.

A lesser ninja than himself might have fallen out of the shadows in shock. But the pattern was there.

_Moving with the wind._

Sickness still impaired the taller swordsman's movements, but his companion seemed to be taking that into account. They moved with the flow of crowds and shadows and paper blowing in the wind at his slower pace, slipping past distracted eyes in that one moment their owner would _swear_ they were paying attention - and be lying all the same.

Fascinated, Aoshi followed. _Other onmitsu? I know of none of ours who live samurai identities in Tokyo. Yet who else has such skills?_

Which made that threadbare whisper, that he had only Beshimi's report, and not a body in his hands, rise to a nagging snarl.

He circled into the broad alley behind the Medical Center with the breeze, searching for his quarry. _Where did they-?_

_Click._

Inaudible to ordinary ears; ki brought it to him like a gift. Aoshi focussed on the window that had just closed five stories up, nodding in admiration. No grapnels, no repulsor-lifts, no vehicles of any
kind. Nothing to set off the webwork of sensors woven about this medical fortress. Only two twists of will; the one to jump, the other to unlock the window and its accompanying forcefield the only way possible.

*From the inside.*

Aoshi reached out with his feelings. One soul restlessly tossing in fevered sleep, the sharp edges of emergency-room doctors, the rough warmth of ward nurses, two more quiet presences slipping away into the maze of corridors....

He slipped through the unlocked window, setting it and its shielding back exactly as they'd been left. Not that he needed this means of escape, Kanryuu's influence would allow him to walk out in plain view if he chose. But he was Okashira, and he chose to be mysterious.

*Where are they going?* Aoshi wondered, white trenchcoat blending into white corridors. *A revenge killing? Samurai are usually not sneaky for less, and yet... Kamiya Kasshin is spoken of as the sword that does not kill. And I sense no anger. Only curiosity, and a hunger to know.*

In a hospital? That made no sense-

Only as his quarry flitted ever upwards to the penthouse medical units, the Okashira realized it made *perfect* sense.

*These suites are reserved for nobles and high Imperial officers,* Aoshi thought, gauging his moment to sneak past a pair of unobtrusive yet highly armed security officers. *People who have work to be done, whether or not they are ill. Work that requires high-level, even classified, information access.*

Which was *not* something a traditional samurai would know. Who in the galaxy was he following?

*They've stopped.*

Eyes closed, Aoshi touched the decorative panel that hid a medical supply closet, coaxing it open with a touch of ki. With foes so skilled, he had no wish to even attempt to sneak into the same suite. But there were always ventilation ducts, and listening.

Settled in a shadowed corner, he reached out for the feel of fingers touching datapads whose rights of access really, truly didn't belong to them.

*There.*

"You realize if our host comes around, we'll have quite a bit of explaining to do."

*The taller one,* Aoshi thought. *The man who stopped Beshimi's dart.*

"One doubts he will, Kenobi-san. You heard Gensai-isha. Jaguchi-san has a habit of going on... binges."

Ah. A name. Useful; while Kamiya had amended her household register to include apprentice Myoujin Yahiko, so far the only other new entry was *visiting rurouni.* She'd have to add the other man by the end of the ten-day, or face more legal trouble than even a would-be Rebel wanted to handle, but knowing the name now would speed matters considerably.

"Nasty habit," Kenobi muttered. "I've never understood why sentients would want to fry the brains evolution gave them... how did you guess that code?"
A quiet laugh. "Those who work within these walls are here because they are not well, Obi-Wan. Which includes being uncertain of memory. Particularly on passwords."

Kenobi made a choked noise. "Are you saying someone's left the system on default?"

"That is why one asked Gensai-isha if rumor knew of a particularly impaired patient, yes."

"Himura, you continue to amaze me."

Aoshi frowned. Himura? Why did that name sound vaguely familiar?

"We will not be able to access much beyond the lowest levels of classification," Himura warned.

"No, no, this should be fine," Obi-Wan murmured. "Let's start with Kanryuu... oh, this is really not good."

Eyes closed, Aoshi caught the subtle bleeps of data being downloaded into handheld storage. So. They were not acting as amateurs, who would read and be amazed into being caught. No; the subtle feel of them held a knowledge of risk and danger, a steady determination that would snatch the information now, and analyze it later, in safer environs.

_Professionals. But whose?_

"Ten minutes until the shift change," Kenobi sighed. "Let's go-"

"There is enough time." A shift in that quiet voice, as if Himura turned back to the console. "Kenobi... start with the gaijin records, and work outwards."

"Kenshin, my personal matters are hardly worth-"

"We are here, Kenobi-san. Who can say when we will have another chance? Nine minutes. Search quickly."

_Gaijin records?_ Aoshi squashed the shock of disbelief. _A gaijin, passing as samurai?_

Or - perhaps not. This was the capital of Meiji, after all; a weakling who favored the Empire at every turn, and denied not only the power of the ninja who had failed the Shogun, but that of the very samurai who had rallied to put him in power. If a man had records on Yamato, even an off-world name might not mean much.

"Star's End...."

"Record it and keep searching," Himura said abruptly.

"But a legal protest."

"One's not entirely surprised. We'll read it later, Obi-Wan, that we will. But the flow of ki is becoming- Keep searching. Please."

"Ulloriaq," Kenobi breathed. "How could you?"

Aoshi frowned. _That name is almost familiar._

But his quarry dropped no further hints, tapping out searches he couldn't identify, downloading information with all the grim haste of worried professionals. Minutes trickled by-
And his sense of them vanished.

A trained onmitsu was never alarmed. Concerned, possibly. Startled, perhaps. But never alarmed.

Not alarmed, Aoshi slipped out of hiding, using ki and skill to guide him back out of the hospital, unseen. There would be a way, even if he had to grasp the darker shades of ki and make one.

There. Retreating from the wide transparisteel doors of the center's Emergency entrance, heads bowed in seeming grief. Just another pair of awkward, old-fashioned relations, who never would have been near a place so steeped in the new ways of the Empire had it not been for a heart-rending accident.

Neatly done, Aoshi assessed dispassionately. They looked, and felt, like sorrow-haunted samurai, wanting only to be away from the place where their kin were in pain. Native manners would politely ignore such distress, and so ignore them, and never mind those gaijin battle-flags of red-touched hair....

Red hair, and the stealth of an onmitsu. It tugged at his heart, like a story from long ago. But what?

Think about it later, Aoshi told himself as the pair headed away from the Imperial district toward the rougher streets that led to Tokyo's docks. They're blending into a crowd, don't lose them.

Only it seemed their concentration was slipping; a pale Kenobi caromed off a red-nosed samurai, tried to apologize-

But the drunk samurai had friends, one of whom took a head-to-toe look at auburn hair, pale skin, and swordsman's bearing, and turned white as fresh paper. He drew his vibroblade, tried to yell - barely managed a choked gasp Aoshi could not quite hear-

Half the crowd screamed. The other half drew whatever they had, and charged-

And Aoshi suddenly found himself very busy, trying not to get trampled to death.

Okashira squashed by rabid mob, Aoshi thought in that brief instant before he gave himself to ki and moved. Okina would never let me live it down....

Sprinting like mad, Kenshin calmed himself and jumped, touching down on blue roof tiles like a startled neko-ao.

If only I could blend that well, the rurouni thought ruefully, all too aware how red hair and gi stood out even this high off the ground. He crouched instead, moving fast to the roof corner nearest an alley, where he could dangle the sleeve-cord from his gi out of sight in the shadows, but still in leaping range of even a sick Jedi following the pale glimmer in the Force that was Kenshin's wry, resigned goodwill-

Weight struck the end; he pulled and pulled, the flex of muscle a mere guide for the stronger grip of ki on his traveling companion. Sandals touched roof tiles; he threw them both flat, wrapping a sense of shadows about them, of not-important, not-enemy.

Below, the mob charged past, screaming death to the monster they were certain was just ahead. One or two glanced toward the alley, but not even dust stirred to indicate any had passed that way, and it was soon forgotten.
The sounds of the mob roared away. Silence fell; then, slowly, the rhythm of Tokyo's streets picked up once more. Kenshin let out a relieved breath. "One thinks it may not be a good time to be on the streets, that I do."

"Space...."

A red brow went up at that feeling of unease. "Are you well, Kenobi-san?"

"I'm not injured."

True. But not an answer. *So much hate. It has to have hurt him.* "Forgive this one. We should have worn hats."

"Who in the galaxy is Battousai?"

*Tread carefully.* "A *hitokiri* - assassin - during the Bakumatsu," Kenshin said plainly. "Long dead by this time, one hopes. But his reputation was so terrifying, there have been those who took up the name to do murder, using fear as their right hand. As a man named Hiruma Gohei did here in Tokyo not long before one arrived here. A truly deadly swordsman, even without ki; Kaoru-dono and this one caught him, and delivered him to the Guard, but fear still breathes on the streets."

"And they mistook me for-" Obi-Wan sat up, indignant. "I'm not even *from* Yamato!"

"But your accent is odd, you are somewhat taller than the norm, and your hair gleams as if gilded with blood," Kenshin noted. "For those still caught in the nightmare of Gohei's two months of murder, it can be enough."

An intrigued brow went up. "This assassin was a redhead?"

"Legend claims it was dyed with the blood of his victims," Kenshin said grimly. "Red hair appears in the mountains, Kenobi-san, but it is rare in Tokyo. We must be cautious."

"More me than you, it would seem." Obi-Wan gave him a rueful smile. "I suppose you're lucky to be short."

"Very," Kenshin agreed, relieved. "Come. Ayame-chan and Suzume-chan will worry if we are out too late, and this one still has many places to show you."

Hesitation, like the barest riffle of a breeze across a koi pond.

*Were he samurai, he might think this an insult.* "Safer places," Kenshin said frankly. "The rougher parts of Tokyo are used to dealing their own justice. They will not be so quick to leap to fear."

"It's not-" The Jedi sighed. "I am far more out of practice than I realized. I should have sensed that mob before it happened."

"Today you are not well. Tomorrow, you will be better. Meditation will help." Kenshin smiled. "And the advantage of mobs is, our follower has lost us most thoroughly."

"Hmm." Obi-Wan sat up, thoughtful. "And who - or what - was that?"

"Onmitsu, most likely. A spy, or ninja," Kenshin clarified.

"Another one?" Obi-Wan sighed. "Or are they working with the cat-eyed man who attacked Sano?"
Kenshin shrugged. "It would be unlikely for the Kamiya dojo to have drawn the attention of more
than one such group."

"Unlikely for Kamiya, yes," the Jedi agreed. "Unlikely for you? That, I'm not so sure of, my young
friend. Not at all."

"Kenobi-san-"

"Kenshin." A trace of Miasma's fever might still grip the older man's body, but his gaze was clear
and sober. "Who's after you?"

Who would not be?

But the rurouni buried that thought, only allowing the slightest fragments to
slip to the surface of his mind. Examined them, in all their painful familiarity. Let them be the
whole of the dread ever shadowing his footsteps. Exhaled, and told their truth. "When one left the
Ishin Shishi, Katsura accepted the reasons of one's commander. Saigo never did."

Obi-Wan frowned. "And Saigo supports Governor Meiji."

"No. Now Saigo leads the rebellion. For Palpatine and Meiji have both betrayed what Saigo holds
as right and true, and the one thing Saigo cannot forgive is betrayal." Kenshin shook his head. "One
suspects that while Katsura lived, respect for him stayed Saigo's hand. But Katsura is dead now.
And Sanosuke has confirmed that Saigo has laid a price on this one's head." He lifted beseeching
eyes. "Do you see why, once Megumi-dono is safe, this one cannot stay?"

"Kaoru would never betray anyone," Obi-Wan nodded slowly. "But it can be rather difficult for
some people to understand that simply not doing what they want is not a betrayal."

"Yes," Kenshin said softly.

"Yet you still don't think this ninja was after you."

"He was alone," Kenshin said dryly. "Saigo knows better."

"Really."

Kenshin hid a grimace at the amused interest glimmering in the Jedi's ki. Pride kills, baka. No
matter how true its claims. "One's known to be able to blend into crowds. Saigo had experience
enough in the Bakumatsu to know that one cannot reliably follow a target with less than four
watchers. So. Our follower was most likely a companion to our most unwelcome guest, looking in
on those who leave the dojo in case one should be Megumi in disguise." He shrugged, and stood to
jump off the roof.

"A moment." Rising slowly, Obi-Wan gave him a measuring look. "What was it you did just now?
So the crowd would not see us?"

Do the Jedi not know of this? Shishou said their Temple was supposed to have gathered millennia
of learning. "It is the shadow-cloak," Kenshin answered. "One attunes one's ki to that about one,
becoming but one leaf of the forest of life. Outer eyes will still see one, but the soul within will not
recognize one as more than a bright feather in the wind."

"Hmm." But the Jedi said no more, waving a hand to invite them both to continue down the street.

Where are we? Ah, yes, Kenshin thought, consulting his memory of Kaoru's maps of Tokyo. "This
way."
Kenobi walked beside him silently for quite some time, only raising a brow slightly as the balance of the streets began to turn more to men than women, and a certain lustful scarlet colored local ki.
"And now we are...?"

"Chou ye yuku."

"What?"

"Well, naka ye yuku, one thinks they say now; one has found that some things have changed since the Great Mirror of the Yoshiwara was written...." Kenshin caught sight of the baleful black willow weeping by the great arch that led into the Nightless City, and drew to a halt. "Kenobi-san. Here is a danger Kaoru-dono would warn you of, did she realize how swiftly it can snare a gaijin not familiar with its peril." He nodded toward the tree. "Reach out with your feelings. Carefully."

"Space...."

Kenshin felt it as well, despite his shields; the numbing thrum within ki, that whispered there was no danger, no danger, only the overpowering urge to sleep.

The Jedi shook off the thrall. "What is that?"

"Yanagi no kuroi," Kenshin answered. "The black willow. In the wild, one of the great predators of our forests."

"And you have it planted here?"

"Its keepers sweep it every week, looking for the hiru-ito that make its wild kin so dangerous." Kenshin held his hand flat, palm up, tracing the length from thumb to little finger. "Thin as hairs, and translucent green, to match the leaves they nest among. Maroon, once they have sucked their fill of blood."

Kenobi swallowed dryly.

"It is a symbiosis," Kenshin informed him. "The hiru-ito receive shelter, and meals brought down within range to crawl; the yanagi are fed by the hiru-ito's droppings, and the bodies of those not strong enough to escape death. This one, they feed with chicken blood." His voice dropped slightly. "Or executions."

Obi-Wan let out a slow breath, releasing wisps of fear and disgust to the ki about them. "But - why?"

"Some of those within Yoshiwara," Kenshin said levelly, "are not there by choice. The yanagi's influence makes it more difficult for them to escape." He let free his own soft sigh, knowing the beauty and grief that waited within those walls. "And one supposes it is in the nature of some of one's folk to enjoy walking close to the edge of the blade. Fugu would never be so popular a dish, else."

"Fugu?"

"A poisonous fish. Most of those in Tokyo licensed to prepare it are within Yoshiwara. One will not be visiting those cooks." Kenshin let wry humor creep into his voice. "One has had quite enough of people trying to kill one, without inviting one's dinner to take a turn."

Obi-Wan coughed, hiding a smile. "So. If we're not here to meet toxic seafood-?"
"Actors."

"I'm almost afraid to ask."

"Street performers," Kenshin clarified. "Kaoru-dono is samurai, beyond question; one had only to inform her of certain options for folk she might speak with, and her own standing smooths the way. But you, Kenobi-san - forgive, but you are gaijin. Sword-smiths will not speak to you without proper introductions. So. We will start with those whose honor is not offended by speaking with you in my company. Their introductions will lead us to others, and theirs to others still, who will lead us to those you must speak with to obtain the parts for your lightsaber-to-be. And one thinks the best place to start is here, in the Nightless City, where those with money and proper manners are always welcome."

"It may take time, but it's not that hard to improvise a lightsaber," Kenobi argued.

"In the Empire? Perhaps. On Yamato, the components one would need are not so easily found," Kenshin said frankly. "We lost starships, Kenobi-san. We did not lose lightsabers, but only because our sword-smiths made crafting those components tradition, passed down from father to son, mother to daughter; sacred rites whose mystery even samurai do not understand." Violet met sea-blue. "They are proud folk, they are honored, and they are not common."

Obi-Wan held his gaze for a sober moment, then smiled. "Of course." He inclined his head. "I bow to the master."

"Do not!" Calm. Calm. "One is no one's master, Kenobi-san. One never will be." Glancing away, he nodded toward the guard-post beyond the arch. "All visitors must register. Write a name you feel comfortable allowing common knowledge. And once inside, remember that it is more acceptable to be the ignorant, rustic boor who cannot help lacking iki, whom the refined will consider naively charming, for a barbarian, than to play at being the sophisticate and be caught short."

"Is that what you do?"

Kenshin blinked innocently at the Jedi. "But one is a backwoods swordsman, Obi-Wan. Anyone can hear it. How could one step above one's poor station to pretend otherwise?" With a slight smile, he headed for the arch. Kuso. This man thinks too much.

Which could help or hinder, once Kanryuu was dealt with and he could vanish from Kaoru's life. What he'd seen of Jedi so far indicated they might be slow to act, but they were quick to judge; almost the opposite of what a sentient needed to survive Yamato's tangled nets of relation and obligation. While Koshijirou was alive, he must have reined Kaoru in, Kenshin thought. No dojo master should have offered me shelter; his obligation to his students would come before any gratitude to a wandering rurouni. She places herself at risk.

Like a Jedi.

But this is Yamato, not Coruscant-that-was. Can she learn that? Can Kenobi?

Can they learn it before I must vanish again?

They'd have to learn something. He couldn't change the world for them. He'd tried that once already, against all his master's warnings and the agony of his own heart. And while he might not change the path he had chosen - at least, not most of it - still, some of the results had been... awful beyond imagining.
I will show them what I can, while I can. For the rest - Sanosuke knows the shadows of this world, and Yahiko has a sturdy soul under all that young temper. It will be enough.

I hope.

His musings had carried him through the registration and beyond the yanagi's influence. Kenshin stopped in the eddy of foot-traffic around an inari-zushi vendor, smiling at the rich scent of sweetened grain and fried tofu. Do I- yes, I have enough.

Obi-Wan caught up in time to shake his head at how fast the sticky concoction disappeared. "Are you certain you're not still a teenager?"

"Mmph?" Kenshin chewed and swallowed. "Forgive, Kenobi-san, but have you seen Yahiko-kun eat?" He regarded the half-wrap left in his hand; he could tuck it away in his sleeve for later....

I'm your master, which means your training is my business, old memory scolded him. Which means when and what you eat is my business. You skip another meal to work on a technique against my orders, I will pound what's left of your scrawny frame through the river bottom. Are we clear?

He'd been on the road with little rest for months, ever since Katsura's death had honed the edge of the whispers pursuing him. Sleeping under the same roof this many days together had started to re-knit his raveled strength, but he knew full well he was not in true fighting condition. Not yet.

Hai, shishou, Kenshin thought now, taking his time to munch through the rest of the treat as Obi-Wan studied his surroundings with quiet curiosity. Very clear.

"Incredible," Obi-Wan murmured. "I'd never thought... for all the pain, there is great beauty here as well."

Kenshin followed his gaze, looking over the colored lanterns that would be lit with nightfall, the flowering trees planted along the avenues; the newspaper sellers and blind shampooers and fortune-tellers and flute-players surrounded by silken-bright colors of kimono, samurai garb, and noble dress, made all the brighter by haughty individuals in drab Imperial gray. High officials, those would be, visiting the quarter on what claimed to be the Empire's business. They'd discard such uniforms after dark, without question. Not even the might of the Empire could influence Yamatoans into adopting such drab colors for their leisure, no matter what the rest of the galaxy might consider stylish.

A certain bright-and-pale contrast caught Kenshin's eye; a young lady, no more than fifteen, mincing down the lane on high wooden geta, face painted white above embroidered blue-and-red kinu cloth, brocaded obi tied behind in a long trail from a simple but elegant knot. Her night-black hair was pulled back and oiled in high fashion, ornamented with two silver combs like tufts of phoenix feathers, and her teeth gleamed like black pearls when she bowed and smiled shyly to passers-by. This near the gate? Interesting.

Beside him, Kenobi had stiffened. "What is it?" Kenshin murmured.

"What's a young noblewoman doing-" Kenobi caught himself at Kenshin's blink of surprise. "Not noble, I take it?"

"It is possible she could have been, once." Thank the kami we both can use ki to speak quietly enough no one else should hear. But where in the galaxy have you been, that you have seen such nobles? "Don't speak with her. Not unless you intend to explain to Kaoru-dono how you spent
enough money for a week's grain in the space of an hour."

"You're... not kidding," Obi-Wan said thoughtfully, eyeing him. "Who is she?"

"More what. She works in-" Kenshin hesitated a breath, "companionship."

"...Ah."

"The knot of the obi, the simple hair - she could be maiko. An apprentice entertainer, student of a geisha, who makes her living providing dance, conversation, and entertainment for men," Kenshin explained, drifting through the crowd in the young woman's wake. "But the blackened teeth could be geisha or oiran - courtesan. And the richness of her furisode, the display of her combs... those would make her shinzou, a young oiran, perhaps being groomed as a future tayuu - the highest rank of that profession."

"But you're not sure."

Kenshin shook his head. "What rights women had on Yamato, the Empire has busily eroded. And so the nobles have been encouraging a blur between oiran and geisha, much to both sides' displeasure. Either way, she is in full array, so she is working. And those who engage her company must pay for the privilege."

"Which begs the question of, precisely why are we following her?"

"She is alone."

Obi-Wan laughed softly. "You were born curious, weren't you?"

"Er... well..." Kenshin flushed. "If she were jigoku, walking alone outside Yoshiwara, none would question it save the Guards tasked to catch her and bring her here."

"By force?" Obi-Wan caught his look, and sighed. "I see."

"But for such a young woman as this to be traveling so - someone has paid much to be conspicuously discreet."

The Jedi raised an intrigued brow.

"An oiran should not be unescorted so near the gate," Kenshin explained. "Almost all of them are sold into this work, and some few do try to escape. Were her intentions lawful, she would be waiting at a teahouse for her customers, or traveling with some of her sisters to advertise their house, or perhaps walking with a kamuro - a maid of her own - to a boat party or restaurant."

"And if she's not an oiran?"

"If she is maiko..." Kenshin frowned. "Their contracts are lighter, and so they are more trusted. She could walk alone. Even through the gate, if she wills; for geisha may be called to entertain anywhere. But she should not be walking without instruments, or dance fans. Not on an ordinary engagement."

"And everyone knows this?"

*Why is there never an earthquake when you need one?* Kami, he could feel his ears burning. "No, not everyone."

Humor rippled through the ki around Kenobi. "And you know because...?"
"One was - young, and not full grown, among men who would spend their days in blood and their nights with - well." If it were possible to die of embarrassment, Shishou would have killed you decades ago. You'll only wish you were dead. "One very often ended up helping out in the kitchens, listening to the women talk."

"I sense that this was a source of trouble for you."

"You have no idea," Kenshin muttered. And this one is not telling you, Kenobi-san, so don't ask.

Bad enough he'd had to flatten more than one drunken Ishin Shishi who'd mistaken him for a willing young girl. And even more who'd mistaken him for a willing young boy - though those incidents had all but ended after his first month working for Katsura. He still wasn't sure which had been worse; being regarded with terror as his comrades whispered among themselves about the Demon of Kyoto, or being watched with sniggers as those same comrades enjoyed themselves and he walked always alone.

The past is done. Let it go. We're almost at-Kenshin slowed, yielding to a twinge of caution and waiting until a gray-haired grandmother's back was turned, before he stepped around the tops she made dance for a delighted crowd of youngsters stealing an hour away from work in this, the hottest part of the day. Well, well. "A hikite-jaya," he murmured to his companion. "Not one of the best."

"Another anomaly?" Obi-Wan looked over the multi-story wooden building, gauging their options. "I assume the front door would not be the best of choices."

"She's moving inside, waiting," Kenshin murmured, reaching out with his senses to follow her shy ki. "The maidservants are waiting for her, one has left again... upwards...."

So easy, to slip back into the hunt.

He was on gold-flecked blue tiles without consciously registering the jump, or the slip away from the crowd's eyes that must have come before it. Ki called out to him, flowing clear as snowmelt; answering to his quick questions of who and where and why. Eyelids, roof - neither was a barrier to the luminous glows within his mind that traced every life within half a mile.

Pull back. Focus.

This was the true strength of Hiten Mitsurugi. Not speed; though that kept its students alive. Not sword-skill; though that granted life to those its students defended. But the ability to read ki, to see it, bright as candle-flames on a moonless night.

One of those bright flames scrambled onto the tiles beside him. Kenshin held up a hand, intent clear as snowflakes in the wind: Silence.

Ghosting with the roof breeze, Kenshin stopped above the shy, frail flame that was their target. Others blazed there as well; the bustling flicker of servant maids, the cool focus of a bodyguard, the probing flash that was Inspector Uramura, the steady, all too familiar burn of a mature warrior....

"Namiji-chan." Definitely an older warrior; the voice had the rasp of one used to yelling commands over a battlefield. "I expected your mistress."

Yamagata!

Not real. Couldn't be real. The smoke of Kyoto's fires was in his lungs, and this could not be real-

Chilled to the bone, Kenshin listened.

Silver feathers chimed sweetly as their wearer bowed low. "My honored older sister Koubai-san sends her regrets, Yamagata-sama." Namiji’s voice was young and sweet, edged with the faintest hint of concealed fear. "While she has added her first efforts to the linked verse you asked of her, the limits of the composition remain elusive as mist. Perhaps, if there were a pillow-word our gracious guest particularly favored...."

A whispery crinkle. A scrap of kinu, Kenshin knew, sensing the faint ghost of it in that brief instant as it passed from hand to hand. Written on, the translucent ribbon could be concealed from eyes and ki in a samurai topknot - or a maiko’s elaborate hairdo. "The falling rains," Yamagata said gruffly. "Tell your mistress I will favor haste over perfection."

"As you ask, Yamagata-sama."

A clap of hands, and a rustle of kimono; moving far enough away that the men could converse unheard, Namiji’s shy fire burned just a bit brighter, as she plucked a samisen someone must have brought.

Cloth whispered, and Yamagata chuckled. "Relax, Uramura. A man might think you'd never been in Yoshiwara before."

"I would prefer to do this in my office, sir."

"Where everything's recorded? You may be a good Security officer, Uramura, but you have no sense of political survival." Liquid poured; sake, by the slurp that followed. "It's not enough not to fail. Allowing the over-eager to precipitously bring good news to high ears - that can be just as fatal."

"Good news, sir?" Uramura said warily.

"Has he been found?"

"He?"

Yamagata snorted. "I was delayed by the mopping up of the Seinan riots - had to be sure all the Rebel bodies were checked to ensure one wasn't our prize after all, damn that slippery eel Saigo - but the rumors came straight to me."

"Ah." Uramura's voice was even, cautious. "Battousai." He cleared his throat. "It appears that whole business was a hoax."

"What?"

For a moment, Kenshin almost thought he'd shouted it himself. Why would Uramura-?

"Hiruma Gohei was apprehended by the assistant master of a local dojo, Kamiya Kaoru of Kamiya Kasshin Ryu," the inspector said plainly. "He's been held and charged with the murder of several security officers and stormtroopers; I expect he will be shipped out to Kessel quite soon."

"A woman?" Yamagata growled. "Kamiya, did you say? Not possibly any relation to Kamiya Koshijirou-"
"His daughter, sir," Uramura said firmly.

"Damn. She'd know." Yamagata sighed. "Oh, wipe that look off your face, Uramura. There were a few Revolutionaries who risked speaking to the Demon of Kyoto outside of assignments. Koshijirou was one of them." He asked. "That man could see the good in anyone."

He did, Kenshin recalled, remembering a few frail sparks of kindness in those last bloody months before Toba Fushimi. Kaoru must have truly favored her mother; he hadn't known her face at all. 

He saw good in the lowest of us, even a man who'd killed, in one blind moment in the darkness.

"With all due respect, sir," Uramura hesitated, then plunged on, "you sound as if you hoped the rumors were true."

"Hmm? Oh, not the murders," Yamagata said firmly. "He'd never use his lightsaber in such a mad way. It's true he killed many earning the name 'Hitokiri Battousai', but never once did he slay out of self-interest. All he did, he did for Meiji and the new era. There's no blood on his soul."

"Liar... damn you... I drown in that blood, every night."

"He saved the lives of many of our warriors. Without him, the Revolution would not have succeeded. And instead of the Empire's open arms, we would have met its crushing fist." A scrunch, as Yamagata snuffed a smoke-wrap out. "We could use that strength again."

"I will report any further rumors at once, Yamagata-san," Uramura nodded sharply.

...What?

"Hmm. Well, you'd do well to keep your eyes open on your way out," Yamagata said wryly. "He may have been cold as ice, and lethal as a demon straight from Makai, but he knew his way around teahouses as well as any Choushuu revolutionary." A dark chuckle. "Sometimes, on the really bad nights, I wake up thinking he's right in the shadows there, the same way he'd just appear next to Katsura..."

A plinking note stumbled.

Not frail ki; dispersed! She's kunoichi!

Grasping his companion's sleeve, Kenshin fled over the crest of the roof.

We're not here. No one is here... you heard a hato pecking for windblown grain, nothing more....

A jump from roof to roof; a ki-slowed leap down, one hand out to the wall to deflect some of gravity's anger into wood and stone instead of flesh and bone.

Let luck run with us, so Megumi's foes grant us a few more days' rest, Kenshin wished, hearing the soft pant of his own breath as he stopped and listened in a quiet alley away from the main thoroughfare. A week, one hopes, for Obi-Wan's sake.

"I take it," the Jedi drew a quick breath, "Yamagata's conversation wasn't nearly as private as he intended?"

"Maiko, Namiji-dono is," Kenshin said grimly. "But kunoichi - ninja - as well. And where there is one...." Closing his eyes, he reached outward with his senses, like a feather-touch of wind. There.

A street, a quick step into a shop doorway as swaggering townsmen brushed by, another street, a
Lying along an awning, ki making him light enough for cloth and wood to hold his weight, Kenshin looked across the thoroughfare to the spinning tops among the children. And the woman who wasn't a grandmother at all.

"Koubai?" Obi-Wan's murmur carried to his ears.

"Most likely." Kenshin waited until the pressure of eyes vanished, curled out of cloth, and dropped to the pavement. *We need to get away from here.*

The Jedi sensed his tension, holding back what must be a score of questions as they wove their way into a maze of smaller alleys away from the arch, where shops more pedestrian or more discreet than teahouses and candy-stalls held sway; hair-dressers, secondhand kimono dealers, and-

Kenshin looked again at the fine steel-ribbed fan spread decorously in the shade of one striped awning, and laughed softly in relief. Twenty years wandering the countryside might have numbed his sense of direction for a city's twisting mazes, but it hadn't dulled it completely.

"A woman's fan?" Obi-Wan asked, following his gaze.

"A fan for dance, or defense," Kenshin corrected. *Serifu. One had the name from a kabuki player one met with Kaoru-dono a few days ago.* Reaching out with his senses, he sought within the shop with care; one kunoichi surprise was enough for one day. "Yamagata-san may not have known where Koubai-dono was, but given those instructions, he knows she is kunoichi. Though one doubts he realizes her young assistant is as well, else he would not have allowed her to remain within the same building."

"His problem is not poetry, I take it."

Kenshin had to smile at the wry distaste in the Jedi's tone. "She likely has composed some as well. It is a common convention in intelligence assignments. Poetry may discuss anything, and there are enough pillow-words - words that allude to other words - that one may give the most gruesome of assignments in the most innocent of ways." He thought over that short bit of coded speech, knowing that half the meaning might have been in eyes and posture, only hinted at by ki. "It would seem she has traced rumors on the subject, but found nothing concrete."

Obi-Wan nodded. "And is that subject Battousai, or Saigo Takamori?"

"One's no way of knowing." *Falling rains. Blossom-fall. Cherry blooms, like lives, loosed to the wind...*  

*You. You made the rain bleed. You, a woman's voice accused across the decades.*

"Kenshin." The Jedi looked him in the eye, gentle and sober. "Yamagata would know you if he saw you?"

"One hopes not," Kenshin whispered. "One does not agree with Saigo-san, but one has respect for him. To be... associated... with the man hunting him, would be unpleasant." He dredged up a wry smile. "And dangerous to Kaoru-dono. Which would be poor repayment for the gift of her shelter, *ne?"

"So it would," Obi-Wan said thoughtfully. Shrugged slightly, and glanced at *Serifu.* "And why, precisely, are we in search of fans?"
"They are said to sell supplies for dance, and kabuki," Kenshin replied, relieved. "Acting, on stage. One does not know how it is on other worlds, but from the holo-casts one has seen, your actors are like kabuki, in that they try to have realistic equipment for their roles."

"Yes, that's true, but-" The Jedi stopped. Looked at him, then glanced at the shop, where a pair in concealing sedge basket-hats had just stepped out with bundles in their arms; dressed roughly as the street but with hands suspiciously clean and unworn. "Do your kabuki actors happen to portray samurai?"

"And sorcerers, ninja, wandering priests, kitsune - historical plays are very popular," Kenshin nodded, moving forward.

"Kitsune?"

"A creature of forests and fields who casts illusions, using ki," Kenshin murmured. "Be curious, but courteous; one needs to see what is here before one knows what to ask."

"Welcome, welcome!" the loosely-dressed shopkeeper smirked, paintbrush still in hand from where he'd been touching up a festival mask. From the slight crease of his eyes, the red hair shocked him; but he smiled onward. "O agan nanshi!"

Very close to Kyoto's Shimabara dialect, Kenshin thought, relieved. And almost amused; the man had thickened his accent deliberately, counting on its difference from modern Yamatogo to bewilder unwanted gaijin into going elsewhere. A typical subtle Kyoto insult. Two can play that game. "Uso-uso shimee yo. There's only the two of us yabo, here to look at fans."

Which meant, of course, that they weren't there for fans at all; but it would do to start. One hopes Jedi are taught more patience than Kaoru-dono has yet shown....

____________________

I haven't heard anything this convoluted since the time I had to negotiate a trade dispute between Bothans, Corellians, and that Zeltros matriarch, Obi-Wan thought, delighted. Kenshin was playing a wide-eyed, bashful youth to the hilt, stumbling from one conversational pitfall to the next just inches shy of insult, winsome as Gensai's little ataru as he wove his way through every display in the little shop, shyly introduced "Kenobi-san of Kamiya Kasshin", and gave the softly regretful impression that while he liked everything he saw, he didn't see quite what he wanted.

And just what is it he does want here, I do wonder - strings?

Looped and tied, along with a small, inked list; they appeared in Kenshin's hand like a magic trick.

"Aaah," their proprietor exclaimed, pride buffed and beaming as Kenshin arranged the loops along his flattened palm, shy and diffident. "Of course, of course! For the war-fans, of Serizawa; it's always exciting when one can use a real vibro-blade onstage! Let me see...."

And suddenly, the spacing of those loops made perfect sense. Finger measurements. "Armor gloves?" Obi-Wan murmured.

"Kote," Kenshin nodded. "One has not worn them for some time, but with ninja involved - one is not interested in losing a hand if they strike the swifter." He hesitated. "And there is a move in Yamato sword-styles one suspects you do not know. Should you encounter it unaware, it could kill."
Ominous. But here was their host, back with a small box of what looked almost like swoop-bike gloves; thin but tough chestnut brown leather, thicker across the back, some with hints of green, others glints of violet. Fingertips were left free, but the rest of the hand would be quite well sheathed, as would the wrist and arm almost to the elbow. *And this is supposed to resist a vibro-blade?*

Useful, if it did. Still. Something about those gloves made him even more uneasy than Kenshin's wide-eyed innocence. Innocence that had turned hesitant, almost timid, as the redhead looked between the wares their proprietor was avidly praising and Obi-Wan's own polite silence.

*Oh, you wouldn't.*

A spark of mischief danced in violet.

And the shopkeeper had already picked up the silent cue, all but waving one glove under the nose of the man who must be in charge. "And as you can see, only the finest stitching...."

*What in space am I supposed to say?* Obi-Wan floundered. *Wait - use the Force, think-*

"Unacceptable!"

The proprietor choked to a halt. "Sir, what-"

"Impossible!"

"But I assure you-"

"Unthinkable!" Snatching the glove from the man's grasp, unable to stop an inward shudder at some wrongness in its touch, he slammed leather to the counter. "Do you expect samurai to believe that *this* could stop a blow from the great Serizawa?"

"Great?" the shopkeeper sputtered. "He was Shinsengumi!"

*Oops. Who are they? Think, think! *"And we know a man by the quality of his enemies, don't we?" Obi-Wan improvised. "This will never do!"

"Sensei, surely they cannot be that poor of quality," Kenshin intervened, surprise and worry written across his face. "Our host is an honorable man, who could not possibly attempt to pass off leather from poisoned ametrine as that of one killed with swift mercy-"

"Could, and did!" Obi-Wan scowled at the man, cold and distant as he'd seen ruder samurai act on their way here. "Look, my young student, and learn." *Though which of us is looking, and which learning... oh, dear.*

"The color is flat," Kenshin said, as if realizing it for the first time. "There is no true play of opalescence... honored sir, how *could* you?"

"I - I assure you, I-"

"Yes, yes; I'm certain," Obi-Wan said testily. Gave the redhead a speaking look. "Well, young one? Is there anything in this excuse for an establishment that can demonstrate to our good host how badly he's been swindled?"

With a bow, Kenshin leapt up and over the counter, reaching in through its back to take out a pair of fans that had been tucked behind their more gaudy sisters. These were plain, undecorated; black metal ribs spanned with red folds of paper, that in turn were edged on their outer rim with a
familiar translucent blue. *Could that possibly be-*?

As Kenshin snapped one fan open with a swift flick of wrist, blue lit with the hum Obi-Wan had once heard from the Black Sun Lord Xist's vibro-whip, and he knew it was.

The shopkeeper's eyes bulged. "No, don't-!"

A thrum of air; the barest sense of a flux in the Force that told him Kenshin had moved, too fast for human eyes to see-

Like paper in a breeze, the two halves of the glove drifted apart.

"I... I swear I didn't know, honorable sirs, I...."

*He's afraid we'll kill him.* Obi-Wan concealed a dry smile; looking over the shaking man with cold eyes. *I imagine some of his customers would. He's lucky he got us today. *Who would know?*

"Kawa," the shopkeeper whispered, face distinctly green as Kenshin snapped the fan closed, vibrating edge still aglow and deadly. "Densetsu Kawa. He's the only one who could make kote to stand up to... *that.*" He gulped. "You... know Serizawa Kamo's war-fan technique?"

"It is well remembered in some wards of Kyoto," Kenshin said evenly. He inclined his head, red bangs shadowing his gaze. "One thanks you for the permission to demonstrate."

"Of - course," the proprietor forced out. "I'll be speaking to my suppliers immediately, this will not be allowed to stand...."

"It had better not," Obi-Wan said dryly, turning as if to leave, then pausing, and glancing back at the shivering shopkeeper. "Oh. And one more thing." He eyed the price-tag still dangling from Kenshin's hand, mentally halved the amount, added a fraction back for the man's obvious terror, and tapped the appropriate coinage onto the counter. "We'll take the fans.

*Now, if we can just get clear of here without breaking up laughing....*

A block away, moving through the crowd around a trio of elderly sisters chanting war-legends, Obi-Wan finally risked a glance at his partner in crime. "It's been a long time since I've played good CorSec, bad CorSec." He lifted an auburn brow. "And a *very* long time since someone handed me bad CorSec."

"Oro?"

"...Never mind." Obi-Wan shook his head, still amazed at that innocent blink. *You polished his ego, flailed around verbally like a teenager out to impress, all but drew him a sign saying "I am innocent and gullible; take advantage of me." And you told me we were here to make connections. You never said anything about buying. I should have picked it up sooner. *What would you have done if I hadn't read your cues fast enough?"

"Talked faster." Kenshin's smile took on a more sober edge. "Kaoru-dono can deal with such folk more easily; she was born here, she belongs, there are limits to what they will try. But you look even more gaijin than this one does, Obi-Wan. One needed to know if you could hold your own."

*In a situation where the consequences would be less than fatal, Obi-Wan filled in. No, you're not*
nearly as naive as you like to appear.

"Though... one is a bit curious as to why...." Kenshin's fingers brushed his sleeve, where the fans were tucked away.

"I'm getting too old to blast into fights with weapons I've never seen before," Obi-Wan said dryly. "You look as if you know your way around those." *And one, two, three-*

Red touched his companion's cheeks. "One is far from expert. One's shishou... demonstrated some of the basics, long ago, and one did see Serizawa fight, but...."

"Which is far more experience than I have," Obi-Wan said plainly. *If he blushes like that now, he must have had a hell of a time twenty years ago. No wonder he doesn't want to talk about it.* Though he had a sense of other pieces that didn't quite fit, nestling sharp-edged in the corners of his mind. *Patience. Meditate when we're home. The answer will come. "Those are good quality, are they not?"*

"Of the best." True pleasure glowed in violet as the swordsman held out one deactivated fan for view. "Durasteel ribs, so it may be deadly as a dagger even without power. Crimson paper, easily replaced should it be unbearably stained in defense. And, of course, the edge." Kenshin nodded. "These days, a fan so plain is the weapon of a geisha, or a last means of defense for samurai women against dishonor - yet even thirty years before, it was considered honorable for a samurai never to activate his lightsaber against lesser foes, but to defeat them with his fan alone."

"As Serizawa Kamo did?" Obi-Wan gave him a curious look. "Precisely who are the Shinsengumi?"

"Ah." Kenshin slipped the fans out of sight. "Now that, Kenobi-san, is a very long story...."

Chapter End Notes

On geisha, oiran, and Yoshiwara in general: I am not an expert, merely fond of history books which sometimes (often!) contradict each other. Also bear in mind the corrupting influence of the Empire. The denizens of the "floating world" have to adapt just like anyone else, meaning historical errors are probably scattered through this story like popcorn. (And may even be intentional.) Remember, this is the same universe where Naboo has an elected monarchy, Hutts keep alien slave-girls of entirely different species, and there's sound in space.

Ani - older brother.

Baka deshi - "Idiot apprentice".

Chou ye yuku - "Going to Chou"; antique saying for going to Yoshiwara.

CorSec - Corellian Security; well-known cops as tough and stubborn as the smugglers they chase.

Furisode - "long sleeves". Type of formal kimono.

Geisha - art persons.
Geta - wooden sandals.

Hai - formal yes.

Hari-choucho - "butterfly-sting".

Hato - pigeon.

Hikite-jaya - "leading-by-the-hand teahouse"; place for introductions and requested affairs.

Hiru-ito - "thread-leeches".

Hitokiri - "manslayer", assassin.

Iki - "refinement", being "cool".

Inari-zushi - sushi prepared in the style of the Inari shrines; usually sweet, given foxes love sweets.

Jigoku -"hell woman"; prostitute.

Kamuro - young female pages.

Kamutobu - "hop-munch".

Kitsune - fox, fox-spirit.

Kote - armor sleeves.

Koubai - red plum blossom.

Kunoichi - female ninja.

Kuso - "damn".

Maiko - apprentice geisha.

Makai - hell realm, "hell on earth".

Naka ye yuku - "to go inside", to visit Yoshiwara.

Namiji - waves.

Ne? - Isn't that right?

Neko-ao - "blue cat".

O agan nanshi! - "Please come in." This is archaic dialect, not at all modern Japanese.

Oiran - courtesan.

Onmitsu - spies; ninja.

Pillow-word - certain words, often ancient, used as poetic conventions in waka and haiku; often because they bring in multiple metaphoric associations or a degree of punning.
Ranbou - violent acts that do not necessarily represent an open defiance of authority.

Rouzeki - "an outrage". Open defiance of authority, such as provoking military force after an order to cease and desist.

Serifu - lines (in a stage play).

Shinzou - "newly constructed"; a young courtesan, often a former (or current) assistant to a more senior courtesan.

Tayuu - high-ranked courtesans.

Uso-uso shimee yo. - "Don't be excited." Archaic.

Yabo - Stranger unacquainted with a place. Archaic.

Yanagi no kuroi - "black willow".
Scratching absently at the base of one of his horns, Densetsu Kawa let his mind wander, waiting for the hide to tell him the best cuts he could garner from it.

"...How in the galaxy did you keep track?" A human male's voice, from the street outside, with an accent both antique and foreign at once.

"Well," a younger man replied, "if they were coming at one with blades drawn and anger in their hearts, one could usually assume they were not friendly...."

The gray-haired Zabrak glanced up as the pair of possible customers passed through the decorous bamboo curtain shielding his shop's contents from easy view on the street. Leather might be necessary and even vital in some areas, but its handling was considered vile, and not fit for modest eyes. Samurai weren't nearly as touchy as townsment about the whole spiritual pollution aspect - they lived with death every day, what right had they to sneer? - but even they weren't comfortable with leather-workers. Though they had a harder time dealing with his fellow human tradesmen than a crotchety old humanoid like himself....

Kawa registered the colors of hair tied back over that plain samurai garb, and blinked. Sun hair? And a Fireryo-blood. Now, there's something you don't see everyday. "Yes, gentlelirs?" he said gruffly. Thank the kami, he didn't have to stoop; a full-grown Zabrak might be taller than all but the largest samurai, but the elder human had enough inches to look him in the eye.

Twin bows, graceful as falling leaves; he hastily set the hide down and bowed back. Manners. Huh. Either they haven't been in the city long, or they're stubborn.

"I am Kenobi Obi-Wan, guest of the Kamiya dojo," the older human began. Ah. Stubborn.

"My companion, Himura Kenshin. We were recommended to the shop of Master Densetsu as having the skill to craft kote to the old specifications."

"Recommended by who?" the Zabrak asked warily. He'd dealt with Kamiya for years, the same as he had every other dojo still hanging on in Tokyo under the Empire. Kami, he'd measured Kamiya Kaoru for her full-size kote not three months ago, when it was clear Koshijirou's little girl wasn't going to grow anymore. She had more sense than to hand out his name to guests, samurai or not.

"The keeper of Serifu," Kenshin said mildly. "It would seem his dealers in such goods have been... lax in their requirements."

"Hah! I'll bet they have." Densetsu caught the glint of humor in Kenobi's odd blue-green eyes, and wondered just how this pair had presented that idiot Sokki with the kind of indisputable proof that had that spineless profit-grubber sending samurai his way. Hmm... Himura's carrying a lightsaber. That would have done it. "Miji! The counter."

"Yes, Father." Momiji hurried out of the back room, dark hair pulled back from her crown of horns, brown and orange kimono fluttering in the door breeze as she cast a curious glance at their customers.
Don't get ideas, little one. His youngest daughter might finally be old enough to marry, true, but even if humans and Zabrak sometimes did wed, samurai tended to keep to their own. Then again, they've manners, and grace; and there aren't that many Zabrak in Tokyo these days that we aren't related to, Densetsu admitted to himself as he escorted the pair back behind the second curtain to the public workroom. The shop's doing well, as are the rest of the family's businesses. A love-child, if she wants one - I could live with it. "Hands."

"One brought measurements," Kenshin began.

"I'm sure you did, Himura-san. Hands."

Kenobi offered first; Densetsu took the right, then the left, pushing up each sleeve to pore over the intricate form of callus, scars, muscle and bone. Dominant right, trained to either; out of training, if not out of practice, for some time. Serious fight recently; can't blame him for wanting a refitting. "Kamiya Kasshin?"

"Yes, mostly."

The Zabrak nodded at that note of caution. "The kote don't differ that much, but if you're mostly on the defense, I find it's good to reinforce along the forearm." Picking up a stylus and datapad, he made his notes, then turned to the younger samurai.

Reluctantly, a small hand slipped into his.

_Huh. A samurai, doing laundry? Well, ronin do what they have to, to get by. He's been careful; doesn't let it wear at the callus. Small and fine, but a similar bone structure... related? Densetsu wondered. Tch, they would have said; humans and Fireryo just look alike, that's all. Not their fault they don't have horns. Dominant right, both trained..._ He blinked as he turned the youth's other palm up, finally registering what those matching white scars had to mean. "Himura-san!"

"It's nothing, Densetsu-san-"

"A blade-catch is not nothing, young man." The Zabrak let out a slow breath as he regarded that mark of bravery, or idiocy. Or both. "You should have been wearing kote-"

"One was." The redhead swallowed. "One was - very tired. And one's opponent, quite skilled, and desperate."

"Offensive style," the leather-worker muttered, reading the form of muscle and bone. "A little thing like you? Built on speed, of course... which school?"

A hesitation. "Hiten Mitsurugi."

Red hair. The cross-shaped scar. The scar of a blade-catch - oh, kami, of course that scar! - from the fight against Darkness that rumor claimed had nearly shattered Choushuu Ishin Shishi and Shinsengumi alike in one storm-tossed Kyoto night....

_I am holding the hand of the Hitokiri Battousai._

"Densetsu-san." Kenobi steadied him as the room went gray, alarm drawing auburn brows down. "Perhaps some water-"

"Yes, thank you, gracious sirs," the leather-worker said gratefully, leaning on his stool with one hand. "It's been a hot day, and I'm afraid I'm not as young as I used to be." Kami, what do I do? _What do I say?_
He was never a monster, Koshijirou's voice echoed in his memory. Only a young man with a perilous gift, caught in the madness with the rest of us.


Easy enough to say when you're not staring him down in your own shop, Kamiya, Densetsu thought now, accepting the offered cup with a wary glance at the younger man. Damn. That is the Demon of Kyoto? He doesn't look like he could hurt a fly.

Then again, kitsune could look like a simple birdbath, too. Until an ataru chased a hito through - and wound up dinner itself.

Assassin, the leather-worker reminded himself. If you want to get out of this alive, Densetsu, don't make a scene. "I've never crafted kote for your style before."

"One would be quite surprised if you had, Densetsu-san. It is... rare." The redhead smiled innocently, fangs almost invisible. "Simple is usually best. One prefers to avoid fighting."

The Zabrak stifled a snort of pure disbelief. The most feared Imperialist of the Revolution, and he didn't want to fight?

Then again, war changes people, the ancient leatherworker acknowledged. It changed Koshijirou. He went off just another young samurai itching for a real fight; came back quiet and sober, and reworked his family's whole style toward defense instead of attack. Even married a gaijin!

Though he'd have to admit, Hana was one of the better things to happen to Koshijirou. The sad, frightened little foreigner cast up like flotsam from the end of the Clone Wars had brought out that protective side young Kamiya had tried to drown after the Shogunate fell; made him willing to wear his lightsaber again, like a proper samurai, bringing honor back to his dojo. Made him smile again.

Take the man at his word, Densetsu told himself soberly. Simple probably is best. Let's see. He stepped back to the farthest corner of the workroom. "Draw."

A red blur, and violet hummed to life. Flicked out again, instants before a breeze might have brushed dangling leather against the blade.

So fast! The Zabrak shook his head. "Given the circumstances, Himura-san, I think I'd better see your outside draw as well. And - have you used wakizashi?" Has he ever. "Light-dagger, or vibro-knife?"

"Either." A flicker of a smile. "Though one prefers a simple tenbesukaa blade. One has - er - ended up in a few rivers."

The Kamo, the Kawa, every other little freshet around Kyoto... oh, and let's not forget those sea-raids on Shogunate warships, Densetsu thought wryly. Even if the rumors likely had grown in the telling - well, he'd heard Koshijirou's stories of how proud, vicious Saitou Hajime, Captain of the Third Squad of the Shinsengumi, had once been fished out of the Kamo river like a drowned rat. Chasing Battousai over bridges was a bad idea.

Then again, chasing Battousai anywhere had been a bad idea. If not a fatal one, for all but a few of the strongest Shogunate fighters....

Carefully not thinking about that, Densetsu beckoned the pair back through the long, thin corridor that led from the shop past his family's living quarters, to the garden courtyard they shared with
other wealthy non-humans. Someone's laundry fluttered in the breeze across the green; a trio of young Fireryo tussled gold and striped a few houses down. They pulled fanged faces at him, then backed off in stumbling haste as he hung out the warning lanterns.

"That should do," he said at last, shooting one more glance at the youngsters to be sure they kept well away. Samurai tended to be careful, but the last thing they needed was a stupid youngling mistake. "Begin."

It was like watching lightning.

_No one can draw that fast!

Yet Himura did, again and again; bare-handed or with borrowed kote, single-bladed or with the vibro-blade wakizashi Densetsu had retrieved from his storeroom. Standing still or crossing the width of the courtyard in one bound; crouched or leaping or twisting in midair like a leaf in a whirlwind. He was a whisper of dawn breeze and a rushing gale; flame and the flickering shadow it cast.

"That'll do," Densetsu said at last, all too aware of the dropped young jaws edging ever closer to the lanterns. _Damn. Well, I've said there aren't enough challenges in my life._

"Not as pretty as a place like _Serifu_," he said a few minutes later, escorting them back to the workroom, "but I know experts like yourselves prefer to see the craft firsthand." He opened a _sugi_-wood chest, taking out supple chestnut that shimmered with hints of green, violet, and rare, precious sparks of crimson. "Swift kill, as you can see; a quick knife, or arrow to the eye. None of this trapping nonsense that stresses the beast. And as for _poisoning_ the ametrine, well-!"

"You have good relations with the forest hunters," Himura nodded.

"Some are family," Densetsu acknowledged. "All of them know I pay them what they're worth. I know city samurai such as yourselves don't hunt the beasts, but let me tell you, they're no easy kill."

"I imagine they wouldn't be," Kenobi murmured, glancing at his companion. Quirking an auburn brow up, as if he saw a glint of humor in Himura's perfectly straight face. "Well. I would be most interested in hearing the merits of your work, Densetsu-san...."

_Damn good bargainer, that Kenobi_, the leather-worker thought ruefully a quarter-hour later, taking out the treated _kinu_ thread and powerful laser-needle he'd need to sew leather to leather. _Knows what he's worth, and what I am. And how to slip extra coin into his companion's stack without being obvious._

Not that he'd charged an unreasonable price. The sheer challenge of shaping kote for one with such skills... it was payment in itself.

It'd simply never occurred to him that the government's hero could be poor.

_But he's not part of the government, is he?_ Densetsu realized. _Legend says he left just after the Revolutionaries won their power; and Koshijirou said himself they all worked on promises and just enough rice to eat before then. Kami, Koshijirou's back wages didn't catch up with him until just before Kaoru was born._ He could still remember how worried the Kamiyas had been; Hana had been on strict bed rest, unable to teach, and Koshijirou and his aging father had been holding the dojo together with dawn-to-dusk work and sheer reckless nerve.

_The greatest of Revolutionaries... is a ronin, washing laundry to get by._
A ronin who'd somehow found trouble enough to drive him to armor again. Densetsu shuddered at the thought. What in the galaxy could get Battousai worried?

Saigo's reward? He's strong enough to take any twenty of the damn Rebels-

But not any forty, or hundred, the Zabrak admitted in his heart. Not if they came with blasters, and stun-rifles, and ki-collars.

That drew another shudder. He wasn't sensitive enough to be a ki-user, not like some few of his kin, but he'd felt a collar once in his past. The cold wasteland it made of the world; the way leather felt flat and empty under his fingers, lifeless as plastic.

His kinsman had rescued him then, slaughtering that band of slavers with the deadly efficiency of a Zabrak ninja. And asked nothing in return.

There would be no one to rescue Battousai.

Saigo can keep his damn reward, Densetu vowed, sweeping his fingers over hides to find the one that called to the kote-image in his mind. I won't yield anyone up to that.

...As long as he stays away from my daughter!

"-And turn! Hira-chan, you're dropping your elbow again...."

She's not bad, Obi-Wan thought, eyes half-closed as he sat to the side and listened to Kaoru's afternoon class. Apparently it was quite acceptable for visiting ronin to simply sit, watch, and meditate, the better to offer insights to the sensei later, with polite discretion. Or so Kaoru had said in a hissed-breath hurry when her errant pair of samurai had finally straggled in, packages in hand; pointing him toward the dojo before she dashed off to meet her students.

Kenshin had escaped, zipping out of sight toward the garden, the kitchen, and preparations for the evening meal. To Yahiko's evident relief; the boy had muttered something about "ugly" and "burning boiled rice" before accurately reading the storm-clouds hovering around his teacher and dashing dojo-ward himself.

Well, I can't say as I mind just sitting here, Obi-Wan thought tiredly. It's been a long day. And Kaoru seems to be a rather good teacher, even if a Temple youngling could plaster most of her students across the wall.

"There are limits to what anyone can teach those not sensitive to the Force," Qui-Gon observed, settling down beside him. "They'll be skilled enough with their chosen weapons. And the discipline is good for her padawan. She doesn't have Council missions to go on; training others shows Yahiko that her responsibilities are larger than just himself, as his will later be when he attains his own mastery."

:They are bound, then?: Obi-Wan asked his old master silently. For nineteen years, he'd been the crazy hermit of the Jundland Wastes because he had to be; he was not going to be seen talking to empty air on this planet. Not if he could help it.

"As well as you and I ever were, my young one. Or as Kenshin and... well." Qui-Gon smiled, translucent form shimmering with unheard laughter.
He's still an apprentice? Now, that was startling. Unless - civil wars caused great chaos and disorder. Add that to the fact that he'd given up his own lightsaber, at least until circumstances led him to build a new one... that spoke of the kind of gaping emotional wounds Obi-Wan hadn't seen since the Clone Wars. An Orphan?

"He will tell you in his own time, I think." A thick brow went up. "You ask me about Himura, Obi-Wan? Not Kaoru?"

Kaoru is easy enough to read. Straightforward and honest and truly, utterly believing in the goodness of those about her, blazing with determination to fight the darkness after Megumi, no matter what the odds. It almost broke his heart, even as it left him breathless with the need to help her. A need that had apparently gathered in his redhead friend as well, for all the rurouni's talk of vanishing into the wind. Kenshin... is a puzzle.

"Years and customs may be different here, but her training is still partly of Coruscant," Qui-Gon observed. "Outside of native variations, like the kote, Kamiya Kasshin holds few mysteries for you. But Kenshin's training is of this world, and you are intrigued."

Of this world, but with a Code we have not used in thousands of years. Obi-Wan stated. Yet... it is still a Jedi Code. He sighed. And if it had remained our Code, then perhaps...:

"Anakin might not have fallen?" Qui-Gon shook his head. "The past is past, my padawan. Anakin chose to fall. You chose to oppose him, and the Darkness he serves. Hana chose to hide, and nurture sparks of Light, and hope one day they might blaze bright in this planet's defense. Not a grand dream, perhaps. But it followed the will of the Force... and in time, I think, it will trouble Vader more than any of your fellow survivors' desperate ambushes."

Ambush attempts that had only succeeded in getting those Jedi killed, and feeding more gore to the Empire's propaganda machines. So, patience, then?: Obi-Wan smiled wryly. But what of the Rebellion? Of the children?:

"Your young charges are currently safe enough on Yavin IV," Qui-Gon assured him. "Fortunately for them, you were not with Luke long enough to train him more than you did. He's not open enough to the Force for the Dark influences there to gain a foothold. Not yet." Translucent eyes went distant. "And by the time he can leave that planet to seek further along the way, his companions will know him well. They will know Luke Skywalker, the pilot; and so, if all goes well, they will know and accept Luke Skywalker, Jedi Knight."

Yes; that he and Yoda had discussed often over the years. Though Order 66 had killed many, there had been survivors who had not gone after Vader. Survivors who, all too often, had died because their fellow citizens feared and hated them, and turned in anyone with a hint of "unnatural" powers. We were too separate from our fellow citizens, Obi-Wan thought sadly. Too different. Perhaps, if all of us had been more like the Corellian Jedi, able to marry and share some of the trials and frustrations of more ordinary folk... if we had made more of an effort to live among them, not simply met them on missions... But one was Jedi, or not. That was the Code. That was the way.

"Only the Sith deal in absolutes," Qui-Gon murmured.

That's rude, Master. The implication sank in, and Obi-Wan fought not to pale. You don't mean...?:

"Yoda still won't believe it, but I know what I have felt in what remains of the Archives," his master sighed. "I believe the Clone Wars were merely the last move in a game the Sith have played for over three thousand years. A game that taunted and weakened us like a million sand-flea bites,
each sipping away some of our strength, our flexibility. Denying us families, because Jedi might turn on the death of their loved ones. Denying emotions, when all beings have them. Denying training or choice of path past certain ages, when of old masters chose based on who they thought fit to learn, so that all Jedi might be trained to certain standards. Predictable standards." Ghostly fingers brushed benediction over his brow. "You yourself can attest that some of us take longer to show our promise than the Council would like."

:But... you truly think the Sith could have-: He couldn't finish the thought.

"It would only have taken a few charismatic individuals, nudging the Council a little at a time over the centuries. And once Yoda himself became Grand Master, to teach every youngling for century upon century... then I think our fate was sealed."

:That's a horrible thought, Master!: 

"Yet you don't disagree?" Qui-Gon regarded him with interest. "A week ago, I think you would have, my young one. Is this world so very different, that it has changed you so?" His voice dropped. "Are these people so very different?"

:It's not that they're different; it's that they're the same!: Obi-Wan paused, watching students flow and stumble over the polished floor as he weighed that thought. :I... met a Zabrak today, Master.: 

"Yes?"

:He was a good person. Not a Jedi; possibly not even as pure of intent as that rascal Sanosuke. But he was a good being.: Obi-Wan hesitated. :It didn't hurt. To look at him. To talk to him. I was surprised.: 

"It has been some years since my death, Padawan." That hawk-nosed head tilted. "You believe that surprise unbalanced you?"

:My surprise led me to overlook his surprise.; Obi-Wan admitted. :There was... an undercurrent, when he spoke to Kenshin. I don't think I was paying enough attention. It bothers me.: 

"Tell me."

:I think Kenshin frightened him.: The living Jedi frowned. :I don't think he meant to... yet he expected it. Tried to hide it. And Densetsu did as well. And those children... they acted as if they'd never seen Tràkata before.: 

"And why should they have? They're not Temple younglings, after all."

:Master, samurai aren't Jedi. Surely, there must be a few besides Master Yoda who practice something so... easily Dark....: 

Qui-Gon waited. 

:Vos., Obi-Wan realized. :Himura reminds me of Quinlan Vos, or Aayla Secura. Shadowed souls, yet still Jedi, and determined not to fall any farther into the Dark.: 

"He did fall once, my young one," the spirit said softly. "And as he's told you, he knows much of Jedi - yet not enough. He knows how iron Coruscant's Code can be."

:But not that it can forgive?: Obi-Wan regarded his old friend. :What did he do?:

And he was gone.

*I should have let Vader kill me and transcended,* Obi-Wan groused silently. *It has to be better to be dropping the cryptic hints than to be the poor, incarnate soul trying to figure them out!*

"Hasn't anyone told you you're supposed to be a wild animal?"

*Squeak?*

"I am most certainly not feeding you out of my own grain bowl, you cadging little monster. The very idea. Ataru are predators, in case you've forgotten. Meat, that's what you're supposed to be eating. The rarer the better."

*Squirk!*

"Oro...."

Kaoru held a straight face for just a moment longer, then joined Ayame and Suzume in helpless laughter. Still squeaking in indignation, the splint-winged young ataru scrabbled at empty air above the slivered fish, held at bay by Kenshin's hastily cupped fingers, a curve of bone and muscle echoing the grip of the Force feet away.

Brushing off his now-deserted shoulder, Obi-Wan sighed. "Really. You'd think one of the terrors of Coruscant would have more pride." He blinked then, looking across the bowls toward a pale face. "Milady Megumi? Are you well?"

"I... that...." The young doctor's glance flicked toward the floating creature, now twisting about to explore the invisible grip of energy, then away.

"Ah, you get used to it," Sanosuke said grandly, clapping her on the shoulder. "Samurai have this funny idea about the word impossible." He winked at Kaoru. "Lucky for you guys that Katsu thinks it's Kaoru cooking tonight. If he were here - well, last trip out, we picked up some weird Imperial propaganda about the end of the Clone Wars, and Katsu swears if he can put that together with some old holo-casts and maybe a few more Rebel pamphlet bits, he can come up with some kind of historical basis for gaijin samurai in the Republic." He rolled dark eyes at how obviously crazy that idea was. "Man, we don't need articles like that in the Dispatch again."

"Again?" Yahiko muttered. "How'd you get away with it the first time?"

"Fast feet." Sano grinned. "Everybody in Tokyo knows about the Dispatch, but nobody can prove it's Katsu. I kind of think no one really wants to. Even Imps get starved for something different to read once in a while." He nodded toward the chirping ataru, now curiously trying its claws against air. "You've really never seen that before, fox-lady?"

"You must have," Dr. Gensai observed. "As I recall, the Takani family had no few ki-healers among them."

"We... did," Megumi admitted softly. "That's different."

"No different." Kenshin lowered the ataru with a smile, serving out some of the fish to delighted squeaks. "It is only a change in scale. In focus. You move within the body's rhythms, to support
and uphold them in the face of injury. To catch and hold in this fashion, this one moves in the rhythms of air, and objects, to push or pull as needed."

The woman swallowed dryly. "I... can't."

"Size matters not," Kaoru proclaimed, echoing one of her mother's favorite sayings. "All you need is a little training."

"Though there are those who have odd limits to their strengths," Obi-Wan nodded. "I've heard of those sensitive to... ki... who can't move more than a simple latch-"

"No. I can't."

Kaoru traded a glance with Obi-Wan. Let it go. For now.

The Jedi inclined his head, then turned his gaze to green scales. "You really shouldn't teach that creature to trust humans, Kenshin."

"Ah, but she does not, Kenobi-san." Violet glimmered with humor. "She trusts you, and Kaoru-dono, and the children. And she trusts that you will be a properly stern flock-leader, and deal firmly with any errant humans who would injure a hatchling."

Squeak! Preening herself with her whole wing, the ataru burped; curled over crumbs of fish, sniffing the air as if trying to decide if she wanted to attack another bowl. Twitched a little, and settled with a sigh.

"Flock-leader?" Sanosuke snickered.

"And what, may I ask, is so amusing?" Obi-Wan asked archly.

"No offense, but I can't see you leading your way out of a flimsy-bag," the smuggler shrugged. "I mean, yeah, sure, samurai; but you're no Imperial officer. Much less- oi!" He snapped his fingers. "Oh, you're going to love this one, Kaoru. You know how Katsu keeps poking into discarded Archives, trying to figure out how the Emperor rewrote history for the Imperial schools? Believe it or not, I think this time he found something. Not that he's going to use it. Pity. It's so crazy, people would read it just for laughs."

"Crazy?" Kaoru said warily.

"Yeah; has to be one of the first propaganda attempts. Something about Jedi Generals leading the clone armies. Can you believe they even thought about trying to tell people that?"

"Um...." She wouldn't glance at Obi-Wan. She wouldn't. But there was an odd stillness to the ki around him. Not calm, but - lack of reaction. A deliberate lack?

"It does seem unlikely," Kenshin observed, face calm. "Why would those our world knows as child-stealers lead the Republic's army against its foes?" He sipped the last juices out of his bowl. "And why would any ki-user collude with those who created and enslaved lives to die in their defense, rather than risk their own blood and soul for what they believed?" Violet met sea-green, level and cool. "Ninja say they are born only to die, but still, the lives they risk so are their lives, and the souls they put at risk with dark ki, to complete their missions, are their souls."

Oh, this is getting way too tense. Deliberately, Kaoru waved a hand at the stuffed hatchling. "You can talk to her?" I can't do that!
"One can reach - impressions. Feelings. Images, sometimes." Kenshin shrugged shyly, glancing 
away. "Ki spreads its gifts differently to every user. This one can commune with life well, but 
cannot easily convince."

But Yahiko said you- Kaoru bit down on her lip, leaving the thought unspoken. You don't want Obi- 
Wan to know. Why?

You think Obi-Wan was in the Clone Wars.

You know something about the Clone Wars. Something I thought only my family knew: that the 
Jedi did lead the clones, before something terrible happened and Palpatine declared them all 
traitors.

How do you know that?

Fortunately for her nerves, both Kenshin and Obi-Wan seemed to silently agree to drop the matter. 
The rest of dinner passed in casual conversation about the girls' efforts at hopscotch, Gensai's latest 
cases, Yahiko's efforts on the dojo floor, Sano's incessant quest for spare parts, and a few delicate 
overtures to Megumi that were met with foxy refusals to talk about anything more serious than the 
weather.

If I could just throttle the truth out of her, I swear- no. Calm. Deep breaths, Kaoru. You've got a 
temper worse than Kaasan's and Tousan's put together; you know that. That doesn't make you 
Dark. It just means you have to work hard on the Code. Every day. Patience. Calm will come.

I just wish it would come a little easier.

She still had to grin, though, as she locked the dojo gate behind the Gensai family and skipped 
back to the house. At the first hint of the word dishes, Sanosuke had jumped at the chance to 
discuss medical storage and equipment for the Sekihoutai with Megumi, thus taking two problems 
off her hands for the evening. Kenshin had taken those same dishes out of the equation with a few 
quiet words about the privacy of family matters.

Meaning he's not going to listen in. Shutting herself inside her room with Yahiko and Obi-Wan, 
Kaoru sat down to face them, and let out a slow breath. So all I have to deal with is one ex-Yakuza 
pickpocket apprentice.

For a moment, she desperately wished she could put this off. But Sano had brought it up... and 
Yahiko deserved to know.

Calm. Serenity. You can do this.

"Why am I feeling outnumbered?" Yahiko grumbled.

"Well, you are and you aren't," Kaoru answered frankly. "From one point of view, we have Obi- 
Wan outnumbered, because we're Edokko, and he's new here. From another, he and I have you 
outnumbered, because our teachings come from the same roots, and you're just starting out with ki. 
Does that tell you anything?"

" Tells me Kenshin's not the only guy who can do cryptic around here. And Sano didn't even seem 
to-" Yahiko hesitated. "When you guys were talking about the Clone Wars, and the Jedi... 
everything seemed to ripple somehow. And Sano didn't notice."

"Actually, I believe he was deliberately ignoring whatever he may have sensed," Obi-Wan mused. 
"Privacy customs?"
"Common sense," Kaoru said wryly. "He really does have some, buried under the bluster. Sanosuke hasn't been around my family this long without figuring out that there's some things he's better off not knowing." She turned a serious look on Yahiko. "But you're my apprentice, and you have a right to know how deep the water is-"

Yahiko held up his hands. "Yakuza?"

Kaoru gaped. "No!"

"Ninja?"

"No way!"

"Imperial aliens in disguise, plotting to take over the Rebellion with evil mind-control powers and transform them into cyborg slaves?"

"You've been reading Sano's adventure holo-novels," Kaoru accused.

"So?" The boy's look was defiant, not quite hiding a gleam of hopeful gruesome interest.

"No," Kaoru said firmly. "I'm just the assistant master of Kamiya Kasshin Ryu. Which... isn't as simple as it sounds."

Yahiko frowned, puzzled; then blinked. "Wait a minute... if you and Obi-Wan both know about ki... but he's from off-world...." His jaw dropped. "You mean Katsu's right? There really are off-world samurai?"

"Were, yes," Obi-Wan sighed. "For over a thousand generations, we were the guardians of peace and justice in the galaxy. Before the dark times. Before the Empire."

"But at the end of the Clone Wars, something went wrong," Kaoru said grimly. "They were betrayed. Murdered, by people they never expected to turn on them. My mother escaped; luck, chance, the will of the Force, who knows. But she came here, and met my father, and together they decided Kamiya Kasshin would try to find a middle ground. To preserve the best parts of my mother's tradition, but in a way that would fit this planet, so no one would know." Her fingers clenched on her hakama. "Because if the Imperials know... they'll destroy this place, and everyone in it." Her voice dropped. "And that might be better than what would happen if the rest of Tokyo found out first."

"Better than being executed?" Yahiko said skeptically. "Come on! We're Edokko; we don't riot over little things like murder warrants. You make it sound as if you're...." His voice died, and he paled.

"No, he's definitely not dumb," Kaoru thought wryly. "I'm not. Exactly. Though I try. But my mother was Jedi."

"Oh, frack," Yahiko muttered in spaceport Basic. "And Kenshin just... oh, kuso, he's going to-"

"Too much time with Sano," Kaoru thought. "Kenshin knows."

"He what?" Yahiko yelped. "No way! He's h- rurouni, there's no way he'd-"

"Apparently, Kenshin knows quite a bit about Jedi," Obi-Wan observed. "Both our strengths, and our failings. Which I must admit I find curious."
Makes two of us, Kaoru realized. Samurai don't know Jedi. Even 'Tousan might have sliced first and asked questions later, if he hadn't gotten to know 'Kaasan first-

"What do you mean, our?" Yahiko ran over her thoughts. "You mean... you're...."

"As I said, Hana Firefinder and I were adopted by guardians from the same clan." Obi-Wan looked down. "And though I now know enough to see that by your planet's ways I likely was stolen, the Jedi never intended to take any child against the family's will."

"But - you're gaijin!" Yahiko blurted.

Kaoru sighed, ready to point out that yes, gaijin samurai kind of implied gaijin adoptees-

"True. Though I suppose being born here might have muddied the waters considerably."

Kaoru stared at him.

Sea-green danced in rueful amusement as Obi-Wan took a datapad out of his sleeve. "Let's see if I've found the right references, shall we?"

"-Honored lords of the court, I must protest!"

The screen held only flat images, not a hologram, but the petitioner was clear. Young, about Kaoru's own age, striking red hair tied back like a farmer's over a simple citizen's brown and blue kimono. Even faded as flesh and skin appeared, she could see the pallor and dark-ringed eyes of a near-fatal brush with Miasma. He shouldn't even be standing! Why in the worlds is he in court?

"Owen," Kenobi breathed. "I haven't seen him since... space."

"I am orphaned, it is true - but I am in negotiation for an apprenticeship with Tamaru-san, lead mulberry-grower of the Kyoto Weaver's Guild, and I have every reason to believe that contract will be accepted. The bonds of family should not be severed unless there is no other hope. Please...." The recorded voice cracked. "Please, bring my brother back to me."

"Your statement is noted, Kenobi Owen, orphan of Kenobi Mori and Kenobi Sain." The magistrate sat on the court's raised platform, hair oiled to samurai perfection, scowling dark as a thunderstorm. "As is this court's leniency in allowing one who has no place to speak at all."

"But lord."

"As your gaijin governments have made so forcefully clear," venom dripped from the magistrate's tone, "those born of other worlds will be ruled by the laws of those worlds. You are blood of Corellia, and so bound by that world's commands. Which Ulloriaq-san has followed, has she not?"

The image panned to a small, dark-haired woman in gi, hakama, and Jedi-brown haori, who could have walked down any street in Tokyo unnoticed. Save by those who took a second look at the lightsaber at her belt, and the chill hardness in her eyes. "Magistrate, I have."

Ulloriaq? Kaoru's jaw dropped as the court droned through the formal recognition necessary for a court witness. But - if this was recorded while she was alive-

Obi-Wan caught her stunned look, and gave her a rueful smile. "Yes, I am a few years this side of sixty," he admitted. "It's given me no end of trouble. Who knows; perhaps Sunrider had a few descendants on Corellia?"
"But - if you were thirty when the Empire took over…." Kaoru swallowed, oddly reluctant to voice the rest of her thought. *You wouldn't have been a padawan.*

"They wiped out the Agricultural Corps as well," Obi-Wan said grimly.

Kaoru tried not to let her disbelief show on her face. *No way. You? In the Agricultural Corps? The way you're trained?*

But it didn't feel *quite* like a lie.

*Twenty years, he's been hiding from the Empire. Like Kenshin has. I haven't pushed Kenshin… then again, I know what Kenshin's hiding.*

*Patient. I'm going to be patient.*

*And if that doesn't work, I am going to find a rock, and drop it on his toe. A big rock.*

The Jedi raised a brow slightly, evidently reading something off her face or ki, then shrugged. *"Hang on, I believe they're actually saying something now…."*

*"The laws of your world require testing of midi-chlorians?"*

*"They do. At birth. Which the Kenobis avoided, though we must allow for the... unsettled... nature of their lives, and the usual forgetfulness of scientists absorbed in their pursuits. Yet eventually they recalled their obligations and had their sons, both of them, tested in accordance with our laws. And were informed of the results." She frowned. "Their objection in the case of Owen Kenobi, fifteen years ago, is noted. There is none such in the case of Obi-Wan."*

*"There was no time!" Owen burst out. "Honored lords, we were ill with Miasma before the results returned - before they were finally released to us by this woman-"*

*"The child's parents were dead," Ulloriaq said levelly. "I acted in the service of my Order. He is alive. He is well. He is within the Temple of Coruscant, receiving instruction from Master Yoda. And there he will remain."*

*"Coruscant?" Owen snarled. "Kami, woman, what did we ever do to you? At least send him to the Corellian Jedi! Let him have family - let him have a life-"*

*"Your parents flouted the law of the Republic. And you would break it." Cool eyes touched the bailiff.*

Even prepared for it, Kaoru winced at the sharp smack of staff against cheek.

On one knee, touching the reddening bruise a gaijin earned by speaking out of turn under a samurai’s gaze, Owen looked up at the Jedi with oddly clear blue eyes. His voice was sane, calm... and all the more frightening for it. *"I hate you."*

*"This case is dismissed," the magistrate declared. "Bailiff, remove-"*

Blue was glazed, unseeing. *"Death comes for you in the storm, Watchman. Blood you have wronged will find you. And not even Darkness will halt the howl of wolves...."*

Obi-Wan's finger stabbed down, and the playback ended.

*I'm sorry," Kaoru whispered.*
"She wasn't like that," Obi-Wan said softly. "At least, I don't remember her being like that. She was cold, yes; and not the most fit person to comfort a lost child. But she meant no harm." He paused, and sighed. "Or rather, she meant no harm to me. Yet I remember sensing something frightening about her when she thought of my parents, and Owen. Like the air before a thunderstorm. And just before she put me on the ship to leave, she told me I had done nothing wrong, and she would see justice was done." He shuddered. "I never would have dreamed...."

*Think, think; say something!* Kaoru cast a quick look at her apprentice.

Yahiko gulped, but jumped into the breach. "That was a vision?"

"It certainly sounds like it, doesn't it?" Obi-Wan blinked, pulled back from the past. "Owen was my brother. It wouldn't surprise me if he were strong in the Unifying Force, as I am. And while I've never been one to suffer visions, I don't think I've ever been so desperate as he must have been, that moment. To lose a brother...." He hesitated. "Well. Perhaps once. But at that time, a vision would have killed not only me, but three lives depending on mine."

"Maybe there's more on Ulloriaq in there," Kaoru said, rising to tap her apprentice toward the sliding screen. "You - off to bed. I want you to meditate half an hour on this, then get some sleep. And if you can't meditate, I want you to think about what you think you learned tonight, and how we can fix whatever went wrong."

"Yeah?" Yahiko gave her a stubborn, cocky look. "And what if I can't sleep?"

Kaoru smiled sweetly. "Then you get to help Kenshin do the laundry tomorrow, Yahiko-chan."

Cockiness turned to outraged horror. "*Girls'* work? You wouldn't!"

Reaching out with the Force, she snatched a bokken from the far wall. "Bed!"

Yahiko ducked, scowling; stopped on one foot, and dashed back to Obi-Wan to give the Jedi a quick, manly squeeze on the shoulder. "It'll be okay."

Grinning again, he dashed out, slamming the screen shut with a *thump*.

"You're going to have your hands full with that one," Obi-Wan observed. "But he has a good heart. I only hope he can overcome the fear within him as well." He glanced at her. "You sent him away deliberately."

Kaoru winced. "I wasn't sure. It's always been hard to get information on the rest of the galaxy here; for all I knew, Ulloriaq could have been a common name. And I was a little young to understand when my parents talked about the Bakumatsu. But seeing her..." She swallowed dryly. "If you found that with your search, you probably found more. And it's not going to be pretty."

The Jedi frowned, turning back to the datapad to tap a few quick commands. Scrolled down. And down. And blanched.

Bracing herself, Kaoru moved around to view the screen, noting the symbol that labeled a Shogunate record only provisionally accepted by Imperial historians as possible fact. A *casualty count*.

Glowing numbers, stark and bare; so many dead, so many dismembered, so many crushed and shredded by ceramic roof tiles flung around like leaves in a whirlwind. Ishin Shishi. Shinsengumi. Civilians.
Children.

"No...."

Swallowing a lump of sorrow, Kaoru drew her finger down the screen to the appended notations of valor.

*Posthumous commendation for Captain Okita Souji, leader of the First Squad of the Shinsengumi, for his actions in protecting Kyoto civilians, to be upheld by the order of Imperial Governor Meiji. Though weakened by his long and hidden battle with White Death poisoning, when faced with the traitorous Jedi Rayen Ulloriaq he did not hesitate, but leaped to defend his people and his city, saving untold lives. Justice does not know a uniform....*

"It doesn't say he killed her."

Kaoru blinked, brought back by that soft whisper. "He - didn't," she said hesitantly. "But he bought time for help to get there." *Did he find- wow. You must have been in some pretty hefty databases. My father only had a copy of this because he knew someone who was there.* And I think this is the first time I've been glad the recording's so bad; you don't really get a good look at anybody. *There weren't that many recordings of the Bakumatsu; Shinsengumi or Ishin Shishi, both sides had been fairly effective at slicing into security systems and blanking cameras before they took action. But no one had expected this night. Which meant stunned survivors had been able to splice something together out of the rubble, trying to figure out just what and who were to blame for the catastrophe.*

Point of view jumped from moment to moment. Storm and wind crackled through the recording, almost drowning out the curses and screams as Shinsengumi and Ishin Shishi ran, tended their wounded, or tried to shield themselves and crying civilians from the deadly knives of flung rooftiles. More than once, the last view was of one of those fired blue missiles before static fuzzed, and it jumped to another camera. But through it all, one thing was clear; high above on rain-swept roofs, amber and emerald blades clashed and snarled against each other, moving too fast for eyes to follow.

A flash of lightning illuminated Ulloriaq's withered face, eyes glowing red with unadulterated rage. "*And this is how you would repay the Republic? By joining with the Separatists?*"

The shadow that faced her saved his breath for the fight, twisting away from a blow meant to take his head.

"*Traitors! Murderers! Users of Darkness!*" A clench of her hand, and clay missiles shredded through the air like shrapnel. "None of you deserve our protection!"

But the shadow had already leapt, impossibly high; amber blade coming down like a lash of lightning-

To be parried and flung aside with a mocking laugh, as emerald licked at his right arm - just the tip, but enough to draw a cry of agony. The amber blade sailed across the rooftops, vanishing out of sight.

A babble of voices filled the stillness between lightning and thunder. "*Did she just-*"

"*Kami, no-*"

"*If she can take Battousai-*"

The shadow was on one knee, now; as if it could not bear to look up at the mocking laughter
moving ever closer.

"And now, this benighted world will see that even demons die."

The emerald blade slashed down-
Halting, caught between two shadowed palms.

Green fire blazed over the kote shielding those hands, ki absorbing the force leather could not. Though not all; smoke rose, and blood fell, dripping black in the hot glow of energy.

But her opponent would not yield. Emerald was held, pulled, twisted-

Flung away, hilt catching the Fallen Jedi in the throat like a thunderbolt. She staggered back-
The blue blur of a vibro-blade whipped out, severing head from neck in one swift battou-jutsu.

Dark energies exploded outward; the recording jumped and jumped again, seeking cameras that hadn't been fried. Finally steadied, in a static-washed image that held no color; she could only identify the Shinsengumi raising blades and sabers by the lighter triangles along pale gray sleeves, flinching back from the more solid hue of a Choushuu uniform. "Stay back! How dare you-."

"It's all right." A breathless whisper from the small, dark-haired human Shinsengumi in his fellow captain's arms, the seared hole of a lightsaber drilled through his heart. "You came. I knew you would. My friends...."

A choked cry, too soft for the cameras to catch.

"You look so sad, Red... please smile. Just once, for me? You know I never wanted to... die in bed...."

Wind and rain. An excited, angry babble-

"Let him go!" A raw roar, from the tall, angry Fireryo Shinsengumi cradling Okita's body, eyes flashing like a predator's in the night. "We'll catch Battousai another night...."

Obi-Wan let that trail out to its ragged end, shaking his head. "I'm not certain how much more of this I can take."

"Me neither," Kaoru gulped, eyes wet. "Mother said - Rayen was Master Quidel's friend."

"Once you yield to the Dark Side, it can carry you into horrors beyond imagining." The Jedi drew a deep breath, let it slowly out. "If there was no one who could reach her, who could return her to the Light.... Stopping her, however it had to be done - that was a great mercy."

Kaoru sniffled even more, caught off-guard by the pure grief rippling through the Force. "I never thought - he doesn't hate, he's just so sad. "H-here. You're going to need these...."

Obi-Wan accepted the box of tissues with surprised dignity, a rueful smile drifting across his face as she grabbed a wad herself to stifle her sobs.

"I know, I know," Kaoru gulped after a few minutes. "I don't do so well with peace and serenity."

"I believe it's a bit easier to achieve when you've been raised around Jedi who've been nothing but serene the greater part of their lives," Obi-Wan observed, crumpling his own wad of soaked paper. "Remind me to tell you of some of the Corellian Jedi I knew. Nejaa Halcyon, for one... a calm
man, certainly, especially when need called for it. But serene? I'm not certain Corellians were ever cut out for that." Wry humor glinted in his eyes. "Which I suppose speaks to part of why I had certain - difficulties, as a youngling and later. I might never have been quite as open and forthright about expressing that volatility as you, my young assistant master, but yes, I do have a temper." The glint turned to an all-out gleam. "I've been rather forcefully reminded of it, these past few weeks."

She stifled a giggle. "So. Meditation?"

"Oh, yes," Obi-Wan sighed. "I suspect we'll all be doing a great deal of that." He raised a serious brow at her. "Part of which, I think, will include numbering the reasons why you have not pressed Megumi for further details on Kanryuu? Much less asked myself, or Kenshin, what tactical information we gathered this day?"

Red burned across her cheeks. "If you're asking, you already know."

"Oh, I know who," the Jedi nodded. "What I don't quite understand is why." He gave her a curious glance. "Why do you think he'll leave?"

"Because he doesn't think he deserves to stay, the baka!" Kaoru clenched a fist on wet tissue. "If - if he wasn't worried about you, and about keeping everyone here safe from Kanryuu - he's a rurouni. They drift on the wind. That price Saigo put on him means he thinks he has to keep moving, or people will get hurt trying to take him. And I don't - I don't think he can keep it up much longer, he's so tired...." She felt a flicker of skepticism, and gave the Jedi a scowl. "You didn't see what he was like a week ago! Skin and bones, not much more. He needs rest. Food. Sleep, somewhere he's sure nobody's going to knife him in the ribs for the bounty. If I let him walk out now-" She shivered.

"We can't hold him against his will," Obi-Wan cautioned.

"I know that!" Calm. Just try. "I know that," Kaoru repeated, more softly. "But I'm the head of this dojo. I say what risks I'm willing to take. And if I can just get him to stick around long enough to get that through his thick skull-!"

"I suspect you'll need reinforcements," the Jedi mused. "A role I might play more effectively if I knew why he was worried about me."

Because he healed you, in a way that chills me even now. Because he linked with your ki to pull you through, and even if he broke that link, he knows you. Because even if his hands are deadly, he has the gentlest heart I think I've ever met.

And when I think about that, and who he was, I get so confused....

"He knows you're lost," Kaoru said instead. "Not in the Dark," she added hastily. "He told me, when you came here, that you felt like some of the people he knew in the Bakumatsu. Unit survivors. People who had... really bad things happen to everyone else around them, but miss them, and they didn't know why." She swallowed. "He's worried about you. And he knows that Jedi stick together, so he knows if he's worried about you, he has to be worried about me, and Yahiko. So he's stayed. Tried to help me help you get better."

"When you're fairly certain he's in worse shape than I am," Obi-Wan mused, nodding at the irony. "Are there no Mind-Healers... ah. He's that paranoid, then?"

"It's not paranoia when they are out to get you," Kaoru said flatly. "Look, we can go over what you
found on Kanryuu tomorrow, when we're all thinking straight."

"And when both of us may have had a bit more time to contemplate ways to persuade our windblown wanderer to consider putting down roots?"

Kaoru's blush deepened. "Right. Though I don't think we'll get that lucky- wait a minute. "You want him to stay? He's - not Jedi….."

"No," Obi-Wan mused. "But he seems to be a good man." The Jedi scratched his chin, as if missing an absent beard. "And he mentioned a technique I'm rather curious about. The same as we saw on that recording, I think."

"The blade-catch?" Kaoru let out a low whistle. "Even with a student saber, I don't want to try that until Densetsu-san has your kote ready. One nick to the tendons… bacta's not that easy to come by if you're not in Imperial service."

"Understandable. I'd prefer to spend time tomorrow going over the 'saber components we acquired today, in any case," Obi-Wan nodded. "They seem quite satisfactory, but there are some individual quirks I'd like to familiarize myself with before I try building it." He hesitated. "Am I correct in believing that, due to this world's reliance on social ties, it would have been inadvisable for you to direct us straight to Densetsu?"

"You would have been going as a supplicant student from this dojo, instead of a samurai and master in your own right," Kaoru said frankly. "He would have had to turn you down, or his family would have lost face. Even if you came back later with greeting-gifts and went through the whole round of introductions, he couldn't have given you his best work. Not until you proved you deserved it." She glanced away. "I know it sounds crazy….."

"Local custom is never crazy," Obi-Wan declared, rising to bow and head for the doorway. "Sometimes inadvisable, often inexplicable, and occasionally perilous to mind, body, or soul." Opening the screen, he turned back for one last wink. "But one never calls it crazy."

Chapter End Notes

Orphan - padawan whose Master has died.

Sugi - cedar.

Tensubeskaa - "heaven's-beskar"; a lightsaber-resistant alloy.

Tràkata - lightsaber combat based off iai-jutsu (battou-jutsu); the user dodges with the Force, lightsaber in reach but either not drawn or not ignited until absolutely necessary. Considered a somewhat dark form of combat, since it takes the enemy by surprise, and can be used outside a lightsaber duel to dispose of a target in close quarters. Favored by Yoda.
You know it's going to be a bad morning, Sano thought in a pre-caf haze, when the first thing you do is almost trample the doc. He blinked at late-morning sunlight, trying to clear out the fuzziness.
"Gensai-isha?"

"Botheration... samurai idiocy...." Rifling through his black bag, the older man frowned at him, made a shooing motion down the corridor toward the main room. "I believe they left you some breakfast out on a tray."

Ah. Food.

Food with a very foxy lady accompanying it; Sanosuke yawned and grinned as he snatched up raisin-decked grain-balls, munching and staring at the curves of a green-and-sun-gold kimono until his mind caught up with his no longer empty stomach. Um... oops?

But no bokken crashed down on his head. Megumi only narrowed her eyes at him, and sniffed, looking away as if he were no more important than a fluff-chick pecking at spilled seeds.

Ow.

For a second Sano frowned, considering how he could escalate the situation. Nobody turned up their nose at him and got away with it. Especially somebody who not only hadn't paid her own passage, but had gotten him, Katsu, and Kaoru dumped in an asteroid belt's worth of trouble.

Yeah? And what if she hadn't been on that last run, tough guy? his conscience snarked. Save Katsu or save the run; either way, you would've been screwed but good.

Okay, okay. So she deserved a little leeway. Just a little. "Come up with anything else for your wish list, Megitsune?"

"Don't call me that, Rooster-head." Her gaze dropped to her tea. "It's a pipe dream, anyway. I'd never live long enough to get back on the Sekihoutai."

"Hey!" Sano thumped his chest. "Who do you think you're talking to, here?"

"Smuggling cargo from one planet to another is a lot different from smuggling a person to a spaceport," Megumi said tartly.

Sano smirked. "Not when you've got samurai to help."

That suddenly, the young doctor looked lost. "He'd do that?"

"Kenshin? I don't know," Sanosuke said frankly, snagging another grain-ball. He glanced at his wrist-chrono in passing, and made a mental note of the time; still a bit to spare. Good. Katsu would get six kinds of prickly if he missed his com-link check-in. "Kaoru, though - maybe. Just maybe." He tossed Megumi a wry grin. "Just, say, if there happens to be an Imperial warrant out there with your name on it, it'd go a lot easier if you didn't mention it to her. She's kind of fussy on what laws she breaks." And she says it's easier to pull a mind-trick if people aren't wound up in hunting down somebody on Security's Top Ten List.

Considering the circumstances, he'd drop his pride and go for easier. A much younger Sano had seen some of Captain Sagara's attempts at pulling mind tricks off - one of which had landed that
long-ago Rebel in a bacta tank for days.

"I can go about my business? Your business is my business, laserbrain."

Oh yeah. Not fun. Granted, Kaoru had a lot more power than Captain Sagara; from little bits Sano had picked up from Gensai on ki and midi-chlorian counts, the captain had barely squeaked past the baseline level for full training, while Kaoru fell solidly into the upper range. But still, the easier, the better.

"No," Megumi said, almost soundlessly. "There's no warrant." She flinched. "But-

"But, they think you're dead," Sano said plainly. "I grant you, given their twisty ninja minds they might not believe you were dead until they scattered the pieces, but look at where we are." He waved a hand around, indicating the whole compound. "One raid like that - yeah, sure, Kanryuu's nasty enough to get away with it. Two? On a traditional dojo? Maybe nobody out there's got the guts to stand up to the bastard face to face, but put together, a whole crowd of people who decide to drag their heels a little can do a heck of a lot of damage. He's not going to blast into this place again without a good reason." The pilot cracked his knuckles. "So. Given once we get you to the Sekihoutai we might have to pull some quick tricks to get you back from there, make a list. What do you need to make shipboard living complete-" He stopped, brain finally awake enough to add morning, Gensai, and medical kit. "Wait a second. If you're here - why the heck did Jou-chan call in the doc?"

Obi-Wan suppressed a flinch as soothing cool wrapped hot cuts. "I appreciate the house call."

"Hmm. Well, it wouldn't have been wise to walk through the streets with these wounds." Gensai taped the right-hand poultice into place, watched his patient flex his fingers before he began taping the left hand. "Samurai may be allowed to wear lightsabers, but that doesn't mean Security has to like it.

It may not be bacta, but stars, that feels better. Gensai had looked him over quickly, chased Kaoru out, then used a more thorough examination to give his patient an impromptu lesson in local herbal medicines. Apparently with a few other herbs soaked into it, the ruby-dotted amber seaweed yawara-kai was amazingly specific for lightsaber wounds. And the very fact that they know that says rather more about the history of combat on this planet than I think I ever wanted to know. "You haven't asked how this happened," the Jedi ventured carefully.

"Given the shock on Kaoru's face when she burst in on me, you weren't practicing the blade-catch with her or her apprentice," Gensai said dryly. "Given Himura-san is out chopping firewood and making weeds flee in terror, he doesn't even know you're injured. And given the dojo itself is still standing, this was not another ninja attack. Meaning this most likely falls into… well, parts of samurai life the rest of us can only watch from the sidelines." He raised a graying brow. "Did you want to talk about it?"

Obi-Wan hesitated. "People with my training don't dream."

"But you do have visions." Setting his kit aside, Gensai knelt down by him. "Of the future-"

"And the past." Obi-Wan flexed his hands, hiding a wince at the tug of cut skin. They weren't very deep cuts; Gensai was of the opinion they wouldn't even scar. But that they'd happened at all… "Yet - this wasn't my past."
Darkness. Darkness in Kyoto.

Not physical darkness; though crackling thunder and rain drew that down as well, whipping ice-water into his eyes until he gave up and closed them, jumping from roof to roof blind.

Well - blind as ordinary folk knew it.

To ki-sense the world was aflame with color and light; there small lives, there larger, here the soft swirls of blowing wind, here the firm solidity of rain-washed tile. He ran as confidently through storm-wracked rooftops as ordinary sentients would through a sunlit field, anticipating each gust of wind, knowing what footing would and would not hold. Gale and rain and lightning would not fell him, could not fell him; he was the storm and the roofs and the empty air between them.

But he was also a small, frail creation of heart and bone and wind-soaked hair, and rain dripped fear and grief through his clothes like acid.

She can't have Fallen. She can't have!

Yet that tornado of Darkness howled Ulloriaq's ki-signature to the four winds, laughing as it mowed down friends and enemies, the armed and unarmed alike. Gorging on fear and hatred, slurping death and destruction like a drunkard at fine wine-

Clarity flashed in the night. The bright, hard-edged shadow that was Okita's ki-signature; frail as obsidian, like the squad leader's failing health, but still sharp enough to cut to the bone.

No! Sou, no! He reached for the Shinsengumi, as he'd never reached for any of the Miburou in his role as hitokiri. :Sou, get away! She'll kill you!:

:She's killing everyone.: The blood-rage was there, the fury that had earned Souji the name Demon-child, yet within it was… peace. :I can hold her here. Just for a little while.: 

:Sou:-

:Promise me you will try not to kill Saitou tonight? He won't get here in time.:.

He felt the fight start, darkness against shadow like ice in his veins. Felt it and ran, fast as ki and muscle could carry him, sensing how the fight flowed, snarled, struck-

Sou. No.

He stopped, gasping, on a rooftop above carnage. Stricken eyes saw streets washed red with blood, fires flickering from fallen lanterns, large and small bodies sliced in two or shattered by flung tiles and roof-beams.

Anything, rather than that emerald blade sliding clear of Okita's heart.

"Ulloriaq!"

Red eyes aglow with hate, the Jedi glanced up. "You." She cast Okita aside, and sneered. "I should have known this world would save its most perverted soul for last."

What is she saying? What is she doing? "Watchman, please," he breathed. "By the teachings we both share-"
"Share?" Lips pulled back from her teeth in a snarl more hateful than any Miburou's. "I share nothing with the Sith!"

*What?* He shook his head, wet tail of hair slapping against his shoulder in the wind. *This can't be happening.* "Has rage so blinded you?" He didn't want to look; didn't have to, only pointed to the scream of grief and terror still echoing though ki. "Children, Ulloriaq! You've killed children!"

"You killed them!" she screamed back. "You twisted their minds; tainted them with Darkness! Every soul born to the Force on this cursed planet; every child who should have been saved, been Jedi-"

Ki didn't warn him. The darkness was everywhere, choking hope, and all he had was merely mortal senses of tear-hot eyes and grief-numb ears-

Amber caught emerald, widening her eyes.

*You are a Master, Ulloriaq - and we both know I am not.*

Clash of blades. Ki swirled and fought around them, blue clay slicing and smashing and turning to slick mud underfoot.

*You are within the Darkness, and it clouds everything.*

He gave himself to the chill fury of his lightsaber, the whirlwind of shadow that was the heart and soul of his master's teachings.

*But I have fought in the Forest of Barriers, where only ninja are meant to survive….*

*And if you go through me… Shishou will be next.*

"I trusted you! You and your damned master! I believed you when you said you meant no harm - that you didn't know the vows of Jedi forbid the foul attachments of this world! I listened to you - listened to Sith! - when you said it was love that kept parents from releasing children to their destiny!" A flurry of blows; he felt wind bite deeper, through tiny slashes seared into his uniform. "But I know what you are, now…"*

*You know nothing.* A plan, he needed a plan; she was good, as only one trained to the sword from birth could be. And he - he was bereft, orphaned by his own raw choices, and sick to death of war.

"I trusted you."

Lightning flashed; he cringed from the withered ruin of her face. How had the Dark sunk its claws so deeply? *Five years, since I left… but there's something more at work here. There has to be.*

"And this is how you would repay the Republic?" she hissed. "By joining with the Separatists?"

*What? But Katsura would never-* He twisted, ducking a swipe meant for his head. *Don't think! Just fight!*

"Traitors! Murderers! Users of Darkness!" Her hand strangled the storm; he sensed the thunderclap of ki, a breath before clay missiles shredded the wind. "None of you deserve our protection!"

*I am not Sith.*

*But neither am I Jedi.*
And you've forgotten much, Ulloriaq, if you don't remember that Shishou and I don't fight from the ground-

His blow was parried, flung aside with a crow of laughter. Emerald bit his right arm - the kote caught most of it, but-

No!

Lose your blade, lose your life. Shishou had drilled that into him, bone-deep. And with the Darkness so thick, he couldn't feel the 'saber fast enough to call it back.

"Pray, if you can." A mocking whisper, as what had been Ulloriaq inched closer. "I would not violate your world's… beliefs."

And with that breath, he knew.

It wasn't a plan. Barely even a hope, from the comforting shadows of his soul. Only a pulse in the ki about him, steady and fragile as his own heart.

*Enchained in peace, there is passion,*
*Through passion, I gain strength.*
*Through strength, I gain power.*
*Through power, I gain victory.*
*Through victory, my chains are broken.*
The Force shall free me.

Peace to strength to freedom to strength drained away into peace. The heartbeat of the universe, of the world, of the tornado of Darkness that hungered to devour him. Of even one lost, war-sick swordsman willing to make an end, here and now….

One with the pulse of the universe, he felt within the Dark-sickened heart beside him, and mourned. She was ill, not evil; consumed, as by a cancer, eating away the core of her soul.

*I cannot heal her. I can only….*

She was not a friend. Not an enemy. Only another heart, dragged out of rhythm by the death-spiral of Darkness.

A heart out of rhythm. A *sick* heart. A-

"And now, this benighted world will see that even demons die."

*A healthy heartbeat cannot be predicted.*

*A sick heart can.*

He knew how the blade would move before it did; knew how to catch it, and what it might cost-

The pain in his hands was nothing to the pain in his heart.

One bleeding hand drew his wakizashi, and it was over.

*Okita.*

"Stay back! How dare you-"
He glared the other Shinsengumi back, too sick of heart to even consider killing them. There was so much blood here already.

"You came. I knew you would. My friends...."

He barely saw Saitou holding Okita's failing form. "Sou...."

"You look so sad, Red... please smile. Just once, for me?" The dying captain wore his own, faint smile, as if the universe had revealed one last, beautiful riddle.

He tried. He did. Kami, it hurt. :I'm sorry... you deserve to live, more than any of us...:

:The demon-child? Who's always loved the kill, more than anything or anyone? No... I made my choice long ago. At least this way... it's not your fault...: "You know I never wanted to... die in bed...."

Ki slid into shadow, and he was gone.

"And then I woke," Obi-Wan said evenly. "Bleeding."

"Hmm." Gensai shrugged. "This sounds more a tale for young Kaoru than an old doctor like me."

"I think you know why it isn't."

Mild as milk, Gensai raised a gray brow. "Do I?"

A wry smile touched the Jedi's face. So you know better than to lie to me. Well. This will be interesting. "If Kaoru knew the Hitokiri Battousai was here, in Tokyo, she might feel duty-bound to hunt him down. As she did Hiruma Gohei."

"I suppose she might," Gensai allowed. "But why in the worlds would the government's most feared assassin be here, in Tokyo, the very heart of their power? I'd think it'd make far more sense for them to send him after Saigo. Or after... other persons who pose a more subtle danger to the Empire."

Oh, well played. "It would," Obi-Wan agreed, "if he were still the government's assassin."

Gensai raised the other brow.

"I've met more than my share of hired killers, I assure you. The myth is as important as the man. If not more so," Obi-Wan said half to himself, recalling how the role of the Jedi had changed so drastically through the Clone Wars; from half-mythical peacekeepers and negotiators to the durasteel fist in the Senate's silken glove. Another desecration we may lay at Palpatine's door. And... the Council's as well, I fear. "That Gohei was allowed to continue his charade so long as he did tells me the government does not have Battousai in its service." Obi-Wan gave Gensai a level look. "Though someone in its more dark and rarified levels may have hoped to lure him there, by allowing slaughter under that name."

Gensai blanched.

Ah. Then I am right. "But the man my vision showed me would not fly to such a lure," Obi-Wan said softly. "He may have been shadowed, and deadly as a blaster to the heart... but there was no love of slaughter in him. Rumor, Yamagata's search, whatever crimes or bounties may have been
laid on his head - I may not know how Yamato reads these signs, but to me, all say he has *stopped killing.*

Gensai was still.

"Yet no one so steeped in ki could abandon it completely," Obi-Wan went on. "He breathes it like air. He must be using it somehow. Perhaps, to work a healing no other samurai in Tokyo could even imagine?"

Creaking to his feet, the doctor gave him a skeptical snort. "Really! I'm a doctor, young man. I wouldn't allow a murderer near my patients."

"You wouldn't," Obi-Wan agreed, rising to match him. "But you are a very good doctor. If a killer - and I do say *killer,* not murderer - held the key to saving a life, I do not think you would hesitate to call on him." The Jedi gave him a narrow look. "Nor to hide his presence from a young and eager Jedi, whom we both know would be hard-pressed to match such a fighter blow for blow, even if age and the Dark Side has bitten at him."

At that, Gensai smiled. "Believe what you like, Kenobi-san. I assure you, I'm not hiding anyone."

*He's - telling the truth?*

Obi-Wan frowned, opening his mouth to speak - there were a number of interrogation techniques he could put to use, without even a touch of the Force to back them-

The screen slammed back before Gensai could touch it. "Oi!" Sano glared at both of them impartially. "Where the hell is Katsu!"

---

*I love the sound of arming detonators in the morning.* Katsu wiped sweat off his brow as he set the last charge, glancing back toward the partly open side door he'd used to get into this out-of-the-way warehouse near the richer edge of Tokyo, where a certain overly-muscled, wild-eyed samurai should have stood reluctant guard.

Not there. Terrific.

*I've flown with worse wingmen than Isurugi Raijuuta,* Katsu told himself dryly, waiting for a wave of fever-dizziness to pass. *Just not often.*

He'd fought sick before; blaster-burned, or burning with fever and shaking with chills, to the point he couldn't even focus to read the diagrams of the security system he was supposed to be disarming. This was nothing. Just a few aftereffects from the Miasma breaking loose and being flat on his back a few days. Another day of rest, and he'd probably have been in the clear completely.

But another day, and Kanryuu would have moved this stock of chemical nastiness, and Katsu wouldn't have gotten the chance to play with things that went boom. And what would be the fun in that?

*If this stuff really does what Saigo's people say it does... bad enough the Empire has a grip on the information people get going into the Imperial Academy. Stuff that'll let the instructors get a stranglehold on their minds and ki on top of that - brr.*

Damned if it didn't make sense, though. Older Security types like Inspector Uramura seemed okay,
but over the past year or so, some of the new ones, in the Security Sword Corps... well, zealous wasn't the word. Like that rabid idiot Ujiki, last month, who'd threatened to execute a whole crowd before Kaoru and Sano got the drop on him. Katsu still got shivers thinking about how fast Kaoru had beaten him down, while Sano held off the reinforcements. And even more shivers when he remembered the grim set to her jaw as she told a concussed Ujiki he had not seen them....

Sano wonders why I don't just ask her to join our crew. But I don't care what Captain Sagara said, Katsuhiro thought darkly. There's no way using ki like that is natural.

Not that the way Raijuuta used it was much better, steeped in cruel arrogance about building an undefeatable league of samurai. Joining Saigo's forces was just one step on his path; he'd made that abundantly clear.

Still, you can't knock that Izuna of his. Cuts right through-

The faintest whisper of that air-splitting blow reached Katsu's ears, followed by silence.

Raijuuta was never silent.

Swallowing dryly, Katsu reached to change the timing on his charge-

Felt his hand caught, as if air had suddenly turned to duracrete.

"Tsukioka Katsuhiro."

He couldn't move. Couldn't run. Couldn't even look toward the quiet beeps as unseen hands disarmed his carefully-placed charges. I'm dead.

"Copilot of the Sekihoutai. Smuggler. Explosives expert." Soundless footfalls; only the soft movement of air over a white trenchcoat warned Katsu as a tall, dark-haired man moved into view. "More widely if less well known as Tsunan, Rebel sympathizer and publisher of the Meiji Inter-world Dispatch."

I'm worse than dead.

Green eyes gleamed, like emerald ice. "The Oniwabanshuu are efficient, not cruel. You will be allowed to die... later."
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

_I should have died on the Death Star._

_No... I should have died on Mustafar, with Anakin. Would have, if Padme's life had not hinged on mine. One swift dive into the flames, and both of us would be at peace..._

Peace he had no right to claim, after all the lives he'd betrayed. He could still see the 'saber-torn bodies scattered over the Temple grounds; still feel the younglings' dead eyes branding accusation into his flesh-

Fire seared along his collarbone, and Obi-Wan shuddered. Tried to curl on himself to pull away.

Couldn't.

_Arms bound above my head, can't move my ankles, and I think there's some kind of biting ant crawling in my hair - oh, Sithspit._ He breathed in scents of sea spray and wet leaves, felt wind skimming chill over his skin, the subtle drum of waves through the rock underfoot, the scaly grate of bark against his back. _Tied to a tree. Again. Just when I thought I'd never miss Tatooine._

A hiss, and the sulfur waft of a struck match. Smoke puffed a foul warmth across his face, carried on a samurai's low, unfamiliar snarl. _"Where is he?"_

__Kaoru's going to kill me._ Gingerly touching the edge of his black eye, Sanosuke trudged the last few feet to the dojo gate. Deliberately ignored the staring eyes and whispers running through the street's sunset crowd, and leaned on the gatepost, careful not to jar his ribs.

He didn't _think_ they were broken. He'd had broken ribs before. They hurt like hell.

_Not that mine feel all fine and dandy, damn that bastard Iwahashi..._

His own fault for having a tough guy rep, Sano figured. When Saigo'd made that little hand-gesture that turned the Rebel-smuggler meet from peaceful to all-out slugfest, Iwahashi's guys had relied on fists as well as stun blasts.

_Then they dumped me in the ditch like so much garbage, and took off._ Fists curled, shaking in outrage. _I'm going to kill those idiots-

Only... everything he'd heard said Saigo _wasn't_ an idiot. Hot-tempered, maybe; proud, definitely. But not an idiot.

_So why would he have his guys jump me? I made delivery, damn it. I kept my mouth shut. I steered clear of the Imperials. And I sure as hell wasn't coming back to try and squeeze out a few more credits; Iwahashi knew that right up front. All I wanted was info on where the hell Katsu was._

He'd spent all yesterday scouring Tokyo for his wayward copilot, from glittering high-class streets to the lowest dockside dives. Nothing. Katsuhiro hadn't left a note, he wasn't answering comm-calls, and none of the subtle tracers the two smugglers used to keep in touch were responding.
Which meant he'd made himself untraceable.

Meaning Katsu's busy finding a way to screw the Empire. Damn it.

Only Katsu would never let himself be out of touch this long. Ever.

Which all boils down to, he found more trouble than he could handle, Sano recalled grimly. Meaning it was probably more trouble than I could handle, without backup.

So he'd called on the one place he knew he could find backup, no questions asked. The Kamiya dojo.

Three sort-of samurai, and a kid. I could cry.

Reputation or not, Sano wasn't about to bring the ex-Demon of Kyoto anywhere near a bunch of hair-trigger Rebels. Besides, Kenshin still looked like a wrung-out dishrag. And somebody had to watch over Takani.

Next contestant, please.

Kaoru would have been his first choice anyway. Maybe she was as hot-tempered as a neko-ao with its tail stomped on, but she was honest as a tatami-weaver's measure. Which was its own kind of protection; if she said all she wanted to do was find Katsu, even the most paranoid Rebel would believe her.

Only Obi-Wan had cut in before he could even start to ask, weaving a web of words about teachers and apprentices and not exposing Yahiko to bad influences....

Yeah, right. The kid was in with the Yakuza, and you're worried the Rebels would be a bad influence?

Then again, he could kind of see Kenobi's point. After all, all he'd tried to do was ask a simple question, and look where it'd gotten him.

Damn it, Katsu, what have you gotten yourself into this time?

Something big. Had to be. Saigo wouldn't have been anywhere near that little seaside shrine if he didn't think he had to hear intelligence coming in from the city firsthand.

Something big enough they'd kill a gaijin, just on the off chance he could be an Imperial?

No. If they were going to kill Obi-Wan, they'd have done it then and there.

You hope, a bitter part of him pointed out. Could be they thought the Sekihoutai was still worth keeping as an option. So they just took him out of sight, blasted him dead, and dumped him in the sea.

Space, he hoped not.

He's samurai. Sort of. Don't count him dead 'til you see the body.

So. He'd gotten Obi-Wan into this, he was obligated to get him out of it. Somehow.

Besides, there were a bunch of Rebels who still owed him answers.

Not that I've even got a good idea where to start looking... there was salt on a few of those guys’
wrist wrappings, sure, but we've got a heck of a lot of coast out here. Sano grimaced. And how the hell am I going to explain this? "I took your guest out to help me look for Katsu, and I lost him"? Oh yeah. That's gonna go over real well.

He just needed a little air. Just a few breaths.

Okay, make that a few gulps.

*Enough stalling. One more bracing breath, and Sano reached out to open the gate. Kaoru's going to kill me....*

Wood swung open, untouched.

"Sano." Violet met his gaze, grim and worried. "Where is Kenobi-san?"

*...If Kenshin doesn't do it first.*

"Where is he?"

Cold. Gloating. Worse than a droid, who might be only programmed to inflict pain. This... this creature had *chosen* the darkness.

"Huh. Wake up." Another puff of smoke, wafting pain into tearing eyes. "Saigo didn't turn you over so I could *kill* you, you know."

*Saigo Takamori, Obi-Wan thought fuzzily, trying to put the pieces together. The Rebel leader. Why...?*  
*Katsuhiro. Katsu's missing.*

*And Sano has a Bad Feeling about that.*

Not that the young man would realize that was the Force reaching out to him, trying to carry some warning of his comrade's fate. Any more than a certain wayward young smuggler had, staring down something that wasn't a moon.

Obi-Wan grounded himself in that memory of Solo, trying to shut away the pain. Hot and burning in waves, crashing against one odd ring of chill.... *If Katsu was in that much trouble, Sano believed the Rebels probably weren't going to hand over answers just for asking. He was heading out of the city to meet with a contact; he meant to take Kaoru. I talked him out of it. Yahiko's too young, too angry - I will not let another master get killed in front of her student.*

*Besides, Megumi's still in danger. And good as he is, Kenshin's still convalescing-*

*Kenshin. Kenshin... and Saigo.*

*They're connected. Somehow. Why can't I remember?*

*Well, the pain probably has something to do with it,* a more sane part of his mind snarked. *Why don't you meditate it away?*

Why not, indeed? He took a soft, subtle breath, reached out to the Force....
Nothing.

A heavy chill about his throat. And the world was flat and empty.

*A force collar!*

"Saigo Takamori took Kenobi-san." Kenshin adjusted his sedge hat as he ghosted up a faint cliff-side trail, trying not to wince at the crunch of Sano's ship-boots on stray fragments of pumice. *Can't he sense his footing before he steps- no, he likely can't. Ah well. "Why…?"

Breathing a bit hard, Sano didn't - quite - clutch his ribs. "How the hell should I know? Damn idealistic idiots - evade Imperial tariffs, sure, and I wouldn't hand over anybody to the stormtroopers, but anybody who thinks they can take on a whole galaxy-"

"Forgive; it wasn't a question, that it was not." Kenshin paused to give his companion time to breathe, disguising it with a measuring look toward the ocean. Rocky cliffs, part of which had fractured off millennia before to form a series of islands like a hook in the sea, and very little beach - but what sand there was, bore distinctive drag marks of a boat. *And there is smoke in the air, pine and salt... driftwood? Hmm.*

"Hang on a sec." Sano took a few breaths; gave up and just gulped for air, staring down violet.

"You know why he grabbed the guy?"

"Know, I do not," Kenshin stated, reaching out with his senses to make sure they were still unwatched. *That, behind the largest island, is likely a fishing boat... spread out that way, to our east, the village it came from; and those lives, plunging into the chill to reap seaweed and shellfish, yet human... divers. Well, well. "Guesses... yes, those I do have. Satsuma saw no problem with off-worlders, so long as they knew their place; and Saigo-san was a child of Satsuma to the bone. One doubts the man has changed since last I met him. Few of us do," he observed, half to himself. "Time may uncover facets we kept hidden as younger souls, but it is a rare being who can truly change.""

"Knew their place - wait. You've met Saigo?"

"Years ago." A wry, bitter smile curved the rurouni's lips. "When one was first told of the man, one expected our first meeting to be our last."

Sano froze. Turned. Stared. "You mean- he- you-"

Kenshin inclined his head. "At the time, he was a threat to Katsura-san."

"But Satsuma and Choushuu were allies!"

"Not," Kenshin said darkly, "for the first five years of the war."

Sanosuke's jaw worked, taking in that stunning statement; he shook his head, and pinned the smaller man with a glare. *"Talk."

"They truly do not teach history well these days, that they don't." Talk, indeed. What could he say? How could he boil down the chaos and hopes and back-stabbing to a few, simple words?

*Strike to the heart, baka,* a voice of memory grumbled. *Always, strike to the heart.*
And if you were such a good speaker, Shishou, why did I leave? Kenshin thought wryly.

But it wasn't as if he had a better idea. "Remember that the Revolution was as much about power as ideals, that it was," the rurouni said bluntly. "When Choushuu took the lead in agitating against the off-worlders and for our emperor, Satsuma had two choices: they could follow Choushuu's example, and be second in rank among the loyalists… or they could be first to speak against us, and be the Shogunate's hammer to crush a rebel han." Kenshin met that angry brown glare. "One believes you know samurai pride, that I do."

Sano swallowed dryly. "So Satsuma-"

"Inflicted many losses on Choushuu, so long as they saw the Shogunate as the more powerful," Kenshin stated. "Saigo was one of the first to call for harsh measures against us, and did all he could to ensure as many of the clan elders as possible would be ordered to suicide. Had Katsura-san not managed to make himself invisible among the river-folk, he might have been ordered so as well." Kenshin looked into memory, recalling those dark days. "Katsura-san told this one that if a leader must die for the good of the clan, so be it - but if that were to happen, Saigo Takamori was no longer to breathe the air of this world."

Sano gulped. "Please tell me Saigo doesn't know this."

Kenshin sighed.

"You didn't tell him!"

"One's not that foolish," Kenshin grumbled. "But when Satsuma and Choushuu did make alliance, two years before the war's end… there were those in power among Choushuu, whom Katsura-san had to keep mollified, who thought it prudent to make clear to our new allies what they risked, should they deceive us."

The smuggler looked as if he'd taken one of Kaoru's nastier blows to the head. "You're Saigo's personal bogeyman."

Kenshin sighed again. "One has no idea why. It was well known one was no longer a hitokiri at that time. Katsura's bodyguard, yes; and one who struck at the enemies of Choushuu, in defense of our people. Though if they had turned traitor, one supposes Satsuma would have been that….

"He's not just mad 'cause you won't work for him," Sano went on, thinking it out, "he wants you dead."

"It is," Kenshin admitted, "most likely."

"Kuso."

Kenshin shrugged. "He is not the first to wish this one dead and buried. One's still breathing, that I am."

"Space, no wonder Jou-chan's so worried about you," Sano grumbled. "You know the guy wants to kill you, and you let me drag you out here….

"For Kenobi-san's sake." Kenshin lifted his shoulders, let them fall. "Had one known whom you meant to meet, Sano, one would have urged you to take any ki-user but him. Even Yahiko would have been safer."

"Hey, I didn't know Saigo would be there until he-" Sano stopped. Held up blocking hands. "You
want to explain, knew their place?"

Kenshin sighed. "That you ask, Sano... means you already know."

Sano's mouth quirked into a humorless grin. "I'm feeling kind of slow today."

The rurouni bowed his head. "For the past century and more, Satsuma has met its tax requirements through the brown cane plantations. Those, Meiji has forced to alter more than almost any other han; the past twenty years has seen them become humane, if not paradise. The sweetness no longer screams when one tastes it."

Sano blinked. "Screams?"

"For licking one's finger when the cane was crushed, a peasant suffered twenty lashes," Kenshin said flatly. "To hold back any part of the harvest meant imprisonment, or death. To grow anything but the cane was illegal. To hold money was illegal. Satsuma's lord set the price he would pay for cane, and Satsuma samurai alone could fetch supplies from the rest of the han, or places outside, to exchange for that price." A shadow of a shrug. "In name, it was not slavery."

"Che..." Sano dug his fingers into spiky hair. "And you worked with these guys?" He shot a sudden look at the redhead. "Can't be. Ninja never would have stood for it."

"Onmitsu," Kenshin said evenly, "were eliminated."

Sano stared at him.

"Anyone with ki, who was not samurai, was killed," Kenshin went on. "Has been killed, in Satsuma, for centuries. Satsuma's daimyo determined long ago how to keep their han financially intact, and what measures they would need to keep the peasants... docile."

Sano swallowed.

"And to this samurai of Satsuma, this man who wishes the old ways of the Shogunate to return, you introduced an off-worlder," Kenshin said gently. "An off-worlder with ki - for while Saigo-san's skill with it may be small, it is enough to sense Obi-Wan's strength." He shook his head. "One is not surprised that he was shot, Sanosuke. One is surprised he was only stunned."

Sano groaned. "Jou-chan's going to kill me...."

Kenshin looked away, allowing the smuggler time to collect himself. There was just a glimmer on the edge of his ki sense, more sensed than seen; if he could just let his mind stay unfocussed a little longer- "Was there anything before the stunning that hinted why Saigo-san would want him alive? Anything at all?"

Sano threw up empty hands. "I've been over and over it, and I can't think of anything. Traded code words with his front guy Iwahashi, I introduced myself, then him-" The smuggler stopped.

Kenshin lifted a questioning brow.

"Kenobi," Sano stated. "Saigo heard the name, jumped, looked over at us - and turned dead white. Next thing I knew, stunbolts everywhere."

Kenshin frowned.

"I don't like that look, Kenshin."

"You're thinking about something, and I
"Kaoru-dono is very kind," Kenshin said carefully. "And trusting."

Sano winced. "You think he's got a history."

"As Kaoru-dono would say, we all have things in our past we don't want to talk about." He gave Sano a resigned look. "But as this one would say, the past can sometimes find one. And that is rarely pleasant, that it is not." And... there. An emptiness where a light in the Force should be. And near it, the ghost-flicker of a dark ki working to conceal itself.

So.

Kenshin closed his eyes, slowing his breathing to slow the body's impulse to panic. Yes, there was peril. Yes, there was the risk of pain, and worse than death. The strength he had used to save Obi-Wan's life, and then Megumi's, had left him weakened even now. Were this the Bakumatsu, he would already be dead.

But it is not, and I do not face the likes of Saitou Hajime. Thank the gods.

A subtle sigh, and he reached into his gi for his carrying pouch, drawing out a cloudy blue crystal the size of his thumbnail.

Sano tensed. "Is that-"

"It would have made the focus for a student's blade, yes," Kenshin nodded. "One meant it for Kaoru-dono... but one doubts she would object to this use, that I do." Cupping translucent blue between his palms, he stared into it, feeling the whisper in the Force that was atoms and quantum particles ready and waiting to attune to new purpose.

For the crystal is the core of the blade is the soul of the samurai-

Presence poured from his ki into waiting crystal, draining away like liquid light. All that was left within flesh and bone were shadows; a gentle rain, unseen on an autumn evening, as a family tired from the day gathered close to the fire.

I haven't had to use this trick in a very long time.

"What did you just do?" Sano asked warily.

Kenshin rolled charged crystal between his fingers, gauging the flickers of ruby within blue. "When hunting one who uses ki, one is either searching for something very bright, or only a shimmer in the background, as the-" target "-one sought attempts to hide. Either can be tracked, if one knows what one is doing. One who does not use ki, in truth, can be harder to find; for while they cannot conceal their presence, neither does it burn in the night like a beacon fire. They can be lost in the crowd; not invisible, but impossible to find as one white scale in a flock of angry ataru."

"You want me to play decoy." The smuggler's voice was angry, but brown eyes were thoughtful.

"Kenobi-san," Kenshin nodded toward the largest island, "is there. And he is not alone; that he is not."

"Now I know I don't like this."

Kenshin smiled. "Maa, maa, Sanosuke; one does have a plan." And not half as risky as some I used...
Ice water dashed across his face; Obi-Wan gasped, and blinked at the sting of it. *Salt. Bastard.*

Green eyes glittered at him in the twilight, touched with madness; his tormentor smirked, strands of gray hair falling over the skintight black fabric framing his face. "Awake? I thought so."

"Where's Katsuhiro?" Obi-Wan managed. *Keep him off balance. He wants control. Don't let him have it!*

"How should I know?" One gloved hand drifted near the sabers at his side; the samurai snorted, and smirked wide enough to show teeth. "One of these hours, I'm going to get bored asking. And then you'll wish you had talked. Where is Hitokiri Battousai?"

"I. Don't. Know," the Jedi gritted out. "Damn it, what is wrong with you people? A month ago I'd never even heard of the man. Now I'm getting ambushed by absolute strangers... don't any of you delusional paranoids even know what he looks like?"

Mad green narrowed. Studied him. Went from puzzled, to dawning, madly delighted comprehension.

"Uh-hu. Uh-hu. Uh-hu-ha-ha-hah!"

*Oh wonderful. I've managed to crack up the homicidal maniac.*

"You really don't know." Still chuckling, his tormentor stepped back, raking the Jedi with his eyes. "Saigo does know what he looks like. He's one of the few Satsuma fools to ever touch the blood of the Demon of Kyoto... and walk away alive."

Which made no sense whatsoever. If that very tall, very heavy-set man had been Saigo - as Sano's sharp look, just before their little forest meeting went completely berserk, had implied he was - he'd been the one to turn their rendezvous from polite brush-off to stunner-laced ambush-

Searing pain.

"Malevolent parasite of a-" Obi-Wan clamped down on the rest of the Huttese insult, glaring at the burning cylinder of dried leaves. *Don't beg. Don't cower. He's insane. But he must have some shreds of rationality, or he'd never have lasted in the Rebellion this long. Try to reach it.*

"Kurogasa." The name was a faint memory of Saigo's voice, blurred by stunning, but the samurai's twitch told him he'd struck the mark. "If you know I don't know, what's the damn point?"

"Pain is the point." The smirk was back. "I doubt a gaijin has the power to sense him... but if he's here, and Saigo thinks he is, he'll sense you."

*Sense me? Are you ignorant on top of insane? You can't just toss someone's pain into the Force and expect it to lure in your prey. To feel my pain, he'd need a Force bond-

-And if he is the healer Gensai found, he made one.*

The Dark one had broken it, yes. But even those shreds of shadow left behind might be enough to do what Kurogasa wanted.

*Especially with torture involved. The Dark Side carries pain so frighteningly well.*
He was the Negotiator; not a flicker of reaction showed on his face. "I'm with the Kamiya dojo. If you think a sword-style that defends life ever taught an assassin-"

"Hah!" Snake-swift, Kurogasa yanked out strands of auburn hair. Twirled one around his finger, chuckling. "I'd heard the Jedi kept their stolen brats ignorant of their own clans, but I never really believed it."

He knows I was taken by the Jedi? How-? Don't react. Don't react. He wants you to ask; don't give him that power-

Blistering pain.

"What?" As he lifted the smoking leaves away, Kurogasa's smile was all white teeth. "Don't you want to know?"

"Oddly enough," Obi-Wan gasped, "I have the distinct impression you plan to tell me anyway."

"Hah!" An odd sort of respect seemed to blend into the smirk. "Maybe even gaijin blood does tell. He never broke either; not even when the Bakufu caught him, once…."

He never broke either.

*Legend says Battousai has red hair.*

*On this world, red hair is from the deepest mountains… or off-world….*

No!

"So… the light begins to dawn." Red gleamed in Kurogasa's gaze, the Dark Side burning bright. "Uh-hu. Uh-hu….

No. Rational thought broke through Obi-Wan's frozen shock, habits of a lifetime's training shutting away emotion. *I saw the court recording. And the fight with Ulloriaq. Owen wasn't the right height. He couldn't have been Battousai. Battousai was-*

* Battousai was… shorter.

It was a shock to an already-stunned system. He hadn't realized how much he'd internalized the picture those about him had painted of the legendary assassin. Who was supposed to be a giant, after all; he'd seen the repaired floor of Kaoru's dojo where the imposter's reign of terror had come to a sudden, ignominious end. You didn't make that big a hole if you weren't near Wookie size.

Then again, *the holo-reporters always thought I was too short, as well.*

"He wasn't easy to track," Kurogasa said off-handedly, his air one of a man taking cruel pity on a poor, confused victim. "Even when Katsura allied with Saigo's Rebellion, he took his dragon's secrets to his grave. Saigo didn't have his clan, his name, or even his home han." He bent just a little nearer, sharing a delightful secret. "But he *did* have his blood."

"Blood you have wronged will find you."

"It shouldn't have led anywhere," Kurogasa shrugged. "Before the Empire, no samurai ever submitted to the indignity of a gene scan. But off-worlders… off-worlders without corporations to back them, who dared to travel beyond the approved ports… well."

*Oh space.* Obi-Wan blinked away sweat with sinking dread. *Qui-Gon's going to call me an idiot,*
and I'll deserve it. It was right in front of me, and I didn't know. I looked at Kaoru, at Hana's child, and I didn't know.

If Owen was on this planet, if he was a sensitive, if he lived their lives, and I know he was trying to...

"But maybe you gaijin aren't as blind to honor as you'd like us to think," Kurogasa mused. "After all...." He waggled his hair-wrapped finger, before inserting the strand into a small, familiar device.

Medical scanner, set to - gene comparison? No-

Eyes gleaming, Kurogasa deliberately turned the screen so his victim could read it.

Second degree relation: 99.97.

"-It took him years, but your brother's son did take a fitting revenge."

Owen's son. Obi-Wan couldn't breathe. Owen had children... space, keep him talking! "Revenge?" He wet cracked lips. "For me?"

"Hah!"

Obi-Wan allowed himself a roll of eyes as psychotic laughter rang over the cliffs once more. All right, not for me, then why-

Corellian law. The realization was a knife of ice. Owen's children would have been tested. And if his midi-chlorian count was high enough for training....

"The brave Watchman made it clear Kenobi Owen's children would be hers by law," Kurogasa sneered. "No household dared take him after that. He lost his apprenticeship, he lost his engagement contract - he was lucky his master had enough pity on him to send him out into the wilderness to lose his name and marry into some peasants' kinu association. Or not lucky. It was in an area used by an off-world chemical organization, and there were... accidents." A snicker. "That village doesn't exist today."

Ulloriaq killed him. Oh, not by Republic law, no; but by the honor and kin-ties that ruled this planet's society? Obi-Wan had been on enough so-called primitive planets to know how honor debts worked. Rayen Ulloriaq would have been better off driving her blade through Owen's heart. That would have been considered a reasonable, straightforward death, easily settled by a higher lord. This... if Kurogasa were telling the truth, Ulloriaq had committed one of the darkest crimes this world knew: isolating a man from all that should have protected him, and leaving him to die a useless death.

And his family. And his people. His home. Kenshin told me, the Shogunate was bound to people who didn't care if they left this planet a poisoned cinder. The rage and sorrow I felt from him when he said it... he must have seen this.

That, truly, could create a Battousai.

"Gaijin or not, blood calls to blood." Red gleamed in mad green eyes. "With his strength, if you're in pain on the same planet... he'll know."

Now, that's ridiculous. I've never heard of a Coruscanti Jedi ever-
But Coruscanti Jedi didn't have families.

And Corellian Jedi wouldn't leave theirs. Not for more than a mission at a time - and that only if they were in hot pursuit with CorSec....

The twins. The twins had been near Vader. On the same battle station.

*Stars. If he's sensed them - if he knows-*!

Breathe. And hope. Fear was of the Dark Side; now, of all times, he must not yield to it.

*I made myself obvious. I made certain the Force held my signature, not theirs. And while I know Leia was tortured, Vader could not have sensed her. Or he'd have-*

What? Stopped the torment? Let her go? The man who had been his apprentice, his *brother*, had slaughtered every youngling in the Temple. Why should he have shown mercy to a young Rebel who stood against everything Palpatine was and would be?

*Oh, Anakin... why? Why?*

He had to remember what was, not what had been. Leia had been in Vader's hands, not Anakin's. And if Darth Vader had sensed who she was, *what* she was-

*He'd have delivered her to the Emperor himself. The perfect gift of loyalty to the darkness.*

"How does it feel?" Kurogasa breathed. Mock concern smoothed his smile, as knowing eyes searched for delightful despair in his victim's soul. "Knowing your line gave birth to the most ruthless killer this world has ever known?"

Obi-Wan laughed.

Caught flat-footed, the torturer stared.

"Thank you," the Jedi said, with all the genteel sincerity a man bound, blistered, and in agony could muster. "You've given me a very great reason to live." *Leia escaped. Luke won. And Owen's son survived. Despite everything, he survived....*

And if he was Gensai's anonymous healer, the Dark Side did not have him. Not yet.

*But if the Emperor finds him, he will be destroyed. Utterly.*

Raised on this world or not, after all, he was a *Kenobi*. And Palpatine had had more than enough experience with that name to think better of letting it walk free. The Emperor would turn him… or, if Battousai still clung to whatever desperate strength or vow that had turned him away from the Dark-

*Death. Death of yet another soul who tried to shelter a little Light in the Empire's shadow.*

*I will not allow it.*

So. He was half-naked, sick, disarmed, tied - very tightly - to a tree, and near fainting from pain. With an armed, psychotic madman of a Dark Side Force-user watching his every move.

Well, he'd worked with worse odds before....
**Torture.** Clinging to cracks and crevices in the jagged volcanic cliff, Kenshin had to pause, swallowing a wave of nausea from the phantom pain. Waves shushed against black sand and rock, far below; the sea calling to its wayward kin seeping from his clothes, cold counterpoint to skin that insisted it was not chilled and whole, but seared and weeping. *Obi-Wan is being tortured.*

By someone with a dark love of fire, if the burning in his collarbone was anything to go by. Kami be thanked, he'd never been strong in the Unifying Force. The Living Force carried emotions, yes - but not for impossibly long distances, and never with the shocking immediacy of visions, which would half-convince a Unifying user they were the one in helpless agony. No; this close to one he had healed, he felt echoes of the torment, but nothing worse.

*Not that that's not bad enough….*

Breathe. Focus. The torture was important, any soul who inflicted pain on another could not be brushed aside - but the *goal* was Kenobi's freedom.

*Break him loose, stop the torture. Simple, baka. Keep it simple.*

*Time. Check the time.*

He didn't have a chrono. Couldn't have risked the light to read one if he did have it.

Didn't matter. He'd been born and raised in the mountains, where time was an angle of sun, a wheel of stars. Tokyo's lights might dim the night even this far from the spaceport, but the brightest stars were enough to read.

*Sano has been moving in for ten minutes. He should be in our enemy's ki-sensing range… now.*

Breathing with the beat of the tide, mind chill as spray-touched rock, Kenshin waited.

*Er… now?*

*Still* no change, in the vicious darkness overhead.

*Mou… I know I'm better at sensing ki than most, but this is getting ridiculous-*

*Surprise! Delight! Fury!*

Biting his lip down to the taste of copper, Kenshin clung to stone and thought of sand, rock, the sea….

*Bloodlust!*

It flamed in his soul, calling to the killer he had once been. Begging him to cast aside the rurouni's gentle mask and *fight*; for the Enemy was here, and if it walked free, everything he loved would be in danger.

*I. Will. Not!*

Night. He was night, and sleepy seaside ataru huddled in cliff-crevices for nests, and the ragged thrum of waves against broken stone.

Yet there was fire blazing above; in the night, in his veins. It called to him like a geisha, like a dark-eyed, fan-masked kitsune, singing sweet ruin and the cherry-petal fall of blood.
I... can't hold....

I must!

And the cyclone of lip-licking fury swept away, sweeping down the gentler path to the shore of the landward side of the island. The only path, most would say; barely fit for a neko-ao, much less a human. No one would free-climb the sheer, earthquake-sliced cliff that was the sea side of this tiny isle.

But then, the rurouni had spent a great deal of time being no one.

Move. I have to....

But he was still shaking; the pull was so strong, the persuasive whispers of the dark soul within him, the warrior that had survived the Revolution, so temptingly *right*.

Battousai could save Kenobi. Easily. As he had saved so many of Choushuu, those desperate, heart-breaking times he'd been able to rescue instead of murder.

*I will not.*

He was a wanderer. Only a wanderer. And he had *promised*.

*When this war is over, I will find a way to protect without killing.*

Breathe. Be rock. Be water.

And climb.

---

*Gone.* Obi-Wan regarded the night through slit eyes, taking in the white glow of a rising moon. A faint hint of gray marked where the medical scanner had landed, cast away in his tormentor's haste to start the hunt. *So either the maniac's plan worked, and Battousai is out there, or-*

Well, *or* didn't truly matter. For the moment, Kurogasa was gone.

Which meant it was time to leave.

*Past time, I'd say.* Grimacing in anticipation, the Jedi prepared to twist muscle and bone in ways a thumb was never meant to move-

Clammy chill touched his hand.

He stifled a yelp at the cost of a bitten tongue; kicked out-

Felt his foot slide by wet cotton, not even brushing the flesh beneath, and blinked at amused violet. *Oops.*

*Damn. He looks like a half-drowned kitten.*

Kenshin held a finger to his lips, then stood on tiptoe to examine each of the Jedi's bonds. Nodded once - a professional summing-up that did not sort at *all* with the soaked youngster he looked like - reached into his sleeve, and drew out a familiar fan.
Right; you can use a vibro-blade no matter how wet it gets, Obi-Wan recalled, as the humming blue edge parted each strand of rope in turn. Hmm, you are a bit overcautious, aren't you, my young friend? Even soaked as you are, you couldn't possibly drip enough to short out your lightsaber. Wincing as he sagged away from the tree, he lifted an aching arm, and indicated the force collar.

Kenshin shook his head.


Kenshin pointed to the collar. Looked down the path Kurogasa had taken. Cupped a hand near his ear, and touched it to his heart.

You believe he'd sense me back in the Force? Kenshin, no one on the Dark Side is trained that well-

Palpatine had been. And he did not know how Dark Side users on this planet were trained.

Not to mention, the man knew you were involved with the Jedi somehow, and still didn't think you were much of a threat, Obi-Wan reminded himself. When on Corellia, listen when CorSec tells you you're being an idiot. Nodding, he spread empty hands, then tilted his head in question.

Kenshin hesitated, teeth finding an already bloody spot on his lip as he looked over the extent of the Jedi's wounds.

Could be worse, Obi-Wan thought bluntly, examining the damage with his own, critical eye as Kenshin walked away. Has been, in the past; he really wasn't trying to kill me. Hurt, yes. But I'll live. He stretched - carefully - and gingerly picked his way over to the medical scanner. One scan, and he could check for sure….

Hand on the scanner, the Jedi hesitated. Saved the data still blinking on the screen, and tucked the little device out of sight.

It's not bad enough for a scanner. However you got here, Kenshin, I'm sure I can follow you back out-

Kneeling by the cliff edge, Kenshin mouthed a silent curse.

Obi-Wan stopped. Forced himself to walk over to that sheer drop. Looked at his wet companion - his wet, grit-smeared companion - and came to the obvious, heart-sinking conclusion.

You came up that?

Kenshin sighed. Paced down the edge, studying rocks and waves and wind. Smiled a little at the play of moonlight on water; one spot not too far from the cliff foot reflected glassy white-gold, unbroken by the foam in water near it.

Glancing at his companion, Kenshin made paddling motions with his hands.

Er... yes, I can swim, what-

There was nothing under him but air.

Heart in his throat, Obi-Wan forced his feet together and prepared to splash. I don't care if revenge is unworthy of a Jedi. If I survive this, Kenshin-
Water hit like plascrete.

Cold watchfulness. Driven purpose. Predatory intent, glimmering like quicksilver. And laced through it all, the utter confidence of one born to wield a blade.

The man Saigo's ignorant fools called Kurogasa prowled spray-slick rocks, nostrils flared, senses spread wide and seeking. His target was vague, faint; there and not there, like a cork bobbing in the waves.

Like a hitokiri, drifting in the shadows.

This will be the best killing.

He licked his lips, the fire of the hunt driving him on into the teeth of the wind. As it would have driven him into the heart of a typhoon; what other reason was there for living, beyond that one red instant of triumph?

To hunt Hitokiri Battousai... oh, I have dreamed of this moment!

He'd never had the chance, in the Revolution; Battousai was no fool. The redheaded assassin had guarded Katsura from all possible harm. Including the risk of ever getting within sight of a hitokiri whose rumored skills with ki included-

Setting one sandaled foot down soundlessly at the edge of a tide-pool, Kurogasa smirked. Well. Never mind. He knew what he could accomplish - and if Battousai did as well, the hunt was all the sweeter.

Sweet enough for the mere thought of it to draw him into Saigo's service, these past years. The Empire swore Battousai was dead, a casualty of Toba Fushimi. He'd believed them for over a decade, cursing that fate had taken his chance to fight the most feared killer of the Revolution.…. 

Until research for one of his own assassinations had turned up evidence of other, interesting searches. By the government... and the Rebels.

Yamagata and Saigo both think Battousai's alive.

And Saigo's so much more fun to work for.

A Rebellion needed a lot of killing, after all. So long as he targeted the government fools Saigo wanted dead, no one much cared how many guards he mowed down to get to them.

Soft fools. None of them would have survived a week in Kyoto-

There! Faint, and flickering, and-

In the water. Where my 'saber will short out with one good splash, leaving you the advantage. Not a fool, are you, Battousai?

Grinning, he drew his vibro-blade and slashed down-

Glass shattered.

What?
Splashing into the waves, Kurogasa hauled out a dripping mass no heavier than a book. Three glass
globes, netted together with rounds of floatwood between; green, amber, and blue, though the blue
was cracked and gaping from his strike, glinting indigo in the moonlight.

*A fisherman's float?*

Stolen; he could feel that from the echoes of righteous fury and sneakiness dripping off with
seawater. Just as he could still feel that echo that *had* to be Battousai, glimmering in the net-

Glimmering ruby and sapphire, in a small blue crystal lashed to the green glass of the float.

*The top glass,* Kurogasa realized. *The one that would bob and soak in the waves, dimming its aura
like shadows….*

Abandoning caution, he slashed his senses across the night. Over the beach, up the trail, to a tree
that still held faint echoes of a prisoner's pain.

Night and rock and sea.

And one cloudy student's crystal, laughing at him like Kyoto's bloody rain.

"**Damn you, Battousai!**"

"*Pull and one and pull and two and pull-*"

Dripping into the bottom of the boat, Obi-Wan tried not to stare as their rescuers sculled in to the
beach, holding Kenshin close as the smaller man finally gave up and let his teeth chatter. "Let me
see if I understand this correctly. You're… mermaids?"

The pair of white-skirted divers who'd helped them both into the wooden skiff giggled behind their
hands. The younger lady was still sorting through strands of the boat's load of seaweed, light jacket
barely drawn across her bare breasts; her mother hadn't bothered, gooseflesh purple as she
flourished a rather impressive knife, trimming a plate-sized crab-creature into soup bits. Likely for
tonight's late supper, by the way the two rowers were eyeing various pieces as they dropped into a
carrying bag.

*Husband and brother. I think.* Obi-Wan shook his head, amazed yet again by human diversity.
Who'd have thought to find members of his own species living in a fashion more suited to
Gungans? *Well, it seems to suit them. They're certainly healthy enough, given the amount of
muscular development in evidence… and mammary development, oh dear.*

*That had better not be a snicker, Kenshin.*

Not that he could tell if it was, which was very frustrating. Damn force collar. He felt… confined.
Trapped in his own skull. Helpless.

*As I was after Jabiim.*

No. Think. Of all the enemies he could expect to meet here, the mad Sith Asajj Ventress was *not*
one of them. This was temporary. *Only* temporary, until they could get to land and Kenshin could
cut the damn thing off-

"D-do not!"
Hand near the collar, Obi-Wan hesitated.

"T-the lock is c-c-complicated," Kenshin got out, huddling to try and avoid the worst of the breeze. "One disarmed the t-tracker, but one will need tools, and another pair of eyes, for the rest." His voice dropped, almost unheard through the grate of sand against their hull. "If Kaoru-dono does not flatten this one simply for asking for Yahiko-kun's assistance, as she very well should….

*Kaoru's right, he is too thin… oh. Oh, dear.* Obi-Wan swallowed hard, and scrambled out onto the shore, suddenly sure of what Kenshin was *not* saying.

*I'm wearing a bomb.*

Damn. Kurogasa was a *nasty* soul.

*Try to think about something else. Try to - oh, blast.* "Shouldn't we be getting away from them?"

Obi-Wan murmured, just loud enough for his companion to hear.

Kenshin gave him a weary smile, trying not to shake in the wind as they stumbled up the rocky path. "T-told you our history, Kenobi-san. The collar will work no matter what one throws at it - slavers are merchants, after all - but circuits meant for war are samurai work. Or ninja. They're based on lightsaber technology. S-soak them in water when they are active-"

"I believe I have the general idea, yes." So *splash* hadn't been simply the quickest, if most nerve-wracking, means of getting clear of Kurogasa's reach. *Someone, somewhere, taught you to think tactically. Interesting.* "Stop moving, Kenshin, we need to get you-" The taste of smoke drifted through his nose. "Warm," the Jedi said, relieved.

Under her share of the load of seaweed, the older mermaid snorted. "Well, of *course* he needs to get warm! Drylander idiot, thinks he can take a plunge like an *ama* born. And a *man* to boot!"

"Oi!" Under another bundle, a fist waved. "Some of us can swim, Wife!"

"And some crows can talk," she shot back. "Nobody thinks they know what *they're* doing."

Balancing her load on her head, the younger girl still managed a sly tilt of her eyebrows. "I like a man who's not sure what he's doing."

Obi-Wan tried not to freeze in his tracks.*Surely, she can't mean-*

Still looking at him, avoiding the rocks without a thought as they walked, the young woman licked her lips. And winked.

…*Oh, dear.*

"Keep moving," Kenshin said under his breath. "Just keep moving."

"Indeed," the Jedi said faintly. Fixed his eyes firmly ahead, on the large woven wood-and-brush enclosure, and its smoke-drifting promise of warmth. He could hear gossip and laughter inside, as the folk of the village built into the cliffs now opening ahead of them relaxed from what had to be a long day's work on the water. *Careful. You're not safe yet. Hard-working souls are usually honest, but they're often desperately poor as well. It only takes one to decide he's better off turning a stranger in to the authorities….*

*Wait a moment. Are those women's voices?*
Kenshin’s chill hand dragged him in regardless, as their two rowers dumped their seaweed and sauntered out of sight, bag of crab bits swinging in the husband’s fist. The young wanderer ignored their ribald parting comments, pressed as close to the central flames as he could get and not char. Waves of flesh and skin parted for the shivering redhead like a clucking, worried sea; carved gourd cups of steaming tea appeared from all sides, and there were suddenly all too many hands helping his chill-clumsy fingers manage cotton ties.

"Thank you, thank you - no, thank you," Obi-Wan insisted firmly, as all but the skimpiest bit of cloth was whisked off him to be dunked in a barrel of fresh water, then steamed out with the rest of the sea-sodden garments.

Sea-sodden women's garments.

Including the skirts.

Local customs, nudity taboos vary from planet to planet, just smile and be polite… my word. That young woman is - er - nursing? In public?

And she wasn't the only one. At least a third of the mature women were - tending offspring, yes; he was a diplomat, if he simply thought of it as yet another alien custom he'd be just fine….

Are humans supposed to be nursed at that age? Children in the crèche weren't.

It wasn't just tiny infants, after all; the children were of a host of ages, some even a little older than the little Gensai girls. He couldn't help but stare. Of course, exobiology had taught him humans were nursing mammals, but he didn't think he'd ever seen it.

Padme never had the chance.

It hurt. It hurt so very much. He had to look away.

At scars.

"Space," the word fell from his lips unbidden, into one of those odd pauses that seemed to strike any group of gossiping sentients. "What in the worlds happened to you?"

Silence.

Kenshin glanced away; then, deliberately, looked straight at him and shrugged. "One tends to attract accidents."

Slowly, chatter picked back up again. Wary. And a shade too cheerful. Especially when one of the more matronly ladies brought over a basket of steaming sponges to clean his wounds, and boiled poultices to bandage over the worst burns.

They knew. They knew what was needed. Without even asking.

A very bad sign.

Obi-Wan set his jaw, and tried to draw some of the ladies' attitude of unconcern about himself. With little success, he knew. Better than anyone else in this shelter, however politely they were deliberately not looking, he knew blasted well those scars weren't accidents.

That knot, in the right shoulder - something thin, and impaling. Slice across the upper back…
Metal claws. He'd seen them made by too many war droids to mistake those wounds.

Someone tried very hard to kill this young man. Several someones.

Yet he was still alive. And if Kaoru were to be believed, Kenshin felt incredibly guilty about that fact. Even, at times, suicidally guilty.

Is that how you lost your Master?

"Ladies, ladies!" A knot of giggles in the back of the shelter unraveled around a tall, sweaty rooster-head of dark hair. "I'm taken, honest. Well, kind of. Um, maybe it's more of a see you for tea kind of thing, but…." Still holding out empty hands, Sanosuke fixed on the Jedi like a drowning man grabbing a plank. "Gods, you're still alive. Maybe Jou-chan won't kill me after all."

"Surely, she wouldn't," Obi-Wan objected.

"Are you kidding? She'd be crying and yelling and hitting me over the head, and when she got done with that, she'd make you a memorial meal. And she'd expect me to eat it." Sano shuddered. "I'm too young to die."

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow.

"Eh... heh... don't tell her I said that, right? She's kind of - well, you know, girls and kitchens are supposed to go together...."

Sniggers rose from the nude crowd.

Kenshin coughed slightly, taking mercy on the stammering smuggler. "There is," he said delicately, "a reason this one has cooked most of the meals."

Ah. That bad, hmm? Well, it wasn't as if he had any reason to brag. Heating up survival meals wasn't cooking. Though he usually managed not to burn water-

"You cook?" One of the bolder girls exclaimed, looking Kenshin up and down. "What kind of guy are you?"

"Oro...."

"A pretty guy," another sallied, to a burst of laughter. "Listen to that accent! Hey girls, call Yoshiwara! I think one of their tayuu are missing."

"Aww, don't call them, Toki!" A salacious grin flashed across the enclosure. "At least, not 'til tomorrow...."  

"Oi!" Sano shoved wide violet eyes back toward Obi-Wan, and planted himself like a cranky stone pillar in front of them both. "Hands off. Guy's had a hard enough night already-"

Cackling.

"A bad enough night," Sano amended, "and ladies, you'd kill him. Come on, give us a break...."

"Indeed." Wizened, dark hair touched with iron gray, one of the more elderly ama rose to her feet, leaning on a carved driftwood cane. "Enough, girls. We've no need to start a war."
Her light yukata rustled softly as she stumped over to them. Planted her cane on the sedge matting lining the floor, and peered past Sano to study violet eyes. "Speak, young man."

Violet blinked, wide and innocent. "What is it you wish this one to say, Honored Grandmother?"

"That's enough." She turned back toward the rest. "Shimabara, not Yoshiwara, you young fools. Call a local teahouse to take him back, there will be a war." Rolling her eyes, she sat down, ostentatiously warming her hands over the flames.

*And not coincidentally, providing us with a chaperone,* Obi-Wan thought, relieved. *But I don't understand. Kenshin's a swordsman. How can these people think he belongs in the - the entertainment district? Just because he's-

Small. And pretty. And exotic. And spoke the local lingo like he'd been born to it, by the way Serifu's owner had reacted.

*And how do I know he wasn't?* the Jedi reminded himself. *Those who can use the Force appear anywhere. That geisha, Koubai - the one Kenshin swears is kunoichi. It could have been mere chance a samurai found him before a ninja did.* "How much danger are we in?" he murmured.

"Depends on how fast the guys who brought you in get drunk," Sano muttered back. "Long as the Empire gets enough harvest of seaweed and pearls, they don't stick their noses in too far, and that's just how the ama like it. But village guys? They spend their lives doing a little farming and a lot of gossip, and when Saigo's guys can liven that up with a bit of spending cash and a pile of stories of messing with the Empire...."

Obi-Wan blinked. Let that sink in. Reached - fruitlessly - to try and sense the rest of the village. *Damn.* "Saigo's here, then."

"A few hundred feet that way." Sano's grin had a hard edge. "Worse luck for us, the party hasn't been going long enough for him to get plastered."

"That would take hours," Kenshin said faintly. His shivers had finally stopped, but there was a slump to his shoulders Obi-Wan didn't like at all. "He has a very great tolerance for sake."

*And just how do you know that?* Obi-Wan set that question aside, to join the host of others he planned to shake out of the youngster. Later. "Party?"

"Don't know, didn't ask," Sano said frankly. "Knowing the local troublemakers, though - something blew up." He grimaced. "Just hope Katsu wasn't in the middle of it."

*We'll ask Kaoru, then,* the Jedi decided. *The Empire will clamp a lid on it as always, but in a society like this, the gossip should be near as good as a news-flimsy. *Honored Grandmother." Obi-Wan inclined his head, drawing on all he'd seen of samurai interactions with those they respected. *Clothing's part of status here, I need something else to give the right impression - ah. The fan.* Kenshin hadn't let either out of his reach, any more than he'd let his lightsaber stray from his side. Obi-Wan scooped one up with as much grace as he could muster. "We are grateful for your aid in an - awkward situation."

The old woman snorted softly; glancing near, but not at, his bandaged wounds.

*How do I - yes.* A gentle snap of his wrist unfolded the fan, unlit; the perfect picture of genteel unconcern. "It would be ungracious of us to impose further." *Such as by hospitalizing your idiot*
menfolk if they try to come after us again.

"It would," she agreed bluntly. "I heard a net float went missing." The slit of her eyes said that was a very grave matter, indeed.

"A stolen float cannot lead samurai back to those who should not be involved," Obi-Wan improvised, weighing Kenshin's calculated innocence and Sano's bland look anywhere else. *This is going to be a very interesting story, when I hear it.* "I suspect one who... purchased it in advance... might clear the debt before the night ended."

"Hmm." She thumped her stick on packed ground. "The north path out shouldn't have anyone watching it besides my sister's grandson. Tell him Great-Aunt says you're going home." A wrinkled brow rose. "You are going home?"

"With your blessing, I very much hope so," Obi-Wan smiled.

"Flatterer." She nodded toward their steamed clothes, and made a shooing motion with her free hand. "We're ama. Let samurai deal with samurai."

*Take your trouble and be off with you,* Obi-Wan translated, bowing politely. The younger men followed his lead; though if that jump of Sano's was anything to go by, Kenshin had delivered a swift and subtle kick to a certain ankle. *So she thinks we're trouble, does she? She may well be right.*

*And it doesn't matter what she thinks, as long as we're going.*

"Hold onto it," Kenshin said as they scrambled through the night down the north path, waving off Obi-Wan's attempt to give the fan back. "One did not recognize the ki of your captor, Kenobi-san, but he was strong. One would prefer neither of us be unarmed."

"You're the one who knows the fans," the Jedi pointed out.

"One would prefer not to leave you with only a weapon that might bring him down on our heads, that I would."

"Say what?" Sano jumped in. "You mean - your lightsaber-"

"The blade is the soul of the samurai. The crystal is the heart of the blade. The mind forms the crystal, so all join in harmony." Kenshin shrugged. "Or as Shishou once said, the electromagnetic resonance of an active lightsaber with the ki of its user is - a bit visible, to those who know what to look for. One does not know if our enemy knows what to look for, and one would very much prefer not to find out."

"The mind forms the crystal?" Obi-Wan asked, surprised.

"Huh. Even I know that." Sano rolled his eyes. "You find one of the right hot springs, sit down, and meditate. Do it right, you squeeze a gem right out of the water."

"It is one of the tests of mastery," Kenshin said plainly. "We should speak with Kaoru-dono about arranging a visit to a spring, so she can teach Yahiko to form a student's crystal...."

"What is it?"

Kenshin tilted his head, listening. "He will not be in range yet. But one suggests that we hurry."
Indeed.

Chapter End Notes

Ama - "sea person", diver; usually female.

Che’ - "damn".

Maa, maa - Easy there; relax.

Mou - "oh, darn!"
"Himura," Aoshi Shinomori breathed, kneeling in his book-filled room as he would for meditation. Though the news he now had would put that peace out of his hands for hours. "The Kamiya dojo's resident rurouni... is Himura Kenshin."

"Hai, Okashira." Horns just a shadow in darker shadows, Han'nya, intelligence master of the Oniwabanshuu, inclined his head.

"Himura Battousai." Aoshi listened to the silence about them, the quiet that marked this austere portion of Kanryuu's otherwise elegant mansion above all others, before he allowed himself a cold smile. "Does anyone else know of this?"

A shift of shadow. "Information indicates that Inspector Uramura suspects, at least. There is an interesting... blandness... to recent reports by Tokyo Internal Security."

"Is there." Anticipation tingled like ice in his veins; Aoshi allowed it one moment of freedom, then crushed it under relentless discipline. "Your thoughts?"

"Guilt could be a motive," Han'nya reported neutrally. "Kamiya Koshijirou lost his life in the Seinan riots, working in the Security Sword Corps. Uramura was not his direct commander. If he had been, it is unlikely Kamiya-san would have been assigned the mission that ended his life. As it stands Kamiya Kaoru is left alone, the last of her name."

And the last to hold mastery over a dojo renowned for teaching samurai and citizens to fight well, and only in self-defense. A small eddy of calm in the torrents of greed and oppression that surged through Tokyo; a poor, quiet school, that had never aspired to have the best swordsmen, but only to teach its students to find the best within themselves. Imperials might raze the buildings tomorrow, and believe no one would miss it.

They would be wrong.

Who'd have thought one tiny dojo could be a shatter-point?

That was the term Okina had used in his training, years ago; a nexus of time and place and person where one change... might change everything.

And most people can't see it. Can't even imagine it. Aoshi suppressed a shake of his head. All you had to do was read the reports, and walk the streets. Crime faded around Kamiya's dojo.

She believes people can be better than they are. She lives it. And by chance or skill or the will of the Force, she's found the right people to start the rest of the community believing it too.

And with all of Yamato to choose from, the Demon of Kyoto had washed up there.

A living shatter-point. That sent a chill down Aoshi's spine, training or not. The only shatter-point of the Revolution to survive Meiji's governance.

Takasugi had died leading Choushuu's forces on the battlefield. Okita Souji had perished on a Dark Jedi's blade. Katsura had finally succumbed to the toxins breathed in his youth, failing and dying in
an Imperial hospital; naturally or not, none dared say. The Oniwabanshuu's information network had gathered other stories, other lives; none of the Revolution's beating hearts remained.

Save one.

Hitokiri Battousai.

Katsu's blade. Katsu's dragon. Death to the Revolution's enemies; a demon even to those he protected. Change followed in his wake like flames... not all of it to Katsu's liking. A slight, quiet man armed as a samurai, shadow-skilled as an onmitsu, and following a sword-school never claimed by either side.

Hiten Mitsurugi. The Sword of the Heavens.

And I may win the chance to face it.

"Kamiya is also young," Han'nya noted. "And pretty. If one can look past the blue eyes."

Which most samurai wouldn't, of course. But Uramura... well, if Aoshi believed there was any good to be found in Meiji's policy of opening Yamato to the rest of the Empire, he would find it in folk like Uramura. The inspector loved his native world, yet also had a keen interest in the people and ideas that came in through the spaceport. Useful, in his line of work.

Yet it made the inspector's defense of Battousai all the more curious.

Himura is not simply a remnant of what we were, two decades ago, Aoshi thought. He is not just another lost ronin - not one trained to be of the administrators with blades who worked under the Tokugawa, nor even the rough warriors of the civil wars, who might pledge loyalty as they chose. He gave up his lightsaber.

Like Rei Isshinta, who legends claimed had shamed a war into ending by breaking his blade.

Rumors say Katsu gave the Shogunate better terms than they had any right to expect, after that.

As he himself knew was true. After all, Tokugawa Yoshinobu-

Well. The less thought of that, or his true purpose in serving as Kanryuu's security, the better. One never knew who might be using ki to pry. Especially when one was thinking about matters related to the Kamiya dojo.

So peaceful on the surface, and so ruthless to law within.

Oh, Kamiya Kaoru's influence stopped violent crime, surely. Theft, robbery, assault - all avoided her neighborhood like the plague. But when it came to paying what the Empire would claim as its fair share of taxes on certain goods... well, Sagara and Tsukioka were only the visible tip of the iceberg. "She's arranged the market for this morning?"

Han'nya nodded. "She tries not to keep to too regular a schedule, but the tell-tales are there, if you know where to look." A faint white glint, that might have been a smile. "Shall I acquire some spools of tensu kinu thread?"

"Pay for them," Aoshi stated. "You should be in plain view when Tsukioka arrives. An... innocent customer."

"The slow route, then?" A shrug of shadowy shoulders. "He informed us Takani survived."
"And Beshimi reported she was dead - and we both know he is not easily deceived," Aoshi said flatly. "We will not move until we are certain."

A slow nod. "Katsuhiro has a strong will. We can't be certain the compulsions will hold."

"Not for more than a few days, no." Aoshi's eyes narrowed. "But that is all we need."

"Will you allow him to die, Okashira?" An apologetic shift of shadowed shoulders. "Forgive my curiosity."

"It will be his choice," Aoshi said evenly. "To die, like a samurai... or live, like a ninja, and know what he doomed by his weakness."

*Either way, we will see the true measure of Kamiya Kasshin... and the Hitokiri Battousai.*

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"Five? Two, maybe, but for that-"

"My Saezuri's still a little young to be watching the baby; if you could come over a few days, I'd take a copper off these sand-plums-"

"Oh, what a lovely blue, like autumn sky... how many spools do you have?"

Still blinking away pre-dawn sleepiness, Yahiko shook his head as the low-key bargaining went on, amazed at how fast a few dozen women and old men had turned this dusty back room of Kaoru's house into a tiny market. Not just for dyes and spices and various other odds and ends brought in by enterprising country-folk to their city relatives, but for help in patching leaky roofs, mending blaster-seared cloth, and looking after sick kin before the last caregiver in the family unit passed out from exhaustion. *The kinds of things somebody - should have done for my 'Kaasan....*

He scrubbed at itchy eyes - *damn dust!* - and shot a glare at Kaoru as she watched from a quiet corner. Her hands were busy with tools and thread-fine wires, still working on the same piece of circuitry she'd had out when he'd hit the futon last night. *Did she get any sleep at all? Sheesh, girls... yeah, sure, Sano's an idiot, and Obi-Wan's gaijin, but Kenshin's old enough to look after both of them.*

He wasn't worried. He wasn't. Kenshin knew about the curfew and the guard patrols, he'd probably just found someplace for everybody to lie low after they got Kenobi out of whatever mess Sanosuke had dragged him into, and they were just fine.

Yahiko swallowed a suspicious lump, probably left over from Kaoru's attempt at breakfast, and jerked his head at the bargaining matrons. "So what are they, all widows?" Not that that explained the older folks, but hey, hard luck happened.

Kaoru's lips tightened a little. "Not yet."

Yahiko snorted. "Oh, come on. Girls don't get somebody else up on their roofs if they've got a husband at home."

"They don't."

*Say what?* Yahiko gave her a skeptical look. "So what, they're all divorced?" *Nobody* left their wives high and dry with no clan around to help out. Not even to take off on pilgrimage. Risk your
kids, your apprentices, the whole continued existence of your name? The rest of your family would kick you out, drown you, or otherwise get rid of the embarrassment.

"No. Not yet." Kaoru shrugged. "I guess you could call them temporary widows. At least they hope it's temporary," she added under her breath.

Temporary widows? But that meant- Yahiko stiffened. "You mean, their guys are out with-"

"Try not to ask, okay?" Kaoru gave him a serious look. "We've just got some people here talking. Nothing illegal about that."

Except that no few of the items people were talking about, and exchanging hard currency for, weren't supposed to be sold without the government taking a cut. Even a kid like him knew that.

Kaoru followed his gaze, and grabbed the scruff of his gi to drag him a little deeper into the shadows. "Tensu kinu," she nodded at the autumn-blue spools an elderly weaver was scooping into his carry-sack. "The Gekkeikan conglomerate harvests the moths on big forest plantations; they can afford to pay the tax and still make a profit. And they can produce it in those hundred-spool lots Governor Meiji made the lower legal limit. Ten wild-gatherers working together probably couldn't get that much." A flick of blue eyes toward another mat, where rough green stones were piled together. "The Empire doesn't like spirit offerings, but they're not outlawed. You just can't get the jade to carve yourself." A twitch of fingers, almost into fists, as she looked toward Dr. Gensai and a few others seriously poking and prodding at various roots and leaves. "And as for traditional medicine...." She closed her eyes; Yahiko could swear she was counting to ten. "Imperial medicine works, too. Their surgeons - they can do things we never could, before. But what good is it, if the people who need it can't afford it?"

Yahiko rolled his eyes. "So the Empire is wrong." Like I didn't know that.

"The Empire is broken," Kaoru said fiercely. "It started out broken, and it'll end the same way." Her fingers unclenched, and she looked lost. "But... if Kenshin's right... maybe the Republic was broken, too."

She's making my head hurt. "Just because they didn't have time to fix things way out here on the edge of the galaxy-"

"Exactly because of that." Kaoru blew out a slow, decisive breath. "If you don't have time to take care of the little things, of the - places that fall through the cracks, way out here - then none of the big things matter." She nodded toward the room. "How is this the way of Kamiya Kasshin?"

Say whaataat? Yahiko gaped like a fish, desperately trying to jump-start his brain. Morning and thinking just weren't meant to go together. "It's - um-" She's got to be kidding! Sword that protects, heck, there's nothing here to use a sword on....

Hang on a sec. Sword that "gives life". We're not doing it by protecting them, they could probably find some corner down by the docks to do this-

Some Yakuza corner, what am I thinking? And even if it wasn't Yakuza, anybody who let these people in to talk might up and turn them all in someday. You never know who you can trust.

Except - everybody trusts Kaoru.

And they can. 'Cause if the Empire catches her, they won't be looking for a few unpaid taxes. They'll take her away and execute her.
Yahiko tried not to shiver.

*But nobody else knows that. They just know they can trust her.*

"It's - helping people - look after themselves?" he tried.

Her grin lit up her eyes like sunlight. And just as suddenly twitched into a frown, as Kaoru cocked her head toward the front of the dojo. "Get Dr. Gensai. Megumi, too, if she's awake and you can keep her out of our visitors' sight. They're back."


Yahiko wasn't quite sure how he got the doctor out of his bargaining session, though he sort of remembered some idiot babble about Sano, body cream mixed with venom ivy, and embarrassing locations the local nighthawks used for revenge. *Jerk deserves it.*

All that mattered was that sense of warm comfort emanating from Kaoru, and the rock-solid shadow that was Kenshin, as Yahiko dragged Gensai into the dojo's main room and they were all together and *safe*....

Then Yahiko's eyes fell on an all too familiar collar around Kenobi's neck, and he knew they weren't safe at all. "*Kuso.*"

"Indeed." Gensai was white around the lips. "Himura-san...."

"One has made very sure the circuits were soaked in salt water, Gensai-isha. And has soaked it again, since our return." Kenshin put a dripping face-towel back into a steaming bowl, not smiling at all. "It is as safe as one can make it without aid, that it is."

"What kind of aid?" Kaoru asked dangerously.

Red hair dipped, apologetic. "The collars are made to need two sets of hands to disarm. In case of rescue."

"And your telekinetic control isn't fine enough?" Obi-Wan asked, casually as if he didn't have a bomb wired to his neck.

"It *might* be - but it has been years since one disarmed a collar. One would prefer not to risk it."

Violet met Kaoru's gaze. "One suspects Yahiko-kun has more experience with these locks-"

"He's my student," Kaoru said fiercely. "This is *my* job."

Still sitting, Kenshin gave her a respectful bow, then removed various less-than-legal bits of wire and composite from his toolkit. "If Kaoru-dono permits... one will outline the steps first. Both must disarm at once. The collars are meant to be built with some leeway, in case of accident, but given who had this collar in his keeping, we should not trust to that; that we should not."

"In case of *accident*?" Obi-Wan muttered.

"Hmm..." A damp shrug. "Accidental shooting, accidental kidnapping, accidental homicide of slavers by relatives who feel the debt should not be repaid in this manner...."

A red-gold brow went up. "You have a rather wide definition of accident, my friend."

"Oro?"
"I think I admire it. In a way." The Jedi let out a slow breath. "Let's get this over with, if you would."

Sano's hand was an iron vise on his shoulder as Yahiko huddled in the corner with him and Gensai; close enough to see what was going on, far enough that Kenshin judged they wouldn't be injured if-

*It's not going to happen. It's not!*

For a while, it looked like nothing was going to happen. Kenshin just talked. And talked, and talked....

*Pressure point right, twist.* Yahiko found himself repeating silently, somehow familiar as the steps of a just-practiced kata. *Pressure point up, hold for a three-count. Pressure point left, twist counter-clockwise, and hold, two, three, four....*

The collar clicked open.

Kenshin let out a relieved breath, and helped Kaoru and Obi-Wan remove the deadly curve of metal. "One will set this in a secure corner of your storage building, hai, Kaoru-dono? It is safe, for now; and one would prefer not to try to remove the explosives without breakfast." Collar in hand, he slipped out of the room.

Obi-Wan simply sat there, regarding trembling hands as if they didn't belong to him. "Well. That hasn't happened in a long time."

"Kenobi-san, if you're not used to suffering shock when something like this happens, I'd sincerely hate to live your life." Snorting, Gensai moved in with tea whose steam carried a heavy load of hashima, sweetened with brown cane and dosed with a dash of powdered seaweed and salt. "Here. I'll hold this if you can't, but get it down. All of it."

Obi-Wan's nose wrinkled, but he sipped anyway. "He's very good, did you notice? Very subtle. I imagine we could all disarm those collars in our sleep, now." Another, deeper sip. "I would have loved to have met his teacher."

Sano stiffened. "Hold up. Are you saying Kenshin-?"

"He was reinforcing what he told me, so we could do it together," Kaoru stated, eyes sliding away, guilty. "I didn't know he could reach all of us."

"Some people just have impressive personalities, yes?" Lifting an edge of Obi-Wan's gi, Gensai stiffened. Bit back a curse. "Kenobi-san, unless someone desperately needs you, I think I'd better see to these in your room." He let fabric fall, gently. "I don't know what Megumi's been through, but if she sees this...."

"I understand." Obi-Wan raised his gaze to Kaoru, sober and tired. "To make a long story very short, Saigo may still carry a rather indiscriminate grudge against off-worlders, but we're fairly certain he does not have Katsuhiro."

"A grudge against off-worlders?" Kaoru's eyes widened.

"As I said, it's a long story." Kenobi's hand hovered near the side of his chest, where an ex-pickpocket's eyes could make out the hard line of a mini-computer under cloth.

*Some kind of scanner?* Yahiko thought. *He didn't have that when they left.*
Which meant whatever was on there could be important.

Stomping on his impatience, he waited until Sano started a stumbling explanation of last night to Kaoru, punctuated with hand-rowing motions, then snuck off down the hall.

"...know this stings, but sometimes, the local seawater...."

"Better - ah! Safe than sorry, yes."

Making himself small and quiet, Yahiko settled down outside Kenobi's room to listen.

"Kurogasa." Cloth rustled as Gensai applied ointment and bandages. "I'm not familiar with the name."

"I suspect it's an alias," Obi-Wan said frankly. "I doubt someone with his... proclivities... could have survived under the Empire without one."

"He did this for fun." Loathing dripped from Gensai's voice.

"No. Not entirely." Obi-Wan's tone was spare, calculated. "He was looking for someone."

Silence. Yahiko tried not to fidget. That's - somebody moving, that beep's somebody getting data-

And that hiss of breath was one very shocked doctor. "What in the worlds...."

"You said you didn't know where to look for Kenobi Owen." There was an odd tightness in Obi-Wan's voice, that clutched at Yahiko's heart. "What if we were only looking for Owen?"

"A peasant?" Gensai's surprise rang through the walls. "But-

"A redhead man with some knowledge of the weaving trade, driven into the mountains by - off-world interference." Obi-Wan's voice was level. It sent a chill down Yahiko's spine. "A man who married a peasant woman, and raised a family with her, only to die with them, perhaps fifty to thirty years ago, in a... toxic accident." A sharp breath. "Except - not quite all of them died."

"Dear gods." Gensai settled back with a groan. "Forgive me for asking, but torturers are known to be liars-

"It feels true." A shift of cloth, like spread hands. "It would certainly explain why I... saw... what I saw."

"Oh, no, no, no...."

"Please." A deliberate pause, as if someone curled and uncurled fingers that wanted to be fists. "He's in danger. I have to help him. You know where he is."


"Gensai-isha-"

"Yes. Healer. Don't you forget that. He's strong; possibly stronger than Kaoru-chan, I think, and she's one of the most powerful ki-users I've ever met. But parts of his soul are fragile."

"The Darkness-"

Gensai snorted. "Not every wound is caused by Darkness, Kenobi." He let out a slow breath,
sighing away impatience. "Think. Think about what you've told me."

A long silence. "He would have been an orphan."

"Very likely," Gensai agreed. "Now. Consider an orphan in our world, old enough to have made his way however he had to, suddenly faced with an off-worlder who says he's family."

Yahiko could almost feel Kenobi's wince. "I imagine it wouldn't go well, no." A whisper of cotton, as if someone hugged themselves for warmth. "But he's in danger, Gensai. Terrible danger."

"He's been in danger for decades, Obi-Wan," Gensai said gently. "That's not going to change now. I'll do what I can, I promise you." His voice dropped, low and comforting. "So I'm going to ask you to do something very, very difficult." Lower, barely a whisper. "Trust me, Obi-Wan."

A long sigh. "Well. Patience is one of our chief tenets." Obi-Wan's voice grew slightly louder. "As is inflicting long, tedious, utterly boring extra training on eavesdroppers."

*Oh hell, busted!*

"So now he's telling Gensai he's looking for some guy out in the mountains, who ended up a peasant - can a gaijin even *be* a peasant?"

Stepping out of his sandals up onto the engawa, Kenshin listened to Yahiko's words tumbling over themselves, and smiled tiredly. So. Kenobi-san had evidently had some insight into his search for his unnamed relation.

*Not surprising,* Kenshin thought, pushing aside the shoji. His steps were soundless down the hall, heading for that knot of young confusion and dismay. *He has had some days now, to read over whatever data our search acquired, and torture can lead you to focus on the most outlandish things. If it doesn't break you first.*

He didn't think Kenobi had broken. But it was good to be sure.

"-And if he thinks this Owen guy is dead, why he still even looking-"

Hand just opening the *fusama* to Kaoru's room, Kenshin stiffened.

"Kenshin?"

The redhead began breathing again, making his way inside. "It's nothing, Kaoru-dono. Kenobi-san has a name of this world; it should not surprise this one that the brother he looks for had one, as well."

Kaoru stared at him. "You brought Obi-Wan into the Imperial Medical Center so he could access the computer net, and you didn't even know who he was looking for?"

"Oro? Why should I? It wasn't important. Even if it is - startling..."

"What do you mean, a name of this world?" Yahiko gave him a cross-eyed look. "Owen's not a samurai name!"

*O-u-en,* the young man voiced it; as so many in the village had. Shishou had always given Kenshin a very odd look when his student had no trouble pronouncing Basic's odd *weh.* As why should he
not? The sound had no equivalent in Yamatogo. A few Twi'lek words, yes; and some of the Zabrak phrases. But not the human dialects. "Not in Tokyo, no. But it is, in the mountains." Kenshin looked into the distance, recalling the folk of those odd valleys and hidden hills, who had little contact with the outside world and wanted less.

Yet it came to us anyway.

Dark thoughts. Too dark, for the curious young ones before him. "There are... many odd names, in the mountains. Passed down from before we were of Yamato, some of them; honored, even today. Nomi. Ulic. Vima. Andur," Kenshin shrugged. "One could name a dozen others, easily. They are not common, no. But they are known."

"You knew somebody called Owen?" Kaoru perked up.

"And you didn't laugh in his face?" Yahiko muttered.

"One would never have considered it," Kenshin said seriously. "One probably can't be more help than the computer files, Kaoru-dono. Even today, with the Empire's patrols ranging farther than daimyo forces ever did, the mountains are deep, and little known."

"It was worth a try," Kaoru sighed. Waved a finger in Yahiko's face. "And if you'd listened to what you were just saying, he's still looking because they're family, and he thinks one of Owen's kids survived a toxic spill, thirty or fifty years ago-"

The world grayed.

"-Kenshin?" Callused hands guided him down to his knees. "Yahiko, go get some of the leftover bean-cakes, now!"

"But-"

Untouched by hands, Kaoru's bokken rattled against the wall.

"Okay, okay...."

"I knew you didn't get breakfast," Kaoru grumbled, chafing warmth back into his shoulders as the fusama slammed behind her student. "Kenshin? What's wrong?"

"Thirty?" the rurouni managed. "Thirty years, Kaoru-dono? Not possible. It was thirty-one years, not thirty.

"Just - sometime after he was taken off the planet, I guess," Kaoru shrugged. "I don't know why he said thirty. I'll ask Dr. Gensai-"

"No!"

Kaoru's hands stilled. Drawing back, she looked him in the eye. "Kenshin? What's wrong?"

It's not possible. It's not. "With only a given name, there is no way Kenobi-san can find this brother."

"He was a kinu weaver, I think," Kaoru stated. "Or working with them, anyway... he was apprenticed to a Kyoto mulberry grower, Tamaru-san."

"Prune the chewers' nest out now, Shinta, you'll have plenty of leaves for the kinu caterpillars later. I learned that from Tamaru-san." Heavy shears in small hands on one of the few sunlit days
they weren't in the fields, as Tousan held onto a tan-barked trunk and urged him toward the mulberry's high branches. "Just watch your grip, and be careful; if we finish up early, we can read more of his manual tonight...."

A manual. But everyone had agricultural manuals, didn't they? The better farmers did, at least; and if his family had been poor, they hadn't been the poorest in the village. Not at first.

"He was a redhead, a bit taller than average - for our planet, anyway - we even have images! There's got to be some way to find him."

"Images?" Kenshin whispered.

"Well, yes, the recording's old, so it's not a holo, but we - Kenshin?" Blue eyes gave him a very worried look.

Not possible. Not.

"Could one... see it?"

A dozen questions hovered on her lips. Kaoru bit them all back, and crossed the room to pick up a datapad, fingers dancing to silence the sound and freeze one image on the screen. "It's kind of upsetting, so I'll just - here."

He's so young.

Not more than Kaoru's age, if that; still sick with Miasma, hair almost as red as his own tied back over a Kyoto townsman's brown and blue kimono. Clothes he'd never seen the man wear, a face lacking near two decades of care and grief....

It's him.

"Gods, you look like you've seen a ghost," Kaoru muttered, taking the datapad from his nerveless hand. "You knew him? This was taken about fifty years ago; before you were even born! How did you-" She stopped. Looked at the image again. Raised a stunned, pale face, to look at him once more.

What do I do? What do I say?

"Oh, Kenshin."

Her arms wrapped warm around him. Kenshin let them, even as he railed at himself for his weakness. He was a student of Hiten Mitsurugi, not a child; the dead were dead, and he had grieved them and moved on. This was but a fragment of a past he'd never known. History. Ghosts and dust.

So why does it hurt so much?

"Tell me."

"What is there to say?" But he owed that gentle whisper something; owed the strong, hopeful woman who even now tried to rescue brightness from grief. "We lived a quiet life. Some of the neighbors thought Tousan was strange, we were born so late... but like red hair, it is known that some of the mountain folk cannot get children until they are near thirty. We had fields, and a loom, and care of some of the forest nearby; Tousan had earned a forester's rights, though he was gentle, and almost never carried his blade." Words stuck in his throat. He swallowed dryly. "Then - one evening, thirty-one years ago - there was an explosion. A mist, with a smell that...." He shook his head, helpless. "We were up-slope from much of the village. Tousan carried this one to the roof, and-"
"Don't come down, Shinta! Do you hear me? Whatever happens, whatever you sense - don't come down!"

"Everything in the mist died."

"Everyone?" Kaoru said numbly. Saw something in his face, and paled further. "Oh gods. The crops."

He nodded once, remembering that dazed, bitter heartbreak, as the few survivors looked over devastation. The grief, and fear, and odd, unwarranted feeling of *betrayal* as the shrewder of those gazes turned toward him.

A minor orphan could not hold an *ie* together. Fact. Simple fact.

Simple as the knowledge that a wounded *ie* - and *none* of the village's surviving families had escaped unscathed - could not afford to take in another, unrelated child. That tax-gathering would soon be on them, and winter would follow close on its heels. That without cash for medicines and food *now*, half those *ie* that had lived might yet perish.

Fact. And yet he'd still been... so terribly *surprised*....

"A *zegen*?"

Kenshin let out a soft huff of breath, relieved not to have to explain. Kaoru was samurai. She knew about hard choices. "One suspects that was the intent, yes. Those one was contracted to never - quite - reached Kyoto." Blood in the night. Three simple stones.

But that was the past. And this was now. "You cannot tell Kenobi-san, Kaoru-dono."

She was shaking her head. "He wants to find you. He wants to know you. He's a good man."

"And what," Kenshin said softly, "would a good man do, faced with Hitokiri Battousai?"

Something thumped outside Kaoru's door, like a young apprentice dropping stunned to the floor mats.

Careless. Too careless. Kenshin rubbed at his eyes, and backed away from Kaoru's arms. *I need sleep. We must search for Katsu again, soon - and Megumi's enemies are still out there, somewhere. "Come in, Yahiko-kun."* Wide-eyed, Yahiko scrambled inside, offering bean-cakes like scraps to an untamed hawk. "You're...."

Sighing, Kenshin nodded. "Are you surprised?"

"Kind of." From somewhere, the boy dredged up a faint smirk. "But it makes sense. You had to get that good somewhere."

"One is skilled, yes," Kenshin said quietly. "But the way that skill was gained - one has met Jedi, Kaoru-dono. Long ago. And while one suspects a survivor would be more flexible than most... Obi-Wan is Jedi." Tired violet met tearful blue. "Hana bore you, Kaoru-dono. Raised you. *Loved* you. He... he was taken from his kin, and raised on a world we cannot even imagine, with loyalty only to the Jedi, and to the Republic. He may be this one's father's brother, by blood - but he is *not* this one's *Jisan.*"
"He's somebody's," Kaoru objected. "Can't you feel it? It's faint, but he has family bonds."

"Not to this one." Though there had been a moment, holding the older man's soul against the lightning. "Jedi often assisted folk in emergencies, that they did. It's not impossible he aided in a Force-sensitive's birth, and never knew he bonded to the child."

"How could you not know?" Yahiko objected, rubbing an ear. Caught his teacher's raised eyebrow, and blushed bright red. "Um - my 'kaasan helped one of the girls once, they threw me right out...."

"I guess, if you'd never had a family-" Kaoru shook her head, wide-eyed. "That just seems so cold."

"When one believes one serves a greater purpose, one may do - anything." Kenshin shook his head. "Hold to your heart, Kaoru-dono. The path of great causes is too often carved through blood."

Soberly, she nodded, fingers a feather-whisper over one of his scarred palms. "Like yours."

"One made one's own choices." Kenshin closed his hands. "But one will not see you pay for what this one did; that I will not."

"Then you better get set to move fast," Yahiko said practically. "Kenobi thinks Gensai knows where the guy he's looking for is. And Gensai said he did know, but he wouldn't tell him. Yet."

"Oro." Kenshin buried his head in his hands.

"It's not that bad," Kaoru managed. "He knows you're a healer with some onmitsu techniques, that's all-"

"And Kenobi-san already knows Battousai was of Shadow, with red hair," Kenshin said grimly. "He is not stupid. Oh gods, what more can go wrong? "One will stay as long as one can, Kaoru-dono. But you may be safer dealing with the onmitsu without this one, than with a hunting Jedi at your back."

"Kenshin...." Her eyes were bright, and fearful.

"He is fragile, Kaoru-dono," Kenshin said softly. "Near breaking. What will it do to him, if he discovers his Code demands he slay his own kin?"

"Oh." Her knuckles wove together, white with pain. "Oh, it's not fair. It's just not fair."

"Kaoru-dono-" His breath caught; he had to swallow, before the words would come. "You have been very kind to this one. It is - all the fairness one can ask of the world, that it is-"

Presence. It jerked at Kenshin's senses, drawing his gaze toward the front gates, as if he could peer through walls to see the physical body.

Kaoru caught his shift in attention, and reached out herself, brightening. "Katsu!"

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Finally. Picking at the last fragments of her late breakfast, Megumi leaned back on her haunches, watching Katsu twitch a hand as he drowsed on a futon. With his copilot back in strangling range, Sanosuke should finally calm down long enough for them to make some serious plans for the Sekihoutai - and the sooner she had those finalized, the sooner she could get out of this fragile little dojo.
She appreciated the risks those here were running to keep her safe. She truly did. But the constant clutch of her heart at any little sound out of place; the strain of staying out of sight and hearing of everyone else who tromped through Kamiya's rooms and training hall, not the mention the whole rest of the neighborhood; the complete and utter inability to so much as drift her hands through a garden of growing plants without fear of steely fingers closing on her own....

Kanryuu would have let her touch his plants. Though you couldn't call that a garden.

_I can't. I can't do that again. I was trained to help, to heal - I can't twist things that way. Not again! _

Even in her dreams, she could see that gleam of polished lenses, as Kanryuu's chemists presented their vial of isolated compounds. See his gloved fingers toy with the changed - _tainted_ - plants, as he turned to her and smirked....

She'd been able to keep them sterile. Resistant to cloning. If he wanted more of his prized toxins, he had to wait for slow, season-guided growth.

Unless he caught her again.

_No. I won't let it happen. I can't._

If she didn't get out of here, she was going to chew through a roof beam.

"Catch that little brat and grill him with the eels...."

A screen slid aside, and Megumi let herself glance at the fuming smuggler stalking inside. "What did Yahiko-kun do this time?"

"Little brat told Gensai the nighthawks smeared venom ivy on my-" Sano reddened a little, rapping a fist against his palm. "Let's just say, Jou-chan's apprentice is about to become paste... what are _you_ laughing at?"

"I can't - I-" Megumi buried her face in her hands, giggling. "Sano... if you had venom ivy there... you wouldn't be walking, believe me!"

He flushed to the tips of his ears, and gave her a glare that should have peeled paint. If he'd been able to meet her eyes. "Great, now I'm the comedy relief. _Oi! You! Idiot!_" A socked foot shoved at Katsu's shoulder.

"Nice to see you too, partner," Katsuhiro muttered drowsily. "Sheesh, what's a guy got to do to get some sleep around here...."

"You've been missing almost two days!"

"I was busy." The long-haired copilot lurched over onto his back, deliberately staring up at his partner upside-down. "Thought we had an agreement. What I do on my off time's my business."

"Yeah. We do. Until I can't _find_ you on your off time." Sano stomped around until he could look Katsu straight in the eye again, then dropped to his haunches to glare close-range. "I used up a lot of favors looking for you, baka. Payback time. And when I get done with you, I'm going to let Kenobi in to collect. You have _any_ idea what one of Saigo's heavies did to him? Not to mention, what Kenshin and I had to do to get him out?"

Megumi drew in a shocked breath. "Are they all right?"
"Gensai's patching them up. After the night we had, I think they'd spontaneously combust if one of 'em had to take their gi off in front of you. Sheesh. Redheads. They blush everywhere."

Megumi blinked, picturing that. *Oh... my.*

"But for guys crazy enough to take a dive off a couple-hundred-foot cliff by moonlight? Peachy."
Sano waggled a finger almost close enough to bite. "And don't tell me samurai can sense where the water is, and where the rocks are, and it was perfectly safe. I didn't buy it then, and I don't buy now."

Katsu sat bolt upright. "They did what?"

"And that was just getting clear of the bad guy," Sano said with relish. "You want to know the rest of it?"

"Um..."

"I want to know where. You. Were!"

"Where else?" Katsuhiro sighed, rolling his eyes.

"I checked the news broadcasts," Sanosuke said flatly. "No hint of anything blowing up."

"Heh. No, there wouldn't be." Katsu's smile was predatory. "Meiji's little bureaucrats probably aren't about to let on that one of their warehouses full of illegal mind-altering drugs went boom."

Megumi tried not to freeze. *Mind-altering drugs. But that would mean-*

"And it took longer than a day?" Sano said skeptically.

"We... lost a guy." Katsu looked away. "I didn't like him. But he was useful in a fight, you know?"

*Lost one man?* An inexplicable chill shivered down Megumi's spine. *That doesn't seem right.*

"So it took a while," the copilot finished, dark eyes smoldering with frustrated rage. "That enough, partner?"

Sano stared at Katsu a moment longer, then rubbed his forehead, sighing. "Yeah. Sorry." He shrugged. "Look. If you need to talk-"

"I know where to find you. Right." Katsu gave a minimal shrug, setting the topic aside. "So. You two make any progress toward getting Sainan-chan here to the Sekihoutai?"

*Miss Disaster?* Megumi's eyes narrowed. Oh, she'd kill him for that.

"Because I," Katsu pulled a bit of scribbled-on paper out of his jacket, "have a plan."

"This isn't like your plan with the cherry bombs in the cherry ice cream, is it?" Sano said, perfectly straight-faced.

Katsu rolled his eyes again. "No."

"'Cause that didn't fly so well, as you recall. Even if the captain did think it was funny. After we put the fires out."

"Yeah, yeah - and it's not like the time with the dragonmounts, either," Katsu added, before Sano
could open his mouth again. "Just take a look. This could work."

Muttering under his breath, Sano took the page. Megumi scooted across the tatami to read around his arm. "Hmm."

Hmm, indeed. If they went that way... and at one of those times, when Katsu knew the particular patrols... with that precaution against being seen....

"Could work," Sano agreed reluctantly. "We'll wait a few days, then try it."

"A few days?" Megumi and Katsu objected as one.

"Hello? Yamato to Katsu? Recent relapse of Miasma? Am I ringing any bells, here?" Sano snorted. "We pull this off, we're going to want to be off-planet for a good long while. A month, minimum. I am not doing that with a sick copilot."

He has a point, Megumi admitted to herself, stomping her disappointment. She could last here a few days longer. Stars, if it would get her out of Kanryuu's reach, she could put up with this crazy dojo for months.

She hoped.

"So." Katsu gave her a slightly less dour than usual curl of lip. "You were saying about how Himura's even crazier than we thought?"

"Oh, yeah." Sano rubbed his hands together gleefully. "You're not going to believe this one...."

---

"I don't believe it." Seated on Kaoru's engawa, Obi-Wan curled and uncurled his fingers, marveling at the perfect flex of kote over wrists and palms. Better even than speeder-bike gloves... droid work is always accurate, yes, but it's still no match for a master craftsman. "These are marvelous, Densetsu-san."

Sipping a cup of the dojo's excellent tea, the Zabrak leather-worker regarded his trials with a measuring eye. "The feelings are a good match? I do what I can, but you're very deep, Kenobi-san. Like Himura; now, there was a challenge."

"They feel fine." The Jedi lifted a curious brow. "Yet I suddenly have the distinct impression you're not discussing a tactile sensation."

"Hmm." Another slow sip of tea. "What do you feel, Kenobi-san?"

Feelings? From the gloves? He wasn't like Quinlan Vos, who could read any object by touching it; nor even like the Living Force users he'd met, who knew people and places like their own hearts, from misty swirls of impressions in the Force. He could only get the vaguest sense of...

Death.

Will to survive.

Fight to survive.

Ending-
Obi-Wan pulled himself free with a shake of head, reaching to pull the kote off.

"Death is lighter than a feather; duty heavier than a mountain," Densetsu declared, stopping his fingers on warm leather. "That's the way of samurai. You fight to survive, to serve your lords and your honor. But death is always with you." He nodded toward the kote. "The taking of this life may save your own, and countless others. You are in the ametrine's debt - and some debts can only be repaid with blood." His harsh voice softened, full of reverence. "That is what it is, to be samurai on this world. It's a hard path you choose, gaijin. Walk it with honor."

A Jedi lives, knowing that for the least of citizens, he may be called upon to die. "You choose the leather not only by its quality, but by the impressions left behind," Obi-Wan realized, taken aback. "You're not surprised at redheads; how did you know?"

"It's not so hard to choose, for most," Densetsu said practically. "The kote reminds you what it is to kill, and to die; browsers they may be, but ametrine tusks can jab through light hull plate, and every year there's a few hunters who don't come back. But it also has to feel like you, Kenobi-san, or the resonance will distract in a fight, rather than aid. That's not so important to lesser blade-wielders, but to someone who truly follows the way of the sword...." He lifted shaggy brows.

Get good enough, and it's the fractions of seconds that count, Obi-Wan agreed silently. And you believe I'm that good. More - you believe Kenshin is. Interesting.

"So you needed a wily one, who'd survived more than one trap meant to kill. And as for being gaijin...." Smirking, Densetsu gestured toward his own cheeks. "You'd best get a better whisker-knife. No human born of Yamato is that bristly."

It's always the little details that get you, Obi-Wan reflected wryly, almost rubbing his cheek. "And Kenshin? If I may ask, " he added hastily.

The Zabrak sighed, and drained his cup. "Grief," Densetsu said at last. "A nursing mother. I knew the man who brought that one in; to shorten a very long story, everything that could go wrong on that hunt did, and it was him or her. He did the honorable thing, tracked the fawn down and made certain it didn't suffer. I still don't know if he'll find the heart to hunt again." Dark eyes regarded him. "Why do you ask?"

"Trying to solve a puzzle," Obi-Wan said honestly. "These past few days, since our... misadventure, on the coast - well, he's been a bit jumpy around me."

"And it couldn't just be seeing an innocent man tortured, could it, my padawan?"

Obi-Wan had a sudden, odd urge to bury his head in his hands. Master!: 

"Hmm. Well, Kaoru hasn't told me about that night, but given some of the rumors about folk who fall afoul of the wrong crowd out that way...." Densetsu shook his head. "I'm not one for politics. All I can do is feel the wind. And if someone like me can tell the breeze that way prickles with a typhoon to come, Himura-san must feel it breathing down his spine."

"A vision?" Obi-Wan asked carefully, trying not to glance toward the translucent figure settling down to sit on his opposite side.

The leatherworker stifled an ungodly cackle. "Do I look like a priest?" He gave Obi-Wan a salacious wink. "And trust me, cute as he may be, Himura-san's no miko!"

"Er..." Obi-Wan hesitated, and risked honesty. "I truly have no idea what that means."
"And now, you're learning," Qui-Gon murmured. "Pay attention, padawan. It's about to get interesting."

"People afflicted with visions usually end up joining a shrine," Densetsu said soberly. "At least long enough to learn to control them. You do know what a shrine is?"

"I know Kaoru has places of honor for her ancestors, in the main house and the dojo."

"That's a start," the Zabarak nodded. "Inside shrines are for family, or a school. Outside shrines are - well, places ki is very strong."

"Light, or Dark?"

Densetsu gave him a surprised look. "Kenobi-san, I don't know how it works on other worlds, but here, most folk think it's a good idea to honor both. Some places just spawn malicious spirits, and they're a lot easier to live with if a pretty young miko sweet-talks them. How strong they are, how noble; how much everyone fears them already, so they don't need to go ravaging across the land."

"That's an... interesting strategy," Obi-Wan said slowly.

"And if it gets any more interesting, it's going to hurt your brain, hmm?" Qui-Gon laughed softly. :You're not helping, Master:.

"But I doubt Himura-san's ever had a problem with visions," the leatherworker went on matter-of-factly. "He feels more like Kaoru. Or like the shadow of ki that runs in my family. We're folk of this world, not the spirits'."

Living Force users, Obi-Wan translated. "So when you say Kenshin feels a typhoon...?"

"You don't need visions to know that much anger in one place can't be good," Densetsu said soberly. "And when you're close, it's likely he feels whatever happened to you, as well."

"Kaoru doesn't appear to share that difficulty," Obi-Wan objected.

"Kaoru wasn't old enough for the last war." Densetsu stared into his empty cup, set it down with a sigh. "I imagine you have Basic, but do you read Yamatogo?"

Obi-Wan closed his eyes a moment, checking the feel of shadowy memories impressed over his own. "I think I can manage."

"Ask Kaoru to introduce you to the local book-lenders," Densetsu nodded. "There's half a hundred histories of the Revolution out there, and you'll want to read a good dozen, at least. It was a mess." He whistled softly. "And we didn't see half the bloodshed of Kyoto."

"And Kenshin was in Kyoto," Obi-Wan realized.

"Mm-hmm. So was Kamiya Koshijirou. For a while. That's how I know it was bad; the way he came back." Densetsu shook his head. "His sword-skill saved his life, but Hana saved his spirit."

Bad memories, Obi-Wan thought, seeing how the Zabarak's gaze stared into a painful distance. "Yours is a truly amazing world," he stated, deliberately changing the subject. "The ametrine, the yawara-kai; I've never been to any planet where life itself seemed to know what to do with lightsabers...." He let his voice trail off, taking in Densetsu's sudden look of near mischief. "What?"
The leatherworker was fighting a snicker. "And you think that's an accident, Kenobi-san?"

"Err...." :Master?:

"Oh, I've heard a few versions of this already," Qui-Gon shrugged. "It should be interesting to hear Master Densetsu's take on it."

Obi-Wan tried not to smile wryly. :Master Densetsu, is it?:

"He may not be Jedi. But in his own craft? Oh yes, Padawan. A master, indeed." A flicker of a smile. "Remind me to tell you about a rather interesting potter on this planet, later."

A potter? Obi-Wan didn't quite roll his eyes. Spirit or not, this was the same man who'd once given him the magnificent present of - a rock.

Mind you, it'd been a very nice rock. But not exactly the sort of thing teenage dreams were made of. Even teenage Jedi dreams.

"Our ancestors may not have had the technology the Empire does, but they did have a few useful skills," Densetsu was saying. "Including the ability to find what they needed in the life of this world... and if they couldn't find it, to shape it."

For a moment, Obi-Wan forgot to breathe. Sith technology! He's talking about warping lifecodes!

"Indeed he is," Qui-Gon murmured. "And precisely what do you plan to do about it?"

"It's mostly lost to legend now," the Zabrak went on. "Though rumor says some of the onmitsu clans may hold the ways of working with animals. And Gensai-sensei tells me no few of the samurai doctor clans still know how to touch plants. For which we can all be grateful."

A potter? Obi-Wan didn't quite roll his eyes. Spirit or not, this was the same man who'd once given him the magnificent present of - a rock.

"It never occurred to me," Densetsu stated. "There are a few families who go through the hashima fields every seeding, checking for nutlets that might be coaxed into something new, and making sure the old varieties stay close to type. If we let it slip to just one strain, Miasma would outwit it in a generation."

The Jedi tried to gather his wits. "Why not just eliminate the carriers?"

"Mmm. I have a nephew, who has a fiancée, who works in the farms near town," Densetsu stated. "There are a few families who go through the hashima fields every seeding, checking for nutlets that might be coaxed into something new, and making sure the old varieties stay close to type. If we let it slip to just one strain, Miasma would outwit it in a generation."

"No." Dark eyes had angry shadows. "Lucky for us, Gensai says, some of the old noble families were damned if Meiji would blast their family gardens with off-world chemicals. They ended up being... refuges, I think was the word he used. For the local biters, and Tokyo Miasma. Both of which had an edge in this area, as soon as the poisons broke down a bit. Meaning we don't have Kanto Plain Miasma here. Not anymore."

The Jedi's heart clenched. "How many died?"
"There aren't any official statistics," the Zabrak said darkly. "But when the Empire got started, Tokyo had over a million citizens. Five years later, when the government finally gave up, I hear the census only dragged up seven hundred thousand." Leathery hands clenched. "Six of those were kin of mine."

Obi-Wan bowed his head. "I'm sorry."

"We take the years fate gives us." The Zabrak's smile was bittersweet as the emotions swirling through the Force about him. "Mind you, when I think about whatever madman shaped the black willows, I have to wonder that anyone goes near onmitsu." A wry grin, as he stood. "Then again, that's probably why they never admit who they are, isn't it?" Densetsu nodded toward the kote. "It's not my place to advise a samurai, but if I were-

"If you would be so kind, please," Obi-Wan said dryly.

"Take your time getting used to those before you wear them into a fight," the Zabrak stated. "Some practice sparring would certainly be wise. The swordsmen I've known all say the sharpness is... very different... from fighting bare-handed." Stepping down into his sandals, Densetsu headed out of sight toward the sounds of suds splashing and children's giggles, Kenshin's kote under his arm.

"Very different, indeed," the Jedi murmured, peeling off the kote. Letting out a relieved breath as that sense of imminent death retreated. "If that's how they prepare for a fight... a difficult path, truly."

"One that is not," Qui-Gon observed coolly, "of the Jedi."

"Kamiya Kasshin does diverge from Jedi ways," Obi-Wan admitted, keeping his voice low. "Far more than I ever would have imagined. Kaoru may not wear them often, but the difficult moves, the ones that her students must do correctly to live - yes, she wears kote for that. And she makes no apologies. As my vision of Battousai did not, for what he knew he had to do.

"Do you truly plan to keep those?"

"While I remain on this planet, it would be unwise to be seen as other than samurai," Obi-Wan observed, catching the sense of his master's frown. "Yes." Unsettling as they are. Still, there was something oddly honest about the kote. Peacemakers Jedi might be - but from the moment a youngling could walk, they were trained to kill.

"And do you plan to remain on this planet?"

"I.... There's a war going on. I should be out there. The Rebellion needs all the help it can get. But there's a Rebellion here, too; and if Kurogasa's any indication, it's gone horribly wrong. How can I leave that cancer to grow, and spread?"

Yet how can I stay? Samurai - they are and aren't like Jedi. And even a Jedi is a sentient being, with a sentient's needs. I'm lonely. It didn't matter so much on Tatooine, no one there was like me but Luke... yet I could belong here. If I chose to. I like these people. I admire Kaoru's strength, to hold this dojo, this community together. Gensai's kindness, treating a complete stranger. Even Megumi's desperation; it's a strong soul that will not take the easy path, and yield to Darkness when all seems lost. And those puzzles that have landed in my lap; Kenshin, and Battousai-

If he left, he'd leave Owen's son.
It hurt.

:Master... something's wrong with me....:

"You've been bound, my padawan." Qui-Gon regarded him with a critical eye. "He tried to break it, once you were healed - but the training of this world encourages bonds between relatives. Even those you've never known." A shift of insubstantial shoulders. "He's blocked most of it, but I imagine it pulls on him, as well."

Eyes closed, Obi-Wan searched within himself, tracing that odd impression of shadows left behind. It wasn't the same.

So beautiful...

Like a strand of spider-web, dew-gemmed with dawn. Almost too delicate to touch.

He breathed on it.

A quiver. Barely there. And... silence...

:?:

I know you!

:!

Flight. Vanishing.

Yet the bond remained. Frail. And shadowed. But real; and tasting of the same soul that had healed one Jedi, and brought grieving, merciful death to another.

My brother's son. Obi-Wan found himself swallowing an odd lump. :I can't leave him, Master. I just - can't.: A definite frown, on blue-lit features. "You'd allow emotions to control your actions."

Anathema, to Jedi. Still. :I thought you were the one who wanted me to trust my feelings?:

"Trust, yes. Allow them free reign?" Qui-Gon shook his head. "You and Yoda are all that remains of the Jedi Order. If you choose this path-"

:Forever will it dominate my destiny?: Obi-Wan cut in, impishly.

Qui-Gon was silent.

The Jedi sat up, alarmed. :Master....:

"I meant for you to find this world, and start anew," the spirit said softly. "You're kind to children. And there are orphans enough here, true orphans... a Jedi could have begun training, right under the Empire's nose. When Luke fulfills his destiny, and destroys Vader, and the Emperor...."

There could be a small group of younglings, ready to be taught, Obi-Wan finished silently. Ready to begin the Order anew.

Wait. "Could have begun"?
"But I did not see him, and I did not see her," Qui-Gon went on. "Battousai walks in shadow, and all about him changes." Blue light began to fade.

:"Master, wait!:

"I have someone to visit, Obi-Wan." A hint of laughter. "Though he thinks I'm a drunken hallucination...."

Gone.

Taking what felt like all the solidity in the universe with him.

_Breathe, and center. Breathe - never mind that it's a youngling's simple grasp of the Force, a Jedi does not yield to pride, and you need calm, now-

It felt like an eternity. But suddenly there was the eager, polite laughter of Kaoru's students taking off for the day, and a bright warmth in the Force standing just out of range of a startled strike. "What's wrong?"

"Kamiya-sensei." _Keep breathing. Slow and easy._ "I think... the past few months simply caught up with me. In part, at least," Obi-Wan amended, more softly. "I was - considering my options." He blinked, suddenly recognizing the odd feeling shaking his calm as _surprise_. "For the first time in over two decades, I actually _have_ options. The will of the Force has no one, clear path; there are many, and I simply do not know enough to choose. It's...."

"Scary?" Kaoru settled down on her knees next to him, brushing a sweaty strand of hair off her nose. "Sanosuke says, if you're in a strange port, and you can't get a good feeling about which cargo's the best to pick up, go for the one that'll let you ask the most questions. Credits don't do you any good on Kessel."

Obi-Wan laughed quietly. "So the young man does have a mind under the swagger. I suspected as much."

"Most of the time," Kaoru agreed brightly. "Even if he is a guy."

"I beg your pardon-"

She raised an impish brow at him, and Obi-Wan decided to swallow the rest of his protest. Truth told, he had observed a tendency toward a certain amount of idiocy in young male humans... even young male human Jedi.

_Like secretly marrying a young Senator-

Enough. The past was past. Did he share in the guilt? Oh, certainly. But he hadn't held a lightsaber to anyone's throat and forced them to their actions.

As Qui-Gon, he realized, was not forcing his actions now.

_He didn't say not to find Battousai. He only warned me - that if I pursue this path, nothing will be the same again._

"What is it like," Obi-Wan managed, mouth dry, "to have a family bond?"

Kaoru blinked, startled; started to speak - then settled back, brows drawn down in heavy thought. "It's warm," she said finally. "Deep. Yahiko... an apprentice bond is like my kata. He's there, he's
important; I have to pay attention to him every day, so that we both get better. I chose that.
Family... family is like air." Blue eyes sought his, determined. "My parents never let it stop them
from doing what was right. But if it came down to a choice between my life, and someone else's-
Knuckles paled as she gripped folds of her hakama. "I miss them."

You were sure - utterly and absolutely sure - that if there was danger, someone would risk
everything they were to save you, Obi-Wan realized. That someone would try. That they would
fight.

Instead of accepting. As Shmi Skywalker had accepted that her son would be forever parted from
her; as Obi-Wan had accepted Qui-Gon's dying wish to train a boy he knew was dangerous; as the
Council had accepted, ungraciously, that they must take in the Chosen One, rather than let him fall
into the hands of the Sith.

Hana chose attachment. Everything we were taught was anathema to us.

Yet her daughter glowed in the Force, calm shot through with joy like threads of gold. And if that
joy was sometimes bittersweet, tinged with what had been and was no longer... even her grief did
not feel Dark.

"I knew - someone who Fell," Obi-Wan admitted. His voice sounded normal in his own ears, and
that itself seemed wrong. It should be harsh, grating; a dark boulder, dragged over mountain stone.
"I thought it was because he had left the Code. Refused to let go of attachments. Formed new ones,
that he knew were not, would never be allowed. And it was, I know it was. But now... I wonder if
it wasn't also, in some, small way that we were blind to - the Code left him."

"Obi-Wan?"

"His mother was a slave." The Jedi kept the words short. Even. "My master bought the boy free,
but not her." He hid a wince, imagining already the firestorm his next words would bring. "And we
never went back for her." It never even occurred to me to try.

"Obi-Wan no baka!" Thwack.

She truly is well trained, the Jedi thought, blinking away the sudden burst of stars in daylight.
Good aim, perfect control, just enough force to make it hurt without being serious... ow.

"You- you-" Shaking her head, Kaoru put down the bokken she'd Force-yanked to her hand. "You
creator of an accident waiting to happen! Kami, I can't even imagine what he must have done."

"You don't want to," Obi-Wan said bleakly. "I saw it. Afterward. I saw it all." His eyes closed,
haunted. "I never knew... how much I loved those little ones..."

"Oh." A soft, hurt breath. "Oh, shh, I'm so sorry."

Sympathy. Compassion. True, honest feeling in the Force, soaking into his soul like summer rain.

I need this, Obi-Wan realized. I need the Light here. Before the Empire, I lived in a galaxy of
stars... and Sidious crushed them, in an instant. I lived, by the will of the Force - no. I continued to
exist. For twenty years, one shrouded candle in a universe of darkness.

I'm not sure I can do that anymore.

And doubt was a weapon of the Dark Side. If Sidious sensed him, if the Dark Side brought any
whisper of his wavering to Emperor's ears-
"I know where the twins are. I cannot risk that!"

"I can't even imagine what I may be choosing," Obi-Wan admitted. "My life has always belonged to the Code." Even watching over Luke, on Tatooine. It was an assignment, nothing more. "Is it possible for another teacher to join a dojo?"

Silence. He looked into blue eyes that were startled, then skeptical, then - slowly - thoughtful. Fingers flexed on her hakama; released indigo cloth, as Kaoru rose to pace away, then back, then away again.

*Always on the move.* He stretched out his senses a moment, listening to Yahiko grumble under his breath as he polished the training hall floor. *Just as well, given how much energy her apprentice has. Was I ever that impulsive?*

"It can work," Kaoru said at last, making another quick circuit. "Sometimes. It's tricky, though. People come here because they agree with the ideals of my school - my sword style. And mine's not the most popular in Tokyo. You've seen me dragging Yahiko over to Maekawa-sensei's dojo to help train there, so I can afford to keep this dojo going."

Dragging, quite literally, sometimes. On the bright side, he rather thought Yahiko was developing a fine appreciation for knots. "You're saying you can't pay me. No, no," Obi-Wan waved away her blush, "I may not have been gainfully employed for part of my life, but I do understand the need for ready credits. And given there is a spaceport here, I have a few ideas. Sanosuke, I think, can help me to gain a better grasp on what may be practical." He wasn't in the top notch of mechanics, but he knew enough to keep a ship or a droid running. And ever since that drastic emergency stopover on Tatooine decades ago, he'd made it his habit to learn where, when, and how to - ahem - *acquire* good, cheap parts in a hurry. Both skills might need a bit of dust blown off, this was not Mos Eisley... but spacers were spacers, and ports were ports. He'd manage.

"It's not that," Kaoru protested, still red. "It's the teaching. We'd have to agree on that. All of it. And I'm the head of the dojo. I'm licensed to teach Kamiya Kasshin Ryuu, by Kamiya Koshijirou's hand and seal; you're not. I'd have to observe you. To certify your training is within the style and spirit of this dojo. And given my age, and yours - I'll need Maekawa-sensei as witness, at least; it'd be better if we could bring in two or three other dojo masters. You'd have to be able to fight in my style. It'll take months."

"I've nowhere pressing to be," the Jedi observed wryly. *Owen's son is here, in Tokyo. If I haven't startled him into fleeing the system entirely. If I can live here, for months... I can take my time. I can't remember Owen, not well, but in that touch, before the fear - I felt curiosity.*

*Family members are supposed to share common traits. If he's anything like me, he's too curious for his own good. If I'm patient, if I don't frighten him... he may just find me.*

Thoughts he planned to share with his host. But - not now. Not yet. "Still, you are correct. We should certainly both take time to consider the matter thoroughly."

Kaoru flung up exasperated hands. "I don't know why you want to do it at all!"

"Because the way of the Jedi should not die from the universe." Obi-Wan sighed. "I don't imagine it will ever be the same as it was, before the Empire. Nor - painful as it is to admit - should it be. The Jedi as we were, an order that had not changed for a thousand years, were blown out like candles by Sith who had. If we must alter our ways... I will endure it. I must."

Kaoru planted her fists on her hips. *"You weren't in the Agricultural Corps."*
"As a matter of fact, I was - for near a month," the Jedi admitted, smiling. "Then my master finally admitted he was going to take yet another pathetic lifeform under his wing, and set about dragging a rather ignorant and sometimes incredibly rebellious youngster up in the way of a Jedi Knight." His smile deepened, crinkling his eyes. "You rather remind me of him. Though I can't ever remember Master Qui-Gon hauling me off mummified in ropes."

Kaoru snickered, hiding a bright-eyed grin behind her hand. "He - he wouldn't have-"

"No, likely not," Obi-Wan shook his head. "But I suspect the thought may have crossed his mind."

She gave him a skeptical look, but let it pass. "And what about Kenshin?"

Indeed. Obi-Wan kept the frown off his face, gauging his own reactions. I didn't even consider that might make a difference to this arrangement. Kenshin is simply there, whenever something needs to be done that none of us has the time or skills to do. The laundry, the garden, the cooking... The young man has a surprising gift for making himself part of the background. "Is there a difficulty with Kenshin?"

"Not exactly." Kaoru hesitated. "He doesn't interfere with training. Ever. But sometimes he does what you've been doing; sits and watches, then comes to me later if he sees someone has a problem. He's better than I am at picking up anger, sometimes."

"Those who have touched the Dark Side often are, even when they've left it long behind," Obi-Wan observed. "Do you trust him?"

"If I didn't, he wouldn't be-" Kaoru blinked. Looked toward the front gate.

Obi-Wan felt the warning chill sweep through the Force, seconds before Ayame and Suzume bolted wailing in from the garden, clinging to "Kaoru-nee-san!" and sobbing about "Soldiers...."

Kaoru rose, hand patting Ayame's loose hair as her face turned grim. "I have a-"

"Bad feeling about this?" Obi-Wan pried loose the girls, tapping one of Suzume's orange-beaded pigtails against her scalp to break the cycle of sobs before scooping them into his arms. "Maa, maa... there now. Everything will be fine."

I hope.

Chapter End Notes

Fusama - internal partition.

Ie - family; in this era, that also often included servants, apprentices, adoptees, and stray distant relatives all living under the same roof.

Kaasan - mother.

Jisan - uncle.

Miko - temple maiden.

Nighthawk - a type of prostitute.
O-u-en - "fate of the cormorant" might be one translation.

Oi! - "Hey!" Usually used by guys.

Shoji - exterior screen or door.

Zegen - "procurer"; one of those who acquired people for the various pleasure districts.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

_He found me. Oh gods, he found me._

Panting, gi still damp from the laundry - kami, what _had_ he done with the laundry? - Kenshin perched in the shadow of a roofline and tried to gather his whirling thoughts.

_I broke the bond. I know I broke it._

Yet Kenobi had reached through a strand of the Force that did not, could not exist, touching the edge of his soul with wonder, and curiosity-

_I shielded him out. I think._

_Space, he's strong!_

He forced his trembling hands still. Breathed; slow in, hold, slow out. Repeat.

_Fear is not always of the Dark Side. Fear can be rational. Fear can be used. If you know why you fear, and what will happen if you do not act anyway._

_Panic kills._

_Gods, of all the days to start carrying kote again...._  

That awful responsibility still weighed against his chest, tucked between gi and yukata. He'd had just enough time to thank Densetsu politely and see the elderly Zabrak turn to go. One second later, and... well. The leatherworker knew samurai. He'd have noticed outright panic.

_Not that it would have been hard, Kenshin thought ruefully, heart finally slowing. If I can't remember getting here... I likely didn't get here in an ordinary fashion. Even ordinary for samurai._

_Survival training. Right, Shishou._

_Though if he were honest, it was._

"_We never surrender. We never submit. We stand between the innocent and those who would slay them, and we must not fail._"

"_But we are human, baka deshi. There will be times the threat is too deadly; the enemy, too skilled and lucky to defeat. Rare times - but a shrimp like you will probably meet them more than me._"

"_And so, you will learn to run._"


"_We are the dragons of Hiten Mitsurugi. And we will not be turned!_"

None ever had. No student of Hiten Mitsurugi had _ever_ Fallen.
Not even Battousai.

_ Kaoru-dono does not understand_, Kenshin thought bleakly. _I do not want her to understand. I was not corrupted. I was not Dark. I chose to be an assassin. To support Katsura-san. Some of what I did was wrong, and I will carry that guilt forever - but how could I stand aside? How could I let people suffer, when I knew I could help?

And if she could not understand - how could a Jedi?

_He must not find me._

Well. And if he wished that not to happen... Obi-Wan was far, far from unobservant.

_To leave the laundry, and the children, without good reason - he will notice. I have no reason to be here._

No reason, save for the familiar ki now passing below.

_Megumi-dono? Out here? Now?_

Shadow drawn about him, Kenshin peered over the roof edge. Megumi, and Katsu. In the streets - Megumi in the best disguise Sano and Gensai could concoct, yes, but in _plain view._

And hours before the smugglers had planned to leave.

_Something is wrong._

Cautiously, he reached out with ki, sensing mind and heart. All seemed normal, for two souls playing the deadliest of games. Worry, relief, anticipation-

_Triumph._

The faintest flicker, in the smooth tick of Katsu's emotions. But there.

_That is not his feeling!_

Roof to roof. Quiet and quick as he could; quiet over quick, where he had to, anyone who had set this trap would be watching....

Laughing at a shared joke, the pair stepped into the shadows of a hairdresser's store.

And were gone.

_No!_

"Wait."

_A Zabrak_, Kenshin registered coldly, hand near his hilt as he turned toward that masked shift of shadows. _An onmitsu._

A gloved hand lifted, palm flat and empty of the many, many weapons of his trade. "I come to speak. Tsukioka is unharmed. For now."

"And Megumi-dono?" Kenshin stated. Still reaching for their signature, though he knew it was futile. What an onmitsu wished hidden, even a master of Hiten Mitsurugi might not find.
A masked snort. "She belongs to Kanryuu."

"She belongs to no one!"

Smashed to the roof thirty feet away, the onmitsu regained his feet, breath rasping. "For one who lives with a pair of young Jedi, you are quite passionate."

That should have flattened him, Kenshin thought coldly, left hand spread and ready to strike with another slash of ki. He is good. He would not reply to the threat against Kaoru, or Yahiko. Onmitsu never gave away secrets for free - and this one had not yet said what he wanted.

"But then, we expected no less... from Hitokiri Battousai."

So. "That man died at Toba Fushimi."

"My okashira-" the Zabrak inclined his head, granting honor to the enemy, "-doubts that. Most sincerely." Striped sleeves shifted with his shrug; a ripple, shoulder to armored glove. "Ask Sagara what service Kanryuu grants the Empire. Then ask yourself if you would truly risk your life - your hard-won peace, rurouni - for the woman who makes it possible."

That twitch - the stripes are a disguise! He's loosed a pellet-

A ki-assisted leap backward, a reflexive twist of air about him....

Smoke dissipated, venomous purple turning harmless and faint in the wind, and then gone.

As was the Zabrak.

Kenshin's fingers curled into fists.

Information. Location. Extract the hostage, and kill the taker-

No!

He was not Battousai. Not anymore. He would not be.

I... need help.

And if the cost of that help was fleeing for his life with an angry Jedi on his heels... well, as he'd told Sano, many people had sought his death before.

So long as we save Megumi, and undo the onmitsu's hold on Katsu... Kenobi-san is Jedi, but he is practical. He will not try to kill me. Not until after we are done.

Decision made, Kenshin swallowed, and turned toward the dojo. The onmitsu had been patient, drawing their prey across half the city before taking them. All the better to delay him now. He dared not use his full speed to return, not if he wished any advantage when they did launch a rescue-

:Warning!:

Blinking, Kenshin almost stumbled on landing, stopping in another nest of roof-angles to catch his breath. Kenobi was reaching out. Rattling the shield he'd set about the bond. Why?

Gingerly, he thinned the shield.
No words. Only a soft warmth, like a kitten rubbing its head against a friendly cheek.

And then, absence.

Kaoru let out a subtle *whew*, sensing Kenobi's relief. Thank the kami, the man was quick. She'd barely had time to more than hiss *who* was here, and *what* he might do to some of Gensai-sensei's less upright colleagues, if he caught them-

Before Yamagata Aritomo, samurai, former Ishin Shishi, and current leader of Yamato's Imperial forces, stalked through her dojo gate.

*I'm not going to faint. Jedi don't faint- don't think that! Samurai don't faint. And there's no one here but us maverick, antique samurai, who don't have any rebellious intentions, no way.*

*Why does he have to be so tall?*

Dark hair cut short, in the Imperial style; a mustache of the type Sano had said was common on some of the worlds between the Rim and Imperial Center. A light rain-cape thrown over Imperial grays, touched with the subtlest stitching of gold to make it fit for simple Court appearances.

Yamagata made the uniform look good. Noble. *Decent.*

It scared her.

Trying not to shiver, Kaoru clamped a hand on Yahiko's shoulder before he could make any rude faces, and flicked her attention to the officers serving as bodyguards. Three men, spreading out to search the grounds, while a rare, rather stern-faced woman remained to stand guard. All officers, all carrying blasters. No stormtroopers. Not for this man. Not *yet.*

Obi-Wan's gaze followed hers to the woman, and Kaoru caught a flicker of surprise. Felt it carefully smoothed, as the Jedi turned his attention back to the *snap* of Yamagata closing her household register. "Everyone listed is here?"

"Last I heard, that was the law, yeah," Yahiko muttered.

She stomped on his toes. "Of course," Kaoru said guilelessly. "Is something wrong? I know Myoujin Yahiko's entry into this dojo was a little... unorthodox. But Inspector Uramura assured me all the records were in order-"

A dark-eyed frown. "The children aren't yours."


"Kenobi-san's right here," Kaoru said, keeping her voice low and reassuring even as her heart felt ready to jump out of her skin. Ayame's eyes had widened, then narrowed with mischief, accepting that Kaoru-nee-san was playing a kind of game with the Scary Man. Had Yamagata noticed? Would she sense it, if he did? *Calm. Be calm.* "Everything's okay." Kaoru turned back to the Imperial. "They're Gensai-sensei's granddaughters. He's the dojo doctor. I'm sure there's a note-"

"Yes." Yamagata's face was unyielding. "As there is about two frequent guests under your roof;"
traders Sagara-" his lip curled a little at that name, "-and Tsukioka."

"Are they out gambling again?" Yahiko rolled his eyes. "I told you-" he gulped at Yamagata's look, and shrank back behind his teacher.

_Oh, scare a kid. Real impressive._ Kaoru felt her temper rising, and breathed through it. "Is there something our dojo can do for the Imperial Army, sir?"

Yamagata ignored her, locking eyes with Obi-Wan. "Kenobi?"

"Kenobi Obi-Wan," the Jedi bowed, antique and proper. "Kamiya-sensei is allowing me to guest here, yes."

"Gaijin don't usually register as rurouni," Yamagata observed.

"I was quite ill." Sea-green eyes were guileless. "I believe no one wished to make a mistake in the characters for my name."

That won a faint hint of smile, there and gone. "A sun-haired wanderer, dressed as a samurai." Yamagata shook his head, and sighed. "My apologies, Kamiya-san. Chasing the ghost of hope can make a man... less than polite."

Kaoru gave him a civil, accepting smile, mind racing. _Why is that woman frowning? Why do I feel like she's the danger?_

"You had word of an old friend?" Obi-Wan asked innocently. "Strange, that he wouldn't try to contact you."

_Agh! No! Just let him go, darn it!_

"He might not have known who to contact," Yamagata observed. "He knew Yamagata Kyousuke, years ago; he may not have heard of Aritomo. Though I doubt it."

"An old comrade, then," Obi-Wan stated. "From a time names were less than fixed and known." He smiled at Yamagata's sharp look. "History's rather a hobby of mine."

"Some hobbies are more dangerous than others." Yamagata looked up as his officers returned, shaking their heads. Frowned. "Nothing?"

"The damage in the training hall matches the file," the youngest man reported. "We've found a few red hairs, but they're all matches to our scan of Kenobi-san."

_Kenshin burns his hair. Always. You think we're hiding someone?" Kaoru sputtered. "I demand to see a reason for this search! This is a registered dojo, licensed by law-"

"A license that could easily be revoked," Yamagata bit out. "Restrain yourself, young woman. Your father was loyal, but a bit too friendly with... unreliable elements. Don't give me reason to believe you share his nature."

"How odd," Obi-Wan said absently, before she could gather a blast of terrified fury. "This begins to sound less and less like a comrade, and rather more like a fugitive. Or even," he shrugged, "a traitor."

"He would _never_!" Yamagata breathed heavily, glaring at the Jedi. "We parted in the wake of an argument. I only want to find him, and explain."
"Only?" Obi-Wan's gaze indicated the armed officers, one auburn brow lifted.

Yamagata's mustache curled. "Some explanations take time-"

Shock. Kaoru felt it ripple through the Force; a quickening of heart and breath as something in the tilt of Obi-Wan's head, the wry twist of humor in his voice, caught Yamagata's full attention. Something that made him look past gaijin to unknown samurai.

And in the wake of shock, there was calculation. And fear.

"We're done here," Yamagata said briskly, gathering his people in with his eyes. "For now."

"Not good," Obi-Wan muttered under his breath, after the gates were barred and the Imperials out of sensing range. "I'd hoped he wouldn't notice."

"Notice what?" Yahiko crossed his arms, and glared. "What'd you do?"

"Nothing," Obi-Wan sighed. "Nothing at all." He plopped a squirming two-year-old into the boy's hands. "Take the girls to the garden, if you would. Your teacher and I need to talk. Alone."

_Urk. But-_ She held up a hand when Obi-Wan would have spoken, _listening._

As that faint trembling in the Force told her someone else was listening.

:Out of my dojo. Now.:  

Dark amusement. As if a little girl could be any threat....

:I am Kamiya Kaoru. Assistant Master of Kamiya Kasshin. If you continue to violate the sanctity of my training hall, I will bring my grievance and my memory of your ki-signature to every dojo master in Tokyo. Get. Out.:  

A creeping, cold fury, like the first breath of frost after a winter's night-

:Don't try it, Koubai.: Obi-Wan's voice in the Force was level. Almost amused. :Kaoru's caught you fairly. And she doesn't make threats. The one you seek for Yamagata is not here - if, indeed, you're truly working for Yamagata at all. An option I doubt he's thought of, the man is remarkably straightforward for a politician... but if someone were to raise that thought, I think he would find it worthy of consideration. Yes, indeed I do....:

Absence.

"Well." A half-smile lingered on Obi-Wan's face as he dusted off his hands. "That was enlightening."

Kaoru gulped, glad Yahiko had slunk out of hearing range. "The kunoichi from Yoshiwara!"

"In yet another disguise. Intriguing. Yamagata must want Battousai very badly, indeed." Calculation flickered across his face, smoothing into resignation. "I fear I must apologize, Kamiya-sensei. I've brought a great deal of trouble to your doorstep, when you've more than enough of your own."

"Uh... huh?" Kaoru blinked as the Jedi bowed low; utter, formal apology. "Don't do that, it's all right-"

"No. It most certainly is not." His head dipped, resigned. "I've not told Sano or Kenshin this, I
wanted to work it through on my own. But I am sheltering under your protection, and doubts or not, I should have told you." He sighed. "Saigo didn't give me into Kurogasa's hands because I was an off-worldeer. I was meant to be bait."

"Bait?" Kaoru repeated blankly. Torture a ki-wielder to lure in his allies; it was a classic staple of bunraku and kabuki. "But... you're not part of this dojo yet, and you don't have any students."

"But I do have relatives." Obi-wan caught her wrist, a warrior's clasp. "Promise me you won't do anything rash."

"Rash?" Kaoru sputtered. "They're your relatives, Obi-Wan, they can't be - well - I-

"I have reason to believe," his voice dropped, almost a whisper, "my brother's son... became Hitokiri Battousai."

Calm. A Jedi is... calm.

Wordless, Kaoru pointed toward the house. Let Obi-Wan follow her inside, and make tea for them both.

Cup in hand, she stared into steaming green. "All right." Her voice was flat in her own ears. Stunned. Just let him not know all of why I'm shaking.

"You'd have to have a really good reason to believe that."

Surprise brushed her through the Force. "I would have thought you'd be demanding to know where he is. Given his reputation as a Darksider."

"I went after Gohei because he was murdering people. Battousai... I'm trying to be a Jedi, not a suicidal idiot."

"He's that skilled?"

"My father said he was incredible." Kaoru felt tears prick; willed them away. Not now. Remember the good times. "'Tousan didn't like to talk about the Revolution. Not ever. But he said, without Battousai, Choushuu might have collapsed."

"Which would explain why Yamagata searches for him, even now," Obi-Wan mused. "No one allows a weapon of that quality out of their reach. Either you acquire it for your own arsenal... or you make very certain no one else can use it, ever." His voice turned grim. "I rather think Saigo is tending toward the latter option."

Oh no. No, no, no... "But why would they think you-?" Kaoru couldn't finish the thought.

"Apparently, my family was required to leave gene-scans with the local authorities," Obi-Wan stated. "I match to Owen, and Owen... matches to a blood sample Saigo kept hold of, whose clan origins may be unknown, but whose source is." He sipped his tea, obviously gathering himself. "Kurogasa confirmed it with a sample from me. And then proceeded to torture me, to lure my nephew in to die." A shadow of a smile. "I would I could tell Kenshin how very grateful I am he got there first. But given how frightened he seems to be of the very mention of the assassin-" Obi-Wan shrugged. "Best to leave some secrets untold, I think. I'm only glad I remembered he was wanted, else I might never have picked up on your cues to hide his presence from Yamagata. Though why someone with that level of power would have any reason to recognize a minor warrior in Katsura's command..."

I'm not going to laugh. I'm not. Though laughing was probably better than screaming. "Just what
did Kenshin tell you?” Kaoru asked warily.

The Jedi frowned. "That when he left the Ishin Shishi, Katsura accepted his commander's reasons for leaving, but Saigo did not. I know that if what I understand of the times is accurate, Saigo and Yamagata were working together, but that still doesn't explain-" He stopped. Sat for a moment, face still. "Kenshin knows some rather subtle details about Saigo. Yet Saigo was of Satsuma - and Kenshin was of Choushuu. If what I've been told is accurate, the two clans did not interact well. Or at least, not at the level of the average soldier." He lifted an auburn brow. "Precisely who was Kenshin's commander?"

"Katsura," Kaoru said flatly. And if I could thump a dead man, I would!

Sea-green widened slightly; narrowed in serious thought. "So when Kenshin told me he hoped Yamagata wouldn't recognize him-"

"He was being very, very literal," Kaoru said wryly. "Did you think he looked that scruffy by accident? Most of the high-ranked Ishin Shishi - they're politicians now. High commanders. Satsuma rules the police force like their own private fief; Choushuu's got the Imperial Armed Forces. Yamagata's looking for someone with power."

"Instead, Kenshin became an outcast. To hide." Obi-Wan nodded. "I'm familiar with the tactic. But why is he hiding? Surely, a healer can't be considered that dangerous."

"He was... kind of a messenger between feuding forces," Kaoru said cautiously. Aggressive negotiations... not going to think about that. Just not. "He knows a lot of secrets."

"Hence the paranoia."

Not trusting her voice, Kaoru nodded.

"As if there weren't enough complications already." Obi-Wan swirled his tea in his cup, absently taking in the scent. "I certainly don't want to scare the young man out of a place of safety, simply for my own convenience. Yet with Yamagata looking at this dojo, it may no longer be safe."

"And he'd be looking at this dojo because-?" Kaoru asked, sitting on her impatience.

"He recognized me." A wry smile. "Or I should say, he recognized something about me that reminded him of Battousai. I felt it change the flow of the Force about him. One moment the future was untroubled, as you would expect of an officer looking at a simple off-worlder named Kenobi; the next, it shifted. Sharpened." He met her gaze squarely. "He knows he's found a key. Whether he'll dare to use it, I do not know."

"A vision?" Kaoru said, throat dry. Her gift was the Living Force, not Unifying. She could feel people; seeing the future, beyond the next moment in a fight, was out of her reach.

"No. Just a feeling. I've learned to pay attention to those."

"We can manage that pretty well ourselves." Kaoru gave him a hard look. "Are you going to do something rash? Yahiko told me you think Gensai knows where your relative is."

"He does," Obi-Wan gave her a rueful smile. "Try not to be too hard on him, would you? Trying to balance the calling of one young patient and friend against the future necessities of other patients, such as myself, who might find themselves in dire need of rare healing skills - it's a very hard call for a physician to make."
"I won't hit him that hard," Kaoru muttered, glaring at her tea. Glanced back up at a prickle of curiosity. "What?"

"You don't seem surprised." Sea-green was studying her, intrigued.

Kaoru gaped for a moment, thinking fast. "W-well, I was - outside. The clinic. When you were-"

"Screaming?" Obi-Wan said wryly.

"It was pretty scary," Kaoru admitted. "I'd never felt anything... anyone... like that before." She gulped. "Dr. Gensai told me, when most people get that sick - they die. Even in the Imperial Medical Center." *Keep going. Just keep going.* "And... I told you 'Tousan didn't like to talk about the Revolution. That's true. It just isn't all the truth. He wouldn't talk to me. I know he talked to Dr. Gensai."

"And Yamagata said your father knew Battousai," Obi-Wan observed. Glanced at her again, mild reproof written all over his face. "Kamiya Kaoru. Were you protecting me?"

"You're a Jedi. He was an assassin. Cat, mouse, come on." She scraped together a smile. "So if I say yes, are you going to be mad?"

His face eased, almost smiling. "Kaoru-"

The comm warbled.

She scrambled for it, almost dropping her tea. "Kamiya dojo."

"Drag over those notes your guest picked up on our problem," Sano's voice said grimly. "Drag him over too, if he's up to it. Katsu's missing."

Kaoru didn't quite bang her head against the console. "Again?"

"Worse." If Sano's tone got any darker, it'd leave soot marks on the speaker. "This time, we know where he is."

"Kanryuu mansion." Sano scowled at the holographic projection, wondering exactly how much arm-twisting it had taken for Uramura to hand this info over.

"It is," Kenshin said precisely, "the most likely place for them to have been taken."

*Then again, may not have been an arm that got twisted.* Sano followed Kenshin's swift glance at the Sekihoutai's bulkhead, as if the rurouni could see through hull-plate and docking bay walls alike. "They're here?"

Kenshin nodded. "One will-"

"Stay right here and keep plotting," Sano growled, stalking down-ship toward the open docking ramp. "I want that idiot back in one piece, damn it." *I hate this. I really, really hate this. Had to let you plot out how to snatch Kenobi; I was kind of out of options, and takes a samurai to catch a samurai. But to count on you to get Katsu back....* Cool your jets and think, flyboy. Would you let that idiot redhead plot a course through hyperspace? No? Then grit your teeth and let him do what he's good at.
And hope what Kaoru brought makes a difference.

Stomping down the ramp, the smuggler dug frustrated fingers into spiky hair, and glared at the trio where he'd hoped for just two. "No way you're bringing the brat, Jou-chan."

"Hey!"

Kaoru's lips thinned, but she didn't smack either of them over the head. "Yahiko goes where I go."

"This isn't an Imperial idiot like Ujiki, Jou-chan," Sano argued. "This is Takeda Kanryuu. People who cross this guy don't get shipped off to Kessel. They wind up in coffins. His own guys end up floating in the river if he doesn't like their work."

"Uh-huh." Yahiko rolled his eyes. "And how's that different from Tanishi?"

"Two words, kid. Money. Power. Tanishi was a guppy. Kanryuu's a damn sea dragon." Sano shot a glare at their silent third, unarmed except for one of Kaoru's heavy wood bokkens. "You've been around the galaxy, Kenobi. Talk to these idiots."

"Some battles must be fought." The off-worlder held up a datapad. "I believe this is the information you requested?"

Sano let out a frustrated breath. "Yeah, bring it in and let Kenshin at it. For a samurai fresh out of the backwoods, guy sure knows how to pull info out of thin air...." Um. Oops?

Kenobi didn't seem to notice, heading into the ship at an unhurried pace. Kaoru shot him a glance, though, miming sealed lips, followed by a definite mock swing at his head.

**Right. Not mentioning just who we've got pulling tactics together. But this is the guy I pulled off an Imperial shuttle, Kaoru. He's got to notice something's screwy.**

If he did, it was subsumed by a general frown at the whole situation, as Kenobi let his fingers drift from point to questionable point on the hologram of the mansion. "This is the official security grid?"

"Takeda-san claims to be an honest businessman." Kenshin finished tapping commands on the datapad, nodding as new information began appearing on the original hologram. "Such a claim brings some measure of protection from official scrutiny, yet it also means limits to how much his defenses can deviate from these records."

"Claims to be?" Kenobi raised a questioning brow.

"He's a drug dealer," Sano growled.

"Spice? Deathsticks?"

"Just the tip of the iceberg. He deals in specialties." Sano's hands curled into fists. "And the Empire's funding it."

"Funding what?" Kaoru asked.

"Mind-rapers."

Yahiko looked from Kenshin's stillness, to Sano's white knuckles, to his teacher's bitten lip. "Um...."
"It was a rumor, in certain circles," Obi-Wan said levelly. "Compounds that might make the will pliable, and... solidify... loyalty, while leaving ordinary reasoning intact. A certain fraction of Imperial-trained pilots have an unsettling habit of deciding they've chosen the wrong side." He met Sano's gaze. "Anyone who could produce such compounds, illegal as they would be, would find a great deal of unofficial support."

"It's called Spider's Web," Sano said flatly. "Does what the Imperials want. Makes the guys on it homicidal sadists, but it works. Katsu blew up a bunch of it, back while we couldn't find him."

"Which is when the onmitsu first laid their influence on him, one believes," Kenshin murmured, tracing certain small alterations in the holographic mansion. "A compulsion. To lay in wait... and bring Megumi-dono to them, when it was time."

"Katsu would never-!" The protest died on Sano's tongue, in face of those sad violet eyes.

"Anyone can be broken, Sanosuke," Kenshin said softly. "One can resist. One can keep a core of one's self intact. Untouched. But with enough time, enough pain - anyone can be broken." The redhead folded his hands together, staring into memory. "They did not have him long. The damage can be mended. If he has the courage to face what he has done." He paused. "If we were to accept their offer, he would be away from them sooner. But one does not believe that would improve the situation; that I do not."

"How in the worlds would that not-" Sano stopped. Looked at the stern set of Kenshin's shoulders, and Kaoru's white face. Oh no. Damn it, no! "They want a trade."


"But why the hell-" Facts crashed together, and Sano had a sudden desire to hit something. "She's a doctor. A damn ki-trained doctor, working for Kanryuu."

"Spider's Web is extracted from plants she has shaped. One believes so, yes."

*I can get Katsu back. And all it'd cost me would be- "And you want to rescue the witch-!"

Violet never flinched. "Yes."

"Why the hell would you do that?"

"Because she's the only one who knows how the drug is created," Obi-Wan said levelly. "Takeda would never be so desperate to get her back, if he had any other way of producing his prize." His voice softened. "I know it's difficult, but we have to think beyond one life-"

Sano took one long stride to glare down at the off-worlder, and never mind that a samurai could probably stand him on his head without even blinking. "Not when it's Katsu's life, I don't!"

"That's enough, Sano." Kenshin's voice was hard. "It doesn't suit you."

"I fly. I move cargo. I get paid. If it's the Rebellion, fine. If it's just regular people, fine. If it screws the Empire, terrific. But I'm not risking my friend's life just for some damn Rebel's greater good!" He spit out his fishbone, and glared right back. "I'm not soft like you! I'm no rurouni!"

The swordsman never wavered. "Did you ever see Megumi-dono's eyes, Sano?"
"She acted hard as any port rat, but sometimes... she watched us with such loneliness." Kenshin's
gaze dipped aside, to where Kaoru had gathered Yahiko close to her shoulder. "Like an abandoned
child, looking for the family she had lost." Steel-blue met wavering brown. "No noble causes,
Sanosuke. No greater good. One life, one soul, who has no other hope for rescue. Whatever reason
a man needs to act... for this one, that is more than enough."

He didn't know what to say. He didn't know what to think.

Mind blank, he glanced at Kenobi. Who looked as though Kaoru had caught him with a bokken
when he wasn't looking.

Makes me feel better about this already. Letting out a frustrated huff, Sano stuffed his hands in his
trouser pockets. Glanced at Kaoru.

Her shoulders relaxed, and she stepped forward to look over the hologram herself. "Um... one
problem." Kaoru looked over her pair of redheads. "These onmitsu are good. Which means they've
studied us. Which means they probably know we're coming."

Yahiko's eyes widened. "It's a trap?"

"Give the kid a gold credit," Sano muttered. Glared at Kenobi. "And why are you grinning?"

"Well." Obi-Wan shrugged, smile still a faint shadow on his face. "I have a policy on traps...."

"Without numbers, it's speed. We break the gate and run."

Flung by Sano's too-helpful arm, Yahiko landed in the midst of the remaining blaster corps, ki
snatching the head thug's weapon before he could blink. And I hated being a pickpocket. Huh.
Never know what comes in handy.

Which was all the distraction everyone else needed.

A few cracks. A few yelps. One spate of panicked blubbering, cut off by a rising slice of Kaoru's
training saber to a fragile jaw.

The mansion courtyard was suddenly, eerily quiet.

Whoa.

Jaw dropping, Yahiko stared back at the path of destruction they'd carved through
Kanryuu's front gates.

Literally.

Lightsaber shimmering blue, Kenshin had slashed one quick X through ostentatious black metal;
then three blasts of ki and one very ticked-off smuggler had hit it at once, flattening the first guards
before they could blink.

The next set of thugs had just - barely - had time to stare at them, and fumble after blades-

Before a red streak was in them, and bodies were flying left, right, and center.

:Remember, stay to my left,: Kaoru's voice in Yahiko's head had ordered, calm and excited at once.
I'll parry if they have blasters; you and Obi-Wan sweep up the guys who aren't smart enough to run from Sano.

Yeah, right, I heard it the first time.

Which was just as well, because the third bunch had had blasters.

And I thought Kenshin was moving before...

Red had blurred, the motion drawing panicked blaster-sights across the courtyard even though Sano and Kaoru were far, far closer-

Yahiko couldn't remember exactly what had happened after that, he'd been snatched by an idiot smuggler somewhere in the middle - but when the world slowed down again, his team was standing.

The bad guys weren't.

Is this what Jedi can do?

Sure seemed that way, given how much attention Kenobi wasn't paying to the chaos. The off-worlder had dug into the guards' comm console with a vibroblade and a few of Kaoru's neat slicer toys, auburn brows drawn down in concentration as he jammed every last alarm that should have been going off. "Ten minutes, I think," he murmured. "Fifteen at the outside. The city security systems may be old-fashioned, but they are efficient."

Near Kenobi's feet, a guard groaned, eyes uncrossing. Blinked, and grabbed for his holster-

Thwack.

Not even looking, the Jedi absently switched his grip on his bokken, batting the freed blaster well out of reach. "There's no tracking system for individual personnel. There are floodlights for the garden in the back, observation cameras for greenhouses within the gardens - I'll need a moment to slice into their feed - bedrooms, a ballroom, an observatory on the third floor-"

Kenshin nodded. "They will be there."

"Why?" Kaoru asked, still breathing fast.

"Because you are right, Kaoru-dono. It is a trap." Violet eyes lifted to the night-lit mansion, narrowing to blue. "And the onmitsu know this one is here."

He is here.

A ghost of a smile touched Aoshi's lips, as the okashira watched Takeda Kanryuu stalk past a glassy-eyed Katsuhiro to Megumi's shivering form. That shadow of ki, in the courtyard below, that to trained senses glowed like stardust on a moonless night...

In the years of Meiji, most patriots have rotted beyond recognition. But that one's spirit is still fresh.

As were those who followed him. Burning suns to Battousai's starlight; easy to sense, to predict. Yet dangerous all the same.
But are they dangerous enough?

No way of knowing. Events fluxed around Battousai like ore in a smelting vat; the future would not settle to any one vision.

The stage is set. My men know their parts. Be in the moment.

And the moment was Kanryuu's gloved hand caressing Megumi's chin, calling her his darling....

And a flash of simple steel across elegant clothes, drawing a red spurt of pain.

"I knew if they took me, they'd bring me to you." Megumi's eyes narrowed with determination. "The law can't hold you. The oaths of those who heal are so much dust under your feet, to be trod on and swept away." Steel gleamed as her fingers flexed on the grip, gathering her resolve for another strike. "But I can stop you. Here. Now."

Dripping blood, Kanryuu shrank back. "You'll never get out of here alive!"

"I never meant to." Dark eyes were cold. "I told you I'd rather die than return."

Kanryuu's head jerked toward the oblivious smuggler. "If I die, he dies!"

Megumi's gaze never flickered. "One more death on my soul? Small change, against all those Spider's Web has driven to kill." Implacable as the tide, she advanced. "This is the only apology I can offer my victims. We're falling to hell together...."

Her hand landed against Kanryuu's shoulder, empty.

Aoshi toyed with her blade, savoring the feel of rage and despair. Yes. This will have set the bait nicely. "Let's stop here."

Megumi paled. Kanryuu stammered, then flushed-

"Wretch!"

Calm, Aoshi watched her crumple to the floor, shuddering as Kanryuu's kicks struck home. Good. The pain will draw them faster.

Though if the heart carrying that pain stopped, they would have a problem. Face still, Aoshi prepared to move-

"Call my men!" Kanryuu drew back with one last contemptuous nudge of polished boots to ribs, sending her limp form sprawling. "We'll torture the spell out of her!"

"They won't come."

"What?" Kanryuu sputtered. "Why?"

Feeling Hyotokko's fire unleashed as if the flames licked his own skin, Aoshi all but smiled. "Listen and you'll understand."

Our bait has caught us a patriot from twenty years gone....

That man is prey for the Oniwabanshuu!
Great balls of fire, indeed, Obi-Wan thought, hand just barely jerked up in time to deflect flames aside with a plea to the Force. As if I needed Corellian cantina songs in my head at a time like this...

He had to abandon his push against the flames, diving aside from a fist larger than his head. The man was huge enough to put Dex Jettster to shame.

And - from the poison darts now flinging here, there, and everywhere - not alone.

Oh, this is going to be interesting.

He sank into the flow of the Force, parrying and dodging, fitting the rhythm of his movements around his comrades. The small cat-eyed onmitsu they'd met before was skilled, yes, and strong in the Dark Side. Still, he should have been only a match for one Jedi. Not three.

Except one of us has only the start of Shii-Cho parries, and none of us have full-fledged lightsabers, Obi-Wan thought ruefully, heavy wood catching a dart before it could break through Yahiko's unpracticed guard. Kaoru's 'saber hummed through space on her student's opposite side, searing down three darts in one swing. It's like taking a stick to a nest of raptor-wasps. Smashing darts down helps for a moment, but he can just scoop them up again with the Force.

And their only true lightsaber was... well, busy.

"Burn!"

"Not one strand of this one's hair will you burn, you freak show."

The Dark Side flexed familiar strength, and Obi-Wan felt his heart clench. When Anakin burned Ke Daiv from the inside out... Kenshin, that's not just fire!

Flame and telekinetic fury whooshed against a whirling blue blade, dashed against Kenshin's Force presence like waves against a cliff.

I didn't know you could do that with a lightsaber.

He could only see fragments; Kenshin parting the flames like water, Sano moving in his wake to go fist-to-fist with the choking fire-breather three times his size. But they seemed to have the giant more or less in hand, which was more than he could say for their still-growing dart problem-

There!

Unlike raptor-wasps, the darts were controlled by one mind. And even the best mind, with so many objects to fling, fell into patterns.

He went high. Kaoru went low.

Cr-ack!

Kneecap and skull broken, the cat-eyed onmitsu crumpled.

"Hah. Heh." Kaoru dragged in a ragged breath, smile breaking out through the sweat. "Whew...."

Obi-Wan grinned back at her, helping a swearing Yahiko off dart-littered ground. "Good to be alive, isn't it? Now, I believe we should-"
For a second, he thought yet another tremor had hit; the planet seemed prone to them, to the point that shoppers in the street barely twitched when the ground shook beneath them.

Flesh and cotton was a mountainous mass on the ground. Kenshin was still, blade posed with tip low, letting fire and Dark energy drip free. Smoldering about the edges, Sano shook out a fist, swearing.

"Somehow, I don't think they need our help," Kaoru chuckled.

"To be sure."

The last flame dripped, flickered out; blue light vanished. "There are more inside."

More? *And I thought the Order had enough problems when we only met one Sith at a time.* He released a shiver of nerves to the Force, and followed fast.

*As CorSec would say, crime pays very well, indeed.*

Elegant opulence breathed from the mansion's polished wood and marble, rainbow-glazed ceramics, high, gilt-washed halls. He'd seen Senators' apartments with less ornamentation.

*Though not many,* Obi-Wan admitted. *Which should have warned us all something was amiss with the Senate decades before Palpatine. If we'd only opened our eyes and looked-*

*:Live in the present, Padawan.*:

A warning. And a welcome one. For a moment painted wood seemed to fade to gray durasteel, and grief....

*It's not Maul.*

Yet it was a Zabrak, with the Dark Side strong about him. Waiting, striped arms crossed, like a mountain shrouded in perpetual night.

"I am Han'nya," came the low growl, "master of intelligence of the Edo Castle Oniwabanshuu."

*The who? Wait - Tokyo was called Edo, before the Empire took hold here-*

"By order of the okashira, I will defend this spot to the death!"

*This spot. The mansion floorplan - what Kenshin's source found-*

Kenshin was point. As they'd planned. But Yahiko was out of place, just a foot ahead of where he should be.

Kaoru's hand whipped out.

*Yes, get him back here, this is going to be tricky as it is-*

Yahiko yelped; not dragged back, but flung further forward.

Just as the floor dropped away.

Breathing deep, Obi-Wan let himself fall, hearing the swears and shouts as his younger comrades tumbled after him down the revealed chute.
Good to know some things are still going according to plan....

Chapter End Notes

Bunraku - puppet plays, often done with near man-size mannequins.

Kabuki - Japanese drama; a lot of plots were drawn from bunraku.

Slicer - SW term for hacker, unorthodox computer programmer.

Obi-Wan's policy on traps? "Spring the trap."
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The floor clanged shut again, leaving a panting young sword student and a grim hitokiri behind.

*They weren't surprised.*

Han'nya was less than amazed himself. Hitokiri Battousai had been legendary for his ability to penetrate the most highly guarded chambers, even with little to no advance warning. Ki alone couldn't explain it.

*You know the value of intelligence. And you know where to find it, when anyone else would think it impossible.*

It was good to know twenty years hadn't dulled the assassin's blade.

"Such struggle is unnecessary." The blue blade was low, casual; almost not a guard at all. "Won't you let us pass?"

*And then again....* "Commands of the okashira-" Han'nya scraped the knuckles of his gauntlets against each other, relishing the keening, "-are absolute."

Yes. Not a flinch of eye or body; but that darker glint in Battousai's ki spoke of *pain.*

*So. He is of Sunrider blood, as we suspected. Their hearing is excellent... and vulnerable.*

"A fight seems inevitable." The lightsaber rose; a deceptively relaxed guard, continuing the line of a bent knee. "Yet against such skill, one cannot hold back."

"The same to you." He settled into stance, grinning behind his mask. "Let's go."

*Reverse-strike!*

Himura was a narrow-eyed blur, moving aside-

All the force of durasteel impacted against the unscarred cheek, drawing blood.

*Surprised you, have I, Battousai? It won't be the last time.*

A whirl, and his backhand blasted the redhead to the floor.

*He's down!*

Exulting, Han'nya drew back a fist, flung it forward with all his anger to crush-

Found himself knuckle-deep in marble dust, as the hitokiri rose to his feet yards away.

*Fast little human.*

"You idiot!" The youth's feet almost impacted with Himura's head. "What are you getting all beat up for? You're faster than that!"

"Speed is not all of the Hiten, Yahiko-kun." Violet studied the onmitsu, beginning to glint blue.
"Timing. That is the key. Punches, strikes, dodged by a paper's width. But at the last moment-" steel-blue narrowed, "-his arms stretched!"

So it would seem, yes. "What's wrong, Battousai?" Han'nya stalked forward, closing the distance once more. "Surely your powers are more than this!" The redhead did not flinch, but the boy behind him was sweating. Only a little more, and he would break.

Yes. Fear me, little Jedi-to-be. Your kind cannot survive our world. You should not even try. "If you can't even break my spell, you won't last a minute against the okashira!"

Fear crested, delicious boost to shadow's power-

Vanished, in a casual shift of Battousai's hands on his lightsaber grip. "A spell, is it?" His stance settled, firm and triangular; his arm extended higher than the familiar sword-form of seigan, blade parallel to the ground and pointing at his enemy's forehead. "Annoying... yet easily broken."

"Kenshin? What the heck-?"

Of course, the boy wouldn't know. He should. He should know what he sees destroyed. "The form of shinken," Han'nya growled. "An ancient defensive stance, that allows its user to react instantly to any change in his opponent's strikes. But defensive! Don't tell me you shrink from this!"

Silence.

"Answer me!"

The swordsman only stared at him. Steady. Unflinching. Peaceful.

Is this the true face of the legendary hitokiri?

"I was a fool to offer you respect!" The onmitsu gathered rage and calculation; let it flow like lava through his veins, driving him forward. "A being like you... you've no right to face the okashira!"

You die where you stand!

His left fist shattered air past the length of glowing blue, darkness extending the force of his punch beyond the reach of flesh and bone-

Brushed through only a fringe of scarlet bangs.

Impact.

The onmitsu reeled back, mask cracked and splitting, head ringing in the wake of a 'saber-strike that should have cleft him from crown to navel.

The rumors are true... he uses the gentle blow. But why...?" Yahiko's delight was a searing light in ki. "You figured it out!"

"Uh-huh." A smile tickled Battousai's aura. "Kaoru-dono has told you, the eyes can deceive. The sideways stripes are the outer layer, tricking the senses; within - the strength of ki, to stretch the force of muscle and bone beyond what one can physically touch, and land a direct blow at the very moment of dodging. The shadow strike." The hitokiri's voice rose slightly. "One regrets to tell you, Han'nya-san, one has seen that spell before. The Yaminobu, within the Forest of Barriers, knew it well."

He survived the Yaminobu onmitsu. "So... your shinken was not only defense! Your blade held
parallel, to measure the true distance-

"And as the lightsaber is the weapon strongest within ki, one could sense its length against the force of your blow." The red head dipped slightly. "Again, one will say this fight is unnecessary."

"Never more necessary." Han'nya clenched his fists, releasing vibroblade claws from the black of each gauntlet. "Beyond me is my okashira - my reason to live! You go no farther!"

Claws out, he charged.

"Yahhh!"

Fumbling his blaster out in the fluxing artificial gravity of the chute, Sanosuke tried not to tangle himself up in a pair of samurai. Good thing Jou-chan likes ponytails; loose hair in this would strangle us all....

His stomach yelped and objected, as the up-and-sideways rattle of powered repulsors gave way to the drop of true gravity. The fall wasn't much, just ten misty feet into what seemed like an ordinary, if slightly spiky, cluster of vines-

Sano fired.

The twisted plant squealed and writhed, tumbling away before they landed.

Obi-Wan touched down on spongy moss with a samurai's uncanny grace, staring about the damp, and sometimes slavering, greenery with a look of pure shock. "What is this place?"

"Kiya!" Kaoru came down in a slashing crouch, the touch of her 'saber searing back a filmy web in a wisp of purplish smoke. The shoumi no tsuta shuddered, sinking back against its host tree's trunk.

"Private greenhouse," Sano stated. "Carnivorous plants. Slightly dangerous. Where Kanryuu does a lot of entertaining." Weren't you listening when Kenshin told you?

"Sagara, where I come from, slightly dangerous does not include eats people!"

"Oh. Yeah."

"Heh. Like a samurai's got anything to worry about." The voice was deep. Amused.

And came with an electric crackle, as something ruby and bright lashed towards Sano's face.

Move!

The smuggler trusted the impulse, flinging up his blaster even as he rolled aside. Lightwhip! Oh, man...

Smoking, the two halves of Sano's weapon fell aside.

The red lash recoiled, hovering near wild dark hair, a scar-laced smirk. "Keeper of the castle gate, Edo... Shikijou."

Big, Sano admitted, taking in the scars that netted bare chest and face, the muscles that defied the scars. Not as massive as that flame-thrower, but big.
And where the flame-breathing onmitsu's eyes had still been human... Shikijou's were pure, angry yellow.

"My way to say hello." Ruby writhed. "Hello!"

Sano dodged the snap of energy; saw Kaoru slap the whip sideways and duck, before the lash could tangle her 'saber. "I don't suppose we could possibly talk about this?" Obi-Wan sighed.

"Nothing to talk about. Best guys go to the best guys. Han'nya gets your little friend." Scarred lips curled, twisting the word. "And I get the third-rate leftovers."

"Third-rate?" Kaoru fumed, rising into stance.

"Calm. Use the Force. Think," Obi-Wan murmured. "With someone so enmeshed in the Dark Side, this will not be an easy battle."

"Easy fight's not what he wants." Brushing vine-bits off his jacket, Sano stepped into plain view. "What say we make this a little more interesting, muscle-head?"

The whip coiled, but didn't strike, wary of a trap. "You got a death-wish, little smuggler?"

"Nah... just like to play the odds." Sano smirked right back, covering the knot in his gut. *Greenhouse is going to eat me alive anyway. Don't care how good Kaoru and Kenobi are, they can't cover me and fight an onmitsu at the same time.* "One on one. No blasters. No lightwhips. No blood-sucking leaf-molds; those two'll keep 'em off both of us. Just you, me - and we'll see who's third-rate."

"Hah!" Shikijou snorted, a wave of hand flinging aside a hollow-thorned branch that had crept too close. "And you expect me to believe that?"

"We're samurai," Kaoru said firmly, 'saber casting blue shadows over her hair. "If that's what Sano wants, you have our word." She glanced at Kenobi.

"Fight with honor," the off-worlder said thoughtfully, lifting his wooden blade to guard. "And do try to stay alive, would you?"

*Kind of the plan, yeah... where's his mind blasted off to? Looks like he's systems away.*

Shaking his head, Shikijou grinned toothily, and let the lightwhip fall.

Fist smashed against fist.

---

"Best guys go to the best guys."

Obi-Wan guarded the perimeter of the brawl, leaning on Kaoru's strength in the Living Force to determine what of the savage greenery was and was not a danger. Trained hands parried, thrust, and slashed, while the rest of his mind was distinctly elsewhere.

*Kaoru may not have full training, but she's far from weak. And this man thinks her third-rate?*

Meaning the one Han'nya had apparently won the privilege of facing... well, it certainly wasn't Yahiko.
Qui-Gon is laughing at me, I'm sure of it.

Obi-Wan had grown up surrounded by skilled Jedi. Lived and fought surrounded by those with even more skill; Anakin was one of the best, and when they'd worked with other Jedi in the Clone Wars, only the strongest were usually by the Negotiator's side. Even twenty years on Tatooine, surrounded by ordinary people, hadn't shaken that ingrained impression: anyone skilled in the Force near him would be near Master level in strength. Always.

*He made it look so utterly simple. Infiltrating the hospital. Rescuing me. Planning this assault.*

An innocent, wide-eyed young man - almost four decades young - who had known Katsura. And Yamagata. And Saigo. Whose rare scars had sparked Master Densetsu's respect... and a flash of concealed fear.

*The same fear I raised in Yamagata. He knew who I was. He could see it.*

Saigo's torturer had needed a name and a gene-scan to know - but Saigo had been of Satsuma. Not Choushuu.

A red-haired wanderer, desperately trying to remain unnoticed by the law, with healing skills even a Jedi Master might be hard-pressed to match.

"I'm not hiding anyone."

A wry smile touched Obi-Wan's face. After all, if his suspicions were correct, Gensai-isha had been telling the exact truth.

Yet they can't be. *Whatever his reasons, Owen's son was a killer. An assassin. And Kenshin is-*

"One is not a Jedi. One never could be."

*But Yamagata recognized me. Which implies some sort of physical resemblance-*

Reddish hair. A pale complexion. The hands and build of a swordsman, even writ small. That rare, dancing light in violet eyes, when the younger man knew he'd won - his opponent just didn't know it yet.

*Kaoru's smaller than Hana. Many of these folk are small, lanky souls like Sano notwithstanding. Partly Miasma, Gensai says, too many episodes without medication can stunt growth permanently... .*

You're avoiding the question. Stop. Face the truth.

*See Hana and Kaoru in your mind. See the changes, mother to daughter. Give those changes to your images of Owen.*

Oh. Dear. Stars.

"Orah!"

Skull crashed against skull hard enough to make Obi-Wan shudder.

"Oh. Sorry. Didn't mean the head-butt." Teeth glistened in Shikijou's smile as he stepped back from the reeling smuggler. "My whole life's been a battle. Body kind of moves on its own."

Too true, Obi-Wan knew, even as Kaoru bit back a mutter of disbelief. In the midst of the Clone
Wars, he'd found out the hard way that even a Jedi could fall into... unsavory habits.

The clonetrooper he'd Force-thrown against a bulkhead hadn't suffered worse than a fractured shoulder. Fortunately. And from then on, the rest of the Third Army had been quite a bit more careful in waking him up.

"Impressive your skull wasn't crushed. But you'd better count on being woozy a while yet." Large fingers flexed, reddened from Sano's grip. "Hard head. I think I like you, kid. Why not cut ties with these jokers and join up with us?"

"Sano, no-!"

"Mind on the present," Obi-Wan called to her, blowing back a cloud of vile-looking pollen with a wave of one hand. "This fight is Sanosuke's choice, not ours." And if he Falls....

That, too, is his choice. Not ours.

Though what we must do if he does - is not a choice. We are Jedi.

"If it's your past, don't worry. You're strong. That's all that counts." Shikijou jerked a thumb toward himself. "Me, I worked as onmitsu in Satsuma, for the Ishin Shishi. And then the government. Then... well, I infiltrated Edo Castle, to get dirt on Yoshinobu. Shinomori Aoshi took me down. Thirteen, and already okashira!" The thumb moved on, absently indicating a network of scars. "Join me, he said. Learn the ways of the Oniwabanshuu, and become unstoppable. And he was true to his word!"

Driven to one knee, Sano breathed hard, focus scattered. "This Aoshi... sounds like quite a guy."

No. Despair was of the Dark Side; Obi-Wan would not yield to it. But it hurt.

Yet... Kaoru is not afraid. Why?

"You said it!" Shikijou exulted. "If it'd been him in Kyoto, hunting patriots - he'd be the legend!"

The legend. Obi-Wan's denial melted like snow in Tatooine's suns, fact meeting that pulse of Dark fear and exultation to fuse into truth. It was a trap.

Just not for us.

What little he knew of Sith philosophy - dangerous subject that it was - revolved around power. Victory was not victory unless your enemy knew you had crushed him. Utterly.

Which was how Sano had been able to lure Shikijou into this fight. The onmitsu obviously prided himself on his strength. Yet by Sith standards, if one enemy could stand against it, even in a draw, all that strength meant nothing.

And Aoshi is not the legend. Kenshin is.

No. Battousai is.

"A hitokiri - assassin - during the Bakumatsu. Long dead by this time, one hopes...."

Amazing, how much the younger man hadn't lied to him. It was oddly warming.

Like the growing Light beside him, as Kaoru's hope jumped from spark to full flame.
"The Oniwabanshuu are strong," Sano admitted, brown eyes coming back into focus. "Your fire-breather, your Firiryoo poison-thrower... deadly fighters, all of you. Still," the smuggler grinned wryly, blood trickling from his lip, "that's all."

Fingers curling into fists, Shikijou stared at his enemy.

"Shinomori Aoshi surrounds himself with the strongest of all. But," Sano braced a hand against scuffed dirt, getting his feet under him, "that's all you are."

"What...?"

"You're strong. But nothing else. All that keeps you together is strength. The fight is everything." The bloodied head lifted. "But Kenshin is different."

Is he? Obi-Wan read the patterns of Force swirling about his young comrades, searching for truth. Searching for the reasons Kaoru might have - well, she hadn't lied to a fellow Jedi. Not exactly.

"The little samurai-firecracker over there, Yahiko - even Megumi." Sano smiled wryly. "They're together because of him. He may be just a rurouni, but when battle starts to swirl around him...."

Shikijou lunged in, no longer grinning. "You think you can judge us?"

"Kenshin never wields his blade for himself!" Sano caught one fist, fingers crunching inward. "He carries that lightsaber to protect people!" The other fist was caught, muscle and bone straining. "You Oniwabanshuu drown in your own strength. Look at you! Pawns of Takeda Kanryuu. Is that what you think legends are made of?" Arm strained against brawny arm - yet it was scarred muscle that was giving way. "Compared to Himura Kenshin, you're nothing!"

Fixed on the drama, Obi-Wan almost missed the rope of greenery dropping past his eyes. Almost.

Sith-spawned - laser-brained - space, is this native, or did Takeda import these monsters from Kashyyyk's deathtrap of a forest?

Given Kaoru's steady focus as she moved in to sear his would-be devourer, the blasted stuff was native. Wonderful.

And here I'd thought this ecosystem was along the lines of Naboo. He ducked and twisted, one thorn skimming close enough to tingle his cheek. After all, Rim-world or not, Miasma or not, the natives are human. Or close to it. Not Wookies.

If it were like Kashyyyk, though... well, it certainly explained why the Empire kept a very loose grip. Layered deathtrap was one of the kinder descriptions of that world. Outside of blast-cleared bases, no one survived Kashyyyk's ecology who hadn't grown up with it.

Or who dwelled in the will of the Force. As Quinlan Vos did.

The shadow-haunted Kiffar Jedi who had Fallen, once, and only won his way back to the Light by luck, repentance, and sheer will. Who had been Dooku's assassin.

Quin - knew his own demons, he said. Accepted them, where other Jedi could not, to give him an advantage. I didn't believe him then, but... he claimed the shadows in his soul were instinct. Natural, like a Corellian sand-panther's venomous claws. That they could keep him alive, when reason and meditation failed.

If he was right....
Star's End. No wonder the first survivors here made a truce! Jedi or Sith - anyone who could use the Force would have to be trained, just to give their people a chance to survive-

Fingers snapped; Sano drew back, and drove one punch into Shikijou's forehead.

*That, had to hurt.*

"That's what I'm talking about, numbskull!" Sano stood, wavering. "Your head's hard as mine, but that doesn't mean either of 'em... can't be hurt...."

Glassy-eyed, the onmitsu crumpled.

"You ever get the chance, Shikijou... face Kenshin." Knuckles red and split, Sano took one long step away. "Maybe you can get back something you lost, all those years ago." He gave Kaoru a shaky smile. "So, how many Oniwabanshuu you think are in this joint? One more like that guy, and...."

Obi-Wan caught the unconscious smuggler, trying not to stagger. "Door?"

"That way," Kaoru nodded. A wave of her hand lifted Shikijou's limp form; she caught his glance, and reddened. "Well, I can't just leave him to be chewed on!"

"Of course not." The Jedi grinned. "After all, I've found dropping a body's worth of weight on top of folk armed with blasters tends to distract them."

"You're awful!" Kaoru sputtered, almost knocking the man's already-cracked skull against a solid trunk as she hopped over encroaching greenery toward the glassteel doors. "And you wouldn't do it, either."

"Well... not unless I were in a tearing hurry, no...."

---

*No time. No time!*

Kaoru was Edokko. Born and raised to danger. Trained - carefully - to deal with even the wilder areas near town, in case bad went to worse and she ended up on campaign in the backwoods of the planet. But a piece of Yamato's pure forests breathing down their necks was more than any sane person wanted to handle.

A wave of Obi-Wan's hand blew the doors open, and they were out, in a saner, safer night.

*I am Jedi. I will not panic... and I will never, ever let fear stop me from doing what is right.*

*But I really don't want to go back in there.*

*Not that I want to go in here, either....*

Setting Shikijou down on the stone walk, she drew in a breath, and darted for the mansion's back door. :*Yahiko?*

*Panic wow scary guy boom Kenshin scarier guy want to help can't-*!

:*Yahiko, breathe!:*
Still lugging Sano, Obi-Wan hit the door by her. Frowned at the lock - which sparked. "Kenshin took Han'nya down, and now he's fighting someone else?"

"Up in the ballroom," Kaoru nodded, fighting the urge to kick the door as the lock grudgingly groaned open. Yahiko needed a lot more practice at sending clear images, but the tumbling cascade had details enough, once you sorted it.

Azure lightsaber snared in vibro-claws.

Two bodies twisting free, to land against the ceiling on opposite sides of the hallway. Bounding down again, red passing stripes-

A splash of blood. Han'nya falling, claws shattered.

Snatch of hand on gi collar, as Kenshin sped up elegant stairs, to dart through an open door....

To stop, facing a tall young man in onmitsu black and gray, covered by a striking white trenchcoat. Long black bangs drifted across green eyes, flickering ever so slightly with amber sparks.

"You who followed us, at the Medical Center...."

"Shinomori Aoshi."

Feet touched floor again, as Kenshin set Yahiko down behind him. "What was said to Han'nya is now said to you. This one would avoid battle when possible. Will you not let us pass, and tell us where Katsuhiro and Megumi-dono are?"

"And did Han'nya let you pass?" A cold shadow of a smile. "He didn't, did he?"

A slow, red nod. "So you have left them in Kanryuu's keeping. A man who would use a healer to murder, and worse than murder."

"It's nothing personal. Himura Kenshin. First of the Ishin Shishi."

"You don't fight for Kanryuu, then. Any of you."

The okashira's face never changed. "Of course not. Who cares what happens to that scum?"

"As Oniwabanshuu of Edo Castle, then. For the Tokugawa Bakufu, crushed by the Revolution."

"A patriot must know of the acts of Tokugawa Yoshinobu, at the battle of Toba Fushimi."

"...Yes." Sadness in violet eyes. "His forces were outnumbered. He fled Osaka Castle with his senior officers on his warship, to Edo... leaving ten thousand men behind to fight and die."

"Many at your hands."

Kenshin did not flinch. "He sought sanctuary at the Kan-Eiji temple, entrusting all to Katsu Kaishuu, who in conference with Saigo Takamori, agreed to avoid battle at Edo Castle. So the most key castle of all was taken without bloodshed."

"Thus ended the Bakumatsu," the okashira said coldly, "Without the Oniwabanshuu ever seeing combat. That stain on our honor chains us to the past, strangling our future!"

"One regrets those chains. But one did not forge them. Where," Kenshin asked softly, "might we find Kanryuu?"
Kote-shielded hands opened the coat, revealing a long, sheathed blade. "Have the child stand back... and ask for their location with your lightsaber!"

And they're fighting right now Kaoru help-!

"A metal blade?" Obi-Wan jumped across yet another threshold after her; how big was this mansion? "Against a lightsaber?"

"Tenbesukaa!" Kaoru flung over her shoulder; jumping and rolling over a polished black marble kitchen counter, ducking as a wailing chef droid tossed cutlery at them. "It won't short the 'saber out, but... and it's a kodachi! He'll be controlling the range."

"Stars...."

She could hear the battle rooms away; clangs and sears and the dull thuds that spoke of bone and flesh connecting-

"Die."

Leaving Obi-Wan and Sano behind in a burst of frantic speed, she hit the ballroom doors, tumbling into the flux of light and darkness. And froze.

There was a small, still red lump on the floor.

No.

"Kaiten Kenbu. Used to finish all who would intrude on Edo Castle." The onmitsu's gaze sought Yahiko's, then hers. "It's over. He's dead."

No!

"You shut up!" Yahiko's knuckles were white on wood. "You get me next-"

"No, he doesn't," Kaoru said sharply. Close. The Dark Side's so close. "He gets us."

"Spirit." There wasn't even a smile on Shinomori's face. "I'm almost sorry to kill you."

The hells you will. Obi-Wan had caught sight of the scene and blanched, unceremoniously dropping a still-woozy Sano to stand at her side. Three of us, one of you. You're going down!

"Kamiya Kasshin... will not die here." Still bleeding from three slashes across the chest, the rurouni got to unsteady feet. "Nor this one either."

Obi-Wan let out a breath of pure, shaky relief.

Aoshi flinched, sweat starting down one cheek. "Are you immortal...?"

"Afraid not." Torn red cotton gaped open, exposing a shimmer of green and violet, dancing over leather.

Onmitsu calm cracked in a strangled hiss of frustration. "Kote! You - weren't wearing them...."

"One can be forgetful, time to time."

"No." Amber flamed in green. "This battle is still between us. And you are wounded, and slowed. My clan's honor will be cleansed. The title of most powerful - will be ours!"
"Illusion," Obi-Wan breathed beside her, as Aoshi's image seemed to split into a dozen whirling figures, all circling Kenshin with flowing speed. "The strongest mind trick I've ever seen."

"It's what he used before!" Yahiko yelped. "Kenshin, look out-!"

"Movement you may hide," Kenshin panted, on one knee, "but the moment you focus to strike...."

"That," Kaoru said numbly, focused on the steel-blue length caught between Kenshin's bleeding palms, "is the blade-catch."

"If you want the title of most powerful so much, Aoshi - have it," Kenshin said grimly. "It's just one more burden to carry. The only things that matter are one's friends, who are waiting-" muscles tensed, metal vibrating, "-and those who need this one's help!"

"Never take a deep breath after a strike like that." Obi-Wan was rubbing his own throat, as if touched by an old memory. "You'll choke. And in the middle of a fight, well."

"Um." Kaoru gave Obi-Wan a dirty look. "Not that I'm complaining, exactly...."

"One doesn't need to ask." Gingerly, Kenshin knelt by the okashira's stunned form. "Forgive this one, Aoshi-san. Megumi-dono's life will not be hostage to your silence." Reaching out, he brushed back black bangs, touched fingertips to the sweating forehead.

"Whoa. Is Kenshin doing what I think he's doing?"

"Something rather questionable, at best." Obi-Wan's voice was grim. "To plunder the secrets of another's mind...."

"Not too many can," Sanosuke muttered. "Captain Sagara said he only heard of one or two who could-" He cut himself off. "Um... does anybody else have a really bad feeling about this place?"
Subtly moving her 'saber to first guard position, *feeling* the pulse of hatred and fear behind elegant walls, Kaoru gave Sano a wry look. "Didn't *you* listen when Kenshin told you?"

Which was when the automated heavy blasters opened up.

*I could really, really get to hate Obi-Wan's policy on traps....*

---

It wasn't a mission, not as he'd known them; serving the will of the Council and Senate, the will of the Force sometimes only an afterthought. It wasn't a rescue - not as he'd carried out in the war, with known Jedi or clones beside him. It wasn't even his lightsaber.

It couldn't matter.

The Force brought it to his hand with the slightest tug of will; Obi-Wan ignited it in a blaze of amber-

*Amber?*

-Ignored his own startled gasp, sinking into the Force with Kaoru to parry and defend without the need of thought.

*When we get out of here, I need to do kata. It's been too long since I've used Soresu.*

At least these were programmed blaster emplacements, not stormtroopers. And not well programmed, at that. The energy bolts were sloppy, overlapping; easy to parry, even for a man years out of practice.

Which was well and good, given the four defenseless people they had to protect.

*Hurry, Kenshin. Sano's too impulsive for us to protect him for long - and I am badly out of practice. If I miss-

A small hand snatched back from Aoshi's forehead as if scalded. Dove into a pocket of the okashira's outfit, drawing out-

*A datachip?*

Three bolts came almost as one, and Obi-Wan knew, *knew*, he wouldn't deflect them all-

Eerie steel sang, glancing a bolt into the floor.

*Kaoru was right. That alloy is blast-resistant.*

A passing thought. Less than a whisper in the wind, as he trusted instinct and the Living Force to guide him. Four defenseless had become three, which meant he could turn some of his parries from mere deflection....

To *attack*.

A bolt zipped in at just the angle he wanted; the Jedi batted it back, searing out one blaster in a blast of sparks. One down meant less bolts coming in, meaning more room to parry, deflect, reflect-
A linked chain of crackling blasts, and all but one blaster was silent.

And that would be our problem. "Takeda Kanryuu, I presume." Obi-Wan inclined his head toward the frothing man behind the blast shield, never missing a stroke. "I believe this is where we discuss the terms for your surrender?"

The yell that came back wasn't exactly coherent - something about buying power, and obsolete samurai, and becoming someone of true power in the Empire-

A shadow wafted overhead.

Smash.

Kenshin stood over the semi-conscious drug dealer, shoulders drooping with weariness, Aoshi's kodachi a cold glimmer in his hands.

He turned the blade, Obi-Wan realized, shutting down Kenshin's lightsaber as the blaster went silent. Hit him with the spine, so it wouldn't cut. Kanryuu is alive.

Most warriors wouldn't have bothered. Many Jedi wouldn't have bothered.

He truly doesn't want to kill.

Kenshin cast away steel as if it burned, lifting his head by pure will. "Those stairs. The second flight. There's an observatory. Katsu and Megumi-dono are there. Go!"

"But what about-" Sano started, looking at the rousing okashira.

"He left her a knife. The belief we would not come. And the truth - if she tried to escape, Katsu would take his own life. Hurry!"

Kaoru was half a step behind him.

The observatory was locked. Silent.

"Arghh! Stupid door!"

Hands still raised to trigger the 'saber on, Obi-Wan traded a glance with Kaoru, then followed the fuming smuggler through wrecked wood.

Megumi's not the only one with a knife.

"Whoa," Yahiko breathed, skidding to the left side. "Oh, man - and I thought we got lucky when there weren't more guys in here!"

"Katsu!" Sano stopped just inside the threshold, paling. "C'mon, buddy, put the pig-sticker down...."

Edge poised by his carotid artery, Katsu didn't twitch. Only breathed, and blinked, eyes lost in a dreamy haze.

"He can't hear you." Megumi stood by one of the far windows, long knife in hand, sweat trickling down the side of her face. "He doesn't have the training to break the spell. Or the strength. It took me years to break mine." A wry, hopeless smile washed over her face, like an ebbing tide. "And in the end, it didn't matter anyway, did it?"
"It matters!" Kaoru slid past Sano, keeping half an eye on Katsu as she reached out to the older woman. "Megumi, it matters."

"Silly little girl. You don't even know what I've done." Megumi's eyes closed. "So many deaths, just to stay alive a little longer."

"You were lost," Kaoru said firmly, edging forward one careful step at a time. "You were alone. People do horrible things when they're alone."

Like Anakin, Obi-Wan realized, troubled. He was never alone - but Palpatine made him feel that he was. Alone, and trapped.

"But you stopped," Kaoru went on, blue eyes searching hopeless brown. "You stopped, Megumi. You fought back."

"Fought?" A ghastly smile. "I'm a healer of Takani, little swordswoman. I could have killed Kanryuu with a touch. If I'd only had the courage."

"Touching the Dark Side to kill isn't courage," Obi-Wan said flatly. "It's cowardice. And you, Takani Megumi, healer who defied Kanryuu and the Oniwabanshuu - you are not a coward."

"Am I not?" A slow shake of long black hair. "I felt Ken-san die down there. And too many people have died for me-"

"But not," a quiet, familiar voice broke in, "this one."

Megumi stared.

He does look a mess, Obi-Wan thought, glancing over his shoulder. Bruised, bloodied, all but wavering on his feet - the rurouni had obviously seen better nights.

But the bruises and the blood and the slow, ragged breaths, all told even the most hopeless eyes one tale: the man was alive.

"One had to convince Aoshi one was down, and finished," Kenshin said apologetically. "One's truly sorry you were deceived as well." A sunny smile. "But you are not hurt. That's what's important."

"Oh." Megumi blinked, eyes wet. "That's good." Her arm lifted. "I'm so glad to have met you. At least now... I know it'll be clean."

I was afraid of that! Obi-Wan reached out with hand and will, feeling Kaoru reach with him, even as Megumi's own desperation fought them both-

Blood flew.

"The hell you think you're doing?"

Dripping red, Sano yanked the knife from Megumi's hand. "These idiots risked their lives for you. We all damn near got killed for you. And you want to throw that all away?"

"But..." Megumi dropped into a window-seat, near voiceless. "Katsu will die if I escape. One more death, after all I've done, and your friend... I can't. Don't you understand? I can't."

"Sometimes, what seems a choice is only another trap," Obi-Wan said evenly. "Have you considered that your death might be counted as an escape?"
Megumi turned white.

*Good. She's thinking.* The Jedi turned to Kaoru. "I'm unfamiliar with this level of suggestion. How would you proceed?"

Kaoru shook her head, eyes wide. "I can reach out to people, but to twist things like that..." Her gaze sought Kenshin's.

*Of course."


"He should hate this one." Kenshin's shoulders lifted, dropped wearily. "To tamper with another's mind, even with the best of intent... it is the darkest of shadows. Sometimes, beyond shadows." He sighed. "A moment. One only needs..."

*You need a lot more than that.* Obi-Wan moved close enough to touch the younger man's shoulder. "Let us help."

"No!"

*Fear pain denial-*

"No," Kenshin said again, glancing at Kaoru, then Yahiko's eager face. "You do not know the danger. The risk! One will not allow it!"

"Then let me help."

"You?" Violet looked up to meet his gaze, disbelieving.

Obi-Wan smiled wryly. "I'm not entirely innocent, Himura. I lived through a war. I lost many friends." *So many. And I'm still alive. Sometimes I'm not sure how I can bear it.* "I assure you I've... crossed the line. Once or twice."

"It is dangerous," Kenshin said deliberately. "The spells of onmitsu are woven with anger, and fear."

*The Dark Side.* "I understand."

"No, you don't," Kenshin said softly, taking his right hand. Reaching out with his own free hand, to lay fingers on Katsu's pulse above steel. "But you will."

---

*Storm.*

It raged about him. Howled within him. Blew the fierce thrusts of his will aside, like so many gossamer threads.

*Don't fight the wind, baka deshi. Walk with it.*

Eyes closed, Kenshin drew ruthlessly on the light behind him. Strength was there and strength he needed; Katsu's life would depend on how swiftly he could slash the chains of onmitsu compulsion.
There.

Dark. Heavy. Twisting a soul already inclined to shadow deeper still, so that what a whole mind would consider suicidal only seemed right, and sane.

Wake.

Chains clanked. Strained.

Wake.

Within the compulsion, Katsu's self peeked out. Shuddered, and shrank away.

But the storm was his, was Battousai's; he was part of it, and no chains or fear would deny his will. Wake up, you selfish bastard, before Kenobi Falls and I kill you myself-

Lightning struck.

"Obi-Wan?" Kaoru's hand was on his shoulder, shaking him. "Obi-Wan!"

The Jedi sucked in a breath, shuddering. "What happened?"

Sano snorted. "Before or after you two decided to redecorate the room?"

"We what?" Obi-Wan said blankly. Blinked, and looked at-

Shattered glass. Splintered wood. Scorch marks scattered like a handful of popped grain, smoke still rising from four of them.

Force lightning? But who- how-?

Yet from the odd, tingling itch in his hands, he knew very well who.

I couldn't have, I- The Jedi shivered, feeling an unaccustomed urge to panic. Plo Koon. Remember Master Koon. Just because I've cast lightning, doesn't mean I've touched the Darkness. I'd know if I had.

Wouldn't I?

"One told you." Kenshin's voice was unsteady, as the rurouni backed away from a very much awake and horrified Katsuhiro. "We unmade the chains. The energy had to go somewhere."

That does make sense. In a way. Obi-Wan felt... well, rather as he imagined the barrel of a blaster would, after the charge had passed through. Not hurt, precisely. But not exactly comfortable, and all but twitching with worry that another finger would stray toward the trigger-

"Demon!"

Kenshin barely dodged the punch. "Katsuhiro-san, now is not the time-

"Get away from me! I'll kill you!" Hands clawed, Katsu lunged.

"Hey. Hey!" Sano snared his copilot from behind, holding tight as the man struggled, wild-eyed. "Katsu! Chill, okay?"
"Oni no ko! Nogitsune!" Katsu bucked and swore; fell back against stronger arms, panting. "He's a demon, Sano! Shoot him already!"

"Nobody's shooting anybody," Kaoru said flatly, stepping between them with an angry light in her eyes. "You hear me? Kenshin was trying to help you, Katsu-

"I don't need a demon's help," Katsu spat. "You invited that in, Kamiya? What makes you think it's even human?"

"Now, that's quite enough," Obi-Wan said firmly. "Really. Tsukioka, you know as well as I no one picks up a Kyotoko accent simply hanging around Tokyo, so there's no way in the galaxy he could be any kind of shape-shifting alien...." His voice trailed off, as he noted every pair of eyes gazing at him with various degrees of disbelief. "Have I missed something?"

"You don't know about kitsune?" Yahiko said warily.

"There is no reason he would," Kenshin observed. "One doesn't think they care for spaceships."

"Oh, and you know this," Katsu grated out.

Obi-Wan felt a shift in the Force, and headed for the window overlooking the courtyard. "Whether he knows or not, we currently have bigger problems."

Armor clattered. Stun-bolts rang out. Bodies were flung to the ground, manacles clamped on every whole wrist.

"The Guard!" Kaoru gasped.

"This, is bad," Sano pointed out, slowly releasing his partner. "Guess your slice ran out. Come on," he grabbed for Megumi's hand, "we gotta get out of here-

Twisting free of his grip, she stepped away.

"Are you nuts?"

"Ken-san." Megumi's hand opened, holding a small ointment box. "From my family. It stops bleeding. Use some until you can see a doctor." Her eyes lifted to one of the ornamental ceiling panels. "Kanryuu built a secret passage up there. You can leave through that, and escape." A wistful smile on her face, she stepped into the doorway.

"Megumi-dono." Kenshin's voice was level. Somber. "A ki-user caught in illegal activities will be executed. Is this what you want?"

Shoulders straight, she paused. "People have died from the drugs I created. There's no running from that. I am a Takani. The lives I've taken will be paid for... with my own life."

Head high, she walked out of sight.

We can't let her do this. Obi-Wan sought Kaoru's bright gaze. We can't!

"The ie... the ariitu... it's all we have," Kaoru said thickly. "All that protects us on this world. If she doesn't... cleanse her family's honor... then if any of them are alive, it could-" her knuckles whitened, "-hurt them."

An honor culture, the Jedi realized. Your reputation is everything. If Megumi escaped, and her crimes were known - all of her family would pay the price.
Stars. I didn't realize. The risk Kaoru has put herself in, claiming me as kin... we must leave here. For her sake-

Where is he going?

The rurouni was a white-and-red ghost down the hall, shadowing Megumi's deliberate tread.

"Oh, bother," Obi-Wan breathed.

"Oh no," Kaoru said faintly.

"A fair amount of those down there are stormtroopers," Obi-Wan observed, heading after him. "As long as not too many of the officers see us, a mind trick should do it." Admit the truth, the Jedi told himself wryly. You're too curious for your own good, and you can't bear to walk away safely without seeing what he's up to.

"Inspector, we've found it!" a young man in uniform called out, hurrying across the ballroom toward an older man in Imperial gray. "Hidden chambers in the basement... and the greenhouses!"

"Seize it!" His superior looked grimly satisfied, shoving up his glasses as he glanced over the growing band of manacled prisoners. "They're all part of the ring. Hold every last one!"

An efficient Imperial. Blast.

"Always hoped we'd have a chance to get in here," the Inspector muttered, looking over the seared and shattered ballroom. "Glad it came sooner rather than later. Though I'd never have expected this."

Megumi stepped into clear view.

"That's her! The maker of the drugs you're looking for! My partner in crime!" Battered and trickling blood from a fractured jaw, Kanryuu struggled against the stormtroopers holding him. "No escape for you, Megumi! Whatever you say, you're still the one who made it. I'm taking you with me to hell!"

The Inspector spared one dark glare for his captive, then turned a stern look on Megumi. "Is this true?"

I don't think a mind trick is going to work on this man.

Megumi swallowed. "It... is....."

Battered hands covered her mouth. "Not true, Uramura-san."

"Himura-san?" the Inspector gasped.

They know each other? Obi-Wan blinked, feeling the patterns of the Force settle. It's going to be all right. I don't know how, but....

Wait. The voice is right - this is that Uramura. Who told Yamagata that-

Oh. My. This is interesting.

Megumi mumbled a protest against Kenshin's fingers. The rurouni ignored her efforts. "This young lady was the protégé of a great doctor, which is why she was coerced into shaping the herbs that hold raw Spider's Web," Kenshin said cheerfully.
"What?" Kanryuu sputtered. "Liar! She's-

"You be quiet."

Shivering, Kanryuu shrank back against the stormtroopers.

"Right, Yahiko? Kaoru-dono?"

"Absolutely true," Kaoru nodded, fighting not to grin.

"Yes sir!" Yahiko gave the Inspector a jaunty half-salute. "Tokyo samurai Myojin Yahiko, here! Would I defend a drug smuggler? No sir, I would not!"

"Don't overact," Obi-Wan murmured. Put on his best diplomatic smile as Uramura's gaze found him. "Ah... I was simply assisting my dojo master, of course."

Kaoru's smile warmed him to the bone.

"Don't look at me," Sano grumbled as the Inspector turned that skeptical look his way. "I came for my idiot partner, here."

"Hey!" Katsu hissed.

"And the fight," Sano went on, not missing a beat. "But if you guys insist on arresting her," he cracked his knuckles, "I could get back my second wind."

"So that's how it is, Inspector," Kenshin said firmly.

Uramura raised an eyebrow.

Kenshin blinked, innocently.

Reputation, Obi-Wan knew, fighting not to laugh. Or sweat. You're using yours to defend hers. But a crime of this magnitude, that can't possibly-

"Fair enough," Uramura smiled. "If Himura-san says it, then it's the truth."

"What?" Kanryuu sputtered. "What the... what?! That woman is my accomplice! You-"

"What are you waiting for?" Uramura said dryly, eyeing the troopers. "Arrest this man."

"Yes, sir!"

And if I needed any more proof. Obi-Wan didn't try to hide his smile as white armor dragged the screaming drug dealer away. Bravely done. But dangerous. Uramura will have to report this. So I'll have to know what he reports, won't I?

"Ken-san?" Megumi whispered, as the officers moved away to start recording prisoners. "Why did you...?"

"The lives I've taken will be paid for with my own life. That's one way to look at it. But they don't come back when you die." Kenshin's hand brushed the saber hanging from his belt. "Lives can also be paid for by the sword, redeeming other lives. That is why, despite the danger, one is still a rurouni, even in the time of Meiji." The ointment box danced between his fingers. "And medicine like this can save even more than one lone sword." He tossed the box back to her. "Become a

"Right!" Kaoru thrust a fist into the air. "Let's go get a bath started - er, Inspector?"

"I'd just like a moment with your student," Uramura stated, approaching. "If that's all right?"

"Of - course," Kaoru stammered. "Um..."

Yahiko rolled his eyes. "I'll be fine, busu."

"Hey!"

"Ah, to be young again, and certain you know more than all about you," Obi-Wan sighed, watching Uramura stalk off out of earshot with the boy. "A fate I wouldn't wish on anyone."

"He will be okay, right?" Kaoru said under her breath.

"He's a street kid, he'll be fine," Sano shrugged. "Uramura, though...."

"Yeah. How did you get him to back off?" Katsu gave Kenshin a very wary look.

"Oro?"

Obi-Wan let Kenshin's efforts to deflect attention fade into the background, stretching out his senses to catch Uramura's frustrated lecture to a child far too young to be risking his life on damn-fool idealistic crusades. A well-meaning Imperial. Unusual.

"-So which one did you think you were, Kenobi or Skywalker?"

*He didn't just say....*

Yahiko gave the officer a sideways look. "Kenobi's over there. And who's Skywalker?"

Uramura's jaw dropped.

*Oh dear.* "Excuse me a moment, Kamiya-sensei," Obi-Wan sighed. "I believe I need to go pry Yahiko's toes from his teeth."

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*He can't be. He just... can't be.*

*Can or not, he's coming this way.*

Distracted, Uramura shoved Myojin back toward his teacher, issued the necessary orders to turn everything in Takeda's mansion upside down and shake it. Physical, data, everything. The more that was seized, the less Kanryuu would have to bargain with. And the *itachi-niku* would try to bargain, he was sure of it.

*Gods, let him not know who just caught him.*

"Inspector Uramura." The man himself stood before him; calm, wooden bokken over his shoulder, a hint of wry humor in the glint of sea-blue eyes.

"Kenobi," Uramura said shakily, voice low. The face was... not quite the same as the holos of a young boy's memories. Clean-shaven, and more sober than it had been even at the height of the
Clone Wars. "General Kenobi."

"Perhaps we should discuss this outside."

Yes. Very wise. Away from his men, away from the Rebel-allied Kamiya dojo, certainly away from Himura....

Did he say, my dojo master?

His boots clicked on the cobbled path of the courtyard, drowning out the softer slap of Kenobi's sandals. "I only have one favor to ask of you, sir." Uramura drew in a deep breath of Tokyo's night, grounding himself. "If you and Himura-san decide you need to do something... drastic... I'd appreciate a little advance warning. So I can order my men out of the way."

"You seem like a loyal man."

"I am," Uramura said flatly. "To my governor. To our laws. To my world. " He met the Jedi's gaze. "But if my men were in your way, they would die. And they wouldn't stop you. I owe them better than that."

One auburn brow lifted slightly, considering that. Nodded, as if it had confirmed some silent conclusion. "I must admit I'm rather curious, Uramura-san. No one else I've met on this planet has come anywhere near recognizing me."

"Half the people you're with are too young to remember the Clone Wars," Uramura pointed out. "As for the rest - holo-news wasn't allowed on Yamato. The corporations wouldn't have it. Except for themselves, of course."

"And?"

Uramura felt himself redden. "I... um... well, when I was younger, I was a bit of a tech nut."

"And it's always amazing how many pieces of perfectly good hologram technology end up in dumpsters." Obi-Wan smiled, as if at a bittersweet memory. Sighed, face sobering. "We're both well aware there's a price on my head, Inspector."

Uramura swallowed. "And we both know what put it there. Sir."

Obi-Wan stared at him. "Kenshin told me, but... are you saying this entire planet knows what Palpatine is?"

"I wouldn't count on Governor Meiji knowing, sir," Uramura said wryly. "Rumor has it he doesn't really believe in ki. A lot of the nobles don't. But samurai, anyone associated with ki-training... yes, sir. We know he's a sorcerer. And one who's gone far too much over the edge." He spread empty hands, feeling helpless. "But what can we do, General? We're only one world. One very small world. All it would take is a moment of suspicion on his part, and then-" He shook his head. "I've seen the records of orbital bombardments. We wouldn't last an hour."

"Less, I fear," Obi-Wan said quietly. "I'm not a General, Uramura. I haven't been one for a very long time."

"Yes, sir."

The Jedi eyed him with a mock frown. "I'm not going to convince you, am I?"
Uramura ventured a smile. "I don't have much of the talent, sir. But I'm pretty hard-headed against mind tricks. Kamiya-sensei... Kamiya Koshijirou was able to teach me that much, at least."

"You're a Kamiya Kasshin student?"

"I had the basics," Uramura admitted. "I'd probably kill myself if I picked up a vibro-blade, much less a lightsaber. I'm far, far better off with a blaster. But I know the spirit of the style."

"Which leads me to wonder even more why you're protecting Himura from Yamagata."

His heartbeat drummed loud in his ears. "What?"

"Or should I say," sea-green was level, unflinching, "protecting Hitokiri Battousai."

_I won't faint. I'm an Imperial Inspector, I will not faint._ "How- how did you?-"

"Know?" The Jedi's smile was triumphant, yet sad. "I didn't. Until now."

_Oh, he's going to kill me...._

"Yamagata does not strike me as a man to react well to being thwarted," Obi-Wan went on. "You've put yourself at great risk. More, perhaps, than Kenshin has, defending Megumi. Why?"

_Why?_ Uramura blinked. _He's not from Yamato, he doesn't know... how can I possibly explain?_

_Find the beginning, and tell it, Koshijirou's voice murmured out of memory. Everything will fall into place from there._

"When I was much younger, Kamiya Kasshin was a lot more violent," Uramura said, piecing his words together. "Everything was more violent. The galaxy had the Clone Wars; we had the Bakumatsu, and the world was insane. Even my teacher, the young man I looked up to the most in the world, more than my own father, went off to fight in the Revolution." He looked up. "He almost didn't come back."

"Kenshin saved him."

"Not the way you think," Uramura stated. "Not with a sword... at least, not the first time."

"Not with-" Obi-Wan stopped. Let out a slow breath. "He's a healer."

"Koshijirou took a bad hit in his first fight," Uramura nodded. "No one knew until it was almost too late."

Obi-Wan looked thoughtful. "And Kaoru knows this?"

"I'd be surprised if she did," Uramura said, startled. "By the time she was born, he'd almost stopped talking about the war."

"So it's an obligation to the dead you feel."

"No." Uramura swallowed, throat tight. "To the living."

"I don't understand."

_Don't you?_ With an effort, Uramura met that too-knowing gaze. "She's seventeen. I may not be much of a samurai, but I know that's a dangerous age."
"The Darkness can be... compelling, yes," Obi-Wan allowed. "Still-

"And she's not just samurai," Uramura said flatly. "She's Jedi. And some of you have a bad habit of going right off the rails. And you have the training to handle any three ordinary samurai with your eyes closed. I know. I've seen her practice with Maekawa-sensei. If she got lost" He looked away, fists clenched. "It'd take every dojo master in Tokyo to take her down."

"Or one hitokiri."

Wordless, Uramura nodded.

"That's a very great fear to have of one young girl."

Uramura gave a mirthless laugh. "Have you seen the body count Ulloriaq left behind?"

"...Yes."

"I hope it never happens," Uramura said tightly. "She's an innocent young woman, her associations beside, and I hope she never crosses the line." He swallowed dryly. "If Yamagata finds out, I'll lose my career. I know that." But to save my city, my people....

I'd lose everything. And it'd be worth it.

"Uramura-san." The Jedi's voice was sober. "I give you my word, I will do everything in my power to ensure Kaoru never crosses that line."

"I believe you," Uramura whispered. "Gods help me, I do." He risked a glance at the other man. "But if you know about Ulloriaq...."

"I know who stopped her. Yes." Obi-Wan looked weary. "He's not the only one ever forced to cut down one of the Fallen."

"You learned under the same teachers. You were of the same school." Uramura shook his head. "How can you sleep under the same sky as her killer?"

"A Jedi does what he must." A shadow of a smile crossed Obi-Wan's face. "And revenge would be poor payment to the man who saved my life."

Saved his- I'm not sure I want to know. "You'd better read some samurai philosophy before you venture down any dark alleys," Uramura said cautiously. "Governor Meiji's tried to modernize ethical teachings in schools these days, but in the classic tradition, if an enemy saves your life, you thank them politely, then kill them."

The Jedi blinked. "I appreciate the warning."

"Not a problem, sir."

"Please, don't," Obi-Wan murmured. "It'd be very hard to explain."

"Yes, sir- they don't know?" He glanced back toward the ballroom with mingled trepidation and an urge to snicker. Oh, to be a kumotsuki on that wall!

"They may never," Obi-Wan said firmly. "I need to analyze my situation." He folded his hands together in his sleeves. "As I suspect you do, as well. Trying to hold five onmitsu prisoner-" the Jedi stopped. Eyed him. "Uramura-san?"
"There are no onmitsu left on the premises, si-Kenobi-san," Uramura said piously. "My men have reported finding four headless bodies, though. And a faint trail of blood up through a hidden passage, as if one survivor took the heads that way."

"Your men have- we didn't kill anyone, I would have sensed a death." Obi-Wan eyed him again, the faintest hint of suspicion glinting in sea-green. "Illusion?"

"Governor Meiji has declared there isn't any such thing," Uramura shrugged, trying not to smile. "So it certainly can't go into a report."

"I see," Obi-Wan said dryly. "If one might ask, what do you think will go into the report?"

"Why, that we responded to reports of a security breach, and discovered various illegal activities in the process, including the kidnapping of one healer, Takani Megumi, most likely held against her will to deal with species that are illegal to keep within city limits," the inspector said matter-of-factly. "I don't know if I can get that hyutu'uun for murder, but even one of those greenhouses adds up to a good two dozen counts of attempted murder. What if those things bred? Drifted a seedling into some poor civilian's roof gutter? No one would know they were within these walls until it was too late." He shook his head. "Believe me, we're going to be far too busy bringing in flame Throwers and containment squads to worry about a few stray citizens assisting above and beyond the call of their civic duties." He paused. "At least, that's what I would expect, for... say, the next fifteen minutes?"

Silent, Obi-Wan bowed deeply.

"So get going," Uramura grumbled under his breath, scanning the too-dark corners of the courtyard. Five onmitsu, four of whom are pretending to be dead... Himura, you'd better have had a good reason for leaving them alive. He glanced back at his silent companion, itching to ask- Kenobi was gone.

Chapter End Notes

Anou - "Um, er, well".

Ariitu - "Aliit"; clan, family, clan name.

Bakayarou - jerk, fool, idiot.

Busu - "ugly".

Fireryo - Firrerreo; a fanged, near-human species.

Furo - bath.

Hyutu'uun - "Hut'uun", coward.

Itachi-niku - "meat-weasel". A repulsive dweller in certain unsavory cave sludge environs on Yamato; seven to thirteen feet long, worm-like, and all appetite.

Kaiten Kenbu - Dance of the Wheeling Sword.
Kitsune - fox, fox-spirit; legendary shape-shifters who cast illusions and sometimes take human form.

Kumotsuki - "moon spider"; ten-legged nocturnal arachnoid with paralyzing venom.

Nogitsune - "field fox"; malevolent fox-spirit.

Oni no ko - demon child.

Shebusu - "shebs" - backside.

Shoumi no tsuta - "vine net".

Tenbesukaa - "Heaven's-beskar"; Mandalorian iron alloyed with cortosis. Capable of taking even lightsaber strikes.

Some of these words are of Mando'a origin; this will be explained in time.
Home, Kaoru thought, trudging toward the furo with a sigh of relief. Home, with nobody shooting at us, nobody laying in wait for us, nobody after us... She reached out with the Force and yanked on a red ponytail before it could head around the side of the building. "Just where do you think you're going?"

"Oro?"

She fixed him with a tired glare. "You are not fueling the bath furnace with those hands, Kenshin."

"Anou... but..."

It's not appropriate for the dojo master to heat the bath when there are students and rurouni around to do it instead. Kaoru hid a sigh. Right. And appropriate behavior was very important right now. Inspector Uramura might be letting them slide, but everyone in the neighborhood knew where they'd been this night. If she didn't want talk to reach dangerous levels, she had to at least attempt to soothe her neighbors' ruffled sensibilities.

"I admit I am lacking in experience," Obi-Wan offered. "If it would not be too much of an imposition, to ask for your instruction?" We need to talk, that sober glance said.

Good idea, Kaoru thought with relief. Great idea. "Yahiko, show Megumi where the dojo medical kit is and help her get these guys cleaned up- Katsu?"

"Out of here," the angry-eyed smuggler muttered. Turned to go- And ran right into Sano.

"Let me out of here!"

"In the morning," Sano said flatly.

"I'm not sleeping under the same roof with that!"

Kenshin didn't flinch.

Why, you- Kaoru controlled her breathing, beating down the red haze of temper on top of leftover adrenaline. Calm. Calm. There is no passion, there is serenity....

"You want to go back to the Sekihoutai? Fine. I'll go with you. After Megitsune over there checks you out." Sano nodded toward Kenshin. "I'm not asking you to like him. Hell, I'm not even asking you to be civil. But he saved your shebusu, you bakayarou. And you owe him."

Katsu's fingers curled into fists. "Sano..."


Katsu let out an explosive breath. "Fine." He glared at the rurouni. "Don't come near me."

"Why, you-"
Kenshin put a hand on Yahiko's shoulder, stilling her student's snarl. "One accepts the terms of your truce, Tsukioka-san."

"Men." Megumi rolled her eyes. "Growl at each other all you like. Just don't draw any more blood. We'll be going through enough bandages as it is." She swept gracefully past, drawing Yahiko along with a tilt of her head. "Let's see this medical kit of yours. It probably needs an update."

Kaoru covered her smile with her hand, watching the guys blink at each other and follow, mutual threats forgotten in the sting of Megumi's wake. Either I'm going to kill her, or I'm beginning to like her. "This way."

Fire was good. Fire was simple, whether out in the wilderness or inside the small stove that served as a water-heating furnace. Build dry wood around dry tinder so air could carry the first flames upward, and ignite.

*With matches, tonight,* Kaoru thought, matching thought to deed. *Don't think I want to try fire-starting after all that adrenaline... brr.*

"So," Obi-Wan's voice behind her was soft. Thoughtful. "Besides Katsu, who else in this dojo doesn't know who Kenshin really is?"

For a moment, the words didn't make sense. *Breathe. You have to breathe, he doesn't know or he'd-*

The Jedi held out empty hands, marked with almost-healed, oddly familiar cuts. "I had a dream."

The world grayed.

"Easy. Easy..." Obi-Wan had one hand on Kaoru's shoulders to steady her; cupped a hand in front of her face, forcing her to breathe her own breath. "Too much oxygen can be as dangerous as too little, after a night like we've had. I do apologize. There are so few times when I'm certain we won't be overheard-"

"You can't tell him!" Kaoru gasped.

"I know he expects vengeance," Obi-Wan said patiently, stepping back. "Uramura warned me as much. But we are Jedi, Kaoru; and he only did what we would have done, had we been in his place. We merely need to explain that he does not need to fear us."

"He won't believe you," Kaoru whispered. "He won't, and he'll run, and he'll die."

"A vision?"

Kaoru shook her head. "Saigo's after him. So many people are. And you didn't feel him when he first came here. He was so *tired.* And then, when he helped you-" She couldn't say it."

"He wounded himself with the Dark Side. Which brings fear in its wake; most especially, the fear of betrayal." The Jedi sighed. "Would he believe the worst of both of us? Even of his own family?"

Kaoru's jaw dropped. She fumbled for another piece of split wood, tossed it through the open stove door. *He's sure. He knows his nephew is Battousai, and he knows Kenshin is Battousai, and- "How can you be so calm about it?!"

"Panicking won't help any of us," Obi-Wan said dryly. "Especially when Saigo's vicious little lackey knows. And Yamagata suspects." He gave her a blink of near-innocent question. "Is there that much resemblance?"
Kaoru shot him a look. "I can hear the 'Oro?' just looking at you."

Night hid whatever blush might have risen, but she could feel that mix of resigned embarrassment and interest in the Force.

Another thought struck her, and Kaoru winced. "Kenshin probably would have figured it out the first time he touched you, if he hadn't been so sure there was no one left."

"No one?" Kenobi looked grim. "Kurogasa said he'd tracked his... subject, to a village that didn't exist anymore."

"Chemical spill," Kaoru said bleakly. "Kenshin told me Owen got him to the roof, then went back to help the rest of his family-" She couldn't go on.

Obi-Wan bowed his head.

"I'm sorry," she blurted. "I know you were probably hoping... I'm so sorry, Obi-Wan."

"I think I knew," he said softly. "I think-" He paused, weighing his words. "There was a time in my life... it was a year after the death of my master. I was still - well, working out the details of just what to do with a young handful of a padawan, and I thought it was only old grief come to call. But I remember waking one morning with a sense of panic, fear for the children, drowning...." He swallowed dryly. "And then, a terrible emptiness."

_Like when Kaasan died. And Tousan._ "Thirty-one years ago?"

"Thirty-one," Obi-Wan inclined his head, "almost exactly." He looked over toward the dojo. "Orphaned, at seven."

"A year too old to get the best price," Kaoru said grimly.

Sea-blue fixed on her with a spark of real anger. Kaoru tried not to wince. _Maybe I could have said that better... forget it. He has to know._ "The village was desperate. People were going to starve! His ie was gone, and that's what happens to you!" Her fists were clenched; deliberately, she relaxed them. "He doesn't hate them for it. It hurts him, but he won't hate them."

"You're all there is of your ie," Obi-Wan realized, a shade of horror creeping into his tone. "If your school failed... if you couldn't support yourself...."

"And Sano and Dr. Gensai couldn't help me?" Kaoru stared into that bleak future, praying once again that it would never come to pass. "I might be able to go rurouni, like Kenshin. If I were fast enough to run. If not... I'm too old to train as a tayuu; probably as a geisha, either. It'd be a force-collar around my neck and a cage for customers to stare in Yoshiwara. If they didn't just execute me for other crimes." She fixed her gaze on the Jedi. "There are a lot of officials who'd consider it a mercy, to trump up some charge to do just that."

"You said it was bad to be an orphan, here," Obi-Wan almost shuddered. "I never imagined... I will not allow this to go on any longer, Kaoru. Not for either of you."

Relief washed over her, leaving her knees weak. Yes, she'd considered him family, but to be sure he would accept her in turn... _Don't faint. Think._ "You can't claim Kenshin as family. Not yet."

"To let him believe he is an orphan-"

"He is." Kaoru swallowed. "You don't quite get family here, yet. I'm Hana's daughter. She named
me, with my father. You're her kin, and mine, because your people, the Jedi, adopted her. The Jedi taught her their ways. Gave her their beliefs. Their soul. Name and soul. That's what family is, here."

"And to keep his children away from Ulloriaq, Owen was forced to give up his name," Obi-Wan said thoughtfully. "So by your ways... we are not family." He looked down. "Yet Kurogasa seemed to believe tormenting me would draw him."

"Because by blood you are family." Kaoru turned over another piece of split wood in her hands. Tugged a splinter off, and tossed both pieces in. "This doesn't usually happen. Blood and name and clan are all together. Usually. When someone's adopted, there are rites. Ceremonies, with the Force, to remove ties to one clan and grant them to another."

Obi-Wan frowned. "But if Owen was my brother, and of age, so with legal claim to me by this planet's ways-"

"Then you weren't adopted, you were kidnapped," Kaoru said bluntly. "And no Yamatoan would ever give up on a kidnapped child. Not ever."

"A loophole, then." Obi-Wan wouldn't meet her gaze. "Does he not want me? A gaijin Jedi, after all."

It was smoke in her eyes, making them sting, Kaoru told herself. Just smoke. "No, you silly," she got out, throat tight. "He doesn't want to hurt you. He thinks... vengeance is serious, here. He thinks one of these days you'll figure out who he really is, and then you'd have to... and you'd have to even if you knew he was yours, and he doesn't want to break your heart."

"Easy, there." Warmth, holding her shoulder; wrapping her in the Force with gentle sympathy. "Shh. It's all right, now. You're not carrying this alone anymore."

Kaoru sniffled on him for a minute, shamelessly taking advantage of that comfort. Gulped, and straightened, getting the fire into proper order before she shut the grate. "I don't know what to do."

"Well, that's always a good start," Obi-Wan reassured her. "For the rest... patience, yes? We'll think of something."

She swallowed, and nodded. "Megumi."

"What?"

"Besides Katsu," Kaoru clarified. "Megumi doesn't know either. And the Gensai girls, and my students. Except Yahiko. Even if he hadn't overheard us talking... well, what Kenshin had to pull off to get Yahiko out of the Yakuza was way more than most samurai can do."

Obi-Wan stared at her, obviously hearing what name she was not mentioning. "Are you implying that planet-hopping, overly impulsive, less than civil, certainly less than mindful of the laws young man-"

Just inside the door to the engawa, Kaoru heard Sano sneezing.

---

Hot water. Eyes closed, Kenshin sank into the large tub with a grateful sigh, paying just enough attention to be sure Megumi's bandages were as waterproof as they should be.
They're holding. Relax. Even Shishou can't be alert all the time. Think of a hot spring in the wilderness, quiet, no one in sensing range. Breathe. Find your calm....

Water splashed. "Kuso. You've got almost as many scars as Kenshin!"

The rurouni tried not to sigh.

"It seems so, yes." Obi-Wan lowered himself in a shade more stiffly than Yahiko's easy splash, muttering something under his breath as very hot water touched bruises. "Bacta's more available in the wider galaxy than here, but depending on the environment... well, scarring is certainly preferable to some of the alternatives."

"Yeah?" Water sloshed as Yahiko leaned forward. "Whoa! You've been in a duel?"

"Er... yes, unfortunately."

"Huh? But we beat the bad guys!"

"Only because we had to," Obi-Wan said frankly. "Violence should always be the last resort. That's your teacher's way, is it not? And I know you saw Kenshin offer the Oniwabanshuu chances to retreat."

"Well... yeah, but...."

"They were our opponents," Kenshin spoke up, abandoning his attempts at calm. *Later. I will meditate later.* "They did not have to be our enemies. One owed them that chance." *Though there are times when there is no choice.*

That, too, could wait for later, and the words of Yahiko's true teacher. It was Kaoru's decision to make, when her apprentice should be exposed to the harsh grays of life. Not his.

"So... what's that one?" Yahiko asked after almost a minute of quiet.

"Hmm." Obi-Wan sounded thoughtful, as if probing a half-forgotten memory. "Shrapnel, I believe. Droids and fast trigger fingers on blasters are a rather explosive mix. A terrible mess. Took weeks to clean up."

Kenshin tried not to smile.

"...Right," Yahiko said doubtfully. "And that one?"

"Oh, frighteningly ordinary, I'm afraid. When I was about Kaoru's age, a friend of mine struck his head on a boulder, and fell into a river. I went after him. There were quite a few rocks."

Kenshin bit back a grin, feeling Yahiko's enthusiasm for battle being expertly worn down. *Oh, young one. Don't you know? Basic has a word for hero. We do not. There are only those of us who do what we must - and those poor, broken souls who fail their duty.*

"Whoa... that one looks like teeth!"

"Ah, yes. Very sharp, in fact. I'm still not certain what that was. Though I doubt I'll ever forget that smell." A grimace roiled through ki. "I know I won't forget hearing my lightsaber short out as it hit the water."

"Oh, man!"
"Ah." The faintest hint of interest tickled the surface of Obi-Wan's emotions. "So that's a problem here, as well?"

"Well... you hear sometimes about ninja coming right up out of lakes with their 'sabers on, but that's just stories."

Ah. So that is what he wishes to know. "No," Kenshin said plainly, calling his lightsaber to his hand. "It is not."

Eyes open, he switched it on; first student's violet, then unshielded amber. Touched it to the bathwater, watching Yahiko's eyes widen as liquid steamed... and the blade remained intact.

Fingers and will switched it off, before the spot of boiling water could spread and harm. "One presumes, from your question, that the Jedi have also discovered this."

"Two focus crystals employing a bifurcating cyclical-ignition pump allow the blade to be used even underwater," Obi-Wan stated, perfectly calm. "A trick I picked up from an amphibious friend of mine... and one I've thanked Kit's memory for many a time, given the foes I've faced in aquatic environs. Your blade shifts color between training strength and full power. I knew you had to be using more than one crystal. I didn't know if you had the rest of the technology as well." He gave Kenshin a wry look. "And I still don't know why it was blue."

"That, is the will of ki," Kenshin smiled at him, waving his lightsaber back to the shelf away from the bath. "The gentle blow softens the blade's strength before it can cut living flesh. It shows."

The Jedi's brow lifted. "You absorb the energy of your own lightsaber?"

"When one must." Kenshin dipped his head. "Though usually it is more a matter of redirection, so the most harmful energies remain on the back of the blade. It is not the most easily mastered of abilities."

"I would think not!" Obi-Wan let out a huff of breath. "Once I've built another lightsaber, my young friend, I dearly want to spar with you. I suspect I could learn a great deal."

He was a seasoned rurouni. A student of Hiten Mitsurugi. He would not eep. Though one suspects you would learn rather too much-

"Of course, it's the building that worries me at the moment," the Jedi went on. "I have the tools and the components to build a waterproof lightsaber, yet I only have one focus crystal. And given you say samurai create crystals on this planet, rather than finding them, a skill I most certainly have not mastered..."

You do not know what you are asking for, Kenshin thought, lightheaded. You do not know. Kenobis-san was not a cruel man, after all. And he did not suspect. He could not suspect.

But even as he was not cruel, neither was he a fool. Obi-Wan felt Yahiko's stunned silence, and sighed. "All right. What have I done wrong this time?"

"Ah- well- um-"

Kenshin gave the boy a slight smile, silencing his stammer. "What Yahiko-kun means to say is, while anyone may pass along a student's crystal, the level of control needed to create a master's crystal renders their gifting far more personal. It is the treasure of master to student ready to face the battlefield; of one battle-comrade to another in dire need. Of," he barely hesitated, "kin to kin,
for the defense of the ariitu."

To ask your own kin for the sword you need to slay them, to defend the clan's honor... it would be a right thing to do.

You must never know. Never.

"But this one is guesting under Kaoru-dono's roof, who has not yet the skill to aid her students." Kenshin dipped his head. "If one could examine the crystal you have in the morning, when we are both rested - one will see what can be done." He let his face grow more serious. "If one can aid, Obi-Wan, one must ask that you conceal the blade's strength, whenever you can. The art of forming two crystals that can work in concert is rare, and a secret ninja clans guard with their lives. They would not be pleased to find it in samurai hands."

"I imagine not." Water rippled, and ki-

"Oro?" Kenshin batted at the swath of hair floating upward at the Jedi's whim, gleaming scarlet and crimson in the lantern-light.

"Forgive my curiosity." Obi-Wan studied the play of color in wet hair with unabashed interest. "I wanted to ask the other night, but given the amount of ribaldry in the air, I didn't wish to give our aquatically-employed rescuers any further reason to pry. Those stripes are a lot clearer in this light, anyway... I've never seen that on another human. Is this why Katsu-"

"No," Kenshin said hurriedly, face heating. "Or - perhaps - Katsu is Edokko, and those like this one are not common here... One's 'Kaasan carried Fireryo blood.' Though hers had been far more marked than his; he could remember winding small hands in rivers of black and gold.

"Firrerreo." Obi-Wan sounded the word out as if it were Basic. And perhaps it was; recognition lit his face. "I've heard of them once, long ago. A rare species in the Outer Rim... but why would that be odd? That onmitsu was obviously of that race."

"Humans marry into the clans," Yahiko said bluntly. "Fireryo never marry out. They don't trust people."

"They can, if they must," Kenshin corrected. Remember the good times. Remember them happy, together. "They do not wish to lose who they are, Yahiko. But they love this world, and they are loyal to their lords. None can ask for more." Kenshin rested his gaze on Obi-Wan. "No. Katsu called this one demon because one used the skills demons are known to have; to enter another's mind, and touch its essence. True demons do far more than that," he added dryly, "but those who suffer such, rarely survive to tell the tale."

"Demons," Obi-Wan said faintly.

"Living nightmares, created from the Dark Side of ki," Kenshin said frankly. "They do exist. If you see a form that should be dead, yet is not... or worse, a black star, roiling with energy and fear... do not stop to ask questions. Run. Gather all those you can with strength in the Light. And do not be alone."

"But that's not what kitsune look like!" Yahiko protested.

Briefly, Kenshin considered pounding his head against the wall of the tub. "Kitsune are not demons, Yahiko-kun."

"But-"
"Oni are dark energy. Kitsune are living creatures, like you and I. Little creatures," he added for Obi-Wan's sake. "Small, four-booted, red-furred souls, with one tail, or many, and boundless curiosity. And a very great strength at illusions."

"But they do horrible things to people!" Yahiko protested.

"To those who stray into their territory? Yes," Kenshin agreed. "And there are always a few who Fall, as humans do, losing their hearts in Darkness. Nogitsune are a danger to everyone." His voice softened. "But many are innocent, Yahiko-kun. Like Ayame-chan and Suzume-chan. They mean no harm. They simply do not understand that when a human's mind is touched, is influenced, to see other than what eyes should see... a human is afraid."

Yahiko stared at him. "They turn into samurai and get them into all kinds of trouble. They turn into trees and fog, so they can send whole army divisions on a wild gachou chase. They turn into courtesans, just so they can get guys alone and suck out their-" he blushed.

Kenshin shrugged. "One never said they were safe." Warm enough, he stepped out of the tub. "Until the morning."

At least he could put it off that long. The very thought of studying Obi-Wan's focus crystal...

Think of something else, Kenshin told himself firmly, treading down the raised walk toward the main house. Anything else. Even- damn.

Aoshi's data-crystal was still waiting, after all. With whatever information the okashira's lord had deemed fit for Battousai's eyes.

I have to look at it tonight, he sighed, opening the screen to his room. Kaoru-dono could still be in danger. We could all be in danger.

And whatever bombshells might lurk in that data, they were meant for Battousai. Not a heartbroken young man of a shattered ie, wondering for the first time in decades whether he was the last survivor... or whether he would be fighting his own blood to remain so.

No. Compared to Obi-Wan's innocent request, it couldn't be that bad.

"Himura-san. If you are viewing this, the Oniwabanshuu have succeeded in their mission, and Takeda Kanryuu has been neutralized..."

It wasn't that bad. It was worse.

Hologram off, Kenshin stared at the crystal, and resolutely stored it away in his medicine box. Pulled his yukata a bit tighter about himself, tucked his lightsaber against his arm, and propped himself against a wall to sleep.

Sleep, and try not to dream of the Bakumatsu....

Darkness sucked him under, and there was no choice.

Sake tasted strongly of blood, tonight.

He ate mechanically, barely tasting the spices Okami-dono had added to try and put a little weight back on him. The rest of the hall was loud, boisterous; warriors celebrating the deaths of their
enemies.

Near him, only silence.

*I should have just eaten in my room. Or just gone there, never mind the food-*

No. Katsura needed him. He had to eat.

Even if it all tasted of ashes, and blood.

Dishes crashed.

*Drunks.* He closed his eyes a moment, suddenly weary. Rinsed his bowl with a bit of hot water, and drank it down. *Well. I've had enough for one night-*

"An' we owe it all to the Demon of Kyoto!" a tall samurai slurred, advancing on him with a peculiar right-sided stagger. "What kind of honor is that?"

*Edokko,* he placed the accent dispassionately. *Not in town long.* His amber gaze flicked to the drunk man's comrades; Kyotoko, and samurai from the backwoods of Choushuu, all of whom had been on Kyoto's bloody streets long enough to know better. They shrank back, but kept smirking.

*Drunks without the honor to save one of their own. Fools.*

"We're s'posed t' be *samurai,* fighting for the honor of the Emperor." Weaving back and forth, the Edokko glared at him, eyes slipping in and out of focus. "Stead we run, while some hell-cursed *assassin* gets 'tween us an' the Mibu wolves... *oi! I'm talkin' to you!*

He didn't move. Didn't so much as twitch, even as the stench of vomit clogged his nostrils, knowing the others were waiting for their fun. Waiting for Katsura's dragon to just touch his 'saber, and terrify this poor, older, naive samurai half to death with only a *look.*

*Eyes.* Something pricked at him through ki; a whisper, so gentle that it wafted past the raw numbness of killing. *Look at his eyes!*

"We're supposed to do the fightin' an' the dyin', like warriors! An' then something like you comes along and makes it all worth *nothing-*"

The punch came. He wasn't there.

Behind the man, he held up an empty palm, calling to the cool threads of ki weaving through hot drunkenness. *Sleep.*

The samurai dropped like a stone.

*That shouldn't have worked so easily. Even on a drunk.* Down on one knee, he peeled back one eyelid, then another; ignoring the sudden silence, whispers, shouts that damn it, the demon had finally *killed* a man, just for being a little pushy-

Left pupil was blown. *Damn.*

He stood, freezing the room with a look. "Get a doctor. He's concussed." *You idiots,* he wanted to add.

Silence.
"When did he start throwing up?"

More silence. A shuffling of feet. "It was his first fight," somebody muttered. "City-bred slug thought his sword-style's so great. Never really drew blood before...."

And that would have been hours ago. Damn. He glanced at one of the inn's serving maids. "Saezuri-dono, get help. Now." He lowered his hand, and lifted; the samurai's limp body rising with his will. "We'll be in my room."

_Hours. He's been getting sicker for hours._ He lowered the samurai down to the futon he himself never used, feeling time trickle through his grasp like sand. Ki was frail about this man, tattered; life fleeing from a hidden injury. _He doesn't have time to wait for the healer._

_Breathe. Center. And in...._  

Eyes closed, he saw the pulse of blood flowing awry under torn skin and bone; felt the pooling pressure, threatening to snuff out life like rising water.

_First, keep him alive._

A delicate brush of ki touched blood vessels as they were, woke from them the echo of what they _should_ be. He reached in, gentle as he could, shaping ki to that echo, so the red flow steadied.

_In and out. Let it pulse with the heart. Gentle, baka; a cherry blossom, falling through air, not a blast to shatter stone and steel and the bone behind it._

The rhythm stuttered. But it held.

_Now. There's too much blood here. Move it away, just a little at a time..._  

Simplest to nudge it back along the gash in bone and flesh, so the scent of copper dripped hot and raw to the floor mats. Okami was going to be so angry with him.

_Better. I think._

_Hold the rhythm._

This was the tricky part, after all; adding just a little of his own energy, to encourage the ki within this man to mend itself. Just a feather-stroke of hope, and good will, and the calm patience of watching clouds blow through an autumn-blue sky, sealing cell to cell until vessels and brain were whole once more...

Hands were over his, a bright light to his shadow. He blinked, taking in the stunned look on the Choushuu doctor's face, before professionalism took over and the healer bent back to his patient.

_Not my problem anymore. Good._ Rising, he settled back into a corner to meditate; books at his side, 'saber against his shoulder.

"Ahem."

He blinked, seeing that the candle had burned down an hour and more. "He's alive."

"Yes, he is." Surprise, in the doctor's tone, tempered by caution. "In a day or two, he should be fit to fight again."

Good. One on one, Choushuu's forces were a match for any of the Shogunate's - but with those
forces outnumbering theirs ten to one, they needed every warrior they had. Samurai or not.

"A few hours more, and - well, he might have lived. But he'd never have held a sword again." The doctor regarded him warily, one hand on the trance-caught man's chest. "He's much improved. But I'd rather not move him tonight."

"Then leave him." Closing amber eyes, he settled back against the wall.

Hesitation. A ripple of unease in bright ki. "Don't you even want to know his name?"

"It doesn't matter."

The fusama slid back, and the doctor's light stepped through the doorway. And paused. "Kamiya Koshijirou."

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Kamiya Koshijirou.

Obi-Wan felt himself waking, and gritted his teeth, grabbing for strands of Force-touched dream. *Not yet. Not yet! Please, I just want to know....*

His eyes flew open, as books fell away from his hand.

His... very small... hand.

*What in the worlds?*

Breathing felt different. The Force itself felt different; a rainbow of playful winds, instead of the sunlit meadow he was used to. Everything *glowed.*

And he was standing in a night-quiet Kyoto inn, by a samurai in healing trance, breathing the copper scent of blood.

*This isn't real. It's still a memory. I think.*

He walked to the side of a man who'd been dead half a year, watching his breath rise and fall. Yes... yes, he could see echoes of Kaoru in Koshijirou's face. Especially the stubborn lines.

*Three guesses where she gets her temper from.* Obi-Wan shook his head, starting at the slap of long hair against his shoulder. Battousai hadn't noticed it; the ronin tail of hair was as much a part of that shadowed warrior as his own padawan braid had been, once.

*Eerie feeling.* He caught scarlet-and-crimson strands between kote-gloved fingers, wondering just what he'd managed with that plea to the Force.

*Just let it happen. If there are answers, they will come.* Ametrine leather peeled back under his searching fingers, exposing an unscarred palm. *So. This is before Ulloriaq-*

Something hummed outside the balcony screen.

His heart clenched. *I know that sound.*

He pushed the screen aside, and stepped into a corridor parsecs away, lit by the red glow of energy gates.
Naboo. This is where Qui-Gon....

Face still streaked with tears, a grim padawan stepped out of the shadows.

Obi-Wan let out a deliberate breath. "You saw."

"I did not think a Jedi could lose to a Sith." The voice was his own, from all those decades ago. Yet the tilt of the head, casting the padawan braid back, was... familiar, and different, at once.

_That's what Yamagata saw, Obi-Wan realized. Years and worlds apart - we are still like one another._

"Yet for one moment, fighting to save the master you loved - you were not Jedi, were you?"

_Force Rage._ He'd used it, that frantic minute before he'd been kicked into the pit; let the Dark Side flow through him, in a desperate attempt to match the creature that had just torn the heart from his universe. "Not one of my finest moments, no."

"You were _reckless._" Haunted eyes fixed on him, worry and anger smoldering through the Force. "Would you take a boat built for Lake Biwa into the teeth of a typhoon? The Darkness could have swallowed you!"

Obi-Wan felt a hint of annoyance; tried to release it. Not so easy, wrapped in this form that was and wasn't Battousai's. The Living Force pulled at him like sea-sparkles in the tide; constant flashes of _look! Look! Here, there, now, life, change! _"And you have a boat fit for typhoons, do you?"

"No! _No one_ does. No one who hopes to use ki, and stay sane." The padawan-who-wasn't stepped nearer. "But a ship built for the sea, and rough sailing - yes, that I have. So if the typhoon strikes, I may ride it, and hope to survive. You Jedi-" A frustrated fist by his side. "You dive in, when all hope is lost. And you _drown._"

"True," the Jedi admitted. "Though I haven't drowned yet. I-" _Ow._ He touched fingers to his left cheek, brought them away a startling crimson.

"You don't know how to dreamwalk." Familiar hands were holding him as he wavered, blue-green eyes wide, sick with realization. "It is an onmitsu skill, you would not know it...."

Obi-wan swallowed, feeling the corridor turn misty and surreal. "It hurts." A wound not in the flesh, but the Force; the frail threads he'd gripped slipping from his hold, tearing-

"Stay."

Fingers against his wounded cheek, radiating healing through the Force. Obi-Wan leaned into them gratefully, opening himself as he would to any Temple medic. _It is not just the will of the healer who works,_ a Jedi Healer's voice scolded from long ago. _It is the will of the patient, to be healed; to accept the will of the Force, and encourage light when all seems cast into darkness._

The pain was gone. Obi-Wan risked a glance up, into familiar, haunted eyes. _Was that what I looked like, after?_ 

_So much grief here. For both of us._

Which truly wasn't fair. This was just a place. Even if it was a memory. It didn't deserve their pain.

_So make a new memory, baka._
Good advice - whomever it was. "How long has it been since you've sparred?"

The other blinked at him. "You should not stay here. Not long-"

"One bout doesn't take long. Does it?" He let his eyes narrow, wondering what it looked like. Rather alarming, if the Choushuu reaction was any clue. "Or are you afraid?"

The low snap-hiss of a 'saber set to training strength was his only warning.

*Even in a dream, he's careful not to hurt me...*

Amber met blue.

*Ataru,* Obi-Wan thought, in the moments between strikes. *No. Not quite.* Oh, the acrobatics were there; the full-fledged whirlwind of death and destruction Master Yoda had once unleashed on Dooku. But it flowed differently; the Force filling his opponent not just for speed and strength, but for attunement to his surroundings so fine, it would have felt a mote of dust falling out of place.

And it went through Makashi like the form wasn't even *there.*

*He's so fast-*

Obi-Wan fell back into Soresu, feeling his soul fumble at the form he'd barely used in decades. Felt his opponent hesitate, considering the new style-

And smile.

*Gone!*

*No, not gone, feel the Force, think-*

Blue crashed against amber, a bare inch from his throat. Obi-Wan whirled in what should have been a disarm, that suddenly *wasn't,* as Battousai used that lightning speed to be elsewhere.

Across the corridor, blue cutting out in a formal bow to end the match. Face still grave, but eyes....

*Laughing.*

*I can feel it.*

Obi-Wan let his own smile slip out, stretching into that odd sense of warmth. Of *belonging.*

A warmth that turned to startled surprise, and a sudden sense of, *oh no-*

Battousai was gone.

The corridor was gone.

And in that brief instant before Obi-Wan opened his eyes to Kaoru's dojo, and felt shields slammed down that could have stopped Mace Windu cold-

*Here,* sang a cord of the Living Force. *Here, here, here!*

*Love you.*

In the thin light before dawn, Obi-Wan grinned.
And - very deliberately - drifted into a meditation that would let him be completely oblivious to the sound of someone pounding his head against a handy wall.

Chest-wraps, gi, hakama, obi, move! Kaoru tore out into the golden dawn, feet thudding on wood, then crunching on gravel, as she bolted for the front gate. The Force was beating at her like butterfly wings - or maybe that was just panic. Just enough time, just enough, keep moving, turn, swing!

Thwack.

"Oro...."

"And where do you think you're going?" Kaoru demanded, trying to get her breath back as Kenshin wobbled in the path, rubbing his head. "More ninja? Somebody else looking for Megumi?" A thought struck, chilling her to the bone. "Yamagata?"

"No!" But violet eyes were wild and panicked as if the battle-lord were standing in her courtyard this minute, with blasters set to kill. "No, one would have sensed him, he is not near - forgive, Kaoru-dono. One has to go. Now." He moved for the gate.

Kaoru side-stepped to block him, 'saber raised and ready. "Go? Where? For how long?" Though from the sick feeling in her gut, she knew how long. He has his bag packed. He's not coming back. "Why?"

The red head was shaking, hands raised and empty, trying to shove her questions - and her 'saber - aside. "Kenobi-san is too close. One can't let him stray closer. Forgive this one, Kaoru-dono, but you will be safe with him. And Yahiko-kun needs your teaching. One isn't needed here. One has to go."

Kaoru saw red. Oh no you don't, jerk! You're not going anywhere until I get an explanation-

Hand met hand.

It's... singing....

Like starlit winds, in the quiet before dawn. Calm, and peace, and familiar in the way only home could be.

She was brushing away another's tears, as they both knelt on hard gravel.

"One has to go," Kenshin whispered.

Kaoru swallowed dryly. "I didn't want Yahiko, either. Not at first."

"But...."

"Half a year, I've been alone in my head," Kaoru pressed on. "It hurt, but I was used to it. It was easier to hurt. Because if I let him in, if I let myself care - then I could hurt all over again. And I didn't - didn't want to hurt that way, ever again."

Red shoulders were hunched. The violet gaze would not meet hers. "Kaoru-dono knows why this one must go."
"No," Kaoru said softly. "No, I don't. Jedi forgive, Kenshin. I know Ulloriaq didn't... but she Fell. Doesn't that tell you anything?"

Misery hung about him like bitter fog. "Kaoru-dono...."

"And you promised."

A startled flinch.

"Yahiko told me, last night," Kaoru pressed on. "I don't know whether to kiss you for being honorable, or hit you over the head for being an idiot, or yell at you because knowing you, you probably think you can just pull it off and run if he figures it out - but you promised." Bracing herself, she looked him in the eye. "So. As assistant master of this dojo, I'm telling you: this is what you're going to do. You're going to borrow that crystal from Obi-Wan. You're going to take it to a spring and see if you can make a match to it -"

"But-"

"Whatever you do is going to be easier if the crystal's right there, you know that," Kaoru ran over his protest. "You're going to do the best you can, and then you're going to bring Obi-Wan's focus crystal back to him. Not slip it under the gate, not pass it off to me or Sano - bring it right back to him. Understand?"

The redhead managed a stunned smile. "Hai, Kamiya-sensei."

"Good." Kaoru took a step back, pulled shreds of dignity around her long enough to nod. "You've already got your travel gear packed, so... wait right there." Turning on her heel, she marched back to the house.

Good. He's meditating.

I'm going to have an awful time explaining this when he comes out of it.

Kaoru tore through the tansu at the end of the room, digging through off-world gear until she found faceted, milky white. Not like any crystal I ever saw used. But it feels right. And if Obi-Wan thinks it'll work- She shrugged, and wrapped her prize in soft cloth.

Marching back to the shell-shocked rurouni, she thumped the bundle into his hands. "So what are you doing still hanging around here?"

Shaking his head, Kenshin slipped out into the morning.

Did I do the right thing? Please let me have done the right thing.

The Force was quiet. But it felt like a good quiet. She hoped.

On the engawa behind her, a throat cleared. "I presume there's a good explanation."

"Oh, is there ever." Marching up to the step, Kaoru planted her fists on her hips and gave Obi-Wan a long, sideways look. "We're going to have a talk about family bonds, and your brother, and what Fireryo are willing to do to keep their aritu's honor, and skittish idiot redheads." Serenity. Peace. Breathe it. Be it. "After breakfast."
"Oh kami. We're doomed." Yahiko swallowed, cringing at what his nose was telling him. "She cooked."

"Come now," Obi-Wan said under his breath, reaching for one of the lumpy bean-cakes on the tray. "Surely it can't be that..." Lump near his nose, he sniffed. "Oh dear."

Gritting his teeth, Yahiko bit into the mealy mass, and gnawed away. He'd eaten worse on the streets, working for Tanishi, sometimes. Lots worse.

Obi-Wan bit into his own breakfast, face carefully blank. "Hmm." Chewed, and swallowed. "...Interesting texture."

"You don't have to be polite about it," Kaoru grumbled, face falling as she nibbled her way through her own share of the bean-cakes and scorched kokumotsu. "I can't cook. Why do you think Megumi went off with Gensai-sensei this morning?"

"Why, to examine his clinic's facilities, of course," Obi-Wan shrugged. "As any good doctor should, when given the opportunity to learn from a more experienced practitioner. Now that she's free to walk the streets, she should stock the Sekihoutai's infirmary properly, not simply with whatever supplies its pilots can liberate at random." Seeing her disbelieving eyebrow climb, the Jedi smiled. "I reserve undeserved flattery for politicians, Kaoru. And hope I don't meet too many of them."

"Now you really sound like Kenshin."

Catching his teacher's gaze, Yahiko furtively shook his head. No, bad idea, don't-

"He knows, Yahiko."

"He... does?" Yahiko gulped, worry turning the taste in his mouth to ashes.

Which was kind of an improvement.

"So, um-" chew, slurp, "you know, and, ah-" the boy sawed his teeth on a particularly overcooked lump of grain, gulping it down with tea, "-no slicey?"

Obi-Wan's sigh was all patient exasperation. "I did not dig into a Grand Moff's secure files, cross half a galaxy, and nearly get myself killed by a disease I didn't know existed, simply to cut down a rather benign Force-user due to a twenty-year-old lapse in judgment." He didn't quite roll his eyes. "Force knows I'd be dead now, by that standard."

"Benign?" Kaoru said numbly.

"Hitokiri Battousai?" Yahiko added, eyes wide.

"There have been Jedi assassins before."

Yahiko stared at him.

Obi-Wan sighed again, softer this time. "I grant you it's not something the Order liked to admit," he acknowledged, meeting Kaoru's disbelieving gaze. "We prefer to be known as peacemakers. Guardians of peace and justice. But there were occasions, in particularly brutal disputes, and when Sith are suspected... at times, there simply are no good options. For the good of all involved, for the best way to peace - sometimes, it is most effective to remove one creature standing in the way."
Kaoru swallowed dryly.

"It was never done unless other reasonable options were exhausted," Obi-Wan went on. "It was rarely done, ever - there are very few Jedi who can assassinate a sentient being, even once, and not have the Dark Side drag them down. I don't know if Kenshin is incredibly strong-willed, or simply lucky. But he is not the first Force-user I have met who walked of his own will into the shadows, and managed to stumble back out again." He looked away, into memory. "I've no way of knowing if Quinlan Vos is even still alive. But if you met him... I believe you would know him. Their signature in the Force feels very much alike. And Quinlan is Jedi." A faint smile crossed his face. "Though he'd tell you he's not a very good one."

"Kenshin's not Jedi," Kaoru said bluntly.

"So he's told me," Obi-Wan nodded. "Still. I believe he's not so different as he may think. He's skilled, efficient, self-sacrificing, modest... well, mostly modest. Assuming every trap is laid for him is more than a bit arrogant..." He stopped, and regarded their disbelieving stares. "Should I take it there was more than one reason Uramura asked that we warn him the next time we take drastic action, so he might withdraw his men in advance?"

"More than one?" Yahiko blurted. And he says Kenshin's a little arrogant? "What did you do to the Empire?"

"Err..." The Jedi smiled weakly. "Well, that would be a rather long and boring story."

Kaoru reached for her bokken.

"All right, it would be a very long story," Obi-Wan amended. "Suffice it to say Vader has at least as high a price on my head as Saigo has on Kenshin's. Precisely how dangerous is Kenshin? Uramura seems to believe he could handle a fully-trained Jedi... well, we've seen the evidence that he did handle a fully-trained Fallen Jedi, but Ulloriaq had already faced Okita Souji and who knows who else that night."

"My mother said-" Kaoru hesitated. Swallowed. "From everything she could put together, he was at least as good as Master Cin Drallig. And faster."

"Who?" Yahiko muttered.

"Our lightsaber instructor in the Temple. He was a master of six of the seven forms; even at my best, he'd score off me more often than I liked." Obi-Wan was silent a long moment. "That good."

Kaoru took another deep breath. "And I doubt Master Drallig used Force Lightning."

"...Stars, no."

"People say he set half of Toba Fushimi ablaze." Kaoru held up a hand to ward off questions. "I don't know about that. Tousan wouldn't talk to me about the war, so I'm telling you what Gensai-sensei says he said. And that was, the battle lasted three days. The Ishin Shishi were outnumbered at least three to one. And they still won."

"Three to one, with samurai on both sides," Obi-Wan said frankly.

"And a lot of Shogunate samurai were better trained than Choushuu," Kaoru said, just as frank. "The Shinsengumi... people say Hitokiri Battousai met Saitou Hajime on the battlefield there, and the sky caught fire. Lightning. Lightsabers. Thunderclaps. Tornadoes. There were craters there, after."
"Met?" Obi-Wan lifted a curious brow. "Not killed?"

"I don't know," Kaoru said honestly. "There are lots of rumors... you should ask Megumi. She's from Aizu. Which is where the Shinsengumi survivors went after Toba Fushimi," Kaoru added belatedly, taking in the Jedi's blank look. "They held out a long time against the Imperialists. And they're still paying for it today. Governor Meiji doesn't like that han at all."

"Flowchart," Obi-Wan was muttering, knuckling his forehead as if to scour away a headache. "This planet should come with a flowchart, I swear."

"Oh! Right!" Kaoru shot to her feet. "Ai!"

"Kaoru's favorite book-lender," Yahiko filled in at the Jedi's curious glance. "She's coming around this neighborhood today. She likes to show up here right after lessons-"

"Not today! You two are going out to catch her early. I've got a list. And Ai said she finally tracked down a copy of Footprints!" Kaoru enthused. "You should read it too, Yahiko; it's great for practicing your Basic. I know it's old, but since it shows how off-worlders in the Republic saw Yamato, it's good for figuring out some of why the government deals with the Empire the way they do today."

Obi-Wan gave her an intrigued look. "Am I to understand that you asked Ai to track down a book for me?"

"Of course! As soon as I knew who you were," Kaoru said brightly. "It just took awhile. There aren't a lot of copies around. The book's about sixty years old, after all. And even if it wasn't... well, people don't always want their neighbors to know they were reading something written with the assistance of Jedi archaeologists."

"With-?" Obi-Wan sat up straight. "You said you'd read works on this planet written by Republic archaeologists..."

"Well, not all of them were Jedi." Kaoru grinned. "And this is the best book. Footprints of Mandalore. By Drs. Mori and Sain Kenobi."

Obi-Wan was quiet for hours after that.

So here they were now, the noise of students hacking their way through lessons streets behind them, as Yahiko poked through Ai's wheeled carryall for the rest of Kaoru's list and Obi-Wan held a decades-old holobook as if it were spun glass. "Footprints of Mandalore," he murmured under his breath. "Yamato as Tri-Species Isolate. Space. No shoes in the house, adopting into bloodlines, look an honorable man in the eye, even Sano's bad language... Mando'a. Mutated by a few thousand years and a few other races, but... and there's almost no armor here, yet... Star's End, you're Mandalorians! How did I end up on a planet of...?"

"He always talk to himself like that, Yahiko-kun?"

Yahiko grinned at Ai. Hard not to; the matronly bookseller had a sharp eye for the best book to snag an interested customer, and an even sharper grasp of when to stop talking and simply flip to an interesting print when somebody got bored with big words. "Only when he's confused."

"A gaijin ronin?" Ai rolled her eyes. "How much more confused can you get?"

"He probably heard you," Yahiko sing-songed.
"So?" Clogs clattering on the pavement, Ai studied her bemused customer. "Kenobi Obi-Wan?"

"Yes?" the Jedi said warily.

Ai pulled a cloud-blue envelope from between two books, giving it one last appreciative sniff before handing it over. "A bright little bird saw that you'd meet me today."

"Saw?" Carefully breaking the perfumed seal, Obi-Wan drew out an ataru folded from creamy paper, regarding it with appreciative eyes before he unfolded it to read graceful ink-strokes.

"You lucky man," Ai sighed happily. "Somebody loves you."

"Actually, I suspect it's a declaration of war." Obi-Wan lifted his gaze to meet Yahiko's, deeply troubled. "I've been invited to the One Promise. Two hours from now. For flower-viewing and tea... whatever that may mean. I don't suppose you know?"

Yahiko gulped.

Ai cackled.

"...Oh dear."

He came. Taimatsu Ran, known to the world as Koubai, surfaced from her meditative trance to the sense of light ki, and the soft slide of her apprentice opening the screen in a perfect kata of maiko movement. I knew he would.

"It is good to see you, Oniisan," Namiji said brightly, rising to complete the kata. "My honored elder sister is about to begin tea."

"A token, for the gentle lady," Kenobi murmured, offering a single bloom of hanabi with a bow casual eyes might have taken for perfect.

Too deep for Namiji-chan, and too shallow for me, Koubai thought critically, as her apprentice accepted the red and gold blossom, placing it in a shallow dish of water. But it could be worse. Clean, neat, presentable, and he knew enough to ask advice on an appropriate token. The hanabi is in season, and well favored for we of Yoshiwara; and he brought but one bloom. Appropriately discreet.

Still, he is gaijin. If he is to pass unnoticed, he will need more than that. Yamagata was wise to ask for my assistance.

Not that Yamagata would ever have asked, of his own impulses. That had taken an evening's worth of skill, to influence by word and sigh and flicker of smile alone, without ever resorting to ki a samurai would detect. The skill and art of a kunoichi... and a geisha.

The one you know, and are well-skilled to deal with, Koubai thought, smoothing her robes as she sat, if your history of encounters with Dark Jedi is anywhere near the truth. But the other?

We shall see.

First, the peace of tea.
She is... exquisite.

Obi-Wan sat seiza, watching graceful, gold-hued hands whisk powdered green to a light froth, Gensai's hasty advice a frantic murmur in the back of his head. A fresh, not-quite-sweet scent wafted through the air; tea, of a higher grade than the Kamiya dojo could afford on their best days, blended with just a hint of protective hashima as guest-courtesy.

And this should be courtesy, not entertainment, the Jedi thought, keeping a frown of concentration off his face. Gensai said that here in Yoshiwara, these are the hours of teaching. If we were alone, it might be paid company - but Namiji is here.

Seated demurely off to the side in her patterned robe of sky-blue and cherry-pink, watching her mistress' movements with learning eyes. Though from that graceful performance at the door, Obi-Wan would imagine the girl was well-qualified to perform this ceremony herself.

Perfect movements; to open the screen, move aside, greet the guest. Practiced. Patterned. A moving meditation. Like the tea.

He'd lay odds most who saw it would never know the time it took to gain such mastery, nor care. Yet he could feel the Force moving with it, subtle and inexorable as the tide.

I begin to see why Gensai thought this trip so dangerous.

Yet it was hard to see the danger, looking over the comb of starry blue flowers set into Koubai's two-toned Firrerreo hair; night-black, with thick rivers of gold, twisted up and back from a white-painted face. Harder still, looking into the embroidered emerald eyes of the kitsune leaping across the left side of Koubai's twilight-hued kimono; a white, five-tailed creature with a look of pure delight on its vulpine face, paws spread wide to toss a ball of blue fire.

Hands unpainted, while the face is white as snow, Obi-Wan thought. Shironuri, Gensai had called it, with a sidelong glance at memories of younger days. Mask the face, mask the identity; bring the role to forefront, not the individual. As Naboo’s Queens did.

Face, shoulders, neck; all of her exposed skin he could see above the kimono was pearl-white, save for penciled black brows and lips red as blood. Lips that bent in a gentle bow of concentration, as Koubai set self aside to perform the perfect ritual of tea.

Pure water. Old earthenware. Powdered green, stirred to froth with a light whisking, inhaled, and sipped. Each movement practiced, precise, delicate and confident at once.

I am in the presence of a Master.

Who means to teach her apprentice something.

Oh, I have a bad feeling about this....

Apprehension stirred the perfect peace of tea.

Gaijin fool. This is time to reflect.

But Koubai was geisha, and the irritation passed over her like water. Her guest was watching,
mindful as Namiji. Ki still about him as a snowfield, in the quiet before dawn.

*You see not a woman, but a graceful opponent.*

*Good.*

Koubai calmed and centered herself again, as Namiji stored ceremonial tea items away and brought out a more bracing pot. A platter of sweets appeared as if by magic; appropriate enough for a learning afternoon, even if it would be frowned on at a true entertainment, where only guests ate. "You have made Yamagata-san very nervous."

Obi-Wan watched her pour for him, poured cups for his hosts with only a slight lift of Koubai's painted brow to prompt him. "I assure you, I never intended to."

"He doesn't know what you intend," Koubai mused. "Which makes him all the more nervous." She regarded him with an honest smile, still amused by the pure turmoil she'd felt from the officer who believed he had planned everything. *Ah, delightful chaos. It does keep us employed. Do you know?*

"Honored lady," Obi-Wan's smile was warm, and almost as wry, "I suspect that would be telling."

*Ah! A worthy foe. It touched even the anger at her core, soothing its rough edges. And a dangerous one.*

He didn't *look* dangerous, which made it all the more interesting. Either he'd lucked out, or someone was advising him; the greens and browns of his clothing were appropriate to a poor but tasteful samurai, not a man of power. Certainly not one of the noble fools she all too often had to entertain lately.

*Fools who would degrade geisha to courtesan, and worse than that....*

Calm. Focus. Darkness brought power, true - but that power had to be tamed. Controlled. Unleashed only when there was a target worthy of destruction.

*This off-worlder is not that target. Yet.*

He expected to be; she could feel it, in wary eyes on her, the careful calculation of the quickest routes out of the building. Not excluding the roof, if that delicate probe of ki at the tiles above was any indication.

*Be a leaf on the water. Wind will come soon enough.*

She let stillness hang between them a moment, then dipped her head to acknowledge the shift in subject. "Soon now, the Emperor will be dead."

Sea-green latched onto her gaze, breath quickening.

*Ah. Now that I have your attention....*

"Soon, of course, is relative," Koubai went on, matching the Jedi stare for stare. "It may be five years. Or ten. Or twenty. But those who use dark ki have roamed Yamato as long as all our people can remember. We know sorcerers when we see them... and we know sorcery's cost. The Emperor has drunk too deeply of the Darkness, and it will devour him. Eventually.

"And when it does - his apprentice is more machine than man. I doubt he will long outlive his
master. A few more years, he might rule, perhaps. A few more months, is more likely.

"And we of Yamato... we can wait."

Wait.

Wait for the Emperor to die.

Wait for Vader's own use of the Dark Side to destroy him.

The thoughts tumbled through Obi-Wan's soul like chips of frozen atmosphere, chilling all they touched.

The way of the Jedi is patience....

"No." He barely voiced it; still, it stiffened his spine. "No, you did not see... Alderaan is gone, my lady. And while the Rebellion has destroyed the Death Star, the very fact that the Empire has obliterated one planet will whet their appetite for more. That hunger to devour."

He stopped, hearing Namiji's gasp, feeling Koubai's shock ripple through the Force. "Gone?" the geisha whispered. "But... Alderaan was a peaceful planet. They had no weapons. They were no threat!"

She's truly shocked. What does an Outer Rim woman know of Alderaan? "They had Bail Organa. Who was a very great threat, indeed." His knuckles were pale, clenching on his hakama; with an effort, Obi-Wan released innocent fabric. "He was a Senator. One of the few in the last days of the Old Republic to hold to what the Senate was intended to be. And he taught his daughter likewise; to uphold law, and justice... and to remember the Jedi who once championed them both." He lifted his gaze to hers. "Justice deferred is justice denied, my lady."

White-painted shoulders were stiff under glimmering kinu. Striped lashes lowered a moment as Koubai breathed slowly out...

Releasing fury to the Force? Fury, and... pain. She did have ties to Alderaan. How?

Demure again, the geisha met his eyes. "But if one does not survive long enough to deal that justice, all is lost."

You truly want me to believe you have no ill intent? Obi-Wan lifted a skeptical brow. "I was under the impression this was a time for teaching...."

"For you." Koubai's smile was sweet, promising everything and nothing; red lips barely parted over black-pearl fangs... that could snap a humanoid's spine, if his half-remembered lessons of Firrerreo were accurate. "Yamagata-san has arranged it. If you will live among samurai, whatever your intent, all of us are safer if you do not draw... undue attention." She let one brow climb slightly. "That is just, is it not?"

"Of course," he acknowledged. Blast. Trapped - and neatly so. How much had these folk learned from Ulloriaq, before she Fell? A Jedi might well sacrifice himself to accomplish a mission, but innocents, civilians - they had to be protected, whenever possible.

Even if some of those civilians have touched the Dark Side?
Even if. There might be sorcerers across Yamato, as Koubai said - but most of their fellow Yamatoans were innocent. This world did not deserve Alderaan's fate.

And it would have that fate, should the Emperor learn of these people. Or worse.

"We will begin," Koubai stated, rising, "with a proper bow."

Introductions. Partings. Proper turns of phrase to address a superior, or inferior, or comrade. The way to sit, or pass a dish, or properly eat: hand cupped around the bowl, instead of a peasant's grip under it; chopsticks to the side of the mouth, never pointing directly in.

So a blow to the hand will not shove pointed weapons down one's own throat, or throw boiling soup in one's face...

Koubai set that thought aside, burying it with the wail of grief that wanted to rise from her throat. Alderaan, and one of the few gaijin she might have called friend, gone-

Calm. Focus on the goal.

Here and now, that was the fast-filling gaps in her student's knowledge. In truth, he seemed to know altogether too much of this already, for a gaijin who'd only been on the planet a few weeks. Childhood memories, perhaps? Though that accent of his, Kyoto on top of backwoods-

Oh. She hid a delighted smile, edged like the pain in her heart, covering it with cool phrases of advice on guest-gifts. Oh, how very, very interesting.

You've found him. Yamagata thinks you don't know... but you do.

And you haven't killed him.

Perfect.

This woman should be instructing the Empire's Diplomatic Corps, Obi-Wan thought wryly, helping her unwrap the multi-layered, black-and-mother-of-pearl lacquered box Namiji had brought out for them. She certainly knows how to cover social ground quickly. I've never seen anyone who could perform impressions of so many different kinds of people, with only a gesture and change of accent... shells?

Shells, indeed. Flat, paired types, of a myriad subtly different shades and sizes. Some had painted designs inside, some did not. Yet all, as Namiji and Koubai knelt to help him spread them over the floor mat, felt ever so faintly of the Force.

Neither Dark, nor Light. They feel more of competition. And... laughter? "This is a game?"

"Matching, Oniisan," Namiji smiled, spreading a last handful like sabacc cards.

"Quite fun when sober. Though if you're playing this in most samurai gatherings, your companions are likely already seeing double." Fangs glinted black in a wry grin. "Not that seeing helps. The object is to move past the outer decoration, and match the essence within. The faster the better." Poised, her hands hovered over creamy shell. "And Obi-Wan?"
Seeing within... your eyes can deceive you, don't trust them... game and status, to judge your comrades' strength in the Force...

Koubai's dark eyes were lit with glee. "Anything you use is fair."

Her hands dove.

Calm. Center. You do not move; the Force moves, and carries your hand with it....

Light. Shadow. A gurgle of freshwater clinging to one shell's memory, a susurration of tidal flat to another, a hiss of saltwater to yet another. Subtle variations, blending together in joyful chorus.

Near, near, near - mine!

The separated pairs called out to each other; whispers and giggles of near-match and far-match and here!

A song, Obi-Wan thought, separated from himself as their three pairs of hands sorted the scattered shells. And the more we match, the more it changes.

As the lone shells grew fewer, their impressions became fainter. More deceptive. Taunting, if shells could taunt; demanding the utmost concentration to sort even as the chorus of matched pairs grew louder, more insistent.

Can't find us, can't find us, can't!

Shell in his left hand, his right landed on-

Koubai's.

Demurely, she turned her hand upward, shell creamy against golden skin.

Manners, Obi-Wan told himself firmly, calming his breathing. When had it quickened? "I concede, my lady." He dropped his shell atop hers, bowing subtly. "The game is yours."

"Not by much," Koubai murmured, eyeing the piles by them. Namiji's was smallest, but respectable; his own, at least a few pair shy of Koubai's. "Blood calls to blood, after all. A little time to gain the skill, and you would be a valuable player, indeed."

He wiped away a hint of sweat. It's not that hot in here, is it? "I don't quite follow."

"You should." Her smile was full, and open, and eerie as a deserted moor. "Don't you know why Yamagata seeks your kinsman so desperately?"

The paint... isn't everywhere, Obi-Wan realized suddenly, eyes drawn by the white curve of Koubai's neck to the unpainted V at the golden nape. There's a living woman under there... why am I even thinking that?

"Hitokiri Battousai. The Demon of Kyoto. The finest swordsman the Revolution ever saw... possibly even better than the best of your order."

She knows.

"And yet, skills with a blade are not what Yamagata fears most. Just as the Confederacy - and the Emperor as well, did he have less arrogance and more wisdom - feared one certain General most."
"They tried to kill him," Koubai mused, eyes down and demure. "Assassins. Traps. Overwhelming numbers of forces. Yet he always survived. As Battousai has always survived. For no matter how desperate the fight, how much even his own allies may fear him, when the winds of battle begin to swirl about him..."

No. She can't mean....

"Battousai... and those of Battousai's blood... seem to have a certain gift at forming ki-bonds." Dark eyes rose to his. "No matter how hard the Imperialists were pressed, how many losses their forces took - those around Battousai would not break."

The ghosts of old battlefields rose about Obi-Wan; of countless Jedi falling in behind his lead, certain without words that he led them in the will of the Force. Of clone soldiers following him into what should have been hopeless situations, believing in him when all their training and experience should have demanded otherwise. Of a Corellian smuggler, not so long ago, believing in him when the man could not believe in Jedi...

Impossible!

"With ki, nothing is impossible. You should know that better than anyone." Her gaze held his like a magnet. "An army with Battousai in it will not break. Will not lose morale. Will not stop."

A weapon. That's all Kenshin is to Yamagata. A weapon too dangerous to let go.

"Such a rare gift, even with hashima to nurture it," Koubai breathed, hand warm on his.

When - when did she get so close? We're enemies - why is she so open? For she was, he could sense it; shields lowered to show all of her Darkness and Light. Like standing on a cliff, in the midst of storm, when wind and sea and lightning gave up pretending they were anything but what they were: strong, and unpredictable, and careless of unready human lives as stars.

"Any clan would value it."

Open. As Kenshin had been last night. Willing to let him reach out to her soul, and touch.

And he wanted to....

A hum seemed to ring in his ears, as if a lightsaber had ignited to chase the shadows. :Run, Obi-Wan! Run!:

Did he escape?

Please, gods, let him have escaped....

Breathing hard, Kenshin sank back into a crouch, leaning back against a thick cane of ebon bamboo to shake off that sense of other-fear, other-peril. Far-sight was not, had never been, his strongest ki-skill. His strength was the Living Force and the now; what-had-been and what-would-be were mere wisps, vanishing at his slightest touch.

:Comfort,: was licks of small tongues against his cheek. :Kin warned. Kin fled.:
Kenshin smiled wryly, scratching under Leaf-snatch-in-autumn's chin, rubbing behind Turn-stones' ears, and letting a tumble of kits too small to give names to not-near-kin sniff his fingers. Kitsune understood more than most might think of humankind; especially kitsune who lived in city shadows, as this family did. But they were still other. If kit or kin were warned of danger, yet had not the time or chance or intelligence to flee... well, they were mourned, but life went on.

Obi-Wan's survived all these years since the Purge. I doubt one geisha will kill him.

At least, not this time. What had anybody been thinking, letting him go off to Yoshiwara alone in the first place?

They were likely thinking that I'd shown Obi-Wan enough the first time to get by, Kenshin thought ruefully. He couldn't blame Kaoru for the mistake. Her father would have introduced her to the parts of Yoshiwara a proper young girl should know... and likely some places she shouldn't, given a teacher was responsible for hauling her students out of embarrassing situations at need. But the full power of a true geisha's display....

They couldn't know. This is my fault. I'll have to fix it, when I return.

If there was anything left for him to return to. That second voice he'd heard, just for an instant, echoing his call to run-

A spirit. A strong one. Obi-Wan's strength is in the Unifying Force, like a miko. He's vulnerable-!

A small red paw planted itself on his shoulder; a half-grown kit who'd given no name, retractable claws kneading his gi. Draws-the-killing-blade:

"Kenshin," the rurouni murmured. Heart-of-sword:

Green eyes slitted, and two tails lashed, as the young kitsune looked toward Leaf-snatch. :

Draws-the-killing-blade:, the older female declared.

Old name:, Kenshin argued, careful not to stare her down. Worn out. Left behind:

Heart-name. Kitsune name:. The six-tailed female sniffed. Fur wears out, kit. Blood and bone and breath wear out. Can't wear out your own soul:

Kenshin tried not to wince. Elder-

She stared at him.

Mindful of his manners, Kenshin ducked his head. Thank you for helping me reach-. He hesitated.

My kin:

Kin helps kin. Kyoto-kitsune clans image well of you:

Of course they would. Before he'd left his shishou's mountain, he'd been on good terms with every kitsune clan Hiko had ever met. Even as Katsura's assassin, he'd always found time to leave an offering for the local clans... and even in his darkest hours, Battousai had never killed an innocent kitsune.

Do?: The half-grown one's dark nose pointed toward the steam rising from this hot spring on Tokyo's far outskirts, drawing in quick breaths of curiosity. Want to see again!

Not a memory crystal:, Leaf-snatch pointed out. Not easy. Especially for furless-kin:
I think that was a challenge. Carefully, Kenshin spread out the cloth beside him again, looking over facets of pearl white, midnight indigo, and rich emerald. Both of these are close enough to sync with Kenobi’s crystal. Both fit for a warrior, a Jedi. Yet - neither feels quite right.

The rurouni breathed out impatience, clearing his mind. Yes, Kenobi was a warrior. Yes, he was true and upright and all the galaxy's best tales of Jedi woven together. But what else was he?

Laughter, with two young girls and their winsome ataru.

Cool calculation, enduring the touch of Shadow that would save him.

A wry grin, in a dream of painful memory.

Desire and fear and the shock of a longing the man had never known, sensing a kunoichi's graceful snare threatening to close about him....

Holding hope to him, Kenshin reached out to the waters once more. Come.

Chapter End Notes

Anou - "Um, er, well".

Ariitu - "Aliit"; clan, family, clan name.

Bakayarou - jerk, fool, idiot.

Busu - "ugly".

Fireryo - Firrerreo; a fanged, near-human species.

Furo - bath.

Gachou - goose; on Yamato, a Compy-like critter.

Kitsune - fox, fox-spirit; legendary shape-shifters who cast illusions and sometimes take human form.

Nogitsune - "field fox"; malevolent fox-spirit.

Oni no ko - demon child.

Oni - demon; on Yamato, a Derriphan. Derriphan (Sith, "devourer") are nightmarish creatures created from the Dark Side of the Force, capable of consuming the thoughts and experiences of living beings, leaving nothing behind but an empty shell. The beast enters the body of the creature to feed; once inside, the Derriphan possessed the individual as they leched their essence. They appear as miniature black stars roiling with energy. The Derriphan were believed to have gone extinct during the time of the Great Sith War but it was later revealed that several survived and existed during the time of the Galactic Civil War.

Oniisan - "honored elder brother".
Shebusu - "shebs" - backside.

Tansu - storage chest.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*Thump.* "Your tab."

Standing at the Akabeko’s front counter, well out of the range of sparks flying in the back of the spaceport garage, Sano winced, imagining that same thump of clenched fist against his kidneys. Likely with a hydrospanner to weight it. For a girl who barely came up to his shoulder, the mechanic had a nasty right hook. "Aw, Tae...."

The sturdy brunette in burgundy coveralls gave him a sidelong look. "You're a sweet guy, Sano," she sighed, Osaka merchant's accent thick as honey. "An' you an' Katsu bring in plenty of other business just by coming here, 'cause spacers know you don't take chances with the Sekihoutai. But I know you got paid." She held out an open palm, fingers twitching in a plain *give it up.*

"Ah, yeah. About that...." Sano stopped suddenly, hit by an odd twinge of *something is wrong.*

"Oh, my!" Tae hurried out from behind the counter, propping up the shoulder of a very familiar, very wild-eyed redhead. "Easy, now. You come right over here... Sano, get him a cup of caf. With extra sweet - I know you know where that is."

"I'm - sorry," Kenobi got out, still weaving even as Tae steered him toward one of the less rickety folding chairs near the caf pot. "I don't mean to be a bother, truly.... I was simply looking for ship mechanics, and someone said...."

"Best place was here?" Sano filled in, handing over the hot caf. "You got it. Obi-Wan, Seigihara Tae, head spanner-twister of Akabeko. Tae, this is Kenobi Obi-Wan. Kaoru's mother's adopted cousin."

"Is he, now!" Warm brown eyes smiled at the off-worlder, making sure he was steady in his seat before she let go of his sleeve. "Well, good. That girl needs a few more friendly faces around. So you're one of Hana's kin? And I've sworn that poor lady didn't have a soul in the galaxy... you must have gotten yourself lost something awful. You staying long? Way you're dressed doesn't fit us spaceport bums, so you must be stayin' for a while...."

Sano let out a relieved breath, inching away-

"Don't think you're gettin' out of here without payin' down that tab, Sagara."

*Nuts.*

Obi-Wan was cupping the off-world-style mug in both hands; sipping, then taking a deep breath of warm steam, then sipping again. His face had the worn relief of a man who'd felt the last strands of rope slip through his grasp - only to have his feet thump down on an unexpected ledge.

*Well, if I'm not going to slip out of here without losing credits anyway...* Sano shook his head. "What the hell happened to you?"

"Underestimation of enemy capabilities, combined with a lack of appreciation for novel tactics," Obi-Wan muttered.
Sano blinked. "Say what?"

"I thought I was dealing with a Corellian sand-panther. Instead it was a krayt dragon."

"Corellian...." Tae gave Sano a confused look.

"Kind of like a togebi, but smaller, with poisoned claws," Sano filled in. Tae might work on spaceships from all over the galaxy, but far as he knew she hadn't been off-planet herself. "Dunno much about krayt dragons, but I think they're something like a hakai-teki-ou. Only twice as big."

Tae swallowed. "...Oh."

"Dojo still standing?" Sano said bluntly.

"Oh, yes. This was a personal threat." Obi-Wan's hands clenched white on ceramic. "I think."

"So... you're not back there because?" Sano prompted.

"I needed something," Obi-Wan hesitated, "familiar." Some of the fog cleared from his gaze as he looked about the garage, taking in rack after rack of equipment most people on Yamato found about as comfortable and familiar as Trandoshan trophy collections. "There was a time I never drank caf, you know. I liked keeping to a routine, and part of that was getting up early to brew a cup of tea. Then the war came, and it was more important to stay awake so you wouldn't be shot -" He cut himself off, wincing. "Forgive me. I'm babbling."

Tae's brows bounced up at that mention of war, but she let it slide. "Homesick, huh?"

"After a fashion," the off-worlder admitted. "Culture shock is the term I'm more familiar with. I don't know quite how to translate it."

"That's okay. I'm not too bad in Basic," Tae said in that language. "Think you'd feel better if we talked this way?"

Obi-Wan blinked. Shook his head, dazed. "Blast." The Basic word stumbled, as if he'd had to hunt for its shape on his tongue. "That actually hurts."

Tae rolled her eyes. "Kaoru should have warned you before she shoved Yamatogo into your head. Crossing languages isn't fun when you learn them the regular way. Trying to switch back when ki's thumped your neurons into another shape - not so easy." The mechanic frowned. "Now, wait a minute. How could Kaoru give you a Kyoto accent?"

"I'm betting she didn't. Sano jabbed a thumb his way. "He really sounds like Kyoto?"

"I know you'd rather be skinned and salted than head near nobles, Sano, but some of us have relatives out that way," Tae said wryly. "Doesn't sound like the city-folk, no - but some of the villagers? People visiting from the mountain temples? Something like that."

"My nephew is from the mountains," Obi-Wan observed quietly.

"Yeah, I hear they're weird up there-" Sano's jaw snapped shut. Wait a sec. Did he just say, nephew?

"Kaoru's got relatives in Kyoto?" Tae perked up, all ears and attention. "They say Koshijirou was out there most a year, back in the Bakumatsu, but this is the first I've heard-"

"He's not Kaoru's relative," Obi-Wan cut in hastily. "This is awkward... there was an irregular
adoption in my birth clan, many years ago. I've only now had the opportunity to begin clarifying
the matter."

Tae gave him a very long, considering look.

Nephew? Sano shook his head, trying to get past that impossible thought. But the guy with the
Kyoto accent is... and they're both kind of short, with sun hair... and the same scary sense of
humor....

"Clan elders finally keeled over and left you a free hand to go looking for strays, huh?" Tae said at
last.

Slightly red, Obi-Wan cleared his throat. "I take it this is not quite as unusual a situation as I was
led to believe?"

"Well, it's not common these days, no," Tae admitted. "But twenty years ago? Thirty? Why, some
places, they say it was almost as bad as the Sengoku Jidai; whole villages gettin' split up an' half
wiped out, caravans vanishing, even a few daimyo castles gettin' plastered from orbit. I hear clans
would pick up survivors at a dead run - and sometimes they weren't too fussy on whose clan they
were pickin' up, especially if they'd had their eye on a kid with talent. And can you blame the kids
for lettin' them? Sometimes there was no one left." She rolled her eyes. "Every few months, I'd
swear, my sister Sae sends another holo-letter about who's claiming they're blood of who, and
who's causing a scandal by goin' back to their birth clan - or not going back. We're going to be
living with this mess for centuries."

Obi-Wan regarded her thoughtfully. "I don't mean to pry, but...."

Tae ducked her head, blushing, and nodded toward a girl in coveralls, about Yahiko's age, currently
refilling a fuel canister for a hand-welder well in the back of the garage. "That's Tsubame. Her
family used to be in service to a pretty rough samurai clan. A lot of those idiots got wiped out;
maybe all of them, if we're lucky. Her parents are still having a little trouble with the way jobs
work in the Empire, but that little bit's taking to this trade like a neko-ao to fresh fish."

"And she couldn't do that if the clan elders were still alive?" Obi-Wan asked neutrally.

"Work in a spaceport, for gaijin? Instead of an honorable position, slaving for samurai?" Tae rolled
her eyes again. "'Course, we can't work if we don't get paid."

"All right, all right," Sano grumbled, fishing out the voucher Katsu had made up, that he'd hoped
not to have to use. Ought to cover about half the tab, I think.

Tae looked at the amount. Looked back at him. Raised an eyebrow, in a manner that promised an
encounter with a hydrospanner. Soon.

"Hey, you know I'm good for it," Sano said quickly. "Some of my funds are kind of tied up right
now. I'm trying to help Takani-san set up the infirmary the way she wants it - and let me tell you,
first-rate medical equipment does not come cheap."

"But it can sometimes be acquired more cheaply than the open market," Obi-Wan said
thoughtfully. "If you know where to look. And have connections."

"And you have connections?" Sano said skeptically. So what were you doing in a hijacked Imperial
shuttle? Are you a spy? For which side? And that doesn't even get into why you're all of a sudden
claiming that Kenshin is your-
"Let's just say, I know certain beings, who know certain beings," Obi-Wan shrugged. "Spaceports have been part of my life for decades. I'm a fair hand at repair, ship or droid, and even better at knowing where to find things - parts, cargoes, people with certain skills - when they're needed." He gave Tae a sincere look. "It occurs to me that this could allow a profitable arrangement, with a mechanic who might benefit from such skills."

Tae gave him a sidelong look back. "And you're offering this to me because...?"

"You're a friend of Kamiya. More importantly, you are the one Sano and Katsu trust with the Sekihoutai," Obi-Wan said bluntly. "I came in on that ship. I know good work."

"Do you, now." Tae planted a fist on her hip. "So if a Corellian freighter comes in with a fluttering thruster, what engine part would you look at first?"

"Before or after I check to be sure someone hasn't simply damaged the control circuitry by cutting the deck to squeeze in another concealed compartment?"

Grinning in earnest, Tae started firing the tougher questions. Sano tuned out somewhere between deflectors and forward sensors, thinking hard. Mixed up with the Imperials somehow... but he's joining Kaoru's dojo... but Uramura seems to trust him... but....

It made his head hurt.

Still, by the time Tae and Kenobi had shaken on a tentative deal, he had a plan. He hoped.

The first part of which included grabbing the off-worlder by the gi the second he'd said his farewells, subtly dragging him off to a corner between a few pieces of hull plating, and hissing, "Nephew?"

"He is," Obi-Wan said levelly. "Yes, Kaoru knows. Yes, Kenshin knows. But he does not know that I know - and given how justifiably paranoid he is about Saigo's price on his life, I'd prefer that state of affairs to continue. At least until I can somehow convince him that I value his life as I do my own." His voice dropped, almost a whisper. "Even his past life."

Even his- Sano swallowed dryly. "Um... no offense, but you don't know...."

"Sano." The sea-green gaze was serious as steel. "I do know. I know who he was. Who he tries to be. Who... what... Saigo and Yamagata are searching for." The auburn head tilted, oddly familiar. "And I've decided I'm not interested in helping them find him. Rather the opposite, if possible."

You know. Sano swallowed. You know? "Why?"

"I know what it is to be hunted."

Off-worlder, even if he was born here. Samurai skills with ki, even though he wasn't raised here. Seems to know tactics good as anybody who's been through a... war.... Facts tumbled together, and Sano's jaw dropped. "Katsu was right?" Makai hellfire, I'm talking to a-

"Please try not to think that so loudly," the Jedi murmured. "You never know who's listening."

"But you're...."

"As Kaoru is. Yes." Obi-Wan inclined his head, face sober. "Unfortunately, I suspect Koubai
knows it."

"Koubai?" Sano said warily. *He can't mean who I think he does. Lots of people out there named Red Plum.*


Sano leaned on red-painted durasteel, feeling his heart sink to his boots. *"Oh, man."*

"If it's any consolation, I don't think she wants either of us dead," the Jedi said dryly. *"Inextricably bound to her will, perhaps, but not dead."*

Sano's head snapped up. "She tried to-" he tapped a knuckle over Obi-Wan's heart before the older man could move away, "-grab you?" He swallowed. "Did she?"

"No. I- you know about ki-bonds?"

"Hey, I wasn't born with the name Sagara, y'know." Sano faked a grin, remembering that bolt of pain, that ache of the Captain *gone.* *"Lucky you got out of there. Not sure even Kenshin could get you out of that in one piece."* He patted the off-worlder's shoulder. *"Now, all we got to do is make sure you stay out of reach... you've giving me a look, Obi-Wan. I don't like it."

"I apparently have a standing invitation to return," Kenobi said dryly. *"On Yamagata's credits, no less."*

"Tell her you're sick," Sano said numbly. "Tell her you're dead. We can fake a funeral. Leave the city. Leave the planet."


"You kidding? She's Koubai-hime. Clan Taimatsu's favored daughter. As in sorcerer-clan Taimatsu? As in *the* most powerful Fireryo clan in Tokyo, and maybe the whole damn planet?" Sano shook his head, stunned. *"And you told her no?" Yep. Got to be Kenshin's uncle. No sense of self-preservation whatsoever.*

"She didn't exactly ask," Obi-Wan said defensively. *"And it's been my experience that the Empire does not allow non-humans that kind of power."

"Officially? No. Out in public, they get ground down like anybody else. And they hate it," Sano said flatly. *"But behind closed doors, where it matters? Even Meiji knows better than to cross Taimatsu without a couple battalions behind him and a damn good reason." Defensive. Not looking at me. He's hiding something. "And did you exactly tell her no?"

"Er...."

Sano crossed his arms. Waited.

"I don't believe so," Obi-Wan said at last. *"I... rather left in a hurry, once I discerned her intent."* Sano closed his eyes, feeling his headache go from dull throbbing to iron spikes with Attitude. *"Please tell me you didn't burn the building down."*

"Of course not!" A pause. *"Though... I'm still not entirely certain if I opened a window before I went through it."*
Okay. Sano rubbed at his headache, squinting at a minor chip in red paint. Some customer must have been in a bad mood; no way would Tae have let that slip past onto her shelves untouched. No permanent damage done, building or honor. Heck, strategic retreat like that's kind of an under-the-table compliment, Yoshiwara-style. We can handle this. I think. "You need an excuse not to be there. A good one."

"Like being dead," Obi-Wan said dryly.

"Don't knock it," Sano advised. "You'd be amazed how many guys miraculously revive on the pyre when a pretty geisha shows up."

Obi-Wan stared at him. Closed his eyes, and shook his head. "I will never understand this world."

That's what I'm afraid of. "But yeah, you're part of the dojo now," Sano observed. "And dead people can't train."

"You'd be surprised what is possible with the Force...." Obi-Wan's voice trailed off, as he looked into the distance. "She does take her own training seriously."

"Spiritual retreat?" Sano perked up. "Yeah, that'd do it. For a while, anyway. Where you going?"

"I'm not planning to go anywhere."

"Nice try," Sano snorted. "You can't go on a spiritual retreat in your own dojo."

"Oh, you can," Obi-Wan observed mildly, "when you're building a lightsaber."

"Beautiful," Sano grinned. And you say you don't get this world. But- "What?" he asked warily.

"Just a passing fancy," Kenobi waved off his worry. "Pay it no mind."

"What?" Sano repeated, more pointedly.

"Well, it's only...." The Jedi gave him a rueful, honest smile. "So much for that policy on traps."

Sano laughed, and clapped him on the shoulder. Oh yeah. You're going to fit in here just fine.

---

First round: a draw, with advantage to our side, Koubai thought with satisfaction, rising from the last graceful flutter of a fan-dance as Namiji's plucked notes died away. A scatter of applause rose from the officials and high-rent thugs drinking at Ogata Minami's party; she smiled at them all, reserving just an extra shade of warmth for Ogata-san himself.

Warmth she did not feel. Thank the gods for training.

Ignorant of our world he may be, but Kenobi is not to be trifled with. If I am to be the victor, I must plan my campaign carefully. She'd meant to have this night to refine her next move. Planned on it.

To plan, and mourn what could have been.

So many ki-sensitives had already been hunted down at Palpatine's command. It did not seem fair that he should have slain one more, who had managed to remain hidden even in the Senate itself.

A year, two, and Namiji would have finished her apprenticeship. Your term would have been soon
to expire, after that, and Palpatine's Intelligence Service would have made certain you were not reelected. You would have been cast aside, helpless to protect your people, enraged....

*I would have molded that rage. Tamed it. Helped show you the power that spans Darkness and Light. And then, perhaps, we might have freed two worlds.*

But Alderaan was gone.

*I would have trained you, Leia. Now... I can only avenge you.*

But to accomplish that, she would need credits. And a scorned rich *human* male, high in the ranks of Yamato's Imperials, could make life very... difficult, for a mere Fireryo.

A *man*, having the right to make a geisha's life miserable. It lashed Koubai's soul like fiery chains.

*The Empire's fault. And they will pay-*


Koubai drew her fan in a petal-slow furl of sleeves, fluttering the red fringe before her eyes in a subtle blink of illusion. Gradually other eyes turned away from hers, encouraged toward the rough jokes and sly winks of men drinking without wives to take offense.

*Good.* Ignored, for now, Koubai turned her attention in and outward, reaching into ki for that odd, chilling quiver of threat.

*Danger to Namiji!*

Slashing into ki, she vanished them both.

"Older sister-" Namiji started.

Koubai caught the maiko's hand in her own, pulling the girl upright and back toward the nearest exit. :*Quiet!*

Behind the paint, she could feel her apprentice's face whiten. :*Yes, Sensei.*

*Three minutes.* Koubai hitched up her kimono, not caring how indecent it looked. Namiji followed her example, trying not to gulp. *We can be out of here in three minutes. Or less. No matter how many guards Ogata has ringed about his little villa.*

*Nothing on this planet could be a threat in three minutes....*

*Death* crashed over them both like a freezing wave; death near, and swift, and filled with pain.

:*Not this way,:* Koubai quipped, hearing the first shrieks. Trying not to flinch, as her apprentice was flinching, as more and more deaths piled ice and pain atop the first. :*Come on!:

Through screens and halls they dashed, wrapped in silence, pursued by screams. Bare feet traced and retraced a path just out of reach of formless hate, white and golden toes delicately stepping around growing pools of blood.

*They didn't even have time to draw their blasters.*

:*It's herding us, Sensei!:*
Damn. Namiji was right.

But they were already back in the dining hall, now strewn with bodies under the festive lanterns. A handful of glitter danced atop crimson, gold sinking into the copper stench that haunted her nightmares.

Sinking? But that would mean-

More glitter was dusted off black gloves, as a dark-robed swordsman cast away a party glass.

Kurogasa!

Koubai restrained a sudden desire to smash a shamisen over Ogata's head. Now the extra security made sense. Saigo sent you a veiled threat. And you didn't listen, did you? Fool!

Though who was the greater fool, she didn't know. For Saigo to order an assassination here, in Tokyo itself....

Meiji can't ignore this. Is Saigo trying to destroy everything we've worked for?

Motives later, Koubai told herself. Get the living out first. Though Ogata's probably already dead-

No, he wasn't. Yet.

"I beg of you," the suited Imperial blubbered, "I will pay whatever you want. Just... please, spare my life...."

"Has the great patriot gone soft, soaking in his tub of credits?" White teeth showed in a vicious grin, as a green blade hissed to life in his hands. "Uhu-hu-hu...."

Geisha and maiko glanced at each other, at their sweating patron, at the swordsman-

-Ki spinning in a vortex of anger, bloodlust, Darkness eating a hole in the fabric of the world-

Possible futures crystallized in his wake, shattering every hopeful outcome to this night, leaving Koubai with one utter certainty.

If I stand against this man, Namiji will die.

:I'm not afraid!:

"You should be, little girl." Another mocking laugh, as Kurogasa advanced on a frozen Ogata. "Don't worry. He's work, but samurai always make time for play, don't we? I'll be right with you."

:Run!: Koubai ordered, abandoning dignity to shove with flesh and mind and soul at her too-brave charge. :Get to Yoshiwara. I'm right behind you!:

:But-:

:We are onmitsu, not samurai! We do not die without accomplishing our mission!:

Namiji blurred away.

Half a breath Koubai waited; long enough for Ogata to gurgle into death, and eerie black eyes to leisurely turn her way....
Ki gathered about her, Koubai bolted.

Timing. Timing is everything.

He was fast. Possibly faster than she was. But she had just enough of a lead, just enough....

Koubai tore through the last screens into the open air of the villa courtyard, feeling his breath on her bare heels. Reached into ki, a kite arcing into lightning-touched updrafts.

I am the heart of the storm....

Leapt, and whirled, slashing her fan through night wind. "Dance of the blades!"

Her fan-snap swirled vortices of night air; twists she fed with will and ki into five whirling dust-devils, catching the dark assassin in their howling midst. Hail rattled, spun out of evening dew. Lightning flashed.

Bloodstained feet touched down on clipped grass; stumbled, knee striking ground. Koubai took one deep breath-

"Sensei!" A chill hand pulled her to her feet, even as the maiko drew one comb from her hair that blazed into a silver light-dagger.

Idiot! Koubai bit back the word, knowing what fueled Namiji's recklessness. She was older sister. Teacher. Master. The ki-bond between them might fade when Namiji gained her own mastery, but it would break only with death.

And I will not die for Saigo's pet assassin!

Apprentice at her side, Koubai ran for her life.

---

Breakfast, and he's still here, Kaoru thought, watching her redheaded wanderer munch a skewered fish between Yahiko and a still-drowsy Sano. They were all out on a garden bench; well, all except Obi-Wan, who had graciously accepted Kenshin's silent return and bundle of crystals last night, then retreated to the dojo's lightsaber workroom. He wouldn't be back out for at least another day; probably three, given the confused situation with Koubai and Yamagata. Maybe I got Kenshin past the panic. Maybe.

Or maybe he was just resting while he could, to vanish into the night the moment Obi-Wan had an active lightsaber. She wouldn't put it past him.

Stubborn idiot... hit him over the head and tie him up until he sees sense- Kaoru let out a frustrated breath, and glared at Sano on general principles. "Katsu still thinks Kenshin's a kitsune?"


"It would not be enough, even then," Kenshin observed quietly, gazing into his tea. "Even collared, there are those who will believe the kitsune is merely casting an illusion from a distance. And that one is not - real - at all...." He blinked away the past, glancing toward the front gate.

Reaching out with her senses, Kaoru brushed a familiar presence, and sat up straight. "Inspector
Uramura? *And he's worried.*

Sharp, stabbing worry, that barely eased when she let him into the garden. The Imperial officer walked in, cautious as a neko-ao on hot rocks. Stopped in front of threadbare red and white, hands carefully not near the blaster at his side.

*Oh, no.*

Bowed slightly, sweat trickling down his hairline. "Himura-san." Uramura swallowed dryly. "We beg your assistance."

Kenshin blinked. "Oro?"

---

Yahiko chomped his way through another fish as Kaoru made the obligatory offer and accepted the polite refusal of breakfast, then offered and poured tea. Sitting on the bench across from them, Uramura cradled the cup in ungloved hands as if to warm them, sipped deeply, and set it aside.

"Before I begin... this matter concerns public respect for the Guard. Even the holo-casts are not reporting this incident." He eyed Sano.

The smuggler shrugged, the picture of unconcern. "Hey, if you expect me to care about the Empire-"

"He did not say the Empire, Sanosuke." Kenshin gave him a mild violet glance, then looked back at Uramura. "In a matter of innocent lives, you may trust Sano as you trust this one."

"Innocent-" Sano started to grumble.

Kaoru gave him a stubborn look.

"You're not helping!"

Sano rolled his eyes, but shrugged. "Yeah, yeah... I'll forget it soon as I walk out the gate. Okay?"

"Lives... of course, you would know," Uramura said, half to himself. Sighed, and nodded.

"Himura-san, we need your help to bring down a murderer."

Kaoru shivered. Yahiko stopped munching.

"He calls himself Kurogasa."

For a moment, Kaoru stopped breathing. *Kurogasa? But that was....*

"He's a serial killer, who targets former revolutionary warriors now active in the Empire," Uramura went on, "whether in the government, or in the economy. He sends a threat letter, and then strikes."

*A black envelope.* She didn't know how she knew, she just... knew.

And then she glanced at Kenshin's distant eyes, and sensed his certainty anchoring her own.

"Over the past twenty years, he has appeared all over the planet, repeating his horrendous deeds," Uramura reported. "He is a ki-strong swordsman, and has not failed in any of his attempts... which now number in the triple digits."

"If he's targeting former Ishin Shishi, then - a grudge?" Kaoru gave the Inspector a stern look. "Or politics?"
"Both are possible," Uramura allowed, sighing. "But above all... he enjoys the killing."

Stillness, wrapped in red and white. It could have been a cloud beside her, poised in the clear blue of an autumn sky.

Uramura cupped his tea again, fingers flexing to seek out warmth. "When he threatens men of high rank, the Guard directs their full forces to protect them. The target also uses his own power and wealth to fortify security. Kurogasa... enjoys breaking through those walls, killing as many as he can. Two months ago, when he appeared in Shizuoka, thirty-four officers and bodyguards were killed. Fifty-six were critically wounded."

"Wait," Kaoru put in. "If you know you're up against a swordsman like that... you must have used stormtroopers. And outside of Kamiya Kasshin - most styles don't know anything about deflecting blaster bolts. "How could so many...?"

"Somehow... every stormtrooper was struck down before he could draw his blaster." Uramura was actively shivering now, even as he tried to control himself. "When those who did not die instantly were questioned, they said their bodies had been suddenly paralyzed. And in that moment-" he shook his head.

"Nikaidou Heihou... Shin no Ippou," Kenshin said softly.

Sano gave Kaoru a sharp glance.

"If a being kills too many, too long," Kenshin went on, cupping his own tea, "he loses his purpose, and has his heart stolen by color and smell of blood." He shook his head. "That a man could be like that still, after twenty years of Meiji...."

"Kenshin," Kaoru breathed.

Not meeting her gaze, the rurouni sipped his tea.

"I have no right to ask this of you," Uramura said colorlessly. "I know, if you do this, Yamagata-san may-" he winced, and looked down. "Yamagata-san will realize you truly are in Tokyo."

Knuckles were white on ceramic. "But Kanryuu has powerful friends still, damn him... I received word only this morning that there was a killing, here in the city - and now, there has been another threat. And that since my men performed so well in arresting an alleged drug manufacturer, they'll be given the honor of protecting this target."

My men, Kaoru could all but hear, in the fear and misery around the Inspector. Oh, gods, my men!

"To be involved, is not this one's preference," Kenshin admitted. Rose, and crossed the space between the benches, touching a shaking hand with his own. "But if these murders are not stopped, many people will suffer. Including Kurogasa himself."

Uramura stared at him.

"It is possible," Kenshin said quietly, "that he has only lost his way. Many did, in the Bakumatsu. Surrounded by blood... the Darkness creeps in so very easily." A gentle smile. "Let go of your fear, Uramura-san. One will help you."

It felt like clouds shredding in the sun. Kaoru breathed in the Inspector's sudden relief, sensing his logjam of panic break up into a manageable worry of security layouts, personnel assignments, and how to fit stormtroopers around the inevitable thugs the target would hire. All shot through with a subtle warmth of-
She almost choked on her tea. *No way!*

Somehow Kaoru got through the formalities of parting, holding onto her calm until Uramura was out the gate and she could round on one idiot rurouni. "You *bound* him?"

Sano spit out his tea. Yahiko gaped, almost dropping a mouthful of his third fish. "No way!"

Kenshin winced. "One didn't intend to-"

"*You ki-bound* an *Imperial Inspector?*" Kaoru sputtered. "What were you *thinking*?"

Violet ducked behind a crimson curtain. "*One didn't* intend to, Kaoru-dono. *One* - couldn't help it. He was hurting, and afraid. *One* only meant to offer comfort. *One* should have known better...."

Kaoru fit those broken words together in her head, and flinched. *Oh no. He can't mean-*

"*You* telling me you can bind people by *accident*?" Sano got out. "*I* thought that only happened with kids."

"*Hey!*"

"*Ow! Damn brat... okay, with little kids,*" Sano amended, prying outraged teeth off his arm.

"*Beings on a battlefield are vulnerable. Especially to those they trust.*" Red-clad shoulders shifted; not quite a shrug. "*And one is cursed with a certain... ability... to slide through the defenses most souls should carry against those not of their clan.*"

Kaoru froze, facts tumbling down like an avalanche. Swallowed, and forced the words past her lips. "*That's why Yamagata wants you.*"

A silent dip of red hair.

"*Oh...*" She wished the benches had a back; leaned her head on her hands instead, fighting the feeling of faintness. "*Oh, not good.*" But it made a certain awful sense. Why chase one swordsman, with all the might of the Empire behind you?

But a swordsman who could bind minds and wills together with all the strength of a clan, and point, and say *there is our enemy-*

"*Who-*" Kaoru swallowed again, and forced trembling hands to still, "*Who else knows you can-*?"

"*Yamagata-san. Saigo-san. Katsura-san.*" Kenshin hesitated. "*Matsuko-dono suspected, at the least.*"

"*Matsuko?*

*Katsura-san's wife. Who was Ikumatsu-dono of Shimabara first, in the Revolution, and so may have informed... others.*"

*A geisha. Whose loyalty would have been to her teahouse ariitu first, and her paying companions later. Darn right she could have told. Probably would have told, at least her house mother, so one of the other girls could try and get Battousai's child. Ki-talents run in families, after all.... Kaoru's eyes widened. And Koubai wants Obi-Wan!"

"*And who else?*" Sano asked sharply.
"Sano-kun...."

"Can't help if we don't know, Kenshin."

If possible, the redhead looked even more forlorn. "Koshijirou-san."

"My father?" Kaoru blurted. But why? How?

"When he woke, after this one helped heal him... he defended this one, whom before he had only named assassin. Acted as a friend. Gave this one the benefit of every doubt, when one knew one's actions did not merit such grace." Face shaded by crimson, he swallowed. "Your grandfather taught him well of ki. He... realized what this one must have done. And he never blamed this one." Violet met her gaze, bright with pain. "He should have."

A shadow flickered, and Kenshin was gone.

"An aide to the men?"

Standing before Tani's desk, keenly aware of the open line of sight through the mansion window, Uramura gritted his teeth. Honor and duty. Remember your oath. You don't have to like the man. Thank the gods.

"There's no need for that. Our opponent is just one assassin," the short Imperial bureaucrat went on, pudgy hand waving shoo, go away, you fool. "Never mind the aide, we don't even need the Guard."

Is he insane? "Take this more seriously, Tani-dono!" Uramura burst out, hands held at his sides by an effort of will. "Our opponent is Kurogasa."

"And you watch your mouth!" Arrogant eyes narrowed. "Does a mere Imperial Inspector dare to argue with one who lived through the forest of swords and rain of blaster fire in the Revolution?"

Ego. Appeal to his ego, Uramura told himself. "Then surely you must understand, sir, how horrifying is the satsujin-ken of a sword master."

"Bah!" Tani leaned back in his overstuffed chair, waving negligently at the dozen-odd toughs crowded into the corners of his office. "Because I understand, I've hired an army of bodyguards - all of them the best of the best! Powerful men, who worship Tani Jusanrou of the Imperial Army Ministry."

"Yeah!" came half a dozen voices scattered through the rabble. "Tani-san's got us with him. The Guard ought to go home and-"

Grimly, Uramura tuned out the insult, focusing on Tani's reddening face. "It's shameful of you to seek help from some no-name thug!" the bureaucrat spit out. "Do you mean to say that this aide is more useful than all your men combined? Disgraceful."

And if I were only samurai, I would have no choice but to agree with you, Uramura thought. And more would die. But I believe in the Revolution. The honor of the individual, even of the clan, must yield to the law... and the greater good of all our people. "I have already requested that he meet you, Tani-dono."
"What?" Tani sputtered.

The door hissed open.

Tani paled.

Kenshin's silence stalked up behind the Inspector's right shoulder. Uramura breathed a subtle sigh of relief. Everything’s going to be fine now.

Which made no sense whatsoever. The danger was still all too real. He knew that.

Still. Seeing Tani going from ranting to dead-white had definitely made his night.

"Listening to Tani-san, he's apparently become a very big man." Kenshin's gentle voice carried through the stillness. "Quite different from the man who was under my constant protection through the forest of swords and rain of blaster fire."

"Gah!" Tani gulped.

Oh, Uramura realized suddenly. Oh! He'd heard that Battousai had been an Ishin Shishi bodyguard as well as an assassin, but he'd never thought... Gods, no wonder Tani looks as though he's seen a ghost!

"Huh. This is the 'best of the best'?" Sagara smirked, swaggering in. "I remember beating the crap out of every one of 'em."

"Gahhh!" came the collective yelp from the hirelings.

Kenshin smiled, warm and harmless. "It must be disappointing to have a no-name thug as a guard. But perhaps you could endure it. Just for one night."

"O-of course," Tani stuttered, shivering. "Q-quite an honor, really...."

Move while he's still stunned, Uramura thought. "Tani-san, in addition to these two, I will assign some Guards to patrol outside. Is this acceptable?"

"Mhmph!" Tani turned away, scowling. "Have it your way-"

"Oro?" Kenshin blinked.

"Er... I mean, please do!"

Thank you, Uramura mouthed silently at the rurouni.

"Thank me later, if we still live." It was a whisper on the wind, carried more by ki than air. "One cannot read the future, but one can sense the chance for death, hovering close."

Perhaps. But you gave us a chance, Himura.

I won't forget that.

---

Tick. Tick, tick, tick....

Hand straying near his blaster, Sano contemplated shooting the clock. And decided against it.
Again. "Five minutes 'til the time on the letter. Think he's coming?"

Kenshin watched the smuggler set down a *shougi* piece on their borrowed game board, studying the layout. "If he doesn't come, he doesn't come."

Sano scratched his knee. "Jou-chan and the kid must be asleep by now." *Glad Kenshin talked her into staying out of this.* Though he doubted even the rurouni could have kept her away if Kenobi hadn't been depending on her. Lightsaber building took the kind of concentration that could ignore everything up to and including earthquakes. You didn't leave a fellow samurai unguarded while he was that focused. You just didn't.

"She said she'd wake early and ready the bath for our return." Kenshin moved a piece, almost without thought. "Why so willing to help?"

"Heh. No way I'd let an interesting squabble like this go on without me."

A few yards away, Uramura made a strangled noise.

*Probably not a squabble to him,* Sano shrugged. *But I want to see the guy who tried to take Obi-Wan apart. I owe him one.* "Since we're being honest, how about answering one more thing for me? That 'Nikaidou-Ippou' thing you said earlier... do you have any idea who Kurogasa is?"

"That's two questions."

Sano reached across the board and knuckled the redhead's brow. "Shut up and answer."

"...It's a rumor."

Sano raised a brow, suddenly seeing how a seemingly innocuous move had left half his pieces in danger. "Rumor, huh?"

"One heard twenty years ago." Violet eyes were fathomless. "Let's say there's a hunch, but no real proof."

"I tried, but Yoshiwara won't even admit anyone was outside their gates last night," Uramura said grimly. "If there was a geisha at Ogata's villa, and the footprints and shamisen argue there was... they're hiding." He blew out a resigned breath. "I can't say I blame them-

Kenshin's head lifted.

A scream wracked the air outside.

Side by side, Sano banged open the window shutters with Kenshin, looking down on the guarded courtyard.

*Make that, formerly guarded,* Sano thought darkly. At least two of Uramura's men were down and bleeding, and the gates...

*Lightsaber slashes. He's coming!*

"Sano, we'll take the front!" Kenshin ordered. "The rest of you, get behind us!"

*Whoa. No shy rurouni here...* Sano smacked Tani with a heel kick, shoving him into the mob of running feet. "Don't just stand there, you pork bun! In shougi, the king stays in the middle!"

The clock struck the hour.
Swords and blasters hovered, ready and waiting.

*But Kenshin hasn't pulled his 'saber yet, Sano thought. What's he waiting for?*

Sweating, the armed mob waited.

And waited.

"Not coming?" one bodyguard muttered.

"Heh!" Another shrugged his shoulders, sweat trickling down his face. "Just an empty threat."

Green hissed, and blood flew.

*How- the roof?* Sano thought, whirling toward the dark-robed swordsman. *He just cut through the ceiling-

"Uh-hu-hu... look at the bugs." Dark eyes gleamed under a black reed hat, teeth showing white in a sneer. "You want to live, go find a rock to hide under."

*Oh, I have a bad feeling about this.*

"One two, three..." the assassin's voice drifted off, as his gloved fingers pointed. "Hmm. Fifteen of you. Less than I thought."

Sano swallowed. "So that's Kurogasa." *Oh yeah. Those are killer's eyes.*

"So you see it too?" Kenshin murmured. "The first move is mine. Look after Tani-dono."

"What are you all staring at?" the bureaucrat fumed. "Hurry up and kill him!"

*Oh no, Sano thought numbly. Tell me he's not-*

"Aren't I paying you enough? The one who gets him earns five times the amount! And an officer's place in the Empire!"

*So much for the plan,* Sano winced, as greed seized hold and every thug in the room lunged. "Idiots!" Though admittedly, they didn't look like idiots, being armed, while Kurogasa was just standing there-

And then, he wasn't.

"Uhu-hah-hah-hah!"

Four were down; the rest slowed, trying to take in exactly why limbs and bodies were flying-

*He's fast!* Sano realized. *Doesn't have Kenshin's grace, but he makes every move count.* "Get back! You idiots don't stand a chance!"

"You cannot run!"

Cold shot down Sano's spine, carried by that sudden red glare of killer's eyes. *What... what just happened?*

"You... cannot... run." Kurogasa stalked toward the frozen crowd, slow and deliberate as winter. "Once blades are drawn, we swing until one is dead. Nothing else will do."
"What... did you do?" Sano forced out through leaden lips, reaching for his blaster one exhausting inch at a time. Like being under ten g's. Everything's so heavy.

"Well." The sneer turned to an amused smirk, as the assassin advanced on him. "Still moving despite Shin no Ippou. You're no ordinary bug."

He'll cut me down before I can even try to pull the trigger. And he's letting me see it coming....

"One side of the soul. Also know as the Isukumi technique. So you are Kurogasa after all."

Red blurred past Sano, and blue sang to life. 'Saber crashed against 'saber.

Kenshin skidded away across the floor, left sleeve smoking. Kurogasa reeled back.

"In Kyoto during the Bakumatsu," Kenshin said, breathing fast, "there were rumors of a hitokiri who performed assassinations for money, without attachment to any prefecture. A master of the Nikadou Heihou style." The red head shook. "To use Shin no Ippou as a weapon is not surprising. But to trap men who've lost the will to fight, and slaughter them - that is cruelty unworthy of the lone hitokiri... Udou Jin-e."

The reed hat cracked, and fell away, releasing a flow of gray hair. "I, too, have heard a rumor," the assassin said silkily. "A patriot of Choushuu, using an ancient sword-style called Hiten Mitsurugi. A legend, known by the cross-shaped scar on his cheek. The hitokiri... Himura Battousai!"

Red flared in black eyes, and Sano felt cold ki blast the room.

And Kenshin froze.

"Himura-san!" Uramura gasped.

"Haah!" Kenshin's arms flexed, and something seemed to shatter in the air. "Shin no Ippou isn't magic; it's a battle of wills! When that will is matched, it cannot work!"

Easy... for a samurai to say. Sano dragged in a breath, and focused on moving his hand. Just a little. Just a little.

"Give up peacefully, Jin-e." The blue glow of Kenshin's saber was low, a ready guard. "Or else you will have to face this one."

"Battousai as my opponent." Jin-e smirked. "I couldn't ask for more." He glanced toward the frozen mob. "But first... I have a job to do."

"Tani, focus your will-"

"Forget it, Battousai!" Jin-e laughed as he blurred forward. "He's rotted in his own greed too long! They all have; all who paid me to kill, and now call it a crime-"

Nobody gets killed right in front of me!

He'd seen Kaoru bat too many blaster bolts away; Sano shot the legs off one of Tani's ornamental durasteel statues instead, shoving it over on top of the assassin-

Who wasn't there.

Oh gods. That hurts.
Laughing, Jin-e withdrew the green blade from the meat of the smuggler's arm, swinging it across for one beheading strike-

"Jin-e!"

He'd never seen Kenshin move that fast. No one could move that fast.

Blue and green slashed at each other, raining sparks. Bodies whirled and twisted. At one point, he could have sworn Kenshin bounced off the ceiling. And-

He could move.

Rolling and leaping, Jin-e landed in the open window, lips split and bleeding, laughing. "I haven't had so much fun since the Bakumatsu!" The sneer spread wider. "I've changed my mind." A gloved finger stabbed out. "My next target is you - the patriot, Hitokiri Battousai!"

A shadow moved across the moonlight, and he was gone.

"You'd better forget you ever knew the gentle blow," floated in on the wind. "I'll be back for you. Soon!"

"Where is he?" Kaoru demanded.

Sano winced, but wouldn't meet her eyes, letting Megumi finish dusting herbs into his wound and wind on a bacta patch. The woman's face was uncharacteristically grim; a fraction of an inch one way or the other, she'd growled, and the bird-head would have lost his hand.

From Sano's abashed duck of head, he knew it too. He moved as if he'd strained every muscle against a ten-ton load, and in the courtyard, late morning's warm light showed dark rings under his eyes. "Six of the guys who were there are in bacta tanks. Three more are getting patched up the regular way. Uramura says it's the first time Kurogasa's left without a slaughter."

"So no one died," Megumi snapped. "Good enough, but I'm with the tanuki-girl. Where is Ken-san?"

"Hey!" Yahiko narrowed his eyes at the doctor. "Don't call busu that."

Do I hug him, or hit him? "Sano, just tell me where Kenshin is," Kaoru pleaded. "If he's an assassin's target now-"

The flinch in the Force around Sano - fear, anger, guilt - told Kaoru more than she wanted to know. "He did that on purpose!"

Sano winced. "Um...."

"Why?" Megumi asked, aghast. "This Kurogasa, Udou Jin-e - you say he was a hitokiri. And now he's an insane hitokiri. Master of swords or not, why would Ken-san think he could...." Something shifted in her eyes, and color drained from her face.

Kaoru's heart sank. Oh, no.

"Red hair," Megumi whispered. "A cross-shaped scar. And a 'saber that moves too fast for the eye to see.' She sat down on the bench, hard. "He... is Hitokiri Battousai?"
"Was," Kaoru said firmly. "He's just a wanderer now. Trying to give something back for the lives he took. Like you're trying to." She met the older woman's gaze fiercely. "Do you think he'd ask you to live without knowing how hard it is?"

"Was, is part of the problem," Sano sighed. "While he was walking me over here, Kenshin said... well, he said he's gone the past twenty years without killing anybody. Jin-e's just kept killing. For a swordsman, it's a big difference."

And for a Force-user, it's a huge difference, Kaoru thought, swallowing dryly. "What else did he say?"

Sano flinched as Megumi tightened the patch, and started wrapping protective bandages over it. "According to him, Jin-e first showed up in Kyoto as a member of the Shinsengumi. The best swordsmen fighting for the Shogun," he added at Yahiko's frown. "The patriots' nightmare."

"Hitokiri have nightmares?" Megumi muttered, taping the bandage down and tying on a sling.

"They hunted Kenshin most of five years," Sano said soberly. "I'll bet he sees blue haori with mountain-stripes every bad night." He lifted his gaze back to Kaoru's. "Kenshin said Jin-e killed lots of Ishin Shishi, but also a lot of other people. The Shinsengumi were about to discipline him when he killed the squad sent to take him and disappeared. Months after that, he showed up on the Ishin Shishi side, as a hitokiri."

Megumi turned her empty hands over, as if they cupped the secrets of the universe. "Killing for the Shogun, then the Empire. Not exactly an idealist."

"Kenshin thinks all he has left is the need to kill," Sano nodded. "Makes him dangerous. Which is why he asked me for a favor."

Kaoru blinked. And reddened. Oh no. He didn't! "Sano...."

"Katsu can take care of the Sekihoutai and Megitsune here. You've got a kid and a gaijin to look after. I'll help. Kenshin's not coming back here 'til it's over."

Calm, Kaoru told herself. Do not strangle him. He can't answer questions if he's unconscious. "Sano. Where did Kenshin go?"

"Riverbank, I think. Said something about hitokiri liking them for escape... hey! Where are you going!"

"Where does it look like?" Kaoru fired back over her shoulder, training saber clipped to her obi. "Kenshin can't do this alone!"

"Are you nuts?" Sano slapped his sling. "Look what that guy did to me! You find Kenshin, what do you think's going to happen? He'll be worried about you, when he should be thinking about staying alive!"

Whirling, she glared at him.

Wide-eyed, Sano took a step back.

"I know what's going to happen," Kaoru forced out, throat choked with grief and worry. "He's going to reach back for the person he used to be. The swordsman who can take a killer that only dreams in the color of blood. The hitokiri." Her hands were shaking; she forced them into fists at her sides. "And if the killer fights... even if Kenshin wins, and fights free of that Darkness one more time...
what if he doesn't come back?"

*Once you start down the Dark path, forever will it dominate your destiny.*

"Father died... and you're always gone... and Obi-Wan *doesn't understand*. If Kenshin leaves on top of that..." Kaoru shook her head, tears spilling free. "I'd rather risk my life fighting, than be alone again!"

Vision blurred, she dashed out of the gates. Following the ache in her heart, that all but tasted of grief... and blood.

*Hang on, Kenshin. I won't let you fall into that Darkness. I won't!*

---

Eyes glinted in the branches near the dojo, watching an oblivious young swordswoman bolt into the city, leaving her three allies far behind.

*Make that, four allies,* Jin-e thought, feeling the edges of Kenobi's concentration. But the Jedi was too involved in his own meditation to sense even an ordinary ninja... much less a hitokiri.

And the others would have no chance at all.

*Bah! That wouldn't be any fun.*

More, it might warn Battousai of his next plan. The plan Saigo thought he knew, fool that he was.

And with the little girl running loose, that next plan had suddenly leapt ahead in its potential to work... and grant him the best killing of all.

"Riverbank... Uhu-hu-hah!"

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**Chapter End Notes**

- Busu - ugly woman, hag.
- Hime - "princess".
- Hakai-tekki-ou - "destructive king" - think 50' T. rex.
- Isukumi - "freezing terror". The technique has been described as an "instant hypnosis" - a very strong mind trick, in SW terms.
- Satsujin-ken - Murderous sword technique.
- Shougi - Japanese chess.
- Tanuki - "Raccoon dog".
- Togebi - "fire-thorn" - 8 to 18 foot saber-toothed mammal-like reptile predator.
...Ow.

Sleep gas and at least one stun-bolt, training stated clinically. You're going to be sick for another two hours, but not seriously impaired. Unless someone waves something awful under your nose.

Ow, Kenshin thought again.

Most of the bolt and gas are handled, training went on, a regular human wouldn't be awake for at least another hour. Stay still, look unconscious, gather more information.

Starting with, what happened?

That was filtering back, in the shattered bits and pieces sudden unconsciousness left of even a swordsman's short-term memory. He'd been sitting on a log by the river, caught between dread and necessity, waiting for Jin-e to track him down.

Kaoru had found him first.

They'd argued... the words weren't important, not with that blaze of fear and heartache behind blue eyes. Wide, bright eyes that said, Stay. Please.

I don't want to lose another friend.

So he'd taken Kaoru's blue ribbon and promised, relieved that she would be going back to the dojo, and then-


And the laughing dark eyes of the assassin who'd shrouded it all.

Jin-e is... truly lost to the Dark, to wreak that.

He might have fought free, even so. Could have, had he been willing to shed the concentration necessary for the gentle blow, and strike his attackers down. But too many of them had felt - not evil, but only desperately determined and afraid.

And ki had said Kaoru, and wait.

So he'd fallen, and wondered if he would wake again alive.

I doubt spirits would feel duracrete under their cheeks. Delicately, Kenshin reached out with physical senses first. Cold duracrete. Hollow echoes that spoke of more duracrete, overhead beams of high-strength alloy spanning a great, high ceiling. Scents of fuel, droid oil, dried food, the odd flowery sweetness of certain explosives.

Empty warehouse.

Soft, gas-slowed breaths a few yards away; a subtle hint of jasmine. A warmth in ki, when he reached out, that could be mistaken for no other.
Kaoru.

Warmth vanished like sun behind a cloud, as clicking droid feet followed near-soundless steps across the floor, carrying Darkness with them. "I know you're awake, Battousai."

You left me unbound, Jin-e. Not wise....

"Someone wants to talk to you."

A holo-projector hummed alive, carrying a voice he hadn't heard in near twenty years. "Himura-san."

"Saigo-san." Kenshin blinked his eyes open, slowly shoved himself up to a sitting position. Jin-e might merely suspect his injuries not enough to keep him unconscious; Saigo would know. "If you wished to talk to this one, a comm-call would have served."

"Who are you working for?"

Of course. Why waste courtesy on one not born samurai? Kenshin met the hologram's gaze. "As this one told Katsura-san after the battle of Toba Fushimi, this one is rurouni. Only rurouni. And a wandering sword serves no one."

"You're working for the Empire."

Kenshin glanced down at his threadbare gi and hakama, gave Saigo a sardonic look. "Oh, of course. Because the Empire pays all its former killers so well."

"Save the dense act for those who don't know you, Battousai."

As if you ever truly knew me.

Anger narrowed Saigo's eyes. "I've followed rumors of you for years. Years! There and gone like the wind, never lingering long enough to be caught; always where the Empire's grasp is trembling on our planet. Until you come, and cut the foundations of rebellion asunder!"

I suppose you could look at it that way. If you were drunk and standing on your head. "One is a wanderer, Saigo-san. Trouble tends to find those not oath-bound to lords. If one wants to keep wandering, a certain amount of trouble must be dealt with."

"And that just happens to help the Empire," Saigo said sardonically.

Kenshin didn't even bother to shrug. Kaoru was across the room by the far wall, slumped in a boneless pile. He could sense fitful ki slowly clearing the toxins from her system, but she'd be out for some time yet. Jin-e is there, and... yes. Guards around the building, and in the rafters. Human and droid. And I am still slowed. Buy more time. "If assisting an honest man to prevent murders is aiding the Empire, Saigo-san-"

"Honest?!" Even through the blue cast of a hologram, Saigo's face turned red. "That traitor to his own kind - how any true samurai could abandon honor to serve as an Imperial Inspector-"

And he's off. Kenshin hid a grin. Katsura might have respected Saigo for his skills on the battlefield, but the Ishin Shishi leader had more than once torn his hair out over the Satsuma samurai's love of his own voice. The man could list his and his han's grievances for hours.

Or, with luck, just long enough for the rest of the sleep-gas to wear off.
"We've got to go after her!"

"Kid, we don't even know where to start looking." Sano's voice was tight, vibrating through the dusk with suppressed fury. "Uramura's scene guys know their work. If they say whoever it was dragged them onto a boat and took off - they could be anywhere. Out to sea. Off the planet."

"She's not! I'd know!"

"Oh yeah? You've been her apprentice for just-"

"I'd know, you ahou!"

"Language, brat-"

Obi-Wan stepped out onto the engawa, completed lightsaber a warm weight of relief at his belt. "What's gone wrong now?"

Sano and Yahiko turned to him with faces that mingled relief and apprehension. "Ah..." the boy stumbled over his tongue, "Well...."

"It's a little complicated," Sano jumped in.

Obi-Wan regarded the smuggler's sling. Took in the nightmares sifting from Megumi's exhausted sleep in a spare room, Kenshin's definite absence, and the lingering echoes of Kaoru's panic and desperation. Gave Sano a skeptical look. "Really."

"It's not complicated at all," a cool voice floated out of the darkness.

*Koubai!*

The Jedi whirled - to see only a loose gathering of shadows on the roofline, barely recognizable as a human form.

*Ninja. Like Shinomori.*

"Your nephew and the little dojo mistress have been taken by Saigo's hired killer," Koubai stated, regarding him through shadowed eyes. "They're alive, or the little one would know. How long they'll stay that way...."

"Don't call me-"

Obi-Wan held up a warning hand. "Kenshin's more valuable to Saigo alive."

"No. Battousai is." Fangs gleamed in the night. Shadows moved, and something fluttered in the wind, like a dove's wings.

Obi-Wan caught the scrap of paper automatically, trying to track the moment shadows went from alive to *empty-*

*She's gone.*
"Tell Saigo his assassinations lack poetry!" the wind carried back.

No, now she's gone, Obi-Wan corrected himself. I think. "That means something?"

Flattening out Obi-Wan's scrap to read it, the smuggler's grin was all teeth. "Means Saigo just screwed up, big time. Uramura said he thought a geisha got away from Kurogasa's last assassination-"

"Kurogasa?"

"Long story." Sano nodded at his 'saber. "That going to work?"

Wordless, Obi-Wan activated the familiar hum, regarding the still-unfamiliar color; pale blue-white, like sun through cool spring clouds.

The emerald had all summer's fierce strength; the dark sapphire, all the clarity of stars in a winter sky. But this one....

Pale blue, with just a hint of green, like the first new leaves after rain. It had felt like new beginnings, after a winter that had never seemed to end.

Not starting over; I've seen too much for that. But starting again... yes. "I take it we have a location?"

"Yeah." From the stiffening of his shoulders, Sano was less than happy about it. "But just the two of us-"

"Three!" Yahiko jumped in.

"-Up against Saigo and all of his guys, not to mention Jin-e-"

"Will fare far better than a battalion of stormtroopers," Obi-Wan said matter-of-factly. "I should be able to cloak the approach of only a few beings, even from Jin-e's senses. The only one we could go to for help would be Uramura, yes? His aid would take time. And if I've read Koubai correctly, time is not on our side."

"Big if." Sano glanced at Yahiko, face sober. "Get whatever you think we'll need, and let's blast out of here. I'll tell you what I know about this bolthole on the way."

"Uh..." Kaoru blinked fuzzily, vaguely registering someone ranting about duty, honor, and the Empire. Tried to lift a hand to rub her aching head-

I'm tied up? She willed the Force to her, tracing the shape of knots so she would know how to break them.

"Don't. Move."

Cold. Gleeful. A voice that sluiced chills down her spine, and a dark grip on the Force that left all but the slightest twitches impossible.

"Jin-e Udou, little girl," the gray-haired murderer introduced himself, smirking. "Not that you had any doubts."
"Leave her out of this!"

Kaour blinked, taking in the almost-empty warehouse, the holoprojector, the flickering feel of armed guards out of sight. *Kenshin sounds... angry?*

*Oh no.*

"Where would be the fun in that?"

"Enough!"

*Saigo.* Somehow, that voice was even more chilling than Jin-e's Dark presence.

"Decide, Himura Battousai." The hologram crossed his arms, eyes cold. "Are you for us - or for the Empire?"

"Neither of you." Violet had paled to startling blue. "The sword of Hiten Mitsurugi is wielded to protect the innocent." Red hair shook slowly. "Do you know how many have been slain in your name, Saigo? Do you care?"

"You sang a different tune under Katsura, Battousai."

"Katsura-san," Kenshin said softly, "is dead. And Battousai has been dead decades longer. Let the past go, Saigo. Let us go. We are no threat to you."

*Speak for yourself,* Kaoru thought angrily. *Five minutes with him and a student's 'saber... no. Calm. Breathe.*

"I doubt your uncle feels the same."

There was a long, agonizing silence.

"Threatening a man's honorable kin to mold his will," Kenshin said at last. "It is beneath you, Saigo."

"Offworlders have no honor," Saigo said flatly. "And I do what I must. For Yamato's sake."

"As must this one," Kenshin breathed. "I will not kill, Saigo. Not for you. Not for anyone."

"I wish I could believe that."

*Oh no,* Kaoru thought, chilled. *I know that tone. That's "this is going to hurt me more than it hurts you," and it's never true-*

"It seems you will have your moment after all, Jin-e."

"Finally!" The assassin stood and stretched; tossed Kenshin's lightsaber to the ground. "No more time to chat, then."

"I will not fight you." Kenshin's voice was low. Taut. Storm-tossed rigging, fraying in the wind.

"For yourself? No. You'd let me stab you through the heart. And what fun would that be?" Jin-e smirked. "But for the girl-" Green slashed down.

Amber was faster.
The heat of the lightsaber at his throat was almost a relief. "So it's a family trait, then," Saigo said coolly. "Attacking from ambush."

"Where I come from," the offworlder said in that archaic, impossible accent, "a thirteen-year-old trying to survive a war would be shown lenience, even if he used far darker means." His voice hardened. "Call off your assassin."

"I can't," Saigo said flatly, briefly wondering whether any of his guards still breathed. Besides the droids, who were partly in evidence in a clatter and a curse from Kamiya's street rat and a growl from the smuggler. "And I wouldn't if I could." He kept his gaze on the holoprojector, where the two hitokiri were exchanging a flurry of blows. Beautiful. Deadly. And yet…. *Is this all, from the legendary hitokiri?*

"Your Rebellion cannot profit from your death."

*How little you know.* "Kill me, then."

"You misunderstand me," Kenobi said evenly. "If Kamiya-sensei dies here, Himura's next target will be you. And I doubt he will let you die easily."

"From what Jou-chan's said," the smuggler growled, "I'm thinking that's probably exactly what the bastard is after."

Pure, killing ki flared bright a moment - and vanished. "I see."

"Yeah, well, I don't!" The street rat glared at Saigo, proud as any samurai. At least he had the blood to back it. "You're supposed to be this great guy, up against the evil Empire? Kenshin and Kaoru didn't do anything to you!"

"Unfortunately for our friends, that doesn't matter," Kenobi said dryly. "A hitokiri, fully Fallen to the Dark Side, could unleash tremendous damage on Imperial forces here. Even, perhaps, drive them from Yamato's soil entirely."

Ah. So the man *did* see-

"Unfortunately for you, Saigo-san, the Empire now has weapons at its disposal that could crush one rebellious world into lifeless fragments of asteroid." Sea-blue eyes were cold as winter storm, and far more unforgiving. "Ask of your contacts, what happened to Alderaan. *There were no survivors.*"

Surety crashed against Saigo's spirit, wave after endless wave. *No… it can't be true…. *

Terror, in a young woman's voice. "Kenshin!"

---

Pain, hot against the chill of duracrete seeping through his clothes.

"Pitiful."

Blood, dripping from his pierced shoulder to the floor.

"You aren't Battousai again, not nearly. In three cigarettes' time, I could *kill* you."
"Kenshin!"

Kaoru. So much fear in her. And a Jedi must not fear.

"I didn't choose this fight to be bored… uhu-hu-hu…." 

Dark ki struck, choking Kaoru's breath in her throat.

"Kaoru-dono!" Kenshin staggered to his knees, right hand clutching his shoulder. He could see the bonds wrapping her lungs, but not how to cut them-

"I made it stronger than usual," Jin-e smirked. "Enough to stop her lungs."

No.

"She'll last two minutes at most." White teeth flashed. "Death by suffocation, so messy…." 

"Jin-e…." Don't make me do this. You have no idea-

"No time for talk!" the assassin snapped. "If you've something to say, say it with that blade!"

As you wish. Reaching within, he called the storm.

And vanished.

One moment the rurouni had been crouched on the warehouse floor, left hand just touching the hilt of his 'saber. The next - he was yards past the assassin, leaving Jin-e staggering from a shattered nose.

Not decapitated? Obi-Wan thought. He still has control, then. But how long can he last?

The Jedi could feel the siren pull of that Darkness himself, calling like wind and endless sky, and shook his head to clear it. Wild. Savage. Like nothing he'd ever felt in the Temple.

And yet, so very Kenshin.

Jin-e was sniggering like a madman. "I never saw the blade, or even your body move! So that's Hiten Mitsurugi style…” he turned toward his opponent, blood still flowing, "and this is Hitokiri Battousai!"

"No time for talk." Himura's voice was cold, pale blue 'saber held loosely in his left hand, eyes pure, molten gold. "Strike, then, so I can kill you."

"W-what is he…." Yahiko stammered.

"Dun Moch," Obi-Wan said clinically, as Jin-e let the top of his kimono fall back to expose a black jumpsuit, and rushed his smaller opponent. "Weakening your opponent by word and will. I've seen Sith use it before." But I've never seen this.

A mere glance of will - golden eyes, blazing into mad green-

And Jin-e sheered off, dodging to land yards away, muscles trembling.

"Afraid?" Battousai asked coldly.
"Such innocent intent, to mask such killing ki…"

Battousai did not move, even to agree. The best blades had sheaths to protect them. Surely his foe knew that. "If you wish to live, break the spell you put on Kaoru-dono."

"I can't."

Truth, whispered through the vortex of ki about them.

"This is far stronger than the spell I cast on that pig, Tani."

Truth.

"She must break it herself, or my will must be shattered."

Truth.

"Of course the former," Jin-e sneered, "is impossible."

Battousai didn't so much as shrug. "Then I will just kill you."

"That," Jin-e chuckled, gazing into the green light of his blade, "is also impossible."

The crystal-

"I - am - steel!"

-Is the heart of the blade-

"I - am - power!"

-Is the soul of the samurai.

"I… cannot lose."

"So," Battousai observed, feeling dark ki lock image into his foe's reality, "by using Shin no Ippou on yourself… you become what you believe."

"Shin no Ippou shadow skill. 'Grasp of the Demon'." A dark laugh. "I haven't used this since I escaped the Shinsengumi, twenty-five years ago."

Ki and 'saber shattered duracrete, flung it in a flamboyant fan of destruction. Battousai stood just outside its range, unflinching.

"You could call it unfair. Yet I will use it."

"Use whatever you like." Battousai snapped his 'saber off, feeling each breath Kaoru could not take. "But when I say I'll kill you… all you can do is die."

Enchained in peace, there is passion….

"Come." Stance was as natural as breathing. As the heartbeat of the woman he would save. "Learn
the meaning of the name, Battousai."

"Stunbolt, Sano, if you would."

"Gladly," the smuggler growled.

Yahiko jumped as the green rings of light felled Saigo. Glared at Obi-Wan. He wanted to cry. Yell. Curl up in a ball and make it all go away. "What's the point? Even killing the bastard won't stop this!"

"No. But whatever the outcome, this man does not deserve to see it." Obi-Wan narrowed his gaze, studying the two swordsmen. "That looks very much like something my Temple would call Tràkata. Have you a name for it?"

Yahiko gulped. "Battoujutsu."

"Battou-" Obi-Wan stood slightly straighter. "I see."

"Yeah?" Sanosuke growled. "Well, I don't! We're just a few walls away. Why not just blast our way down there and kill the bastard who's killing Jou-chan?"

"Things are not always what they seem, my impetuous young friend." Obi-Wan bent a slight smile on Yahiko. "Have faith in your teacher."

Perfect stance.

Kaoru watched with a samurai's admiration, awe almost eclipsing the fact that she couldn't breathe. Despite the lashing storm of ki about him, Kenshin - Battousai - crouched, still as one perfect, curling wave.

A tsunami. And all within its path will perish.

Except - there was a glint of calculation in Jin-e's gaze. The merest feather-brush of quickening anticipation.

Battoujutsu is a one-strike move, Kaoru thought. Call the 'saber to your hand and ignite it with the Force in the same instant; far faster than any flesh and bone can press the activation switch. But with all your concentration bound up in that, you don't have the will to spare for anything else.

And even if Jin-e can't freeze him - he can make Kenshin blink. Even… make Battousai blink….

"Strike now, Battousai!"

Glowing green rushed the redhead, dark ki piercing ahead like an arrow to the heart. Blue blazed to life-

Slashed past the black jumpsuit, searing a gray hair-

Couldn't possibly return in the fraction of a second needed to parry-
“Victory is mine, Battou-”

Crack.

Jin-e smashed to duracrete, flattened yards back from Kenshin’s outstretched, lightning-filled left hand.

“Hiten Mitsurugi Ryu Battoujutsu… Souryuusen."

*Double dragon strike!*

"I know very well that battoujutsu is normally a single strike,” Battousai said coldly, shaking free red sparks. "And vulnerable to any mental technique that interferes with timing."

Jin-e writhed on the ground, red lightning still sparking along his sword arm.

"One who has mastered everything of battoujutsu. That is the meaning of the name, Battousai."

The gray-haired assassin hissed, struggling to his knees.

"I crushed your elbow and severed your ligaments. Even now, my lightning destroys your nerves. Bacta tank, prosthetic limbs - nothing will change that. Your life as a swordsman is over."

Dear gods….

"And this-" the ‘saber changed in Kenshin’s hands, blue overpowered by blazing amber, "is the end of your life." He raised amber high. "Die."

Silence, stretching through the warehouse darkness.

Jin-e smirked. "What’s wrong, Battousai? Why do you hesitate?"

Kenshin… he’s unarmed, you can’t… a hitokiri wouldn’t care, but you can’t….

The redhead was still.

"You must kill me to break the spell. If you don’t, the little girl will die. If you do, she lives. It’s the easiest of choices." The smirk spread. "There’s no reason to hesitate. You’ve no time for it-"

"You underestimate your opponents, Jin-e." Glowing gold lifted to her gaze, creased in the slightest of smiles. "He will not live a heartbeat beyond your last."

*Easy for you to say, you’re not the one who’s suffocating… over… here….*

Only - she wasn’t.

Oh, she would be, inside another half-hour or so. She’d had no time to prepare, just the oxygen trained reflex had snatched in that instant before Jin-e’s will crashed down. But she was Jedi. She didn’t have to breathe all the time.

And he knew it! When I get loose, I’m gonna-

Well. Obviously, she had to get loose first. Because Battousai had no intention of helping her, although two minds together could probably break the spell with ease.

But then I wouldn’t learn anything, would I? And that would be just wrong. You should always look
at yourself, when you're facing death. Particularly if you... brought it on yourself....

Gods. That's why he's not helping me.

She wasn't to blame for Saigo's self-glorifying actions, no. Not for Jin-e's mad bloodlust, either. That was their choice.

But she had dashed after Kenshin without thinking, knowing there was an assassin after him. A killer with no respect for life, and absolutely no qualms about targeting innocent bystanders.

*It's not my fault he used me to get to Kenshin. He'd have used anybody to get to Kenshin. It is my fault he could do it this easily. Why did I do that?*

Kaoru sank within herself, seeking the roots of pride, envy, fear.

_The last of my kind. Only - I'm not anymore. But I am, I'm more samurai than Jedi, and I didn't know... and Yahiko will figure it out and leave me for a better teacher, they'll all leave me. And I'll be alone._

_And - I'd rather die than be alone again...._

"We are all alone." Battousai's voice was cold, but... somehow, not unkind. "To live is to risk death. To love is to risk loss. The butterfly rests in your open hand; will you close it?"

...No.

*I am proud. And afraid. And terribly alone. And... I'll never stop having feelings like that, not really. I'm a sentient being like everyone else, and we all feel._

*But courage isn't not being afraid. Courage is seeing the fire, and knowing how bad it'll hurt, and how you might not get out. And going in anyway. Because it's right._

*I will not give into my fears. I will follow the will of the Force. I am Jedi._

And I will not... let my friend... kill an unarmed man....

Kaoru breathed.

____________________________________

_She did it._

Anger was... hard to let go of. It clung with fingers of swamp muck and righteous flame, unwilling to relinquish its place to the rurouni's cultivated calm. Hitokiri did _not_ leave live enemies behind them.

"Kenshin...." Sweating, she collapsed.

Anger blew out like a candle as he caught her. Looking within one's self was never easy, even without other lives to worry about. "Kaoru-dono!" Not part of the harmless act; it'd belatedly occurred to him that he didn't _know_ how well Hana had trained her daughter, she could have been in far more peril than he'd believed. "Kaoru-dono, are you all right?"

Kaoru was breathing hard - but she was breathing. Alive. Smiling. "I'm all right... Kenshin."
She knows the difference. He smiled weakly back. She knew, and still her ki welcomed him, wishing him not to go-

Dark ki moved behind him, and Kenshin tightened his grip on his 'saber.

"You and the bird-haired punk, I can understand. But a little girl, breaking my spell?" A vibroblade hummed. "I must be getting soft."

"Stop it, Jin-e." Kenshin remained still, reaching out with ki's sight to know exactly where his foe was. "With a wakazashi and your left arm… you've no chance." He reached within for the words that would bite, tear, shatter what remained of will. "You've lost. It's over."

"Indeed." Kenobi's ki was almost as quiet as his voice, but unmistakable. "Your allies and your employer are all… otherwise occupied. I suggest you surrender, and wait for the Guard."

"No." The blade lifted. "It's not over yet."

Even prepared-for, the blow was a shock; vibroblade humming through bone and flesh with a swift pain that moaned like a ghost in every soul left intact. Dimly Kenshin felt Obi-Wan wrapping bright power's protection around Sano and Yahiko, even as his own trained reflex swirled a dragon of denial about himself and Kaoru.

She is of Light, Kenshin told the burning corpse. I am of Shadow. Crimson as his lightning, the dragon bared fangs against the unleashed Dark. You have no hold on us. Begone!

No hold, Battousai? Malicious laughter brushed the vibroblade embedded in Jin-e's own heart, forced the charred corpse to speak. "By now… Saigo will have escaped. And no one will believe… a hitokiri did not kill me….

"Amaterasu's sweet, glowing-"

"Language, Sanosuke," Obi-Wan reproved.

"Hey, a dead man is talking! If a guy can't swear now, when can he?"

"And it is true," the inhuman voice went on; half from charred lips and tongue, half carried by oily ki. "Like the truth in your eyes, Battousai… when you said you would kill me…"

No. No; I-

"You are in truth a hitokiri," the black wind murmured. "Another hitokiri tells you this. It cannot be wrong."

No; please, no, not in front of her-

"A hitokiri is a hitokiri until death. Play at rurouni if you want. I'll be watching you from hell.…"

Ash crumbled in a sourceless wind, leaving the vibroblade embedded in shattered duracrete.

"All right!" Sano's strong hands landed on Kenshin's and Kaoru's shoulders, shoving both toward the door. "Out! Out! Everybody ki-sensitive, away from nasty bad dead guy. That goes double for you, Yahiko!"

"I'm not dumb, rooster-head!"

"Could've fooled me, brat."
Outside, and the clean touch of night air. Kenshin breathed deep, taking this precious moment before he had to face reality. What Kenobi and the others had heard... what they had seen-

He choked on a pungent drift of spray sealant. "Oro?"

Shaking the can so it rumbled, Sano sprayed a few more neon-orange strokes of spacers' emergency atmo-seal, scribing a familiar warning symbol on the door he'd just closed. "Don't want the Guard walking into that mess."

Too true, Kenshin thought wearily. Uramura at least could be badly injured, should he come on that unwarned.

"I can read some of your script," Obi-Wan began, "but I don't recognize-"

"Bad death, bring a miko," Yahiko filled in. "Kaoru's got a book full of stuff like that. I bet Kenshin knows... most of them...."

_Probably all of them._ Kenshin dared to raise his gaze to the Jedi's. "So." Hard to swallow, in a throat gone dry. "Now you know."

Obi-Wan didn't answer, instead glancing at Kaoru. "I'm curious. Jin-e didn't know a Jedi's training includes breath control. How did you?"

_It's not as if he can kill you twice._ "Ulloriaq-san was a friend of this one's master," Kenshin admitted. "But... when the Revolution grew more bloody... one hadn't seen her for five years. Before that night."

"Ulloriaq?" Sano shook his head in disbelief. "That crazy offworld sorceress? If that's one of your master's friends, I'd hate to see an enemy!"

"Shishou has no living enemies," Kenshin said dryly.

"That, I can believe," Obi-Wan mused. "And she was an honorable being, once." His voice softened. "The woman I knew would have wanted to be stopped, before she could murder more innocents. I'm grateful that it came by a friend."

Kenshin stared at him.

"For the love of-!" Kaoru grabbed his whole shoulder, turned him to face her glare. "Yes, he knows you're Owen's son. Yes, he knows you were Battousai. Yes, you're safe in my house, he does _not_ want to kill you!"

"...Oro?" It didn't make sense. Any of it. Obi-Wan was Jedi, and Light, and....

Yahiko poked him, and shook his head. "I think you broke him, busu."

"Who's ugly, Yahiko-_chan?"

"I think the guy is still bleeding, and I'm not going to get any sense out of any of you 'til we're away from the bad spot, here." The smuggler swept Kenshin up in one quick grab, muttering under his breath about idiot samurai and kitsune who'd better be ready with their med-kits.

"Do you know, Sanosuke," Obi-Wan said thoughtfully as they started back toward the lights of town, "I think you've the most sense of any of us."

"Oh gods," Yahiko muttered. "We're all doomed."
Kenshin might have agreed with him, if he weren't half convinced he was hallucinating anyway. *Obi-Wan... doesn't want to kill me?*

Maybe Sano would wake him up when the world started making sense again….

Chapter End Notes

Ahou - fool, idiot.
"I suppose it's too much to ask of the universe," came a low growl, "for that idealistic fool to come back from a simple assassination in one piece."

Very good at shielding his Force signature, was Obi-Wan's first thought as he stepped down into the dojo courtyard. Imperial gray, and higher ranked than Uramura, came second, followed closely by, lucky the others are occupied yelling at each other or fussing over Kenshin; everyone's nerves are wound so tight, uniforms alone might set them off. And if they had a hint who was wearing them....

Then again, in his experience, there was no such thing as luck.

"Assassination!" Uramura sputtered. "I'm sure he didn't - I mean, there's no reason anyone here would - er... this is Chief Inspector Fujita Gorou, Kenobi-san. He's recently transferred to Tokyo, and he's...."

"Going to be ensuring Yamagata hears a proper version of last night's events?" Obi-Wan said mildly, raising one brow at the man. Squinty blue eyes, Imperial short haircut striped darker-black-on-black when the sunlight hit it, a faint glint of fangs in his sneer....

Fujita Gorou, indeed.

"A task made simpler, given someone sliced the security system's records," the Chief Inspector smirked. "Only physical evidence to worry about. Though I suppose some might say we have nothing to prove that evidence remained untainted."

"I'm certain those of the Kamiya dojo would never do that, sir," Uramura said forcefully. A deceptively lazy twitch of lips, like a cat eyeing a mouse-hole. "Of course not."

Meaning you did, instead, Obi-Wan thought wryly. To what end? "It's all right, Uramura-san. We both know Yamagata-san is a very important official. There's no reason for him to be wasting valuable time chasing baseless rumors."

"None at all," the Fireryo officer said blandly.

"Of... course." Uramura looked between them warily. "If I may ask - how is Himura-san? There was blood...."

"Which no truly skilled hitokiri would leave behind," the Chief Inspector observed.

Yes, I know who he is, and you know who he is, and perhaps we could get to the point sometime before we both die of civility? "Far better than I expected," Obi-Wan said honestly. He'd seen Kenshin move his left arm freely during the fight, despite the wound, but still.... "I would have thought Jin-e's blade would do as much damage on exit as entry. But it seems he escaped with a simple stab." Really, he shouldn't be this surprised. Kenshin had been bleeding. Not at all the result when a lightsaber's energies were granted free rein to ravage their foe. And if Kenshin could control the power of his own blade to injure no more than a blunt impact - surely he could lessen the damage of another's strike.
"He always was quick," the Fireryo noted.

Uramura stared at him.

"I imagine Fujita-san," Obi-Wan stressed the name slightly, "will have an extensive briefing for you. Later."

From the alarm behind glasses, Uramura hoped later would never come.

The Fireryo inclined his head slightly. "But there is one thing we should settle now." Blue narrowed, glinted wolf-gold. "Are you staying?"

Obi-Wan smiled dryly. "Would it be safer if I left?"

"For whom?" the Chief Inspector snorted. "The Kamiya girl? Her spirit puts her at risk so long as she draws breath. The smuggler? He'll catch a blaster bolt, or not, one of these days, as Fate and customs agents will it. Takani? She's more of a danger to herself than anyone else could be. And Himura... he'll be in peril to death, and beyond." He paused, deliberately. "You now, Kenobi-san - you have the look of a man who's been hunted. And given your ki is still calm after a murderer's well-earned death... you've been hunted a long, long time."

Uramura twitched.

The Fireryo's expression didn't change, but there was a glint of predatory amusement in gold. Anticipation of the hunt, and the kill.

"Perhaps it would be best if the two of us continued this conversation privately," Obi-Wan observed. Granted a soothing smile to Uramura, who looked as if he desperately wanted to haul a poor, defenseless Jedi away from his man-eating superior. "I'm certain the local troubles are over. For now."

Uramura's slight glance toward the Chief Inspector said he doubted that. But when the Fireryo nodded, he saluted, and left.

"Finally." A fanged smirk. "He has admirable nerve for one who's never killed in war, but it still needs stiffening."

"He's concerned for the people he serves," Obi-Wan said neutrally. "Something I imagine you understand quite well... leader of the Third Unit of the Shinsengumi, Saitou Hajime."

Saitou's lip curled, even as a slight shift of stance made visible the lightsaber at his side. "If you ask Meiji's government, they'll tell you that's the name of a dead man."

"Because the Shinsengumi died fighting, and so there are no more Shinsengumi." Obi-Wan smiled without humor. "I've been introduced to recent history. I don't know how any of you keep it straight without a flowchart, indexed computer files, and a dedicated protocol droid."

"Best learn quickly," Saitou said dryly. "For your nephew's sake."

How did he-?

"Don't act so surprised," Saitou snorted. "Whatever your style - and I know it's not Kamiya Kas Shin - it didn't teach you nearly enough about concealing your ki. Saigo might have needed a DNA scan, but anyone with half a brain who's fought Battousai and lived can feel you're kin."
Luke felt like Anakin... at least, Anakin before Geonosis. Before he started drifting into Darkness. So samurai know who their families are? That must be so very strange... Belatedly, he realized Saitou was giving him an almost openly curious look.

"Spying on Saigo doesn't surprise you, but relative's ki does," Saitou said thoughtfully. "No one trained on this planet would be so amazed...."

Oh dear.

"Kenobi Obi-Wan," Saitou stated. "Ulloriaq's stolen child. Well, well, well."

"Please tell me that's not common knowledge," Obi-Wan sighed.

"Your name? No. Court records are sealed. And most pre-Meiji records are simply ignored, these days." The former Shinsengumi shrugged. "After Ulloriaq's death, the old stories of Jedi as rabid child-stealers burned through Kyoto like wildfire. I wanted to know the truth of my enemies."

And either his status as a Shogunate warrior or his skills as a spy had allowed him access to that truth. At least, as this world knew it. "I," Obi-Wan said deliberately, "am not your enemy."

"No? A Jedi of Himura's blood...." Saitou's voice trailed off, and true surprise flickered across his face. "General Kenobi. Prudent, to eliminate the beard. You'd resemble your wanted poster entirely too much, otherwise."

"Is there that much of a resemblance?" Obi-Wan exclaimed, incredulous. "Yamagata, Saigo, Uramura, you...." Ah. That was what had been troubling him. "And while Yamagata and Saigo don't know who I am, you and Uramura simply don't seem to care."

Saitou gave a soundless laugh. "Wrap your mind around the realities of Battousai in your midst, Kenobi, and one more of his power isn't that much more to take."

Obi-Wan studied the Fireryo a long moment. "...You're quite serious."

"Choushuu was one han, all but alone for much of the Revolution," Saitou stated. "Tokugawa had all its own samurai and ninja to command, along with those who wished to curry favor. More than I can count were sent seeking Katsura's life. None succeeded." He inclined his head toward the dojo. "Much of the reason is there."

"And...?"

"And, he managed to run scores of Shinsengumi ragged every few nights in the bargain." Saitou's smirk showed teeth. "Once a shrimp of a redhead's cut a bridge out from under your whole squad, and escaped unscathed, you tend to stop underestimating the little demon."

"...You are serious." It would not be a good idea to show weakness in front of this man. Otherwise, Obi-Wan would be very, very glad to sit down.

"Blood isn't a sure measure of power, but it's better than most," Saitou said practically. "Saigo sees only a roshi who should never have been granted the right to a name, much less power. Those of us who faced him - there are reasons legends say red hair is a mark of demon blood."

"Sunrider blood," Obi-Wan mused, recalling quiet afternoons spent browsing in the most ancient sections of the Jedi Archives, so long ago. "I've read some of their history. They do have a reputation for being hot-tempered." He couldn't help but wince. "Did, I should say."
Was it his imagination, or was there the faintest glimmer of compassion in that fierce gaze?

Not your imagination. Trust the Force. "And that," Obi-Wan dared, "is why you are not my enemy, Saitou-san. You know what it is to have given all your strength and blood and heart to what you believe in… and to survive when all about you were lost."

"Another one." Saitou's smile had a bitter edge. "I'm not certain Tokyo can survive two who read hearts as well as Battousai."

"I didn't intend-"

Saitou held up a gloved hand, shook his head. "Shinsengumi, hitokiri - we fought for what we believed in. What I've been able to learn of your kind states you did as well. And that whatever Jedi codes you claimed, in battle, the best of you followed our code: Aku. Soku. Zan."

Destroy evil. Instantly. Obi-Wan drew a wary breath. "It's not quite that simple."

"Life never is." Saitou gave him a level look. "Those I grant loyalty to intend to protect this world. I believe Yamato would not be protected, if any politician thought the Demon of Kyoto were at their beck and call. The war is over. Assassinations rarely solve the problems that remain - and when they do, they risk drawing offworld attention. More subtle means, if possible, are best… and if that is so, then I believe our planet is best served by allowing Battousai to choose where he will intervene. Or not."

"It's worked for two decades, after all," Obi-Wan observed.

Saitou's smirk was all fangs.

"So you mean to leave us unmolested, if not unwatched," Obi-Wan concluded. "And the price for this forbearance?"

"Never allow an Imperial agent to survive with knowledge of who - and what - you are," Saitou said flatly. Reaching into a uniform pocket, he withdrew a small stamp, with raised, reversed symbols Obi-Wan recognized as some of the local inked characters. "Your signature seal. Stamp the Kamiya girl's register, and learn to write it gracefully. From someone other than Battousai," the Fireryo added wryly. "The idiot's ink-strokes are atrocious." Dropping the stamp into the Jedi's hand, he sketched a sardonic bow. "And I wouldn't worry too much about Saigo. Someone's managed to bounce a copy of the latest Meiji Inter-world Dispatch off his thick skull. It contained some very interesting information on Alderaan."

With a wolf's grin, he left.

"That," Obi-Wan mused after a moment, "is the oddest offer of sanctuary I've ever had."

"A most unusual being, Saitou Hajime."

Obi-Wan smiled. :Good morning to you too, Master:. The Force ghost inclined his head, ruefully amused. "Your nephew makes me glad to be as I am," he said wryly. "I suspect if I were still physical, watching over him would give me even more of a headache than you did."
"It shouldn't be possible," Qui-Gon stated. "To swim in that sea of Darkness, of his own will, and come away unscathed...."

"Who was it taught me, with the Force, all things are possible?" Obi-Wan's smile sobered. "I wouldn't say unscathed. No more than Quinlan was, or Aayla...." He swallowed the sudden, tear-prickling sorrow, and began the task of releasing that emotion to the Force. And it is a task, he realized once again, one brow lifting in wry amusement. "Should join Kaoru and Yahiko in their meditations more often. "More volatile," indeed, Gensai-isha. No wonder samurai and ninja here use their emotions to touch the Force. They could hardly get away from them.

"Aayla rests easy in the Force, and in your memories," Qui-Gon murmured, concerned. "Are you certain of this course? I know I hoped you would find refuge here, and healing...."

"It's not just myself who needs healing, Master:"

Qui-Gon folded his hands, drawing on calm. "The manner of his teachings... allowing this bond to continue is not what I would call safe, my padawan."

"And since when is the life of a Jedi safe?" Obi-Wan sighed, arraying his thoughts in order. "Master, the only reason Saitou's granted me sanctuary is because we are bound. Because I am Kenshin's family, and a Shinsengumi can trust his old enemy to keep a potential loose laser-cannon of a Jedi from shredding this planet's carefully-crafted safety."

"An illusion of safety, so long as the Sith exist."

Obi-Wan inclined his head, granting the point. "Still. It has worked, so far. Assisting those who mean to aid that deception - I believe that would be a worthwhile task for any Jedi."

"And you're fond of the boy."

Hardly a boy, despite his looks. But that was irrelevant. "Fond isn't the right word, Master. As well be fond of your arm. Or your heart." Obi-Wan drew a breath. "If I left him, if he died... I could go on. As I did, after Siri became one with the Force. But I would miss him, Master. He makes me feel - at peace."

"As you do for him, when he's not fleeing your imagined vengeance." Qui-Gon's rough face softened into a smile. "I believe he's escaped Healer Takani for the moment. And you have much to talk about."

Yes, they did - wait a moment. "Master. You said Aayla was at peace. What about Quin?"

Vanishing, Qui-Gon winked.

Quin is alive. Obi-Wan made himself breathe, when everything seemed to want to freeze in one incandescent moment of joy. Quin is alive!

I'm not the last. I'm not alone....

---

Refuge. Kenshin slumped on the rooftop in relief, stroking sun-warm tiles with gratitude. He didn't begrudge Kaoru and the others their worry, or their right to yell and grumble about taking actions
that, to them, had seemed risky and perilous indeed-

Well. If he were honest, it had been risky. But no more so than many missions he'd taken during the Revolution. He'd survived then; why did no one seem to think he could manage it now?

They don't know what you are capable of, a more logical part of his mind pointed out. Not yet. With luck, not ever.

And that's not why you're really up here.

True enough. Twenty years, he'd wandered Yamato, never in one place longer than a season. He was… not used to others being concerned for his health. With so many others involved, and what - who - he'd sensed… well, it was flee, or risk putting rurouni-shaped holes through Kaoru-dono's innocent walls.

A quiet voice, from the courtyard below. "Would I be intruding?"

Kenshin tried not to sigh. "Are you carrying medicinal tea, bokkens, cargo manifests, or a gagged apprentice?"

A chuckle. "Not at the moment, no." A joyous shift of ki, like wisps of rainbow, and Obi-Wan touched down on the roof near him.

Joy.

Kenshin tilted his head, allowing innocent curiosity to show. "What has happened?"

"It's-" Obi-Wan deflated slightly, sitting within inches of him. "Too dangerous to speak of openly, even if it is unlikely anyone would have listening devices targeted here."

Kenshin caught the older man's hand, easily as he'd take the paw of a kit who wanted to show him now, first prey, mine! :Then do not speak::<br>

Surprise at his touch. Wonder that he would allow anyone so close. A torrent of images of a tall, tan Jedi with dark hair and a yellow clan-stripe tattooed across his face.

Quinlan Vos. Friend. Battle-comrade. One who fell to the Dark, and returned, sad but wiser. One the Force whispers is alive, alive.

One who reminds me of you….

"He is - not quite the same as this one," Kenshin admitted, allowing their grasp to loosen. "Wait, but a few moments." He rose to a crouch, circling the space they would speak in. Silence, he finger-sketched on warm ceramic. Solitude. Overlook. Ignore.

The four directions tended to, Kenshin settled down beside the Jedi again, and drew the final character in air.

Seal.

"I can just barely feel that," Obi-Wan murmured. "What did you do?"

Recognizing Kenshin's request, ki drifted into a new form, softening the breezes about them. "A silence spell," the rurouni stated. "Proof against onmitsu, and technology. No one will hear us, and no lenses will focus enough to read our lips." He tilted his head. "Saitou did not threaten you, or one would have sensed it. What was he after?"

Obi-Wan blinked. "You could… well. I shouldn't be surprised that you could sense him." He thought a moment. "Threat assessment, I believe. He seems to find it reassuring that we are
related."

"He would," Kenshin muttered. "He prefers his enemies gathered in one place."

"Oddly enough, I don't believe he is our enemy," Obi-Wan mused. "He seems dedicated to protecting this planet. Even if the best way to do so involves protecting us." His voice was level. "Is it because of Okita?"

"No. But I'm not sure...." "Not likely." Gods, how to explain? "Souji... knew he would die young, of poisons that had been unleashed on our world. And I... this one did not expect to survive the war. We both wanted - hope. To help those young ones who would survive, whom our battles had orphaned. And while this one was hitokiri, one's face was not known, and Sou looked very different out of uniform....""

Obi-Wan was rubbing at a headache. "And you could both conceal your Force signature."

Kenshin smiled weakly.

"I'm beginning to suspect the galaxy has a sense of irony," Obi-Wan muttered. "Dare I ask?"

"We assisted at the same orphanage for almost two years," Kenshin admitted. "Sou... he is one of the reasons this one has studied healing. There is a technique, in Hiten Mitsurugi, for shedding the body's toxins. One thought it might be adapted, to help...." He looked down. "One was only able to finish it years after the war. Okita... would not have survived that long."

"I'm sorry."

"He died as he wished, and in the Light," Kenshin said quietly. "We should all be so lucky, ne?"

The Jedi nodded. Let the silence rest between them, while Kenshin gathered his thoughts.

Took a breath, and nodded toward the symbol-touched tiles. "I've seen stage magicians use words and gestures, when they put on a show," Obi-Wan stated. "But none of them touched the Force."

"There are many paths of ki on Yamato," Kenshin said honestly. "One has tried to learn what is useful, when one finds such."

Obi-Wan frowned. "A Jedi uses his will to work within the will of the Force-"

"And does one not see you reach out a hand, when you wish to move a foe, or a friend? That is a symbol as well. It is only a matter of degree."

"...Hmm."

"The most skilled minds can mold ki without such symbols," Kenshin admitted. "But ki responds to one's unconscious mind, as well as trained will. Spells, such as this silence, are a way of aligning them in harmony. Like meditation. They allow one to be more subtle with ki. To use less. For those who do not have the strength of Kaoru-dono, or yourself, using less is very, very important."

"Especially if the goal is not to be sensed." The Jedi looked into the distance, considering that.

Kenshin inclined his head. "Similar spells are inscribed in every shrine and temple on Yamato, maintained by priests, miko, and any with strength to aid them. Yamato is not important, they claim for those with eyes and will. Yamato is not here, they claim for those less strong of soul. And even their instruments will tell them so."
"Even their-" Obi-Wan cut himself off. Hesitated, choosing his words. "I have read of techniques that could mold the Force in such a fashion. Like the manipulation of life-codes, it was practiced by those… not friendly to Jedi."

Sith, then. He'd suspected as much. "Before you choose to react to a situation," Kenshin said, as carefully, "one would ask that you reach out, through the Force, and sense the nature of that you would deal with. Techniques have moved from clan to clan; healer to warrior to scholar, and back. Many of these spells may have begun in the Dark, but have turned to Shadow, or even Light."

A thoughtful silence.

Kenshin ducked his head, trying not to blush. "There is," he admitted, "another reason one might use spells, instead of pure ki. It is - a shortcut. A way to learn that shape of ki quickly, without the deep understanding needed between master and apprentice. Spells may be learned from books, or holo-recordings, or ancient symbols scribed on forgotten cave walls. Though one would suggest avoiding those. At least once a generation, it seems, some fool who lusts for power and cannot otherwise touch ki stumbles into stony Darkness - and what is left to stumble back into living air usually needs several samurai and a miko to put down."

"Or one rurouni?" Obi-Wan eyed his blush, let it pass. "Holding Megumi in that death-trance. A spell?"

"One learned it as a spell, but one did not have time to cast it as such," Kenshin nodded soberly. "So one used ki alone… and you saw the difficulty."

"I'm amazed you could do it at all," Obi-Wan said frankly. "Morichro is an advanced healing technique, and its last living practitioner was lost in the Clone Wars. Unless we can somehow reclaim the Archives on Coruscant, it may be forever lost to the Jedi." Sea-green eyes weighed violet. "Unless one who knows it, however imperfectly, would be willing to help us rebuild it."

Breathe, Kenshin reminded himself. "One is not Jedi, Kenobi-san."

"You follow our code; an ancient one, but still valid. I know you Fell, and became an assassin-"

"One never Fell." Say it. Clearly. Now. He must know. "One is not of Light. One is a Shadow."

Long silence. "Please," Obi-Wan said at last, "explain."


"You're not-

"One is, Obi-Wan. One ever will be. No student of Hiten Mitsurugi has ever Fallen." Eyes half-shut, he reached into the shadows of his soul, and let them surface. "And neither did I."

Obi-Wan tensed, hand on his lightsaber. But did not strike. "You."

"Me." Battousai smiled wryly. "You may think of us as two halves of a soul, if you wish. It is not entirely untrue." He leaned back against the roof, deliberately looking away. "Every school of Shadow - and we are few, Jedi, very few - has its own means of balancing the Light and Dark within us. Koubai, I suspect, entwines them with her two different lives: geisha and kunoichi. Some of the Shinsengumi, like Saitou, granted bright loyalty to those who deserved it and swift death to
their enemies. And I wait within the cycle, roused when I am needed."

"The cycle." The Jedi's hand was no farther from his lightsaber. But no nearer.

"When we are at peace with the world and ourselves, is when our strongest attachments form,"
Battousai explained. "Parent and child. Husband and wife. Friend to friend, and yourself to the
world that nurtures you. The best - the only - reasons to fight, and die. Or kill." He smiled at Obi-
Wan. "The Sith may have forgotten, but the true source of all power is peace."

From the careful non-expression on the Jedi's face, he didn't like that smile. At all.

*Pity.*

"So when those I care for are threatened, I *remove* the threat. However necessary. Even with the
Dark. Death is part of life, and destruction as much child of the universe as creation." He paused.
"But to use the Dark too much, destroys the chains of peace that bind us together. The source of our
power. So we must never dwell in the Dark. Know it, yes. Call on it, at need. And when the fight
is over - let it go."

"You were an *assassin.*"

"I chose to be." Battousai looked down, nights of blood and fire shadowing his memory. "Katsura-
san needed someone to kill in the shadows, to strike terror into the hearts of those who supported
the Shogunate. He asked me if I could kill. I said yes."

"You were *thirteen.*"

"I knew what I was doing," he bit out. Winced, and sighed. "I did not realize how much pain my
actions would cause. And for that, I am sorry. I would that I could change… some of what
happened." He stared golden defiance into the Jedi's level gaze. "But I *do not* regret serving
Katsura."

"Why not?"

Another sigh. "Our world was dying. Someone had to act."

"Or others would suffer," the Jedi stated. "As your family suffered."

*As my father - your brother - suffered. *"Yes."

"Why you?"

Battousai shrugged. "Why not me?" Cast a glance toward the Jedi, sensing a flare of surprise.
"What is it?"

"No ranting, no claims of vengeance, or wreaking justice on those who betrayed you… you're
surprisingly sane."

"No," Battousai said softly. "No, I don't think so. Sane people know their nightmares are over once
they wake." He lifted his shoulders slightly, setting aside the pain of the lost child he had been,
who wanted-

*I protect the innocent. It doesn't matter what I want." Be wise, Kenobi-san. Protect those who
deserve it, and let this nightmare vanish once more. Away from Tokyo, and Jedi, and innocents
who have never seen war. Into the stories to frighten children, where it belongs."
"It would be a poor Jedi," Obi-Wan said, as softly, "who decided a repentant man did not deserve protection."

"Kenobi-san-"

"My nephew," the Jedi went on relentlessly, "has every right to call me Obi-Wan."

Amber eyes narrowed. "Would you endanger two of your own?"

"As a Master - one of the last - I acknowledge that Kamiya-sensei has passed her Trials, and may choose for herself the dangers she allows her padawan to face. If, in fact, you were a danger to any of us."

Battousai glared at him.

"One of these days I need to tell you about another Jedi Master, who knew his own Darkness, and a 'saber style called Vaapad." Sea-green turned stern. "I have faced Sith Lords, and murderers, and Jedi whose paths led them through deep shadows. I will not allow you to manipulate me into fearing you."

Damn.

"Nor will I allow you to drive me away," Obi-Wan went on, more gently. "I have missed my brother for years uncounted, and I wish to know his son."

I know Shishou swore I hadn't the common sense the kami gave a blind kitten, but I didn't think it was hereditary!

Yet the arms around him were real, and warm.

"A danger to this dojo," Obi-Wan stated, resting his chin against Battousai's whole shoulder, "would never have risked himself for a stranger. Would have behaved as if his means of manipulating the Force were superior, instead of warning impressionable youngsters precisely how dangerous they are. Would have killed his foes, instead of granting them every chance to save themselves."

"Obi-Wan…"

"I was in the Clone Wars. I know what it is to fight, and kill, even as despair paints all the world in gray." He drew back, enough to search Battousai's face. "I saw you heal Koshijirou. I felt you grieve for Ulloriaq, even as you struck. You would not have suited the Coruscanti Temple, true - but I believe you would have made a fine Corellian Jedi, indeed."

Battousai stared at him.

"Now," Obi-Wan said briskly, sitting up, "what was that odd emotional projection you used? It reminded me somewhat of family interactions I brushed by on Zeltros; they're empaths, and not shy about sharing. Yet I haven't sensed anything like it elsewhere on this planet, and I didn't notice you shaping any symbols….

He's not running. Battousai became aware of a very rurouni-like desire to pound his head against a wall. Or possibly Obi-Wan's. Why is he not running?

Not a trace of fear in the man. Only sympathy, warmth - and pure, unadulterated curiosity. If he'd held any lingering doubts about the Jedi being related, that would have squashed them.
Guess I'm not the only one who has to learn the hard way.... Kenshin let his shadows fade back, setting the problem aside for further consideration. "It is not a spell," he said reluctantly. "It is... Tousan was thought... somewhat odd. All our village knew of the kitsune living near us, and left offerings, and message-scrolls when village affairs might affect the forest. But only Tousan wished to talk to them." He gave his uncle a rueful shrug. "They are cautious, and not inclined to trust humans. But they are also curious - and the chance to meet a newborn human kit, with strength enough to touch ki as they did, and a mind that might be taught the proper manner of speaking, was too interesting to ignore."

"You were raised with kitsune?" A slow nod. "That's how you know they're not demons."

"They are not human," Kenshin said bluntly. "When they harm us, and they do, it is often not from malice, but from a knowledge of our lives as imperfect as ours of theirs. A kitsune may sense that the peasants who let her hunt fat rodents in their fields wish to see a government official brought low, and cast an illusion that makes it seem as if one peasant took action - and be bewildered when that peasant curses her for the trouble that follows. They love, but they are ruthlessly practical, and they are very much creatures of now." He hesitated. "And some of them - not many, but some - do choose evil. Nogitsune are dangerous to all that lives. One has been asked to deal with them, from time to time."

"By which people?" Obi-Wan nodded, as if the question itself made the answer obvious. "They must trust you a great deal."

Kenshin tried not to think of blood, and snow, and a chill of body only outmatched by that in his soul, as sight returned and he knew.... "They were aid and shelter when one had lost all hope. One would very much like to correct Yahiko's impressions of them, someday." A slight grin tugged at his lips. "One would like to correct Katsu's as well, but one doesn't believe in miracles."

Obi-Wan nodded in rueful agreement. "I've grown accustomed to fear and distrust from those unfamiliar with the Force, unfortunately. To find it in one who's been exposed to its practitioners all his life-" He shook his head. And gave Kenshin a considering look. "May I come with you, someday? I try to make a practice of meeting the native sentients of a planet."

"One will ask," Kenshin promised.

"And do you ever intend to share the contents of that datachip you took from Shinomori?"

Kenshin let out a long breath, somehow not surprised. He is patient as the Jedi of legend. "Yes."

Something that concerns the whole dojo. Kaoru studied the faces of her fellow Jedi, and one rurouni who swore he wasn't, in the evening calm. Kenshin had the ninja datachip in hand, ready to slip into her holo-projector - then stopped, and quirked one red brow up at her.

She reddened, but straightened her shoulders, and looked Obi-Wan in the eye. "Kenobi-san, I owe you an apology."

"Oh?" Polite interest, nothing more.

"And that's part of why," Kaoru said reluctantly. "You blend in so well here, sometimes I forget how much you don't know. You should feel like you're part of this ie, and you don't - and I've left you alone when I knew you needed family."
"The fault, if there is one, must lie as much at my door as yours," Obi-Wan replied. "Family - well, it wasn't part of my training."

"But I've been most of the problem, because I was afraid." She gave Yahiko a look when he would have jumped in; he subsided, frowning. "I'm the only woman running a dojo in Tokyo, and I'm young, and - custom is, you'd be head of the family." She took a breath. "And I wasn't trained in the Temple, and most of my training is samurai anyway, and my mother was married."

"As was Master Cho-Leem," Obi-Wan stated. "Many times. The Force only knows if any of her children survived the Purge… she was an excellent Healer, and always welcome in the Temple. As for the rest, I've known more than a few Jedi trained outside the Temple, and I certainly would not presume to take your place in a society I barely know." Brows lifted, he smiled at her. "Public beliefs to the contrary, no true Jedi would fault a Knight for being afraid. You mastered your fear, and acted from calm. Well done."

Kaoru blinked, not certain she'd heard correctly. "Huh?" Is he saying - I passed?

"What she said," Yahiko grumbled.

"He means," Kenshin explained, "that once Kaoru-dono has mastered the crystal meditation, she will be truly ready to claim full mastery of Kamiya Kasshin."

_I passed the Trials. I did it!_ She wanted to jump for joy.

"Oh," Yahiko said doubtfully. "Why didn't he say so?"

"Because I'm not from this world, and so lack knowledge of how to phrase matters appropriately, at times," Obi-Wan answered. "Diplomatic training for hundreds of cultures, and none of it covered here."

"There is," Kenshin stated, "a very good reason for that." Leaning forward, he inserted the datachip.

"Himura-san." A tall, calm Yamato man of noble bearing folded his arms in the hologram; dark gray haori over lighter blue gi and hakama, hair tied back in a simple topknot.

"Hitotsubashi Keiki," Kenshin said quietly. "Better known as Tokugawa Yoshinobu. The last Shogun."

"If you are viewing this," Yoshinobu went on, "the Oniwabanshuu have succeeded in their mission, and Takeda Kanryuu has been neutralized.

"I apologize for involving you in this matter. Takeda's situation evolved more rapidly than we had expected. Swift action was necessary; and action of a nature that would not draw Imperial attention. At least," here the man's smile turned wry, "no more attention than Spider's Web has already drawn.

"Takeda has been trying to bring his compound into official view for quite some time. We believe he first made contact with subordinates of Grand Moff Tarkin, through a bounty hunter sent to our world to seek out information on a Kenobi Owen... more on that in a moment.

"Takeda has been building his network and influence over time. Three months ago - my people were only able to ascertain this after the fact - he finally made contact with medical inquisitors in Tarkin's command. Who were _very_ intrigued. Tarkin is dead, thankfully, and whatever he knew with him. The trail of Spider's Web should have gone cold.
"It must remain cold. No matter the cost.

"I don't need to tell you that the Imperial Medical division has easier access to Vader, and the Emperor, than any other branch of the government. If one of them, or their ki-sensitive agents, were to come here... we've already been lucky twice, before and during the Clone Wars. I don't want to try for three.

"Yes, twice. I know you've heard the story of the boy Watchman Ulloriaq kidnapped. Who hasn't? Kenobi Owen made a valiant plea. It should have been honored, for its sheer bravery.

"But the Shogun's own miko swore to interfere would mean disaster. Not only for the boy, but for all of Yamato. Darkness was seeking our children, as it had sought our ancestors millennia ago. The only way to stave it off was to allow the Jedi to believe they had succeeded - and failed, all the same. Our records of Ulloriaq's transmissions to the Jedi Temple on Coruscant indicate that the boy showed promise, but was ultimately destined for the Agricultural Corps. Between that and my predecessors' refusal to allow midi-chlorian tests on this planet, the Jedi, and something else, lost interest in this world.

"If you've seen holos of the Emperor, I imagine you know quite well what that something else was.

"We narrowly escaped disaster again a few short years before the Revolution was over. When this man-" the holo shimmered, into a tall, arrogant silver-haired human, dressed head to toe in Inner World black, "-visited our world."

"Dooku," Obi-Wan breathed. Caught his companions' eyes, and winced. "He was a Jedi... before he became Darth Tyrannus."

"We have evidence he spoke with Watchman Ulloriaq on several occasions, before she... well, you know well enough," Yoshinobu sighed. "Onmitsu shadowed him from a distance. They knew better than to do any more. But some of our kunoichi were able to probe him, carefully. And they discovered something interesting.

"He knew very well we had souls strong in ki here. And he did not intend to tell his Master."

The holo shimmered back to Yoshinobu's image. The former shogun looked weary. "I can only speculate that, like the Sith of legend, he planned to strike down his own Master at some point. And that he considered a planet full of potential apprentices a weapon too valuable to be known. Whatever his reason, he was very efficient, and influential. Outside of our direct trading partners, information on Yamato has vanished from every off-world database our onmitsu have gained access to. It's rumored even the Jedi Temple lost all record of us.

"I tell you this so you may know what is at risk. You were always an honorable enemy, Himura-san. I know you will do what is right for our people, and our world."

"That," mused Obi-Wan as the holo faded, "is a very dangerous man."

"Had he been shogun in the heart of the Revolution, instead of Iemochi, things might have gone differently," Kenshin agreed. "By the time he was chosen to take control, Emperor Komei was failing of the offworld plague, and the Shogunate was already collapsing. Though it was almost two years before Toba Fushimi demonstrated that for all to see." Violet looked down. "If Komei had not died, leaving Meiji in loyalist hands... if the patrol squad had missed Sakamoto Ryouma in Kyoto... if Yoshinobu himself had learned earlier to shed the fear of being branded traitor, and done what was right instead of what was wise..."
"If you had never joined the Ishin Shishi?" Obi-Wan said quietly. "We all carry regrets, Kenshin. I know I have more than my share." He glanced at Kaoru, sympathetic.

*If Tousan hadn't gone to face the riots….* Kaoru made herself breathe, and release the grief. The world was as it was. Tousan would be the first to tell her to keep moving forward.

"Um… maybe this is a stupid question," Yahiko ventured, "but how come he's not trying to kill you?"

"Saigo commanded the loyalist forces at Toba Fushimi," Kenshin said frankly. "He has seen many samurai sword-styles, and he knows Hiten Mitsurugi is more dangerous than all of them. Yoshinobu saw only the aftermath of the battle, and had little intelligence of precisely how much of the damage was this one's responsibility." He smiled wryly. "Though he was still overheard to say he would not hunt this one without bunker-buster torpedoes." Violet turned thoughtful. "One has not met the man face to face, but… Okubo and Katsura-san claimed he was a man of wide vision, yet one who sometimes missed matters close to him. And by the time this one's name would have reached Yoshinobu's ears, one was no longer an assassin, but a skirmisher, guarding the Ishin Shishi in the streets of Kyoto. One suspects that the idea Battousai could be a threat to him, simply has not crossed his mind."

Kaoru narrowed her eyes at a thoughtful Obi-Wan. "You're plotting something."

"Plotting has such a sinister air," the Jedi said mildly. "Let's just say, I am considering potential future scenarios."

"One would advise against any scenario that included meeting Yoshinobu without at least an intermediary for introductions," Kenshin cautioned. "He lives in retirement in Shizuoka; he has recently arranged a marriage, but otherwise avoids people and sees only a few of his old retainers. If the Oniwabanshuu still serve him, they have been very discreet."

Obi-Wan arched an eyebrow. "You know a great deal about a man you never expect to meet."

Kenshin winced. "One left politics on the battlefield. One has learned, in years since, that it will never repay the favor and leave this one in peace." Violet glanced down, thoughtful. "It is, after all, likely one reason why Yoshinobu does not consider this one a threat. Battousai was known to be of Choushuu - and Choushuu was sworn enemy of the Shogunate from the moment it was first created. Yoshinobu saw us as honest enemies. But those of Satsuma, like Okubo and Saigo, first crushed us as the Shogunate's hammer; then, when our power grew, pretended to support the Shogunate while all the time preparing to betray it. Yoshinobu has *not* forgiven. Or forgotten."

"Should he have?"

"Okubo was for Katsura from the beginning, but had to bow to the wishes of his clan, at first," Kenshin said honestly. "Saigo…." He shrugged, and spread empty hands. "He believes, passionately, in good and evil. When Choushuu was accused of trying to kidnap Emperor Komei, we were evil, and Saigo led the campaign to crush us. When those with knowledge of the wider galaxy spoke of the weakness of the Shogunate, and how a new government might save our world, he allied with us. Katsura-san worked with him, mostly through Okubo, but he did not trust him."

A breathless sigh. "And given what he has tried to do… neither can I."

"You guys tried to kidnap the emperor?" Yahiko's eyes were round.

"One wasn't involved, so one doesn't know the full facts, that I don't," Kenshin said practically. "There were many with hot tempers. On both sides." He smiled wryly. "Some things, it would
"But Spider's Web doesn't matter anymore, right?" Kaoru objected, trying not to shiver. "Takeda's in prison. Megumi's safe."

"She'll remain safe only so long as no one makes the connection between her skills and Takeda's products," Obi-Wan said soberly. "If I knew of a safe means to remove that memory from her mind-

"Memory-wipe her?" Yahiko objected, aghast. "That's rape!"

"Not if someone agrees to it," Kaoru said uneasily. Though I don't know how anyone could. To lose part of your self…. Kenshin shook his head. "It would not matter. The danger is not only in what she knows, but that she has the skills to create it in the first place. A determined enemy would force her to recreate what she could not remember."

Yahiko gulped, obviously all too able to picture that. Kaoru felt sick. How can Kenshin think that anyone would be so evil- I'm not sure I want to know. "So what do we do?"

Kenshin and Obi-Wan traded glances. Looked at her. Oh, I have a bad feeling about this….

"No," Sanosuke growled, as two chattering youngsters, their indulgent grandfather, and the rest of the Kamiya dojo's usual inhabitants swarmed through his ship. "No, no, and no."

"Now, now; the education of the young is a responsibility of every decent, upstanding adult in society," Obi-Wan reproved gently, trying not to laugh. Sano made a strangled noise. "Since when am I-

"And Gensai-isha's assistance will allow you to refit the Sekihoutai more efficiently and effectively," the Jedi went on, letting a hint of a grin slip out. "Surely, the chance to show his daughters a real, live spaceship is not too much to ask."

"You're not the guy who's got to deal with Katsu after this," Sano grumbled.

"That's actually what I wish to speak with you both about," Obi-Wan admitted. "If I may?"

Sano cracked his knuckles, and rolled his eyes. "I'm going to regret this, I just know it….

But Sano headed down the ramp into the hangar anyway, evidently trusting Kaoru to keep the less tech-savvy of their visitors from breaking anything. "Hey, Katsu."

Katsuhiro slid out from under a spare thruster manifold, dark brows lifted - and falling again, face cool as he noted who was behind his partner. "Oh. You."

"Kaoru informs me that along with other cargo, the two of you sometimes work for the Intergalactic Zoological Society on Mycroft," Obi-Wan said bluntly. The more he thinks of us as business instead of samurai, the better.
Katsu glanced at Sano, and frowned, obviously distracted from what would have been a chilling insult. "Yeah. Yamato ecology scares most of their people, and the ones it doesn't scare aren't interested in risking Miasma. So we ship them a few things. Why?"

"I imagine Megumi's skills may make it easier for you to transport various botanical specimens," Obi-Wan observed. "But if the Society is still anything like the one I was familiar with a few decades ago, they have much greater - and for you, far more lucrative - interest in zoological specimens. Which would be far easier to transport if you had someone along who knew how to calm them."

"Like you," Katsu said neutrally.

"Or other members of the Kamiya dojo, yes."

"Himura?" Katsu's gaze was dark. "No."

"He has the most skill with animals of any of us," Obi-Wan pointed out. Gently. Not a hint of influence. The man has reason for his paranoia, even if it is unfair. "And if you do mean to keep Takani on as crew, it would be wise for you to have samurai along to guard her."

Katsu's eyes narrowed.

"She's a healer, trained in ki. There may come a time when you need someone to weave an explanation for an… unusual healing method. Or to cover your escape, if worst comes to worst." The Jedi made his voice light, casual. "The Kamiya school teaches some basics of spaceflight and technology, but Yahiko would learn faster with real equipment to examine. And I find that while my nephew seems to have surprising skill at database manipulation for a backwoods samurai, he has no idea how to fly. Or even which end of a hydrospanner to pick up. My forebears would be spinning in their graves." If Jedi had graves. And assuming their ashes weren't twisting in whirlwinds already, given what he planned to do. Still. A Force-sensitive who couldn't pilot? Unthinkable!

"Your nephew?" Katsu brushed dark bangs out of his eyes, Force prickling around him with distrust and disbelief. "Himura?"

"I'm not asking you to befriend the man." Obi-Wan stood straight, unyielding. "He did what he had to, to save your life. And I believe we can be useful to each other."

"Useful, as in a good excuse to be out of Koubai's reach if she gets grabby again?" Sano grinned.

Obi-Wan smiled ruefully back. "I can't deny that would be handy, yes."

Katsu scowled at his partner. "I suppose you want to say yes."

"It's got pluses and minuses," Sanosuke said levelly. "Right now, Saigo's pissed at us. Meaning we've got to find other cargoes to carry. Megitsune's travelling doctor routine could bring in credits and give us a reason to hang around ports a few days longer than normal, which means more time to pick up the best cargo for us, and more time for you to soak up juicy news. But if she does use some of her ki techniques, and if she's a good doc she probably will, it'd be better if there's a samurai or two around to back her up. Healers can burn themselves out without help, you know that. And Kenobi's right about the Society." He rolled his shoulders, working out stress-kinks as he looked back at the Sekihoutai. "Downside - extra food and supplies, less cargo room, and the samurai have to keep their 'sabers out of sight offworld."

And you'd have to deal with Kenshin, Obi-Wan could hear Sano carefully not saying. "We don't
need an answer right away," the Jedi stated. "I believe some members of the dojo plan to go on a training retreat, to certain crystal springs outside the city. A trip I'm given to understand may take a few weeks." He bowed. "Please, do give it your full consideration."

*Now to find the other side of the argument.*

Hmm. Not in the ship. Not in the hangar, or the alleys outside. So where-?

Letting his eyes slip half-closed, Obi-Wan quested *out* and-

*Up. Why am I not surprised?*

A few Force-leaps and a scramble later, Obi-Wan joined a wayward rurouni on the hangar roof. "For someone who's never seen Coruscant, you've quite the taste for heights."

"One was raised in mountains." Kenshin didn't look his way, violet eyes searching the bustle and confusion of ships loading and unloading, guards searching, isolation ray shields springing up and down as particular items or passengers were scanned. "Cliffs were common. As was the knowledge that past thirty feet, there is no reason to fear; you have the skills to survive the fall, or not."

*And there are limits to who can reach you here without a lot of fuss and obvious noise,* Obi-Wan thought, almost sighing. As Kaoru had said, it wasn't *quite* paranoia. Not given Kenshin's list of enemies.

Odd. There was something in the way Kenshin's eyes searched the vibrant tableau below, trying to take in everything. "You've never been in a spaceport, have you?"

Kenshin shook his head minutely. "One saw the ships that came to and from Kyoto, during the Revolution. One was responsible for taking them, more than once; one spent the most time on a large freighter, I think. Its defenders were many, but lax…." He shrugged, setting the thought aside. "Another of the Ishin Shishi had to fly. It was always… unsettling, to be on a craft with no will of its own, no connection to land or sea. And no idea what to do if it should suddenly decide to fall out of the sky," Kenshin added dryly.

That would be a bit hard on the nerves, Obi-Wan imagined. "But you do intend to learn."

"One has little choice," Kenshin said practically. "You are Jedi, and Sano is a smuggler - and if assisting the Rebellion *here* is difficult because of Saigo, Kaoru-dono will eventually think to look *out there.*" Violet turned on him, unreadable. "Is that not, after all, where you are likely to find your friend?"

"Actually, I rather think not," Obi-Wan stated, considering the matter. "He does remind me of you, after all. His teacher was Master Tholme, who learned - well, some rather odd things from an Anzati master assassin. Unlike most Jedi, they knew espionage, and assassination… and a way of vanishing out of the Force much like your own."

The rurouni's eyes narrowed slightly, weighing that. "You believe this one is enough like them to be a guide for what they might do?"

"With all the Galaxy out to kill them if they were discovered? Yes." Odd; when had Quin, in his mind, become more than just Quin?

*Because Master Tholme was always wary enough to have two backups plans for every occasion,* Obi-Wan recalled. *If deception and intelligence could save a life, he stood a better chance than most of us.* Granted, Master Tholme had been getting on in years, hair gone from black to almost
completely gray. Still, even without Sunrider heritage, human Jedi who didn't die on assignment would live decades beyond the Galactic average of a hundred and fifty. He'd be a bit more creaky, yes - but if he lived, Tholme would still be able to fight.

**But I doubt either of them would be fighting. Not if there were another way.** "Quinlan saw some of the worst of the Clone Wars," Obi-Wan said carefully, fitting fact together with feelings and the will of the Force. "He knew what it was to kill, and to lie, and to walk in Darkness. He had many regrets… and his former padawan, Aayla Secura, died in Order 66. He would have been - wounded. And the last order sent from the Temple was *scatter and hide.*" The Jedi shook his head. "I can see him gathering information. Helping those who crossed his path. But to go to war again, when he believed the Republic had become corrupt beyond our ability to save it? No. No, I think not."

Kenshin's expression didn't change, but he felt a whisper of concentrated attention down their bond.

"You expect me to leave this world, and seek out the Rebellion," Obi-Wan realized. "Why?"

"Do you not have friends there?"

Obi-Wan hmphed, all but hearing Master Yoda in his head. "Much as Yamagata-san is *your* friend, to be sure."


"You… don't know," Obi-Wan realized, stunned. "Uramura knew who I am, and Saitou - you grew up isolated, in the mountains. And with all the havoc on this planet - you didn't see holo-casts in the Clone Wars, did you?"

Shyly, Kenshin shook his head. "Why does it matter? One knows you are Jedi. And as a Master, you were a General. One of many."

"Jedi Master Obi-Wan Kenobi," the Jedi bowed, as befit a proper introduction. "Former General of the Third Army. They called me the Negotiator."

Kenshin eyed him as if he'd sprouted fangs. "One did not think the Jedi encouraged their exploits to be attached to any one name."

"We don't," Obi-Wan said candidly. "I assure you, the last thing I ever wanted was a reputation. Unfortunately, I have one - one that ensures if I ever come to the attention of Rebel leader Mon Mothma, I will be in just as much trouble as you would be in Yamagata's sights. And for much the same reason."

"…Oh."

*He sounds so young.* Peace and tranquility were well and good, but Obi-Wan had a sudden sympathy for Kaoru and her bokken. "I tell you I want to get to know you, and you think I intend to take off on some damnfool idealistic crusade?" He gentled his voice. "No. Why would you even think so?"

"…You said you cared."

*And your parents cared, and they died, Obi-Wan knew. But - no. That was gasping and terror and the first chill of autumn. This hurt in you, this flinch from the fear of betrayal…. "Why do I feel snow?"*
Panic in violet, pain-

Oh no you don't! Force-granted speed let him seize the younger man's hand, just barely. And he would not let go.

No place for the Negotiator here. He's one with the Living Force, he feels more than thinks....

Read my feelings, Kenshin. I, too, have known betrayal.

He dragged forward memories of lava, of Padme's body broken by one she loved. Sparks and breathlessness and fighting for his life against the brother of his heart....

Snow, reached back. Dark hair, sad eyes, never smiling. But compassion, deeper than any love a young man expected, holding back the madness of war. Compassion with the darkest of roots, sprung from murder and hate... snow, freezing cold in Dark-twisted woods, bleeding and death near and striking out blind to save-

:I couldn't save her:.

:I couldn't save him:.

:I wanted to die:....:

:But I made a promise:.

:I will find a way to protect without killing:.

:I'll keep your children safe:.

:But nothing I do can ever be enough:.

:-Because it was my fault. I was his teacher, I was a Master, yet Palpatine turned him right under my nose:.

:-I killed her beloved, and she was trapped by her own vows, for revenge. Who would stay with such a monster?:

:Who could ever forgive one whose blindness brought the Sith to power?:

Obi-wan sighed, and stroked two-toned red hair. "I don't know what next month may bring, or next week, or tomorrow. But for now the will of the Force has brought us both here, and I for one plan to make the most of it." He raised a brow at his nephew. "So. How do we handle Koubai?" He hesitated. "Preferably without my getting married, buried, or - ah - otherwise entangled."

That won a faint smile from the rurouni. "Well," Kenshin said impishly, "one did have the start of a plan...."

Chapter End Notes

Ne? - "isn't that right?"

Nogitsune - "field fox"; malevolent fox-spirit.
Owari - end.

Roshi - wave warrior; more polite than ronin.

On merging the manga Rurouni Kenshin with the Star Wars Extended Universe…. While RK is supposed to be set in a "realistic" 1878 Meiji Japan, many characters in the setting do things that are practically impossible. (Fans have used the phrase "Watsuki physics"). The Force fits perfectly. In this AU, while Hiten Mitsurugi likely strongly resembles Ataru, it is actually a development of the ancient Form VIII, Sokan; users make strategic use of their surroundings as well as general acrobatics. (Kenshin will sometimes perch on overlarge weapons, much to their users' dismay.)

Timeframe for training a Jedi versus the known time Kenshin had learning from Hiko…. A Republic-era Jedi not only learned Force-use and lightsaber combat, but also inter-species diplomacy, spaceship flight and maintenance, multiple languages, and who knows what else in the mechanical and technological arena. Hence a relatively long training period. Kenshin's diplomatic abilities come from watching what happened in the Ishin Shishi for five years, and another twenty-odd knocking around the planet. (He definitely didn't learn them from Hiko!) His knowledge of anything originating off-planet is extremely scanty.

End Notes

Aa - informal yes.
Aku - evil, bad.
Chamidori - "green tea".
CoreSec - Corellian Security.
Desu - I am.
Edokko - "child of Edo"; Tokyo native.
Engawa - a shaded porch.
Fireryo - "Firrerreo"; near-human species with fangs and two-toned hair.
Fringer - someone living on the Outer Rim; settler.
Gi - short kimono; top.
Hakama - trousers, ranging from near-pants to culottes in looseness.
Haori - jacket.
Hashima - "stripe-leaf".
Ison Trade Corridor - a small route that branches off from the Corellian Trade Spine, passing through five systems before reconnecting with the Spine. Along this corridor are,
Coreward to Rimward, the Varonat, Bespin, Hoth, Anoat, and Ison systems. Widely seen as an obscure dead end, with backwater systems devoid of potential, and prone to ambushes by pirates; all reasons the Rebels later chose Hoth for their base. (Thank you, Wookiepedia!)

Itai - Ouch.

Jou-chan - "Little Missy".

Namae wa - Your name is?

Obi - belt, sash. "Obi-Wan" could roughly be translated as "Gulf Belt".

Ohayo - Good morning.

Oi! - Hey!

Onmitsu - spies, ninja.

Rurouni - "wandering swordsman"; Watsuki created this word.

Vornskr - native to the planet Myrkr; wild, vicious canine beasts with the unusual ability to hunt using the Force. This helps them hunt ysalamiri, but as a side effect, they mistake Force-sensitive people for their favorite prey animal.

Yukata - light kimono, under-kimono.

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