Love Above All

by wolfiefics

Summary

On a mission to investigate a planet in the midst of a trade crisis, Jedi Knight Steve Rogers discovers a mysterious Force sensitive object of ancient origin. When he is unable to obtain it for the Jedi Order and it is stolen, he is blamed for the theft. To clear his name, he must battle a mysterious Dark Force user who is familiar: an old friend and lover from his past, long thought dead. Will Steve, with fellow Jedi Knight Nat Romanov, be able to save his friend, recover the Jedi artifact and defeat the forces of evil before the darkness consumes them all?

Notes

When I saw Noirhound’s art during the review process for the MRBB I legitimately screamed. The story sprang into my head and I knew I had to get this art for my story. Noirhound has been a delight to work with, as has the MRBB mods, and I greatly appreciate the opportunity to participate in this bang. Thanks to my betas Juulna and Annaelle as well. So settle in for a Marvel/Star Wars style ride. May the Force be with you.

Will post one chapter every two days until December 19.
Chapter 1

A Long Time Ago, In a Galaxy Far Far Away
It is one hundred and fifty years before the fall of the Galactic Republic,
Before the birth of Qui-Gon Jinn, Obi-Wan Kenobi and the Skywalkers of infamy.
Master Yoda sits upon the Jedi Council and has sent Jedi Knight Steve Rogers
To the planet of Corinth to settle a planetary dispute before it erupts into war.
However, Knight Rogers will soon learn there is more at work here than even the Force is willing to reveal at this time….

Jedi Knight Steve Rogers sat at the pilot’s control of his small spacecraft. He’d been sent to this bright, shining sphere in space called Corinth to stop a possible war before it engulfed the planet and possibly the entire system with it. Though he felt equal to the task, something deep within the Force told him there was more to this mission than a simple dispute needing resolved. He couldn’t put his finger on what it was but it made him wary. He would need to be on his toes to counteract whatever forces were at work on the green and blue planet rotating before him.

Steve had achieved the status of Jedi Knight three years ago and had become an effective member of the Jedi Order upon completing his trials, facing the darkness within himself and overcoming it. He was proud of his tutelage under the great Jedi Knight and Master Soma Phylakes and knew he would someday take an apprentice of his own to pass along the knowledge of being a Jedi. He didn’t feel ready yet, and Master Yoda, wizened Grand Master of the Jedi Council, told him there was no shame in not taking a Padawan Learner so soon after completing his own trials. Sometimes it was good to get a bit more experience under one’s belt first.

The planet of Corinth, Steve felt, would be a test of those skills, if the unease he felt in the Force was anything to go by. Corinth was the fourth planet in the Celetez system, one of three inhabited planets. The other planets were mostly ice mudballs or gas giants. Around Corinth rotated three moons of varying sizes. The system’s yellow sun blazed bright in Corinth’s sky, Steve had no doubt. Sunset and moons-rise was undoubtedly spectacular and he hoped to have a spare moment to enjoy them during his mission here.

Corinth was also the primary inhabited planet in the Celetez system. It’s dominance over the other two inhabited planets meant that unrest on Corinth spread to the other two quickly and, as the past had shown, disastrously. That was why the Corinthian government had requested a Jedi to come negotiate for a peaceful settling of their internal disputes over resources and trade with the non-Celetez systems. Yoda told Steve personally that he felt Steve was the Jedi the Force wanted for the job, though the old master knew not why.

“Mysterious the Force is,” Yoda had wheezed after Steve had been given his assignment by the Council. “Watch yourself you will, Knight Rogers, for I sense a great disturbance in the Force in regards to Corinth. If backup you need, we will send Knight Romanov.”

Steve remembered now that he’d been vaguely insulted that he would need backup for such a simple mission. “Surely,” he’d protested. “I’ll be able to handle anything the Corinthians throw at me, my master. I was trained by the best.”

“Even the best overcome by circumstances. Call for help you will if needed it is. Take too much upon yourself you will not,” countered Yoda, brooking no argument. Steve had merely bowed to the venerable master respectfully and left to pack.

Now, staring at the slowly spinning Corinth, Steve confessed that Yoda’s unease was probably not
unwarranted. Having his old friend, Nat Romanov, at his side should things get hairy would be a comfort. Nat was clever, strong in the Force and cynical whereas Steve, equally strong in the Force, was forthright and inclined to see the best in people before the worst.

“Corinthia landing station, this is Jedi Knight Steve Rogers requesting permission to land,” he said after flipping the communications transmitter on.

“Corinthia landing station to Jedi Knight Steve Rogers. We welcome you and a delegation will meet you on landing pad 211A. Please follow the guide marks for landing.”

“Thank you, Corinthia. I’m pleased to be of assistance.” Steve turned off the comms and smoothly piloted the small space vessel into the planet’s sapphire atmosphere. Wisps of clouds whirled around at first and then he broke through the clouds to reveal a bustling city not too dissimilar to what he saw from his rooms at the Jedi Temple on Coruscant. The city of Corinthia, the capital of Corinth, was a huge metropolis of numerous beings, both the native humans and alien.

Expertly piloting the ship to the designated landing pad, Steve could see a delegation waiting for him. He relaxed slightly. Nothing untoward had happened, yet, and it would do a disservice to the people of Corinth to doubt them just because he felt unease. He would remain on guard, as always, and make no judgements.

He landed, did the procedures for shutting down the space craft, gathered his things and exited the vessel down a ramp. He met the delegation party halfway, bowing low in deep respect to the representatives of Corinth sent to greet him. “Greetings to you, I am Jedi Knight Steve Rogers,” he introduced himself. “I was sent by the Jedi Council to be of service to you.”

A man stepped forward and gave an awkward bow in return. “We welcome you, Jedi Knight Rogers, to Corinthia, the capital of Corinth. We have accommodations for you prepared and hope you find your stay with us pleasant and uncomplicated. We are grateful for your advice and council during our difficult times.” The man, who twitched a bit like a space rat did when confronted by a Lathan hunting cat, turned to his companions and introduced, “This is our High Secretary Alex’ander Pierce, Sub Viceroy Brock Rumlow and I am Jasp’er Sitwell.”

Steve executed another bow. His studies on Corinth told him that Pierce was a high official within the government and the leader of the faction demanding more trade with the outside systems and the Republic. Rumlow was Pierce’s bodyguard-cum-support staff. What position Sitwell held Steve did not know but he sensed it was of little importance or not important enough. He was a messenger, nothing more, but Steve was still inclined to offer respect until it was no longer warranted.

“Welcome, Knight Rogers!” Pierce spread his arms out in jovial welcome now that the formal introductions were done. “We have luxurious rooms appointed for you and tonight I host a formal gathering for all parties involved to introduce you around. Tomorrow we will begin the formal negotiations.”

“That is acceptable, thank you, High Secretary,” Steve told the man with a slight smile. Parties and gatherings were all part of the things Steve suffered through for negotiations such as these. He wasn’t much of a party person, not into idle chit-chat, but he knew to refuse attendance would start things on a bad foot and he wished to offer no offense.

The Corinthian officials began to walk deeper inside the space port and, shouldering his pack, Steve followed. The unease was still in the Force, stronger now, putting him on high alert. He relaxed his body, however, not wanting any of his tension to be evident to the men who welcomed him.
Exiting the landing port, Rumlow led the way to an enclosed land speeder and all four men climbed in, Sitwell driving.

“Now tell me, Knight Rogers, how will you proceed tomorrow?” asked Pierce with evident curiosity.

“I will ask for formal remarks from both sides and allow the Force to guide me in contemplation of the matter,” Steve replied.

“Ah yes, the Force, that mystical energy you Jedi worship. How does that work? Is it like intuition?” Rumlow’s question was almost a sneer but Steve answered the question as if were honestly answered.

“The Force speaks to me through instinct and perception,” he began and then paused. “It is difficult to explain, you must understand. Call it a gut feeling, if you like, perhaps that is the best description.”

Pierce laughed and slapped Rumlow on the shoulder. “Rumlow is always going by his gut reactions. Perhaps he too is strong in the Force, eh?”

Steve smiled politely and stretched out his Force sense to the men around him. Someone, he was startled to discover, was indeed strong with the Force but in a way that was oily, unclean. It made Steve want to shiver but he tamped down on the reaction. He’d felt the Dark Side only once in his life, during his trials when he confronted his greatest fear and defeated it in the name of the Light. While the sensation wasn’t an exact match it was close enough that it made Steve uncomfortable. One of these men in his presence would bear watching but he had no way to determine which one. He would be on guard all the same.

The speeder made its way through thick traffic to a tall, imposing building whose mirrored windows flashed in the bright Corinthian summer sun. The speeder pulled into a covered garage and the four men exited the vehicle, Steve following along since he had no idea where they were going. They entered an elevator, which shot up at a high rate of speed, making Steve’s stomach wobble a bit. Once they exited the elevator, the three Corinthians led Steve to an unremarkable door. Sitwell swiped a key card and then handed it to Steve before pushing the door open.

The room was indeed luxuriously appointed, with soft velvets, silks and bright colors pleasing to the eye. Steve had no doubt every comfort was considered for him, but in all honesty, he was a simple man with simple pleasures. Still, it would be rude not to thank his hosts for the sumptuous surroundings.

He bowed and said, “It is lovely. I look forward to my stay here.”

The three men bowed in return, Rumlow almost mockingly. Steve sensed that Rumlow had no liking for Steve, whether it was because he resented a Jedi sticking his nose in Corinthian politics, invited or not, or for some other reason. “We will allow you to settle in, then, sir Knight,” Pierce said in almost condescending tone. “There will be someone to pick you up out front promptly at sixth chime. I will hold a feast and then there will be a getting to know one another gathering after that, with drinks and conversation.” Pierce paused. “Is that all right?”

“No, it will be perfect,” Steve replied, focusing on keeping his serenity. A get together to meet all the involved parties in the disagreement wouldn’t go amiss, Steve reasoned. He could gently interrogate and get a better understanding of the emotions involved in the dispute to see how he could manipulate them into a resolution. The opening remarks tomorrow would give him more insight into the politics involved, though his reading on the matter after taking the assignment gave
him quite an idea. Nothing was better than direct involvement, however, and meeting the parties face to face.

Pierce nodded, as if satisfied with Steve’s acquiescence. “Don’t forget, sixth chime. One of my servants will bring you to my home for dinner.”

“I thank you, High Secretary, for your hospitality and look forward to sampling Corinth’s delicacies.”

Grunting with satisfaction at Steve’s congenial manners, Pierce left, with his two flunkies in tow, leaving Steve alone in his luxurious, if temporary, rooms.

Steve walked to the window and looked out. Unlike traffic lanes on Coruscant, which were layered, the Corinthians still drove at ground level. He meditated for a few minutes on the darkness in the Force he felt with the three men who had just left him alone and wondered what it meant. Was one a Force user or just attuned naturally to the Force, not strong enough to have been picked up by the Jedi or just never found by the Jedi? Steve knew there were children strong in the Force often not found by the Jedi and grew up with unmastered access to the Force, both light and dark. He’d met a few of them, on the both sides, and either befriended or battled them.

Would he face the dark here too? Is that what the Force warned Yoda of, and now Steve? Having no answers, Steve slipped out of his soiled tunic and stepped into the fresher unit to shower off the unclean feeling that always generated after space travel. It was something, he reckoned, that had to do with the artificial atmosphere in the space vessels. As attuned with the Living Force as Steve was, the unnatural surroundings left him feeling dirty and unclean, both inside and out.

Once out of the fresher and into clean tunics, he poured a cup of Corellian wine and sipped it as he looked around. The bed was fine and comfortable-looking, draped with a dark blue velvet spread and plump pillows. The fresher had been Corinthian marble, a light blue streaked with gold. No expense was spared for him, that much was certain. There was even fruit and stasis-held sweetmeats for his enjoyment waiting for him. Fresh flowers of pinks, purple and yellows sat in vases dotted around the room.

Steve walked back to the window, wine in hand, to look up. There he could just barely make out the outlines of the planet’s three moons, hovering in the sky like ghosts. So aligned was the moons’ orbits that they seemed almost piled on top of one another. They all looked nearing full, so the night would be brightly lit, even without the city’s artificial lighting.

He sighed heavily and resigned himself to an evening of inane chatter and quiet investigation of the parties involved in the upcoming negotiations for peace on Corinth. He preferred peace to war, as did all Jedi, but to be honest he was better with his lightsaber than with his mouth. Why he’d been tapped for this mission, he couldn’t say, but he had a feeling it stemmed from Yoda’s Force intuition. It was the Force’s will that Steve be here, so here he was, reading and willing to follow the Force faithfully.

How Bucky would laugh at how tamed Steve had become. Steve felt a twinge at the memory of his friend and lover’s bright laughter so often at Steve’s expense. “Punk,” Bucky would say, “believe in the Force. You know it won’t steer you wrong. You’re right where you need to be.”

‘Yes, Bucky’, thought Steve to Bucky’s memory, ‘I’m right where I need to be, Force willing. But you aren’t with me, are you, lost to the Force these past five years along with your master.’

Bucky was one with the Force, Steve resolved to himself, and the Force was always with Steve, therefore Bucky was with him too. One day they would be reunited and Steve would hear Bucky
call him ‘punk’ once more. Steve knew he had a long wait for that to occur and was content to allow the Force to work it’s will but it was patently unfair that Bucky’s young life was cut so short, as promising as it had been.

He sipped his wine and decided to not think about Bucky. He tried not too dwell on Bucky’s loss too often, knowing it would distract him from his own purpose in life. It had been a tragedy but not unheard of to lose a master and apprentice pairing on a mission. Thought ten thousand strong, the Jedi were still outnumbered by the people who wished them harm for purposes of revenge, greed, or undeserved hatred. That Steve had lost his precious Bucky had hurt the tall blond Jedi greatly, for Bucky had been his closest confidant and lover, as well as best friend. They shared everything, their triumphs, their woes, jokes and passion. Now Steve felt adrift and alone. When Bucky and his master, Oh Reng, had been declared dead from a space pirate battle on the way to their mission, Steve had turned to his own master for support. Only Soma Phylakes knew the depth of Steve’s devotion to Bucky. He hadn’t approved, per se, but he understood that sometimes love superseded the Force. Or perhaps, better, that the Force was bound in love, the two strongest powers in the universe.

Soma had helped Steve overcome his intense grief, coaxing his padawan learner to great achievements for Bucky’s sake as well as his own. Steve studied hard, meditated often when the grief threatened to overwhelm him and strove to achieve his goal of making knight. His knighting ceremony had been bittersweet without Bucky there, but Steve knew his master was right in saying that within the Force, Bucky had been there, watching and proud. It offered Steve a measure of comfort at the time and still did. ‘Master Soma Phylakes is indeed wise,’ Steve reflected. ‘He knew exactly what a heartbroken apprentice needed to hear at a time of great distress. I only hope to have a tenth of such wisdom when it is my turn to pass along the ways of the Jedi to my own apprentice.’

Pierce’s home was typical of a high level government official, sumptuous to the point of ostentation. Artifacts of historical significance to Corinth littered the rooms, as well as works of art from all over the planet and galaxy. Everything was gilt and glittery, designed to impress and intimidate. Steve could tell it was working for some of the guests, but Steve had seen such things a hundred times before. While it was interesting, it was not intimidating.

Steve wandered the guests, stopping to converse here and there. Pierce was postulating in a corner about something and Steve resolved to avoid the area for the time being. Drifting from his last conversationalist, Steve wandered over to view some artifacts in cases. One specifically caught his attention.

It was a sphere of a pewter type metal etched with markings that looked vaguely familiar to Steve. He knew he’d never been to this system before so why the markings would be familiar to him puzzled Steve. He walked around the case, to get a different view of the object, trying to determine what it was and why it seemed familiar. He felt out with the Force to see if it could tell him something.

He stopped with a jolt. By the Force! It was a Force sensitive object!

Steve stared at it in wonder. What was a Force sensitive object doing in the home of a stuffy official from a system distant from the Galactic Republic? He reached out with the Force again, trying to determine the origins of the metal sphere before him.

“Magnificent, isn’t it, Jedi?” came Pierce’s voice and Steve turned to see the High Secretary smiling at him like a Kaminoan shark.
“What is it?” asked Steve with genuine interest.

“A rare artifact from what we believe is a Jedi temple in the Great Corinthian Forest,” Pierce explained with a canny expression. “You find it of interest?”

“Oh, immense interest, High Secretary,” Steve said honestly. “I can feel the Force resonate off it, calling to me.”

“Really?” Pierce seemed to consider something a moment and then reached into his pocket, drawing out what looked like an old-fashioned key. “This key is tuned to the locking mechanism of all these cases. Let’s see what reaction you have when you touch the orb.”

Steve hesitated but admitted to himself that his curiosity was wanting him to test his reaction to touching the artifact as well. A Jedi Temple on Corinth? He remembered none of his Jedi history classes as an initiate mentioning anything about the Celetez system and any ties it might have to the Jedi Order.

The case door swung open at the twist of the key and Pierce motioned for Steve to remove the etched orb. Steve reached in and felt a strong jolt through the Force as he touched the artifact. A reassurance swept through him, warm and calm, from the artifact, similar to the former bond he had with his master. He gasped and turned, artifact in hand, to Pierce. “It’s marvelous!” he breathed in awe. “I feel…” His voice trailed off, unable to articulate his feelings.

Pierce looked smug. “Perhaps before you leave after the negotiations, we can take you out to the ruins and you can investigate further?” the man suggested with an arched brow.

“Perhaps. That would be excellent, High Secretary, thank you,” conceded Steve, reluctantly giving up the artifact to Pierce’s outstretched hands. “The Jedi Order would be very interested in this artifact. Would you perhaps allow it to be studied by our Jedi historians off-world in the near future?”

Pierce hesitated a moment before setting the sphere back in its case. “I’ll think about it. It’s a piece of Corinthian history. I’d hate for it to be accidentally destroyed or have our precious history changed in the annals because of an outsider’s viewpoint, you understand?”

Steve fought the urge to protest that it would just be studied with great care, that the Jedi were not careless, and would never attempt to change the identity of a people’s origins. He held his tongue but merely gave a shallow bow and said in as gracious a tone as he could manage, “Thank you for allowing me to touch such a rare piece not only of Corinthian history but also Jedi history.”

With great difficulty he turned away and made his way to the opposition party leader’s side to start a conversation on water right disputes on Corinth. His mind whirled at the backhanded insult and wondered who’d been feeding Pierce lies about the Jedi Order. Would Pierce’s seeming distrust of the Jedi in particular have an adverse effect on the negotiations set to begin tomorrow? Steve hoped not but he would have to see how things played out as the days progressed. He had no doubt he could overcome whatever obstacles Pierce threw in Steve’s way.

The night’s gathering ended and Steve was escorted by private speeder to his temporary residential building. He shucked off his long, brown Jedi robes and stopped at the window to view the three moons high in the inky sky, stars glittering like diamonds in the darkness. Even the light from the city paled in comparison to the brightness of Corinth’s moons and surrounding stars.

Steve slipped out of his tunics and trousers and into his sleep pants, stretching out beneath the luxurious velvet covers on the sumptuous mattress of his bed. He sank into a meditative state,
ruminating on what he’d learned this evening, not only from Pierce’s guests but also about the mysterious, possible Jedi artifact.

He would send communications to the Temple first thing in the morning to detail what he’d found out about the orb. Perhaps a High Council member could negotiate with Pierce on either on-world or off-world study of not only the artifact but also this Jedi temple deep in the forest.

Steve awoke with the sun and, after breaking his fast with delivered fruits, local cheeses, bread and cold meats, he meditated on the day’s coming events to see if the Force had any guidance for him. As he sank into a meditative state he immediately felt a disturbance. The Force slipped through his mind like water, quicksilver and fluid. He was unable to relax enough to find out what was wrong, so unsettled was he.

He was getting ready to clip the lightsaber onto his belt to go downstairs to meet the speeder that would take him to the negotiations when there was a pounding on the door accompanied by shouts. “Open the door in the name of the High Secretary, Jedi!”

The ill-at-ease feeling increased with each step Steve took to the door. There he confronted four uniformed guards, armed with blasters and fierce expressions. “What seems to be the matter?” he asked with a calmness he certainly did not feel. That armed guards were here meant nothing good.

“You are under arrest for a theft in the High Secretary’s home!” announced one of the armed guards.

“I assure you, gentlemen, after I was dropped off, I have not left my rooms. I immediately went to sleep, woke this morning, ate breakfast, meditated and then dressed. I have stolen nothing,” Steve told them gently.

“We were told you would lie, Jedi. You will come peaceably or we will force you.” The leader of the guards spat the words and Steve tensed. That’s what the Force had been trying to tell him. He was being set up to take a fall for some crime. No, he would not go peaceably.

Centering himself deeply in the Force, Steve reached out through the gossamer threads connecting each armed man before him to the Living Force, whether they knew or not. He put an ounce of his will into their minds and, with a wave of his hand, made his Force-suggestion, “I was not present when you came to capture me,” he said. “You have no idea where I have gone.”

The leader turned to his men and they stampeded into Steve’s rooms even as the Jedi Knight slipped out. As Steve strode down the corridor to the emergency stairwell, he heard one of the other guards say in frustration, “He’s not here! The High Secretary said he would be here!”

He needed to get to a safe location and contacted the Temple on Coruscant immediately. Undoubtedly his ship would either already be under guard, or would be soon. He couldn’t go there. He’d read that Corinth was known for having areas with communications ports that allowed people to freely contact friends and family throughout the galaxy free of charge. He would find one of these communications buoys and send an immediate message to the High Council of this development. Undoubtedly, the Council would consider this development worthy of backup but Steve found he didn’t so much mind having Nat at his side at the moment. She would help him get to the bottom of whatever misunderstanding had occurred.

Steve exited his residential building through a side door and slipped into the early morning crowd on the avenue. With his plain garb, he garnered no attention. He slipped among the population until he found a communications buoy outside a café that wafted mouth-watering smells to him. Glad
he’d partaken of a hearty breakfast, Steve ignored the smells of roasting meat.

He triggered the communications buoy and immediately sent a coded message to the Temple.

“This is Jedi Knight Steve Rogers. There has been an unforeseen development on Corinth, my masters. I have been accused of theft by the High Secretary. Armed guards were sent to apprehend me. I deemed it more prudent to escape into the population and elude capture. I shall attempt to learn more regarding the circumstances,” Steve relayed into the message but his attention was caught momentarily by a flashing message. He touched the screen on the message and his visage flashed before his eyes, declaring him a renegade, a thief and an attempted assassin. The populace was ordered to report Steve’s whereabouts as he was considered armed and dangerous. “I have been labeled a thief and possible assassin, my masters. I am on the run. Please send assistance as soon as possible. This may have something to do with a possible ancient Jedi artifact in the High Secretary’s possession that is strong in the Force,” he added. “May the Force be with you, and me.”

He closed out the communication and saw that it was transmitted before he left.

Now that the populace was being alerted to his identity he needed to get off the streets and main thoroughfares. He needed to find a place to hole up and hide until help could be sent to him. He also needed more information on just what in the Sith Hells was going on.

He maneuvered through the alleyways and back streets for at least an hour. His personal communicator went off and he ducked into an abandoned building to check it. It was a message from the Council. That was fast.

“Knight Rogers, we are investigating and in contact with the government of Corinth. We are attempting to find out what you are specifically accused of and finding a way to get you granted immunity from this manhunt. Near as we can tell, a thief broke into the High Secretary’s home and stole a valuable Force-sensitive artifact, almost killing the High Secretary in the theft. He is convinced it was you, as you had shown interest in the artifact last night and asked permission to remove it off-planet. This smells like an attempt to discredit the Jedi’s efforts to bring peace to the region. Continue to elude capture. We are sending Knight Romanov to you for assistance. Fight if you must but try not to do any further damage to our negotiations in freeing you from suspicion. Send a communication to us, if possible, tonight or tomorrow morning to advise us of your status. May the Force be with you.”

The message shut off and Steve pondered his situation. It was as he’d surmised; the artifact had been stolen and he’d been accused. The attempt on the High Secretary’s life was news to Steve and brought home how serious the situation was. This would undoubtedly also be blamed on the High Secretary’s opposition in the negotiations, if the negotiations were even still going to happen.

Steve pondered his next move. He needed to find someplace to spend the night. He was hungry; it had been a long day since breakfast, but he could do without for another day or so. If worst came to worst, he would reluctantly resort to theft for food from a street vendor. But he needed someplace safe to spend the night. He could sink into an alert meditative trance and forego actual sleep for a day or two and still function normally.

Deciding to head for the outskirts of the city, he moved east as quickly and unobtrusively as possible. Twice he dodged patrols of armed city guards looking for him. He couldn’t move through a busy city totally incognito and they were no doubt reacting to tips from concerned citizens. Steve knew he would have to be careful and not do anything that drew attention to himself.

On the outskirts of the city, he found a deserted park with a small decorative pond full of local birds swimming and dunking for fish and insects. There he found a small boat house with moored canoe-type boats floating outside it. He ducked within its dark recesses and deemed it suitable to
hide in for the night.

He settled in and sank into an alert meditative trance, his senses alert for intruders approaching his hiding place, the Force within him fanning out into the environment around him. It would alert him if someone, or something, approached that meant harm to him.

Steve emerged from his trance a little after dawn, rested but with no plan other than attempting to gain more information on what had occurred two evenings before at the High Secretary’s home. He did some stretches and a low-level kata to warm up his muscles and open his mind more fully to the Force. He’d sensed something during his long meditation, something tickling at the back of his brain. He couldn’t discern what it was though and decided to dismiss the sensation until more was revealed to him. It did not do to dwell on the unknown.

He left the boat house, alert to anyone who could report his presence. He wondered idly if he should remove his distinctive Jedi clothing and opt for more civilian friendly attire. If he wasn’t wearing the simple, monkish tunics, obi sash, belt and long robes, he might be less noticeable, since that is what all citizens of Corinth were looking for.

And how the hell would Nat find him?

But first, breakfast. He needed nourishment to maintain peak ability. He couldn’t outright buy it from a street vendor so he would have to, unfortunately, resort to theft. He hated being a thief but circumstances dictated reality sometimes.

He made his way back into the city, keeping an eye out for a way to change his appearance and something easily stolen to break his fast. His luck held out in the latter when a vendor caught his eye and motioned him over. Steve cautiously approached and the vendor handed him a handful of fruit pies.

“I don’t believe what the High Secretary is saying about you,” the man told Steve. “Here, have some breakfast. I figure you haven’t eaten since you ran away, am I right?”

“Thank you,” Steve said humbly, “both for your faith and the food.”

“I’ve had dealings with Jedi in the past. You aren’t thieves unless forced to be. If you had stolen what he says you had, you’d have left the planet immediately, not stuck around. Doesn’t make sense,” grunted the vendor.

Taking a risk because the Force told him the man was honest and kind, Steve asked, “Where can I find clothes less conspicuous, kind sir?”

The man waved a meaty paw to the left of his street cart, down the thoroughfare. “There’s a second hand clothing shop two blocks down this road. They barely have staff and will pay you no mind. And they’re cheap. I assume you have your credit stick on you?” Steve nodded. “Yeah, you can find something cheap and unobtrusive there.”

Steve gave the man a shallow but respectful bow. “I thank you for your generosity and information. May the Force be with you.”

“And with you, Jedi,” the vendor said and turned to an approaching customer with a wave of his hands and a boisterous greeting designed to camouflage who he’d been speaking with. Steve ducked into a nearby alley to consume his breakfast and then slipped down the street toward the second-hand clothing shop as indicated by the pie vendor.
He was perusing the racks, totally ignored by a young woman more engrossed in her hand-held device than any potential customers, when his personal communicator went off. Before answering, he lodged himself in a far corner away from the girl at the register and answered, “Rogers.”

“Can’t send you anywhere without you getting into trouble,” groused Nat Romanov’s voice over the commlink.

“I didn’t even do anything but rest, so I don’t know how this can be laid at my feet,” Steve protested.

“I’m in orbit around Corinth and will be landing. Where can we meet that won’t get you arrested?”

“I’ll meet you at the landing hangar, we can make plans aboard your ship.”

“Or we can just leave,” suggested Nat.

“No, we need to clear the Jedi’s name here. There’s something else going on and I can’t put my finger on it. The Force tells me I’m supposed to be here and this is happening for a reason. I just don’t know what that reason is,” Steve told her tersely.

She sighed. “All right, fine. You’re too noble for your own good sometimes, Rogers. I’ll send a message over the commlink with my landing pad. I’m coming in as an itinerant space traveler, not as an official Jedi.”

“I’m looking for less obtrusive clothes as well speak,” Steve told her. “Message me when you’ve landed.” He clicked the commlink off and stowed it back in one of his belt pouches.

He found some trousers that he could easily tuck inside his boots, a shirt made of mock synthsilk in a deep blue that he knew would garner Nat’s approval and a second hand bag to carry his Jedi clothing in. He paid for the clothes then ducked into the dressing rooms to change. Once that was complete, he left the second-hand clothing shop feeling a lot less conspicuous. He retained the belt so he could hang his lightsaber from it. It wasn’t what he preferred but it was necessary. Steve didn’t want to be caught unawares without his weapon handy.

A few blocks away, his commlink beeped. Landing pad 445A, it read, and Steve made his way across the city by public transport to the landing hangars.

Nat was dressed like a space pirate, all black leather and earrings with Drakonian dragon feathers hanging from her ears. She looked nothing like a Jedi. She perused Steve’s outfit, pursed her lips as if warding off a comment, and they stowed away his Jedi clothing.

“What have you learned?” she asked.

“Nothing new that the Council hasn’t told me,” he confessed. “I found a street vendor sympathetic to me. He said he’d dealt with Jedi before, knew we weren’t thieves. He gave me breakfast. But otherwise my plan was to try and get footage of this theft and assassination attempt, see if I could discern who is the real culprit.”

She smiled like a shark. “With my hacking skills, that’s easy to accomplish,” she all but bragged. “Let’s use the ship as a base of operations so let’s find someplace else to hole up.” With that said, she grabbed a high-end datapad and they exited the ship, locking it down against intruders.

They maneuvered through the city and set up at a café around lunchtime nearby the upper end side of the city, not too far from Pierce’s residence. There Nat began to work her magic.
Steve sipped his chala tea and picked at a pastry while Nat typed furiously on the datapad. After about fifteen minutes she muttered an, “A-ha!” and typed even more furiously. “I’m inside his security feeds. Now to navigate to two nights ago. There’s the party. What are you looking at?” she asked as she perused the footage. “The supposed Jedi artifact?”

“Yes, it’s extremely Force sensitive. It was like electricity coursed through my body when I touched it. I felt floating and free within the Force in its presence,” Steve told her. “We should probably add checking out the Jedi temple ruins to our list of things to do, if we have time.”

Nat nodded, distracted by the video feed. Finally, she scooched her chair over to his, the video paused. “Okay, here’s where things get interesting.” They both watched the screen’s video as a dark figure entered the room where Pierce kept his museum-quality objects d’art. The figure went straight for the Force sensitive orb. But what caused both Nat and Steve to rear back was that when Pierce and a guard-in the dark, which was odd—confronted the thief, a red lightsaber flared and flashed in a fighting style Steve thought familiar but couldn’t place.

“A red lightsaber?” breathed Nat in surprise. “Definitely not you, unless you are moonlighting as a Sith Lord in your copious spare time.”

“No, my blade is blue, as you know,” he told her, though he knew she was being sarcastic. “Where did he get a red crystal and why the laser beam guards running horizontal from the blade?”

“I don’t know, but this definitely isn’t you and probably why this hasn’t been released to the public. The build of the thief is stockier than you are and the blade is a definite giveaway. Anyone with half a brain would know immediately it’s not you. So right now, it’s Pierce’s word against yours and you’re on the run, looking guilty as hell, despite what your street vendor says,” Nat told him with some asperity. “We need a plan to bring this red lightsaber user out into the open.”

“But what?” asked Steve. “We know nothing about him or where he comes from. All Kyber crystals are mined and owned by the Jedi almost exclusively. A few trickle out here and there, we both know that, but red ones are monitored because they are so highly prized by the Dark Side of the Force.”

Nat tapped her chin thoughtfully and then tucked a strand of her red hair behind her ear, showing off the earring hanging there. “We need to move locations. Pierce will undoubtedly have security monitoring and might be able to trace to this café. Where did you stay the night last night?”

Steve frowned. “An empty boat house in a park on the outskirts of the city.”

She shook her head. “Might be a good rendezvous point in the future if the ship’s compromised.” Steve told her the name of the park. “Okay, first things first, we need to find this Force user with the red lightsaber and recover the stolen artifact.”

“And then?”

“Figure out how to expose him to the good citizens of Corinth publicly, thus countering any claims Pierce makes against you.”

“Okay,” Steve nodded. “Now how do we do that?”

“I think it’s time to investigate the grounds around Pierce’s residence. Maybe if we can figure out how the thief got in we can find clues as to his identity.”

Not keen at getting so close to Pierce’s residence but knowing they had nothing else to go on, Steve shrugged and led the way out of the café. They’d gotten half a block away and stopped to watch as
planetary constabulary officers piled out of a speeder and into the café. Soon customers were being marched out into the sunlight to be compared to a holopad picture of Steve.

“That was close,” breathed Steve.

“Yeah, let’s get moving,” agreed Nat. They began to wend their way toward the upper class residential area, trying to look for all the world like tourists viewing the homes of the rich and powerful.
Chapter Notes

Please forgive the late posting. I actually...(coughs in embarassment)...forgot. You will get the rest for the next two days, I promise!

Steve and Nat stood close enough to the gates of Alex’ander Pierce’s small mansion, studying the grounds before them, without being viewed by guards or video surveillance. The fences looked like they were set up with current when touched and the gates had razor wire and spikes. A secure locking mechanism that Nat declared almost impossible to break into kept the gates closed to the outside world.

They traversed the fence line, looking for signs of egress and found only one location that both Steve and Nat thought someone could have conceivably snuck within the high, electrified walls. “Here,” Nat said and Steve nodded. He could see the boot impression marks in the ground as well as she could. “A lot of pressure was built up to leap over the fence.”

“And it’s a low point in the current as well, so less damage should the thief miss going over,” Steve noted, reaching out to the Force to gauge the current of electricity rolling through the fence.

Nat peered through the open grated fence and noted, “There is where he landed,” she said pointing to a divot in the immaculate grass.

“This is probably where he exited too,” Steve noted. “Let’s look more deeply further away and see if we can sense how he got away from the area.”

Together, their senses open to the guidance of the Force, the two Jedi made their way through the dense foliage bordering the fence to the road, the shrubbery and trees acting as a natural wind break and noise buffer from the street traffic.

“I lose all sense of him here,” Steve reported, stopping at the edge of the street’s sidewalk.

“Me too. Probably boarded a transport of some sort and sped away with his loot,” Nat said disgustedly.

Steve reached out to the Living Force, trying to get more information, but all he got was the continued sense of something familiar in the Force around him. “I can’t get anything else,” he stated dejectedly. “But there’s something familiar about the Force signature around here, beyond you and me, I mean.”

Nat looked at him puzzled for a moment and then she concentrated. Steve could feel the tendrils of the Force radiating from her. Eventually she shook her head. “Nothing for me. What’s it feel like?”

“Like I’ve met this person before,” admitted Steve. “But I don’t recall meeting any Force sensitive thieves wielding red lightsabers. That would probably have stuck in my mind,” he added with false cheerfulness.

Nat grinned briefly at him.
“Okay, whoever this is, he is strong in the Force and familiar to you but not to me. Interesting. Come on, let’s head back to the city and the ship. We need to contact the Council. Maybe Yoda’s been meditating on this and something’s come into his little green, troll head.”

They jogged until they reached a nearby public transport and took it to the landing port. There Nat contacted the Council. Yoda, unsurprisingly, answered the call.

“Find Rogers you did, I see,” the wizened master huffed.

“Yes, my master,” intoned Nat and Steve gave a respectful bow.

“We’ve determined the thief is a Force user wielding a red lightsaber with cross beams acting as guards running horizontally from the blade,” Steve reported. “Does that mean anything to you?”

Yoda’s left ear twitched. “It does not,” the ancient master admitted, “but intrigued I am. Sense I do that ties to you, Steve, this Force user has.”

“I sense that too, Master Yoda, but I’m puzzled as to who it could be. I know of no one like this individual.”

“All will reveal itself in time. Attempt to find out more about this Jedi object you should. Perhaps then can find out it’s whereabouts. Travel to Jedi temple ruins you should,” Yoda commanded.

Nat and Steve shared a look and then both seemed to shrug. “Certainly,” Nat replied. “Anything particular we should look for?”

“Verify Jedi artifact it is first you must,” Yoda told them. “No record have we of Jedi temple on Corinth, though long-time member of Republic the planet has been. Go where this object discovered and what purpose it fulfilled if possible. The more we know, the more we can predict if sold to black market it is.”

Steve nodded. “Makes sense. We shall do so, my master.” He and Nat both bowed to Yoda.

“May the Force be with you,” intoned Yoda before the commvideo blinked off.

“Well, that’s our next few days planned,” Nat exclaimed, clapping her hands once in muted excitement. “Just what I always wanted to do, traipse through the woods with you looking for a lost Jedi temple!”

“We need to find a library or something, learn where it is, how to get there and then rent a speeder. It might be a day or two out from Corinthia,” Steve told her.

“Yeah, this information won’t be in any database we have on the planet otherwise we’d have investigated a possible ancient Jedi temple.” Nat blew air out of her mouth in consternation. “I get this feeling that we’re being led somewhere. I just don’t know where the manipulation is coming from.”

They left the ship, locked it up and headed back into the city proper. On the lookout for signs to a library or similar facility, they soon found some which led them to a huge edifice that had dozens of people walking in and out of it constantly. Steve and Nat entered the building, found a database of the library’s inventory and began their search.

They searched, read and scanned maps until the library closed, with Nat taking surreptitious pictures of important information. Steve focused mainly on the supposed history of this Jedi Temple and pondered why no one on Corinth had ever informed the Jedi Order of its existence. All
the photos in the books and data entries seemed to indicate that it was indeed once a Jedi Temple.

Steve and Nat left the library, found a street vendor selling meat and vegetables on a stick to nibble on while they discussed their options. Steve bought them some portable bread, cheese and fruit while Nat casually asked where the nearest speeder rental was located at. Thus directed they headed that way.

They chose a closed speeder in case of inclement weather and decided to head on out despite encroaching darkness. “According to what I read,” Steve told Nat, “it’s open to the public during daylight hours. We don’t need a tour guide, we need to sneak around to get answers.”

“I’m convinced it’s a Jedi temple,” Nat concurred.

“Me too, which begs the question of why hasn’t the Order ever been told of it’s existence?” pondered Steve.

“They found it about five years ago,” she noted as she drove out of the Corinthia and into the rural areas surrounding the city. “They may have just figured out what it was and hadn’t gotten around to notifying the Jedi of the find?”

“Maybe, but did you notice that Pierce’s name was all over the dig accounts?”

Nat nodded. “Yes, I did. And that’s not suspicious at all.”

“I felt a Force signature in the speeder on my first day. Pierce and two of his subordinates met me at the landing pad,” Steve told her. “The signature was blurry, I guess you could say, and I couldn’t pinpoint which of the men were Force sensitive.”

Nat gave him a long, measured look. “Interesting. With all that we’ve found out since then, how much you want to bet it’s Pierce you sensed and he was attempting to mask, badly, his Force sensitivity?”


Nat shrugged. “More will reveal itself in time, but my guess is that he wants to sabotage the peace talks.”

“That’s crazy,” Steve all but scoffed. “It would result in a civil war. What would he gain by that?”

“I don’t know, but I have a feeling that’s where this is heading,” Nat responded.

They settled into a comfortable silence the rest of the drive, each reaching out into the Force for elusive answers that did not come.

The Corinthian Jedi Temple ruins were not massive but they were still impressive. Tall spires rose in the distance as they approached the location. They’d considered stopping for a couple hours of sleep, but Steve put himself in a meditative, relaxing trance for a couple hours, then they switched drivers so that Nat could so the same. They were not at their peak, but they were somewhat refreshed. That refreshment however did not bring answers to the questions they had regarding the theft, Alex’ander Pierce and this mysterious red lightsaber-owning thief.

Steve parked the speeder a distance from the ruins entrance and they stepped into the forest outskirts of the temple to survey the lay of the land.
“The maps I took pictures of,” Nat said, perusing her data pad, “say that the inner sanctum of the temple is located in that building there.” She pointed to a building with the highest spire, a marble like stone glinting in the pre-dawn light, the moons of Corinth hanging low in the sky.

“Let’s check that out first,” suggested Steve. Nat nodded and they entered the temple’s grounds, keeping an eye out for early morning visitors to the ruins, or workers doing pre-opening duties.

As they walked, Nat said, “The Force is strong here.”

Steve felt it too. “Powerful. Makes sense to put a temple here. I’m still bothered that the Corinthians never told the Temple on Coruscant about this place. It almost mimics the look of the temple on Coruscant, with the spired buildings and massive complexes. Look,” he added pointing, “that looks a little like the area we keep the creche and initiate housing.”

“And that looks like a battle arena for lightsaber practice,” Nat noted pointing to an open air arena-style building.

“It has all the hallmarks of an ancient Jedi Temple, they are excavating it as such but keeping it secret from the outside world,” mused Steve. “Too what purpose?”

Steve assumed Nat had no answers either for she didn’t respond.

The two Jedi made it to what they assumed was the main building of the temple ruins. It was crumbling in places and there were ropes to keep the curious back away from dangerous areas as they went inside. “Wait,” Steve said, grabbing Nat’s arm to stop her from going further in. “Do you sense that?”

Nat frowned a moment and then her expression cleared. “We’re not alone,” she breathed quietly. They moved forward with caution.

The end of the corridor angled upward so on they went, hands on lightsabers, ready to grab them and activate at a moment’s notice. Steve, with Nat close behind, came to a room filled with equipment looked like it was used in archaeology digs. Some of the floor was pulled up and digging had been going on. Trays to sift dirt and debris were set up but lacked workers to use them. The room was not unoccupied, however.

A wizened man with a distinct hunch to his back was staring at them with watery, blinking eyes. “Jedi.”

Steve paused and wondered how the man knew what they were.

Nat stepped forward. “Who are you?”

“Keeper of this place, Jedi Knight Romanov,” the old man answered.

The Force drifted off him like smoke, unable to attach but still linked to him in some way. It made Steve uneasy and, from her Force signature, it made Nat the same.

“How do you know my name?” she asked warily.

“It was not unknown that the Temple on Coruscant would send you,” he merely replied mysteriously.

It did not quell the unease Steve felt that someone could predict what the High Council would do.
"I don’t understand," Nat confessed to the stooped old man. “How could you know this?"

“I see more than you do,” was the even more mysterious reply.

“What is this place?” asked Steve, waving around a hand to encompass the entire temple around them.

The man merely smiled and did not answer.

“What are you called?” Nat tried.

“Zola.”

“Okay,” Nat said and cast a look at Steve, clearly at a loss as to what to do next.

“If you are the keeper of this temple, why wasn’t the Jedi Order told of it’s existence?” asked Steve.

“Perhaps,” the wizened man told him, “you should rethink that the Order should have known about this temple. You, and others, assume it is Jedi. It is not.”

Steve thought back to all the history he’d read in the past of the Jedi and Sith artifacts found scattered around the galaxy. Nothing about this temple screamed Sith to him. It was constructed as a Jedi temple would be constructed, except for the feeling of unease, but that had been present since he’d stepped foot on this planet.

“It’s not Sith,” he said with certainty.

“No, it is not,” Zola agreed amiably. Not once had the old man shifted his weight or moved. He stood stock still, almost like a small vulture over a corpse. The sense of disturbance grew within Steve.

“But it’s not of the Light,” Steve decided.

“Decidedly not.” Zola gave a wheezy laugh, the motion shaking his body with hilarity at their confusion.

“Steve,” Nat muttered in alarm. “This temple was used by Dark Force users ages ago.”

“Yes,” Steve agreed, equally alarmed. He turned to Zola once more as the old man’s laughter died down. “What are you? I can sense you but you don’t seem real.”

Zola made his first motion and tapped the side of his nose. “Now that is an insightful question, young Jedi.”

And that’s when it all clicked into place. “We’re being stalled,” Steve said out loud.

“What?” asked Nat, turning to him fully.

Steve reached out with all his might into the Force and felt it. Incoming danger from the sky.

“We’re being stalled,” he repeated. “Danger is incoming. My guess a missile or air strike of some sort. They mean to destroy this temple, us and this old man,” he waved a hand toward Zola.

“Ah, I can’t be destroyed. I am one with the Force,” chortled Zola.
Steve felt the danger encroaching, fast. They would not have time to exit the building before whatever was incoming hit. He grabbed Nat’s arm and all but threw her inside one of the digging pits in the floor. He jumped in after her and used the Force to levitate one of the big floor blocks over them for a measure of protection. Just as the floor piece went down, they heard the whine of a missile, barely discernible over Zola’s maniacal laughter.

The missile hit and the rumble of stone cascading down upon them was deafening. The dust in the air was thick and both he and Nat began coughing. Even the Force was no use in these circumstances. They must trust that they were meant to survive and then do so.

Once the din of rubble crashing down upon them ceased, they began levitating, using the Force, the stone and debris that had fallen on top of their makeshift refuge. It took long minutes; minutes Steve was sure they didn’t have. He was tired of playing someone else’s game. It was time to take matters into his own hands. It was obvious that Pierce, or someone, knew they would come to the Temple. Perhaps, with Pierce’s power and influence, all transmissions leaving the speeder were monitored. It would be easy to scan the rental agencies to determine when one was rented by people meeting their descriptions. There was nowhere safe, apparently, on this planet that Pierce did not have reach.

United, they hefted the final stone from their hiding place and Steve and Nat force-jumped from the hole. As they scrambled over rubble and debris Steve told Nat, “We’re being manipulated, you’re right, but Pierce seems to know exactly what our next move is. No more contact with Coruscant. We do this on our own.”

“Right,” Nat nodded.

They headed back to the forest, meeting no one thankfully, and found that their rented speeder was unharmed and undiscovered.

“No doubt, the destruction of the ruins will be laid at your doorstep,” Nat told him.

“Oh, I think they know you’re here as well. You rented this speeder and they knew exactly where we were at when we were there,” Steve told her. “They know I have backup.”

Nat was silent for several long moments. “What do we do?”

“I have no idea,” confessed Steve. “We need to learn more about Pierce and his habits, find a way to get him alone and get information out of him about his plans.”

“We could contact his opposition,” Nat suggested. “We need allies.”

“Not a half bad idea,” agreed Steve. “I met a man the night of the formal gathering, a Sam Wilson. He seemed intelligent and no fool. Perhaps we can ask him for assistance.”

“Let’s look him up once we get back to Corinthia,” Nat said. Then she settled into a deep meditation. Steve drove the speeder, allowing the Force and his own five senses to keep him alert to any further danger.

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Sam Wilson’s home was on the outskirts of Corinthia in a respectable neighborhood. Both Jedi entered Wilson’s backyard and approached the back door with caution. They would be prepared to flee if Wilson raised the alarm, but Steve’s Force sense told him this was the right move.

Steve rapped on the back door and stood back, prepared to run. A shadow moved inside, he could see through the door’s window. The door opened to reveal a dark-skinned human male. Steve
remembered that Sam Wilson had an easy grin and congenial personality.

Wilson stared at them for a long moment before opening his door all the way and motioning them inside. “There you the hell are,” he hissed. “We’ve been looking all over for you but we’re one step behind Pierce in locating you. He’s got more resources than we do, most of it half the government.”

“We’ve been around,” Nat told him. “My name is Nat Romanov, I’m a Jedi Knight like Steve.”

“I’d say welcome to Corinth but you’ve had a shitty time from the looks of you both,” Wilson said, ushering them into a large kitchen. “I’ve got clothes that will fit Steve, but not you Nat. Well, maybe not you. My sister might have left something last time she was over. No offense but you both are filthy. What a wall fall on you?”

“More like an ancient Jedi temple,” Steve told him. Wilson turned in shocked surprise. “Pierce, or someone, fired a missile at us while we were inside the Jedi Temple ruins in the forest. We barely found shelter before the whole thing crashed down on us.”

Wilson whistled with an impressed mien. “Jedi are hard to kill, I guess.” Steve tried to look unaffected by the admiration in Wilson’s tone. “So what’s your plan?”

“We need to spy on Alex’ander Pierce. Everything starts and ends with him. We’ve determined that Steve was framed and that someone with a red lightsaber is the culprit. Possibly another Force user, but not a Jedi,” Nat explained. “We know this puts you in deep trouble with your government, but can you help us, Mr. Wilson?”

Wilson pursed his lips thoughtfully. “I got no problem helping you. Pierce is bad news. I certainly didn’t vote for him but I know plenty who did and now feel their confidence in him betrayed. He’s systematically setting our planet back both technologically and ecologically by decades if not almost a hundred years. He’s polluting everywhere and stealing our natural resources to sell off-world, leaving us high and dry and without them for ourselves. He’s also funding archaeological digs and selling the artifacts on the black market. I saw several examples of his collection at the formal gathering the other night, including that orb that had you so entranced,” Wilson added to Steve. Both Jedi nodded and all but collapsed in the chairs around a large kitchen table that Wilson waved them into. “He’s bad news for Corinth and Celetez system. We’ve got to get him out of power any way we can.”

“Our goals are the same then. Do you know if Pierce is Force sensitive?” asked Steve frankly.

Wilson blinked and shrugged. “Wouldn’t surprise me, to be honest, but I always thought the man was just charming as a snake.” He looked at them frankly. “Since you’ve been in the forest for the last couple of days, you probably didn’t hear that Pierce recovered his Jedi artifact, suddenly and mysteriously.”

“So I’m cleared?” asked Steve in surprise.

Wilson snorted. “No, they claim they got it off you and you evaded capture.”

Steve frowned and Nat sighed. “Okay, Pierce is likely a Force user or at least Force sensitive,” she tallied, checking off each point with her fingers. “He’s likely in league with this other lightsaber wielding thief. Pierce, or someone with Pierce likely, tried to blow Steve and I up, taking the ancient temple ruins with us. We found out that the temple ruins are not Jedi but have the hallmarks of Jedi. Pierce has in his possession a mysterious and powerful Force object of unknown origin and use.” She finished ticking off points. “The question is do we confront him or do we just
Wilson shifted in his chair. “You guys hungry? Let’s talk plans while I cook. Then we’ll clean you up, get you fresh clothes, or at least wash the clothes you’re in and then put our plans in motion.”

“You have a sound head on your shoulders, Mr. Wilson,” Nat laughed.

“Call me Sam,” Wilson invited, standing up and moving over to the chillbox. “Mr. Wilson makes me think you’re talking to my father.”

“Very well, Sam,” Steve agreed. “What would you suggest we do?”

“Watching Pierce isn’t a half bad idea. All sorts of people go in and out of his compound, despite the high electrified fence. A thief getting in doesn’t surprise me.”

Steve shared a surprised look with Nat. “Why do you say that? When we checked the location out yesterday morning it seemed pretty difficult to break into,” Nat told him.

“He’s always complaining in the press about having things stolen. We think it’s partly cover for his black market operations. If something he claims is stolen appears on another planet, well, that’s because it was stolen. We figure there have to be open spots to back up his stories in his security. A closer look might not be amiss,” explained Sam, pulling out fruits, bread and slabs of meat.

“How’d this lightsaber thief get in, you know?”


Sam hummed as he took a pan down from a hanging rack and turned on the stove. “Makes sense. He used a Force user to frame a Force user.”

“That’s what we thought. But I think I know this Force user, though I don’t how and from when,” Steve told him. “The thief’s Force presence that lingered was very familiar to me.”

“You can pick up impressions?” asked Sam, half turning with a strip of meat in his hand.

“In the Force, yes,” admitted Steve.

“Handy thing to have, this Force sensitive stuff,” mused Sam, putting the meat in the pan to begin sizzling. He then turned to cutting up fruit for a side.

“Sometimes. Sometimes it’s a pain in the butt,” muttered Nat. “It’s all ambiguous and unhelpful, like now.”

“The Force works in mysterious ways,” intoned Steve in the manner of his master. Nat snorted derisively. “So, we spy on Pierce tonight at least. Are we safe here? Do we put you in danger by being here?”

“I’m good. I’m low on the oppositions hierarchy,” Sam told them reassuringly. “No one will even remotely expect to see you guys in my company.”

Within minutes food was served and the Jedi ate voraciously. They’d expended a lot of energy moving the stone and debris from their impromptu cover from the missile, plus the long drive back to Corinthia. There was juice to go with the meal, a sweet flavor made from local fruits as well. Once their appetite was sated, Sam led them upstairs to freshers and changes of clothes. Sam had been right, his sister had left some casual clothes behind and they fit Nat fairly well. Steve was a bit taller than Sam but they were similar in build otherwise. Steve retained his pants and Sam had
 Them washed and dried in no time at all. After a wash in the fresher and clean clothes, both Jedi felt ready for the next phase of whatever cat and mouse game they were involved in.

“We left our rental speeder at a nearby park,” Nat told Sam, who nodded.

“We’ll take my transport then. No doubt Pierce knows exactly what your driving,” Sam noted. Both Jedi nodded agreement.

Sam drove his yellow speeder out of his neighborhood. It too was a closed model, light and compact. Nat took the back while Steve sat up front with Sam. Sam maneuvered onto one of the main thoroughfares.

“Why does no one drive in the air?” asked Nat. “Everyone’s on the ground.”

“An old tradition,” shrugged Sam. He was about to say more when there was a thump on the top of the speeder’s roof. Steve felt his Force sense go haywire. That familiar sense was back, strong and nearby. “What was that?” asked Sam.

“We’re about to have company,” Steve told the other occupants. There was another thump and when Steve looked up a fist imprint was pressed down in the metal roof. ‘By the Force!’ he blasphemed. As he spoke another punch punctured the roof of the speeder. Sam yelped and slammed on his breaks, sending their rooftop occupant flying. The figure landed in a crouch on the roadway before them. He was masked and human-looking, with a mask and goggles covering his face and eyes. A leather mockup of a Jedi uniform hugged his muscular form.

“What in the Sith hells is that?” Nat asked. “Hit it, Wilson! Run him over!”

Wilson gunned the speeder’s motor but the figure merely leaped over the speeder just before it made contact. A bump behind them caused Steve and Nat to swivel in their seats. A large, armored vehicle was following them.

“So much for Pierce not knowing we’re with you!” yelled Nat in alarm. Sam cursed and began evasive maneuvers Steve had only seen in combat situations. There was more to Sam Wilson than just being politically opposed to Alex’ander Pierce.

They were rammed from behind again, causing the speeder to jolt wildly, almost out of control. Sam maintained control, however, and at Steve’s wordless direction, got them off the main street and onto a side street that was less heavily trafficked.

He pulled his lightsaber from his belt. “Can you handle yourself in a fight?” he asked Sam. “It’s gonna be a fight.”

Sam pulled a blaster out of a holster in his jacket. “Don’t worry about me. Former Corinthian military. I can handle myself in a fight.”

Steve nodded. “Let’s go.”

He and Nat, with a swish of their lightsabers and the Force, peeled the roof of the speeder like an onion, leaping out in tandem. They were on an exit ramp with the main thoroughfare above and the side street below. Nat’s yellow blade blazed like the sun to Steve’s thinking, bold and brilliant. His own saber was electric blue in color. His master had often told him it matched his eyes when he was ready to fight.

He and Nat charged their attackers at the same time. Nat’s saber locked with the red blade of the Force user while Steve’s cut through the laser rifles of the Force user’s compatriots like a knife
through warm butter. The three men stood there, blinking stupidly, before pulling crudely made lightsabers. Steve grinned wolfishly. They knew nothing about how to wield a lightsaber, he could tell just by their stances. This would be too easy.

The battle commenced. He dispatched one with a Force push over the side of the exit ramp. The next he gutted like a fish. The last one he all but toyed with for a moment before slamming him backward with a Force kick and knocking the crude lightsaber from the man’s hand. “Watch him!” he yelled to Sam, pointing at the fallen man. “I’m helping Nat!”

The fallen man sputtered, Steve heard a light crunch and as the man’s mouth foamed, he gasped out, “For the Dark Side!” before collapsing, dead, in the street.

Sam and Steve exchanged alarmed glances, each thinking the same thing. These men were willing to die rather than be taken prisoner and compromise their master. Sam leveled his blaster at the fight Nat was engaged in and Steve too turned his attention to Nat and the other Dark Side force user. The red lightsaber was better made but he sensed its flaw was the crystal. He could almost see a shimmering heatwave coming off the weapon. No doubt, considering how tightly the Jedi kept hold of all Kyber crystals on the planet Ilum, this man had a hard time getting a halfway decent crystal to construct his lightsaber. Steve watched the man duel Nat, eventually giving her a well-timed Force shove into the armored vehicle behind her.

Nat ducked a swipe that would have removed her head from her neck and Steve saw his chance to attack. Nat was a powerful saber wielder, that was not in doubt, but Steve was in the top 10% of the Order when it came to fighting with a lightsaber. As he engaged the unknown Force user, Steve was ready for a fight.

He got one. It was like his opponent knew his every move before he made it. Each used the Force against the other, blue and red clashing and sizzling with impacts. Steve flipped over a stopped speeder as civilians caught in the midst of the battle fled their vehicles. His opponent just cut through the speeder, hacking and slashing. It gave Steve a moment to recoup his internal resources and watch the man’s technique to gauge where a fault might lie that Steve could take advantage of.

His opponent didn’t seem to want to fight. Steve found that puzzling. The man fought as if on autopilot, doing everything right and instinctively but not with his heart and soul. Like a droid who wielded a lightsaber.

Through the obstacle, Steve’s opponent swung his lightsaber directly at Steve’s head. Steve blocked overhead, the two blades sizzling against each other. Steve removed one hand from his saber and gave a push with the Force to move his opponent away from him.

The cut-up vehicle was close behind the other man and he stumbled into it from the Force push. Some leaking oil caused the road to be slick and the man slid, losing his balance. He dropped his saber. Steve took immediate advantage and used the Force to pull the dropped saber to him. The other man caught it as it slipped by him.

Steve gave another Force push to keep the man off balance but missed the torso area as the man slipped again, hitting the man square in the face. The mask and goggles flew off. The man’s dark hair slid back from his face and gave Steve a good look at his opponent unobstructed.

Steve stared. It couldn’t be. He powered down his lightsaber instinctively and reached out a hand. “Bucky?” he asked in numb voice. It matched how he felt, numb from shock and surprise. It was his best friend, his lover, Bucky Barnes, long thought dead but here, alive and looking at him with blank blue eyes.

“Who the hell is Bucky?” Bucky rasped. He swished the red lightsaber at Steve to keep Steve back
and regained his footing. Once done, Bucky did a backward Force leap over the destroyed speeder and, using the Force, sped away as fast as his two legs would carry him.

Nat jogged over to Steve. “You okay? Did you see his face? Can you describe him?”

“It was Bucky, Nat,” Steve said in a near whisper.

“What?” She was taken aback.

“That was Bucky, alive, but he didn’t know me and didn’t know his own name.” Fury raced through Steve with an intensity that even had Nat taking a step back in alarm. “What the hell has Pierce done to Bucky?” he all but roared.

Sam came up. “We gotta get off the street. I think it’s time we did some investigating. Pierce obviously has resources even my friends and I don’t know about.”

Steve banked his anger. Anger led to the Dark Side and there was enough of that in play.

“Any ideas?” asked Steve, breaths evening out, though with difficulty.

“Yeah, we can guess where this red lightsaber guy is going. Let’s spy on Pierce’s house and see if we’re right.”

Steve, numb from shock, nodded and ignored Nat’s look of concern.

Steve followed Nat and Sam, trying to piece together where Bucky came from and how he was involved in Pierce’s mad plan for power. Last Bucky had been seen was as a senior padawan with his master heading for negotiations in the Gareth system. The Jedi were told that their transport had been destroyed by space pirates and all aboard killed. The Jedi had mourned and moved on.

Now Bucky was here, on Corinth, in the middle of a madman’s bid for power. It made no sense and Steve knew it wouldn’t make sense until he got answers from Pierce himself.
Dark was approaching as Steve, Nat, and Sam crept up to Pierce’s compound. There were still guards at the gate and the fence was wired to shock, but nothing in the Force told them that security had increased. Going to the location Steve and Nat had found previously, Steve and Nat used the Force to levitate Sam over the fence, the other man landing in a crouch. Nat leapt over, followed by Steve, and the three of them stealthily made their way through immaculate grounds of pale green grass and flowering shrubs to Pierce’s home.

A line of trees and shrubbery lined Pierce’s home and the three of them crouched in the foliage for cover, easily able to see into Pierce’s residence through big, open windows. Pierce, Steve reckoned, was either stupid or arrogant in allowing so much outside access to his home. Steve knew, though, that Pierce was far from stupid, so arrogance it must be.

Nothing of interest went on within the house for about half an hour. They moved from window to window to peer inside different rooms. Twice they spotted guards within the house, but none outside the house, which was puzzling. Did Pierce have that much faith in his security? Steve was puzzled. If Pierce was a Dark Force user as he and Nat suspected, then surely Pierce would know a fence would not keep a Force user out.

All was revealed twenty minutes later. Nat nudged Steve and Sam from her position between them and motioned to a figure skulking in the darkness toward the house. The figure slipped inside a darkened room and sat at a table as if the person belonged there. A few minutes later lights bloomed in the room and the trio made their way to cover to peer inside the now lit room.

Pierce stood there with three guards, each one armed to the teeth except Pierce himself. Bucky sat in a chair at the table. Steve couldn’t make out Bucky’s face, as Bucky’s back was to the window but he seemed relaxed and calm. Pierce was gesturing angrily and even slapped Bucky once when Bucky seemed to speak. Pierce waved a hand at the guards, who surrounded Bucky while Pierce left the room, only to return a moment later with the Force-sensitive artifact in hand.

“That’s the artifact I was telling you about,” Steve whispered to Nat. She nodded but didn’t reply.

Then the most horrid thing Steve had ever seen and felt in the Force happened. The orb in Pierce’s hand began to glow red, a pulsing light that was almost blinding. The Force within Steve went haywire, and he felt immersed in something like a gelatinous liquid. His mind felt sluggish and thoughts didn’t come easily to him. His link with the Force was suffused with darkness. Anger, fear and pain welled through Steve’s body and mind like a tidal wave. He gasped and almost fell over but Nat held him up.

“What is that?” hissed Nat, clutching Steve’s arm with one hand and her head with another.

“It’s bright,” Sam observed. “It looks like your friend is in pain.”

“We are too,” Steve panted. “My connection to the Force…” His words trailed off and Nat’s hand clamped spasmodically on his arm tightly, almost painfully.

“I feel the dark like when I faced my trials,” murmured Nat, her voice husky with emotion.

“I think I can feel Bucky’s pain,” gasped Steve, wanting desperately to double over from the misery racing through his body. His eyes, when not closed, were glued on the writhing form of his best friend and lover, Bucky Barnes, in the room before them.
Bucky was arching and writhing in misery. Two guards were holding Bucky up and keeping him in the chair. Belatedly, Steve realized that he and Nat were only getting the periphery of the damage the artifact was doing. Bucky was taking the full brunt of it. This was how Pierce was keeping Bucky in line. Steve could feel the insidious tendrils of Pierce’s will seeping into his own consciousness but he was able to keep it at bay, maintain control of himself but just barely.

Just as suddenly as it began, it stopped.

The waves of misery, pain and control in the Force ebbed away, leaving Steve feeling weak and wrung out. The pulsing red light ceased strobing the room. Forcing his eyes open, Steve saw Bucky slumped between the guards holding him up. Pierce was speaking, gently brushing the hair from Bucky’s face, almost tenderly and Steve tamped down the rage that went roiling through him. First Pierce tortures Bucky and then uses gentle caresses and no doubt honeyed words to ensure Bucky’s loyalty and compliance.

Nat regained her composure before Steve did. “I’ve seen and felt enough. Come on,” she said urgently. They traveled back to their point of egress, hoisted Sam back over the fence and Force jumped themselves over. Steve landed on a stagger and Sam braced him.

“What was that thing?” Sam asked them, keeping his voice low.

“I don’t know, but it sent my Force sense careening to the Dark Side,” Steve answered, regaining his balance and pulling away from Sam. “And the pain I felt from Bucky was intense. My own pain seemed to hardly register.” And that was true, Steve reflected. It wasn’t so much his own pain he’d felt from the artifact, but Bucky’s instead.

“We need to find a way to break Pierce’s hold on Bucky, get him back to the Temple and our Force healers,” Nat said as they began walking back toward their hidden, stolen speeder.

“What’s Pierce’s plan?” Steve pondered.

“Rumor is he wants complete control of the government, turn us from a democracy to a dictatorship,” Sam told them. “I think it might be time to introduce you to my compatriots against Pierce.”

“Yes,” Nat agreed, “that’s an excellent idea. We need to figure out a way to free Bucky, defeat Pierce and get our hands on that Force object in his possession. It’s dangerous and needs to be studied by the Jedi.”

Ma’ria Hill was a no-nonsense woman of around 30 standard years with a military bearing. She directed Sam and the two Jedi to a security-enclosed room with a long conference table and chairs, video screen and other electronic devices.

“Pierce,” Hill said without preamble, “is going to try a take over of the government. It’s the how we don’t know about.”

“Are there any suspicions he’s a Force user?” asked Steve, settling in a chair next to Nat. Sam and Hill sat opposite them.

Hill looked startled by the question. “The Force?” she mused. “I’ve never heard of him being particularly sensitive but he does seem to know things he shouldn’t when meeting someone for the first time. We always just chalked it up to good spies.”

“He has in his possession a dangerous, Force-sensitive artifact,” Nat told her. “We saw it in action
tonight. It’s powerful and we think only a Force user can tap into that power.”

“He’s got a lot of artifacts, collects them from all over the star system,” huffed Hill haughtily. “A lot of it he sells on the black market but the choice pieces he keeps for himself. He’ll occasionally let a unsubstantial piece be donated to a museum to generate goodwill, but it’s rare and usually only a public relations stunt.”

Steve and Nat shared a look. If Pierce had one Force-sensitive artifact, that was alarming, but what if he had more?

“I understand you were at the ancient temple when it was destroyed,” Hill commented, turning their attention from the artifact.

“Yes,” Steve felt obliged to admit.

“He’s been stating that you Jedi used the Force to demolish an ancient Corinthian site out of spite and anger.” Hill gave them a wary and inquiring look.

“More like someone fired a missile at us,” Nat told her. “We’re powerful in the Force, but not powerful enough to bring a temple down on our heads. I doubt even the venerable Master Yoda is that powerful.”

Sam interjected, “There’s no way the Jedi would have destroyed an ancient site, Ma’ria. I’ve worked with Jedi in the past. Their noble and upstanding, keepers of peace, warriors of honor. There’s no way they would just willynilly destroy a planet’s historical site out of spite.”

“Anger leads to the Dark Side,” Steve told her. “As does fear and a desire for power. I assure you, we were exploring, learning more about the place the Force-sensitive artifact was presumably found when I sense in the Force the incoming missile and we took cover. We barely escaped with our lives.”

Hill leaned back in her chair and nodded. “I had to be sure,” she told them. “Pierce is generating a lot of doubt in not only the Jedi Order but the Republic you serve. I think he means, once he’s in power, to pull Corinth out of the Galactic Republic.”

“That’s crazy!” exclaimed Sam. “Most of our economy is based off trade within the Republic. We’d be reduced as a society to paupers in less than a generation!”

Hill nodded. “But we’d be entirely dependent on anything he gives us too, which is what he wants.”

“Absolute power will corrupt absolutely. If he controls your resources he controls the planet,” Steve said, fiddling with the handle of his lightsaber hanging from his belt. “If he controls one planet, what’s to stop him from attempting a coup d’état on the other planets in this system?”

Hill and Sam were arrested by the thought and shared alarmed looks.

“We need to stop him,” Nat urged, leaning forward. “He’ll not go down without a fight, from all we’ve seen, sensed and heard about Pierce. A confrontation is the only recourse and it needs to be Steve and I to do it. If he’s Force-sensitive like we think, he’s too dangerous for the average Corinthian to take on.”

“I’ll gather men loyal to the opposition and join you then,” Hill told them, standing up. “We may not be able to take on Pierce but we can at least thin the ranks of his fanatical followers for you.” She walked to the door and paused, hand on the door knob. “We have someplace for you all to rest
and eat. We’ll strike tomorrow. I need time to send out word to our security forces on where to gather and strike.”

“We need to strike at Pierce’s heart,” Nat said decisively. “His home compound. It’s his place of power. And where he keeps his most prized possessions, such as the Force-sensitive object.”

Hill’s expression turned wry. “I suppose the Jedi will want this object once Pierce is taken care of?”

“If the Corinthian government doesn’t mind. It’s powerful and needs to be studied by those mindful of the ways of the Force,” Steve told her, standing up himself.

“What’s one more Corinthian historical artifact gone off-world?” Hill shrugged but her tone was sarcastic.

“Anything else in Pierce’s possession belongs to the people of Corinth,” Steve told her. “That artifact is dangerous in the wrong hands. It distorts the mind and causes torturous pain and agony. It has to be kept in a safe location. A museum is just not the place for it.”

Hill nodded. “Very well. The artifact is yours. I suggest one of you take on Pierce and the other gather the artifact. We’ll have a limited window to attack before his reinforcements arrive.”

Sam grunted. “If they arrive. He has them scattered thin all over the city and countryside looking for two wayward Jedi. It’ll take some of them awhile to get to his home. By then, hopefully it will be all over. The question is, what do we broadcast to the people once this is taken care of?”

Hill opened the door and said over her shoulder, “Let me worry about that. Obfuscating information is what I do, after all.”

With that she exited and they all followed her.

His room was small and cramped but had a small refresher so he could get cleaned up. There was a small window in his room and he stood by it dressed only in his undertunic and pants; boots, outer tunic, obi sash and belt were laying across the bed, ready to be donned. There was no light on in his room, which was what he wanted. He didn’t want to draw attention to the fact that the room was occupied. No light shone from the window next to his, meaning either Nat was asleep as Steve should be, or she too was standing or sitting in the darkness.

There was a light knock at his door and Steve went to open it. It was Nat. She slipped in and closed the door behind her.

“Tomorrow one of us will have to face Pierce and one will have to face Bucky,” she told him. “You know Pierce will have Bucky nearby. He’ll sense in the Force, as we do, that a reckoning is coming.”

“You could never best Bucky or I in a fight, Nat,” Steve told her frankly. “You’re good but we’re better. Even brainwashed as Bucky was, you barely held your own during the street fight. Let me worry about Bucky. I don’t think you’ll have too much to worry about with Pierce. He might have a blade, but I doubt he’s all that skilled with it.”

She nodded, as if agreeing with Steve’s statement. “How are you holding up?” she asked instead.

Steve puffed his cheeks and blew out air in frustration. “I’m trying to figure out how I could reach Bucky during a confrontation. He didn’t recognize me at all during that street fight.” He hesitated a
moment. “I don’t know if you ever picked up on it, but Bucky and I had been lovers.”

Nat seemed unfazed by the revelation. “I know,” she said simply. “That’s why I think you’re the one who can reach him, if anyone can. His master would have been ideal, with the training bond between them, but undoubtedly Bucky’s master is as dead as we thought Bucky was.”

Steve sighed sorrowfully.

“Were you bondmates?” she asked delicately.

“No, but we’d talked about perhaps petitioning the Council once we became knights to become bondmates,” admitted Steve.

“It’s a rare thing,” she murmured. “You know how the Jedi code forbids attachments.”

“I know but we Jedi are mortals all the same. Bucky and I had a saying that we appended to the code,” Steve told her, turning to face her squarely, the moon lit window behind him. “There is no emotion, there is peace,” he began to recite.

“There is no ignorance, there is knowledge,” Nat continued. “There is no passion, there is serenity.”

“There is no chaos, there is harmony,” Steve finished. “There is no death, there is the Force.” He paused. “We added “Love above all.”

Nat closed her eyes briefly and then opened them. “It’s dangerous to love,” she told him.

“It’s a stupid rule. We have feelings, Nat, we feel joy, sorrow, fear, anger, cheerfulness, pensiveness, and passion. Why should we be denied the most powerful feeling of all, love? Jedi have a great capacity for compassion. It’s one step down from love. If we loved more, though our hearts might be broken, we would be stronger and better for it, I think.”

“I don’t know, Steve,” Nat sighed. “I’m not a philosopher. I serve the Council and the Republic as I’m told. I follow the will of the Force.”

“Exactly. Where in the Force does it say we cannot feel love?” argued Steve. She looked taken aback by his statement. “The Force is everything in the universe, or so we believe. So it stands to reason that it is love too, right?”

“I suppose,” she conceded. Then she braced a hand on her forehead. “Ugh, all this roundabout thinking gives me a headache. We have a plan. You go for the artifact and track down Bucky. I’ll take Sam or this Hill woman and confront Pierce. If you get through to Bucky, get him to my shuttle. We’ll rendezvous there.”

Steve impulsively hugged his friend. “You’re a great friend, Nat. I wish us both luck tomorrow in our confrontations.”

“May the Force be with us,” Nat said, hugging him back.

“Indeed, may the Force be with us, and not with them,” Steve agreed.

Pierce’s compound had the two guards, which were easily overpowered by Hill and her security forces. Steve and Nat led the way in, encountering a few guards running from the main house. Hill’s security forces engaged throughout the grounds, allowing the Jedi to move into the building.
unopposed. It had been decided the Jedi would enter the house and Hill and her forces would maintain the security of the grounds.

Using his cursory memory of the house and what schematics Hill could provide Steve and Nat entered through the front door of the house and immediately split up with a nod to each other in silence. Steve moved down the corridor until he reached the room where he thought the artifacts and collectibles were displayed. He opened the door and slipped inside. The buzz of a lightsaber told him he was not alone as he closed the door. The telltale red glow told him it was undoubtedly Bucky.

Steve moved deeper into the room. It was not totally dark, being daylight outside, but the room’s windows were shuttered to the outside, giving it an overly shadowed atmosphere. Steve couldn’t determine where exactly Bucky was in the room but he thought at the far end, where the red light seemed strongest.

“Bucky, it’s me, Steve,” he said loudly. “Please, you’ve got to remember me.”

There was nothing but silence in response. Steve activated his own blue blade and turned to his left just time to block the red blade swinging down at him.

“Bucky, don’t you remember?” Steve pleaded as he blocked strike after strike, the lightsabers sizzling with impacts. “We were friends as initiates. You taught me how to flip using the Force and I taught you how to underhand block. We were best friends.”

Behind the red blade, Bucky’s face was impassive, blank and uncaring. Steve stretched out his Force sense, brushing his oneness with the Force against Bucky’s presence. Steve anticipated Bucky’s sense of the Force to be cold and unreceptive but instead it was hot, burning Steve through their fragile bond. Steve marveled at the fact that the bond was still there, to be honest. It had never been strong to begin with. They’d been afraid to deepen it lest their masters sense it through the training bond.

That now, after all Bucky had been through, Steve could still sense Bucky seemed miraculous to Steve.

As Steve brushed Bucky within the Force, Bucky faltered a step and then stepped back, a puzzled expression crossing his face. Steve pressed his advantage. “You’ve known me your whole life,” he begged. “Please don’t make me fight you, Bucky. You’re my everything, my love. Remember?”
Bucky’s expression hardened and he struck, knocking Steve back into a plinth holding a vase, causing the vase to rock precariously and then tumble to the floor with a crash. Steve’s boots crunches in the pottery as he side-stepped a swipe from Bucky’s saber. Deciding that words would not get through to his lost love, Steve focused on his position in the room relative to where the Force-sensitive artifact was, and keeping Bucky at bay. That and he kept brushing Bucky’s tie with the Force with his own sense of the Force, since that alone seemed to be causing Bucky disturbance.

On they fought, occasionally destroying some collectible or artifact. Steve kept his senses focused not only on Bucky and the fight with him, but also on whether or not any guards would come to assist Bucky. They were making a lot of noise. Yet no one else came, so Steve soon realized that the few guards Pierce had here must be occupied by Hill’s forces outside.

Block after block, strike after strike, Steve parried, feinted and thrust. His purpose was not to hurt Bucky whereas Bucky seemed to be ending Steve as soon as possible. That Steve was countering Bucky’s every move seemed to frustrate the lost Jedi more and more. Steve could feel Bucky’s growing impatience, fear and confusion in the Force.

Finally, Steve maneuvered them nearby the artifact he needed to confiscate. He’d been hesitant to do anything to Bucky but sensed that Bucky knew Steve was where he wanted to be and that he’d undoubtedly been ordered to protect the artifact at all costs. Bucky’s swings turned ferocious, attempting to force Steve away from the orb in its case.

Steve was tiring and he could see Bucky was as well. Bucky had gotten in a couple of swings that got past Steve’s blocks and Steve had several singed areas on his arms and one on his left side. Bucky had scorch marks all over him, though Steve had pulled his thrusts to not do too much damage.

Sensing he needed to end this and soon, Steve held out a hand and gathered the Force deep within him, sending it out in an almighty push at Bucky. It sent Bucky flying toward a glass wall, crashing through it with a cascade of sound and broken glass. Steve slammed the hilt of his saber into the
glass case housing the artifact, breaking it too. He reached within as Bucky struggled to his feet and picked up the orb one handed.

Steve felt the electricity of the Force object’s power roar through him. His head felt as if the neurons within were lit up like Tatooine at noontime. Something happened this time that he didn’t recall happening last time he held the orb. He heard voices. They rose in a chatter, hard to distinguish until finally one said clearly, *Use us to clear his mind of the Dark.*

Bucky staggered to his feet half the room away and swung his lightsaber into an offensive position. Acting purely on instinct, Steve stretched out the hand with the orb in it. Nothing happened. *Speak to him* the voice in his head told him.

“Bucky.” Steve’s voice itself seemed magnified and a blue glow emitted from the artifact. Bucky stopped in his tracks, staring at the orb in fascinated fear. “Love above all,” Steve said and a rush of light bled from the artifact and straight into Bucky’s head, causing the other man’s head to snap back with the force of the intrusion.

Steve couldn’t say, even to the Council later, what happened next. It was like he and Bucky’s minds melded together. Memories entwined and came to the fore: Bucky and Steve naked in a shower, Steve and Bucky sparring with each other both as young children and as padawans, their braids flapping behind their ears. Steve and Bucky inseparable, always together, in step and in synch when together. Side by side, as Jedi with their masters. Their masters had not known each other before taking Steve and Bucky as apprentices but had become friends by dint of their padawan learners being friends. The foursome had often sparred together, eating meals together and on two memorable occasions, went on missions together. Steve and Bucky were friends for life, their masters used to say.

If only they’d known, Steve thought, as memories flooded through his mind of he and Bucky entwined naked on a bed in sweaty lovemaking. When he was with Bucky, Steve felt whole, complete. It felt that way now.

The blue glow faded and Steve wanted to sag with relief as the pressure let off his mind. He didn’t dare for he knew now what Bucky’s reaction to this mind-meld would be. He forced his eyes to lock on Bucky’s figure and almost whooped for joy.

*Recognition* was in Bucky’s eyes. His mouth was open and whispering, “Steve?” over and over again. The red lightsaber deactivated and fell to the floor with a metallic thunk.

“Bucky? Do you remember now?” asked Steve hoarsely.

“I remember you,” Bucky took a shaky step forward and then stumbled. Steve deactivated his own saber, belted it in one practiced motion, and rushed forward to grab his friend and former lover.

*Together, forever* the voice in his head said in a fading voice. *You are bonded.*

Bonded. Steve hefted Bucky from his near collapsed position, bracing himself. The voice said they were bonded. Was that why he’d had such trouble believing Bucky dead when word came? Was that why he rarely involved himself in personal affairs because he felt he was being unfaithful to Bucky, even though he’d believed Bucky dead?

“Come on, Buck,” Steve said, sending waves of comfort over their bond in the Force. “We’ve gotta get out of here.”

Bucky gave a short nod. “Pierce,” he muttered.
“Nat will take care of Pierce,” Steve said.

“No, we got to help,” Bucky managed.

“You’re too weak, Buck,” argued Steve. “We have help outside the house. They can get us to safety, help us get offplanet once we rendezvous with Nat.”

“Pierce is more than what he seems,” panted Bucky.

A sense of foreboding stole over Steve and he finally nodded. “Okay, but can you stand and walk on your own?”

Bucky nodded again and straightened up weakly. Slowly they maneuvered through the half destroyed room and out into the corridor, Steve still clutching the artifact in one hand and desperately wanting to hold Bucky’s hand with the other.

The sounds of a fight could be heard and together they moved toward it.

The room where the fighting centered was a huge computer control room, full of holo and video screens, crays and who knew what other electronic equipment. Nat’s yellow blade lit the room, systematically destroying everything she came into contact with in between blocking parries from Pierce. Pierce wielded his own red lightsaber, also crudely constructed. Steve immediately relaxed, despite his sense of foreboding. Nat obviously had a handle on the situation.

“Need help?” he called.

“Oh, please,” Nat sniffed derisively. “He’s not even in the lower ten percent of the 9 year old initiates in training with a lightsaber.”

Steve watched Pierce with bemusement. Nat was right. He might be an evil mastermind elsewhere but with a lightsaber he was next to useless. No wonder he did all he could to keep Bucky compliant. Bucky’s skill even brainwashed more than transcended Pierce’s.

Pierce, enraged by Nat’s comment and the fact that Steve was just standing there watching with Bucky in tow, screamed at Bucky, “Fight them, you belong to me!”

Steve shifted a bit. “I figured out what the artifact is, Nat,” he told her conversationally as she casually blocked an inept blow.

“Oh?”

“Apparently beings who have gone before us in the Force either reside in it or the artifact helps you tap into them. They helped me clear Bucky’s mind. He’s back with us, no longer Pierce’s puppet.”

Nat glanced at Bucky even as she blocked another thrust, gave a nod and said, “Fine, then I can end this?”

“By all means. We haven’t got all day,” Steve told her magnanimously.

Nat did a complicated feint and twisted high above and over Pierce’s head in a Force leap. As she came down, she neatly lopped off Pierce’s sword arm. Pierce fell to the ground, screaming with pain and rage, clutching the burnt end of his arm, and his lightsaber deactivated as it fell to the debris-strewn floor.
Nat deactivated her own saber, clipped it to her belt and dusted her hands in a ‘that’s that’ motion, stepping past Pierce and over to Steve. She looked Bucky over. “Give me the artifact. You hold him up, he looks like he’s about to fall over.”

Steve handed over the orb, glad to be relieved of its havoc on his senses. Nat gave a start and a wide-eyed look at Steve. He nodded to affirm that’s what it was supposed to feel like. She gave a huff and left the room, Steve grasping Bucky’s arm and hauling him behind her.

Sam, Hill, and their men had held off any of Pierce’s security easily enough. Pierce, in his arrogance, had no anticipated a full assault by people other than the Jedi it seemed. As the Jedi exited the house, Sam jogged up to them. “All right?” he asked worriedly.

“Pierce is still alive within, missing an arm. He’ll be going into shock from its loss any moment now. If you want him to stand for any crimes, you might want to get him some help,” Steve told him.

“And the artifact?”

Nat hoisted it up. “We’ll take it to the temple. Apparently, it helped Steve bring Bucky’s mind back. We’ll take them both to the Temple on Coruscant. Bucky will no doubt need a Jedi mind healer to help him sort through everything.”

Sam gave a nod and motioned to several of the men standing around. “Pierce is inside. Arrest him. See that he gets medical attention.” The men nodded and rushed inside the house to do as they were ordered.

Sam escorted the Jedi off the premises and into an armored speeder. “I assume you want to leave immediately?”

“Pierce is taken care of, with the information you can find within in his home, no doubt his dirty dealings will come to light and clear Steve’s name,” Nat told him.

“Bucky is my highest priority now,” Steve said. Bucky had said nothing the entire time they traversed the house and now sat slumped against Steve in the speeder, staring at nothing as if lost deep within himself. “We have to get him to our healers.”

“Right,” Sam nodded and lapsed into silence the rest of the way to the hangars.

Nat and Steve’s ships both were still in their respective hangars. As Steve’s was the largest, they climbed aboard his and Nat took the controls while Steve directed Bucky to a seat and buckled him in. “What about your ship?” he asked Nat.

“Corinth is only a half day from Coruscant,” she replied while clearing them for take-off. “I can come back for it soon enough.”

Soon the Jedi plus Bucky were headed for Coruscant. Nat put in a call to the Council, asking for someone to meet them at the landing pad, healers and whoever else needed to be involved in the return of a lost Jedi.
Chapter 4

Master Yoda and Healers Peg and Jar-vis met them at the landing pad reserved for the Jedi Temple. Master Yoda was a small wizened alien of ancient age and infinite wisdom. Peg and Jar-vis were both humanoid and strong healers in the Force.

Steve helped Bucky out of the ship and brought him before Master Yoda. Bucky had come to himself during the trip to Coruscant, speaking a little, mostly murmuring memories between he and Steve. It was encouraging, Steve thought, that Bucky was remembering after so many undoubted years of being a blank slate, commanded to do darkness.

Master Yoda watched as Steve and Bucky followed Nat down the ship’s ramp, his left ear twitching occasionally. The healers rushed forward and Bucky drew away from them in fear. Yoda’s ears rose in curiosity and Steve hastened to reassure Bucky that Peg and Jar-vis wouldn’t hurt him.

“Go with him, you will,” Yoda instructed Steve. “Jedi Knight Romanov can tell Council of all that happened. Give your own version later you will.”

Steve bowed to Master Yoda, relieved that the ancient one understood, and turned to the healers. “Please lead us where you want us to go. I don’t think he’ll let me get far.”

Peg frowned a bit but motioned to Steve to bring Bucky toward a lift. Steve looked over his shoulder at Nat and Master Yoda. Nat gave him a reassuring smile and Yoda stood there with a complacent look on his face. Reassured Steve put his arm around Bucky’s shoulders and drew him close.

“I won’t let anyone hurt you, Buck, I promise on my honor as a Jedi,” he whispered to his friend.

In the Healers Ward, Jar-vis and Steve coaxed Bucky out of his clothes to look for physical injuries. He was thin and ill-fed, Jar-vis announced with a frown, and with a few bruises and scorch marks from hits from Steve’s saber during their fight, but otherwise healthy. The next part came the Force brush with Bucky’s mind.

That’s when things got intense. The healers encountered walls and shields each time they attempted to go into Bucky’s mind to assess the damage. Finally Peg, in exasperation, turned to Steve. “Can you reach into his mind? He seems to trust you.”

“What am I looking for?”

“Nothing, we’re going to piggy-back on you,” Peg told him, casting a glance at a blank-faced Bucky.

Steve hesitated and then nodded reluctantly. “I promised him no one would hurt him,” he told the healers. “I will stand by that vow.”

“We will cause no harm, we just want to see what the damage is to his mind. Then we’ll determine how to go on from there,” Peg reassured him.

Steve settled cross-legged in front of the still form of his best friend and slipped into a meditative trance. His oneness with the Force reached out instinctively for Bucky, like a flower reaching for the sun. He imagined their link to be like a tendril or thread, connecting each other. He slipped into Bucky’s mind and immediately hit a wall, durasteel and formidable.
Bucky, it’s Steve. Let me in.

Steve?

Yea, Buck, let me in. I just want to see if you’re hurt.

There was a hesitancy and then the walls came down. Dimly he heard a gasp from one of the healers but he was too busy reeling from the misery and pain washing over him from Bucky to note which healer it was.

Bucky was in immense mental anguish. Confusion and fear were front and center. It pelted Steve’s senses like a tidal wave, causing his mental self to writhe with it.

Steve? Bucky’s voice in his head was alarmed and fearful.

Oh my love Steve returned tremulously How you’ve suffered. You don’t have to suffer anymore. Let us help you, Buck. We can help the pain go away, ease the confusion, make you whole again. Please let us help you, my heart.

There was another pregnant pause before a tendril of Bucky’s Force self reached out to Steve and wrapped him up, drawing Steve deeper within Bucky’s consciousness. Deeper they went through Bucky’s vague memories of his life after his capture. Slavers. Steve felt sick. Bucky had been captured by slavers and then sold to Pierce, who had recognized a fellow Force user.

Steve still had no idea how Bucky lost his memory though he suspected the artifact had helped keep his memories of his life as a Jedi apprentice at bay. The healers, now given permission by Bucky, began to soothe and knit together the disjointed tendrils of Bucky’s memories.

Steve had no idea how long he sat there, wrapped in Bucky’s mind but once the healers indicated it was time to leave he was physically and mentally exhausted. Emotionally as well. He withdrew carefully, as not to disturb Bucky in anyway. When he opened his eyes, it was to find Peg and Jarvis all but reeling on their feet and Bucky in a deep sleep.

“How long?” Steve asked blearily.

“A couple of hours,” Peg said tiredly. “Take the bed next to him, Knight Rogers, that way you can be on hand should he wake.”

Jarvis helped Steve up, as Steve’s whole body was in a cramp from the position he’d been sitting in. Steve stretched a bit to work out the kinks and then shed his robes, outer tunic and boots. His belt and saber he set on the table between he and Bucky’s bed.

“What did you find?” Steve asked the healers fearfully.

“The damage is unusual,” confessed Jarvis. “But not unmanageable. We’ll be able to bring back a lot of his memories from before his capture. After that time, well, I’m not sure. We would have to see this artifact for ourselves to determine if that’s even something to mess with.”

Steve nodded tiredly, put his head on a pillow and fell into an instant sleep.

Bucky was still asleep when Steve awoke. He also found Master Yoda standing at Bucky’s bedside, eyes closed and apparently in deep meditation. Steve was hesitant to bother the aged master but he also wanted to know what Yoda was thinking in regards to Bucky.
Yoda solved the problem for Steve by opening his bright green eyes and turning to look at Steve. The wizened master tapped his gimmer stick on the floor once with a click and grunted.

“Master?” inquired Steve, trying to figure out what was wrong.

“Bonded with him you are,” Yoda said in an almost accusatory tone.

Steve hung his head for a moment before realizing he had nothing to be ashamed of and lifted his head high and stared the High Council member dead in the eye. “I believe so. Probably from before his capture.”

“Dangerous that is.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not. I believe it’s the will of the Force. The Force knew what was in Bucky’s future and knew that there needed to be someone to overcome the darkness he was forced to reside within,” Steve countered.

Yoda grunted again and looked at the peacefully sleeping Bucky. “Always said it is to lose one of our own so tragically. Oh Seng powerful master Jedi and his apprentice on the way to becoming a trusted Knight.”

“Yes.”

“Knight he will never be now. Once healed turn him loose upon the galaxy we must.” Yoda pronouncement was almost sorrowful.

“Surely we can find a place somewhere in the Temple for him,” protested Steve.

“If bonded to you he has become, happy would he be tending trees or younglings?” Yoda struck the floor smartly with his gimmer stick cane. “Think, Knight Rogers, if you in his place, happy with this would you be?”

Steve had to acquiesce. “No.”

“Of course not. Even Alex’ander Pierce recognized Bucky Barnes as man of action, used his physical prowess and abilities to Pierce’s advantage.” Yoda’s eyes turned glassy a moment and his next sound was a thoughtful hum. “Think, however I do, that perhaps the Jedi could find something for Bucky Barnes to keep him from the Dark Side.”

“So you think he’s redeemable?” asked Steve, half-fearfully.

“If not, bring him here you would not have done,” Yoda told him with a raised eyebrow of reproof. “Know you did that save him we could.”

Steve gave a half-smile. “I didn’t know for certain but I hope beyond all hope we could. This Force object that Pierce had, my master, it did something to him. Nat and I got the edge of it’s power in Pierce’s hands. Bucky got the full brunt of it.”

“Yes, the artifact,” mused Yoda. “Believe we do it ties to Jedi ancestors.”

Steve was startled. “Our ancestors? Then how could Pierce tap into the Dark Side with it.”

Yoda sighed heavily and marched over to a chair by Steve’s bed and hauled himself into it. “Long story it is but short version is that Jedi not always embrace only the light side of the Force. Many many years ago it was believed there could be no light without dark. It brought much discontent
among the Jedi. Thus the Sith were born, the darkness to our light. There were many wars between Jedi and Sith. Eventually Jedi won, so to speak, and Sith lost. I sense, it will not always be so, but that is neither here nor there.”

Steve absorbed this with a frown. “You think Bucky’s experience as a Jedi and then tainted by the dark brought about the ancestors of the Jedi and Sith both? But why would they help me?”

“Recognize they did, no doubt, that he was controlled and had no free will. Even to Sith free will is something,” Yoda ruminated with a shrug. “To Pierce Bucky an animal to be controlled and manipulated. No Jedi or Sith would do that to one another, I think.”

Steve looked over at Bucky and brushed his gaze over Bucky’s peaceful expression. “Can we help him, Master Yoda? Can he be saved?”

“Memories we can bring back,” Yoda said brusquely. “What he does with them I cannot say. You must guide him to make right decisions but beware, young Jedi, if he turns let him go you must, despite broken heart.”

Steve’s heart ached at the thought of Bucky’s trust turning to hate for Steve and all Steve stood for. “I know I shouldn’t, my master, but I love him.”

Yoda heaved a heavy sigh and nodded. “Know this for many years I have. Not unusual for Jedi to fall in love with each other. Mortal we are after all, despite high ideals. Let it overcome you, though, you must not. Do not let passion rule you. That way leads to jealousy, pain, heartbreak and perhaps darkness.”

“You knew?” Steve was surprised.

Yoda gave him a wry grin. “Blind I am not. Over six hundred years I have lived. No fool am I.”

Steve was abashed. “I didn’t mean to imply otherwise,” he said humbly but Yoda waved away the comment.

“Not offended was I. Love is useful thing in the course of a life,” Yoda told him. “It can heal, make one happy and continue one’s family lineage. The Force sometimes manifests on its own within a Force user. Sometimes it is passed on through blood line. Have children, however,” the wizened master said with an unrepentant grin, “you and Bucky will not be doing.”

Steve flushed at the implication. “Um, no.”

“Loved him for many years you have,” Yoda revealed. “Plain as the knot on my stick.” He waved the stick in Steve’s general direction. “Worried your master was when Bucky died so distraught with grief were you.”

“Is that what tipped you off that we might have bonded?” wondered Steve out loud.

“Realized long before that,” Yoda told him gravely, “before you became padawans. Always something about Steve and Bucky there was, a link between you. Worried I was that one of you not chosen by a master and separated you would become. Worried for nothing until Oh Seng and Bucky were thought killed.”

Steve nodded. “What is the Council’s stance on Bucky?” he asked the question he’d been pondering for some time now.

“See we will what the healers say,” Yoda told him. Yoda looked over at Bucky’s sleeping figure.
“Believe I do, though, that saved he can be. Perhaps never Jedi but force for good he will become, despite brush with the dark side.”

Steve relaxed. He understood what Yoda was saying, that Yoda would side with Steve and Bucky when Bucky came before the Council. Yoda would see that Bucky received the best of care and a chance at a new life, hopefully with Steve even if Bucky couldn’t be a Jedi. That rankled that Bucky would never be a Jedi, especially as Bucky had shown such promise, but Steve understood the reasoning behind it. He was too old now to be taken as an apprentice to a new master and with his experience with the dark side, no master would take him anyway, likely. They would rehabilitate Bucky and put him in the way of the Supreme Chancellor for missions that Jedi could not, by their honor, be bound to take. The darkness had brushed Bucky, even against Bucky’s will. There was no coming away from that unscathed.

“Understand you do,” Yoda said with an approving nod. “Good.” With that the wizened master climbed from his chair and slowly exited the room. Just before he cleared the door, he said over his shoulder, “Tomorrow morning after breaking fast you will report to the Council all that happened to you on Corinth, Knight Rogers.”

“Yes, my master,” Steve agreed and settled down to stare at Bucky and hopefully get some more sleep.

Bucky was still in a deep healing sleep when Steve left for the High Council chambers to report on his experiences on Corinth. The report was long with many questions thrown at him, questioning his actions and reactions. He was a little irritated at the end of the briefing but no disciplinary action was taken against him for his actions. He’d not broken the Code, after all. The matter of Bucky’s reappearance was of some consternation to some on the High Council, however, and Steve found himself defending Bucky as a victim instead of a willingly fallen Jedi. It was only the report from those studying the artifact, as presented by Master Yoda, that gave Steve any hope that the Council would give Bucky any courtesy as a former Jedi.

He ran into Nat on the way back to the healers’ ward and she walked with him. “How fares Bucky?” she asked solicitously.

“Tired and hungry. We managed to wake him from the exertions of healing the damaged pathways in his mind to get him to eat a little bit late last night,” Steve told her tiredly.

She nodded. “The healers will have their work cut out for them healing him. And you.”

Steve blinked in surprise. “Why me?”

Nat gave a derisive sniff. “You two are all but pair bonded. You never really believed Bucky was dead, Steve, even after all these years. Yoda’s questions about the artifact and how you described your reactions to it comparing it to how you thought it affected Bucky told me that as well. You said you felt Bucky’s pain. I felt pain but not someone else’s. Thus pair bonded.”

Steve smiled. “Master Yoda is not happy, but he accepts it,” he confessed.

“Of course he does. It’s a done deal,” Nat told him, halting before the door of the room that Bucky was in. “Do what you need to do to heal Bucky. I’m willing to fall on the Council’s saber for questions about everything that happened on Corinth. You’ve given your preliminary report. They got further questions, they can ask me. I’ll set them straight.”

Steve impulsively gave her a hug. “Thanks, Nat.”
She returned the hug and then waved him imperiously into Bucky’s room.

Steve entered into chaos. Two healers were attempting to hold Bucky down as he thrashed, fear evident in every line of his face and body.

“Bucky!” Steve cried, rushing forward to help.

“Steve!” gasped Bucky, straining against the healers’ iron grips. “They want in my mind. No more!”

Steve shoved one of the healers away from Bucky and pulled Bucky from the grip of the other one, hugging his friends close. “They are trying to help, Buck,” he soothed. “But I won’t let them do anything unless I’m with you. Love above all.”

The words soothed Bucky almost instantly. “This is highly irregular,” protested the first healer Steve had pulled away from Bucky.

“Where’s Healers Peg and Jar-vis?” demanded Steve.

“We can handle one dark force user,” responded the other healer.

"He’s a lost Jedi Padawan and you’ll do well to show him some respect. He’s a victim, not a Sith!” Steve retorted, easing Bucky down on the bed. “Healers Peg or Jar-vis or no one else touches Bucky’s body or mind."

The two healers exchanged a look and looked ready to be more physically forceful. “Or I go straight to Master Yoda and say you are mistreating a lost Jedi brought back to us by the Force. See what he has to say about that,” threatened Steve.

Bucky shifted minutely in Steve’s grip at the mention of Master Yoda. The two healers looked at each other again and the second one shrugged. “Fine, whatever, but he has the taint of the Dark Side to him. He’s lost. He needs to be wiped of his Force ability and sent out to make his way in the world.”

“What kind of healers are you?” demanded Steve scornfully. “You have no compassion. You are obviously bitter at your lot in life and ashamed of your position if that’s how you see the injured who come into your care.”

Neither responded to Steve’s words but they left the room, the last one shooting Steve an almost hateful look. Steve thought they had both been unchosen initiates who chose to stay as healers rather than serving the Agricorps or Diplomatic Corps for the Galactic Republic.

"Steve,” gasped Bucky, clutching Steve’s arm and burying his face in Steve’s shoulder. “Please don’t leave me.”

“Oh, Bucky, I had to report to the Council, but I promise I won’t leave you unless I have to.”

The door opened and Healer Peg hustled in. “What’s this about Bucky not allowing treatment?” she asked.

“They were treating him as if he were a Sith Lord,” Steve told her, allowing the anger he’d felt at the other two healers’ callousness heat his words.

Peg looked taken aback and then she sighed. “I was afraid of that. I’ve had my doubts about them being in the Healer Corps but Jar-vis was sure they could handle this.”
“I don’t want them anywhere near Bucky in the future,” Steve told her. “If you or Jar-vis cannot attend to Bucky, I want his room off-limits to all but myself, Master Yoda and Knight Romanov.”

Peg looked taken aback at the demand but after a brief hesitation she nodded acquiescence. “Very well.” She walked over to the pad by the entrance and keyed in some information. “Only the five of us will be allowed in this room.”

Bucky relaxed infinitesimally. Steve put his arms around Bucky’s shoulders and rubbed his arms comfortingly.

Peg turned back to them. “Bucky, do you understand that your mind has been damaged? We are trying to remap your neural pathways so that you’ll have your memories back and regain your former sense of the Force.” Her voice was calm and soothing.

Bucky looked up at Steve and then glanced at the healer before nodding once. “Yes,” he said in a low tone. “They didn’t want to help me. They only wanted to punish me for having been touched by the Dark Side,” he told her frankly in a near whisper.

She walked over and ran a hand through his long brown hair. “No one will hurt you here. Steve and I won’t let them. I heal, not hurt.”

Bucky gave another short nod and then buried his face in Steve’s shoulder. Steve continued to rub Bucky’s arms soothingly.

“I need you to lay down, Bucky, so that Steve and I can continue healing your mind,” Healer Peg said in a firm, but gentle tone.

Bucky reluctantly let Steve go and Steve helped him lay down into a comfortable position on the infirmary bed. Peg brought over a chair for Steve to sit in next to the bed. Steve clasped he and Bucky’s hands together.

This time, Bucky’s memories were more readily accessible. The sleep he’d had, probably the first restful sleep he’d hand in years, along with the previous mapping session allowed for the memories to come easier to him.

They seemed to be childhood memories for the most part, reminding Steve of scrapes he and Bucky had gotten into as young initiates and slight older padawan learners. Classes taken, pranks played on each other and their masters were revealed. Everything was easy going and benign so Steve was unprepared for the descent into the dark.

A memory of Steve and Bucky eating at the Temple mess hall with a group of their friends, talking about nothing important whatsoever, dissolved into flames, a rush of heat hitting Steve’s face in Bucky’s dreamscape.

Twisted metal, melted into slag with holes gaping in a ship’s bulkhead, the shimmer of emergency shields activated the only thing between people running through the corridor, screaming and shoving each other, and the vacuum of space. Despite the heat of the flames and heated metal there was a coldness seeping in from the holes to space outside the ship.

A lightsaber flashed in Steve’s peripheral view and he turned to see Master Oh Seng blocking blaster shots. The tall Togruta Jedi, with blue and white head tails, was turning to shout something at someone over her right shoulder. Steve followed her line of sight and started.

Bucky was also blocking blaster fire. Both Jedi were attempting to defend the civilians milling around them, blaster fire coming at them from beyond the flames and smoke. Steve turned just in
time to see a blaster shot hit Oh Seng right in the head, heard Bucky’s howl of rage, fear and sorrow. The civilians panicked at the loss of the Jedi master and stampeded through the corridor, flowing around and buffeting Bucky. Bucky found the strength to reach his master’s side but shadowy figures latched onto him, dragging him kicking and screaming away. His lightsaber lay next to his master’s, gleaming in the flickering light of the flames around them.

No doubt, Steve thought as he and Peg withdrew from Bucky’s mind, the pain at the sudden loss of the training bond had made both mind and body numb. Otherwise, Bucky would never have let his lightsaber fall from his hand.

“By the Force,” breathed Healer Peg. He sensed her send a wave of reassurance and sleepfulness to Bucky to keep him under.

"Well, now we know that his master is indeed dead and not a slave on some world somewhere as well,” Steve said sadly.

“I suppose. Her death was clean,” Peg replied. “That was a kill shot.”

“Yes.”

"Now I have a starting place for treatment,” Peg told him. “We deal with the guilt he undoubtedly feels that his master is dead and he lives. There is no doubt guilt about being used by the Dark Side, despite it being against his will.”

Steve placed a hand on the top of Bucky’s head gingerly. “But he can be healed?” he asked desperately.

Peg gave him a bright, if tired, smile. “Of that I have no doubt. I’ve been studying the artifact you brought back from Corinth. It’s geared to manipulate the Force. If it’s what I think it is, I might be able to use it to help instead of harm him, much like you did when you brought his free will back to him.”

Steve was hesitant to use the artifact on Bucky when it had caused Bucky so much harm in the past. He would discuss the situation with Master Yoda first, before he allowed either Healer Peg or Jar-vis to even bring it up to the vulnerable man.

Peg left them alone and Steve curled up on the second bed. Exhaustion pulled him into a restless sleep and when he woke a couple hours later Bucky was sitting up and staring at him with a perplexed look on his face.

“Hey Buck,” greeted Steve, rubbing a hand down his face sleepily.

“You saved me,” Bucky stated matter-of-factly.

"Of course I did,” Steve told him.

“Why?”

Here Steve hesitated. How much did he confess? He decided on the truth. “Because I still love you,” he told the other man. “I never stopped, even when people convinced me you were dead. I guess something in myself and within the Force told me that it wasn’t true. I was surprised to see you on Corinth but relieved as well. My long-held hope wasn’t misplaced.”

Bucky continued to stare at him, his expression intent as if Steve were a puzzle Bucky was determined to solve. “You love me, you didn’t believe me dead, not really, so you decided to save
me even though I served the Dark Side.”

“I knew that wasn’t you,” Steve explained. “You didn’t know your own name. I could tell you weren’t participating with your whole soul. You were an automaton, with less life than a droid. Someone else was pulling your strings, as if you were a puppet. I couldn’t give up you. That was never an option.”

Bucky looked away, as if Steve’s naked emotion was disconcerting. “I see.”

"Do you?"

Bucky shrugged half-heartedly. “I think so, but, it was stupid.”

Steve gave a deprecating smile. “One of my flaws, I’m stubborn. Used to give you indigestion and my master heart attacks, my stubbornness.”

“My master – “

“Would be proud that you survived and are getting a second chance,” Steve said firmly.

“She’s dead because I failed.”

“No. I saw your memory. She was distracted in her concern for you. She died from that distraction. A mistake, a deadly one yes, but nothing that you did.”

Bucky sighed. “She was telling me to get the civilians through the flames and the attackers. There were fewer attackers on my side than on hers.”

Steve could see the scenario in his mind’s eye. “Her orders were sound. It was the will of the Force that she fell.”

"I can’t believe an all benevolent Force would allow me to suffer in darkness for years for nothing,” spat Bucky, showing the first sign of any emotion besides fear since they’d arrived on Coruscant.

"The Force is not a god or omnipotent being, Buck, you know that. It’s not Fate or a sentient being playing us like puppets.” Steve searched for the words to describe the Force.

“‘The Force,’ came Master Yoda’s voice from the doorway, “is the universe. It is. There is nothing but the will of the Force. Suffered you did for a reason yet to be discerned, Bucky Barnes.”

Steve started to scramble to his feet, but Yoda waved away his movement. “Rest you must get. Stand on ceremony with me you will not.”

“So, what was the purpose of my being tortured and manipulated by the Dark Side,” Bucky asked belligerently.

Yoda hefted himself into the empty chair still sitting by Bucky’s bed and between the two beds. “Not certain am I, but a glimpse of your future I have seen in my meditations. A Jedi you cannot be,” he added regretfully, “but of great assistance to the Republic you still can be.”

“All I ever wanted to be was a Jedi Knight,” Bucky told Yoda angrily. “Now that’s stolen from me by nothing I did, if you and Steve are to be believed. So, what, I become an assassin and spy, doing the dirty work for the Republic that Jedi are too honorable to do?”

“Yes.”
Yoda’s blatant agreement stunned both Steve and Bucky silent.

Steve found his voice first. “What?”

"Many failed Jedi initiates become more than what a Jedi is honor bound to offer the Republic. Powerful in the Force they still are, that cannot be taken away,” Yoda told them, wiggling on the chair to get more comfortable, not looking at either human male.

“What about the fact that Bucky and I are all but bondmates?” protested Steve, sitting up completely on the bed and swinging his feet to the floor.

Yoda’s smile turned sly. “Steve will be Bucky’s cover, yes he will. Everyone will be concentrating on the Jedi, they will never see the assassin or spy coming.”

Both men blinked.

“That’s…” Steve had no words.

“Diabolical and un-Jedi like,” Bucky finished for him.

Yoda shrugged. “The universe a dark and dangerous place. Something tells me that within my long lifetime it will become more so. Perhaps time is at hand that Jedi become a bit more tarnished.”

"Does the Council know of this?” demanded Steve incredulously. He couldn’t believe the High Council would sanction this. It was, if not outright breaking the Code, definitely a gray area.

“Ten thousand knights, masters and padawans have the Council to wrangle. Easy for one Jedi and one former Jedi to fall through the cracks or conveniently take care of assignments for Knight Rogers I do.” Yoda waved aside the concern as if it were irrelevant.

Steve and Bucky exchanged a look and Bucky seemed to shrug. “No offense but I don’t think I could be a Jedi again anyway even if it were offered to me,” he confessed.

“Unorthodox Knight Rogers has always been, even as an apprentice. Bonded you are all but are. Take care of finishing the bonding we can this afternoon. Help with Bucky’s recovery it will. No need for the use of artifact, which needs to be studied more first, despite Healer Peg’s enthusiasm.” Yoda’s eyes slid almost completely closed. It was a signal he anticipated eventual capitulation and was willing to wait out whoever needed to come to the same conclusion he had.

"Buck?” asked Steve hesitantly.

“Love above all?” Bucky answered with a question of his own.

“Let’s do it, then,” Steve told Master Yoda and Bucky both.

Yoda made sure they would be uninterrupted as he said the process would take some time. Then he settled the three of them on the floor, Steve and Bucky facing each other with Yoda sitting off to the side but between them.

“Guide you I will,” he said.

"Have you done this before?” asked Steve with a flutter in his stomach.

“Three times have I helped Jedi bond to one another. Unusual it is and usually only with Council permission,” Yoda replied. He seemed unconcerned that they were doing this without the Council
even knowing about it, let alone having given permission. Steve figured Yoda was going off the old adage that it was better to ask forgiveness than wait for permission.

“Relax you will, focus on your feelings for each other you will,” instructed Yoda. “Close eyes,” he added with an admonishing tone when they just stared at him.

Steve obeyed and closed his eyes, reaching out in the Force for Bucky as well as for his feelings for Bucky. He thought of the first time he noticed Bucky as a sexual being: how flushed his body became when Bucky was nearby, how Steve thought of nothing but Bucky even when they weren’t together. His hands had longed to touch and caress Bucky’s body.

He then turned his thoughts to what it had been like when he and Bucky started their relationship: the weak knees, the heart pounding excitement every time they met in secret, the electricity that raced through his body when they touched, how he knew this was more than simple lust but actual love. He’s always assumed one or both of them would grow out of the infatuation but they hadn’t. Instead it had strengthened their friendship, making them even more astute about the other. It wasn’t until Bucky’s eighteenth birthday that they’d realized the feelings between them were forming into a bond. It had frightened them at first but Steve reasoned quickly that there was nothing shameful in what they were feeling.

Now Yoda was confirming that, unusual though it was, some Jedi were bonded and helpmates no matter what path the Force and life took them. Steve felt justified in their surreptitious act. He reached out with all his senses and brushed his Force sense with Bucky’s.

He was startled by the calmness and sense that Bucky would rather be nowhere in the universe but here at this moment. It went a long way to reassuring Steve that they weren’t pushing Bucky into something he didn’t feel comfortable doing.

“Relax,” came Master Yoda’s gravelly voice. “Let the Force reach out from one another and connect. See it in your mind’s eye, you should. Colors of rainbow or perhaps a tendril or string.”

Steve focused and saw the Force similar to how he did when he connected with Bucky with one of the healers. It was a sonic wave, rippling like grain in the wind. He allowed that wave to draw him toward Bucky’s Force sense, allowing himself to mix with Bucky’s essence, two beings in the Force connecting willingly and through love.

It was a gentle sensation, like floating in still, warm water. Steve wanted to sink into the sensation and decided why not? He relaxed his mind further, ceasing thinking so much about what was happening and let the Force guide him.

Like an aurora the ‘sky’ around them lit in an array colors, weaving in and out between another. Steve was shocked to find his feet on solid ground of a sudden and looked around. He was in open tundra with sky awash in color above him. Trees and mountains graced the horizon. Bucky stood before him, watching him with those deep blue eyes and a small smirk of a smile on his lips. He looked like he had as a padawan learner, braid with the marker designations of the accomplishments, both academic and practical, gracing the braid in the form of beads.

Steve looked down, saw he wore his apprentice tunics as well. A hand reaching up behind his ear told him that his braid, blond in color, was draping down to his shoulder, similarly adorned. He looked up and saw Bucky shrug.

“I thought how we last saw each other was more appropriate than us now for this. Back when neither of us was damaged,” Bucky explained.
“I suppose,” conceded Steve.

“I can’t hear Master Yoda anymore,” Bucky told him. “I don’t know what we’re supposed to do next.”

Steve lurched forward and sealed their lips together. Once the kiss was broken, he stepped back. “Maybe not make love but I think we’re connecting okay,” he told his love huskily.

Bucky gave a joyful laugh, his old laugh before tragedy struck. A buoyant sensation lifted Steve from the mental doldrums he was mired in and inspired him to reach out for Bucky’s hand. He lifted the long fingers to his lips and kissed them.

“Yoda seems to have seen our future and has it all planned out for us,” Bucky commented, placing both hands on the sides of Steve’s face. “Do we let the old troll tell us what to do or follow the Force?”

“Oh, I think Yoda is following the Force. If he’s guiding us to become bondmates without the knowledge of the High Council then he’s not giving a damn about the Code and the rules and following the will of the Force.”

“I can feel you in my soul,” whispered Bucky, moving slowly to envelope Steve in his arms. Steve put his head down on Bucky’s shoulder, feeling the same awe. He could feel Bucky’s emotions and, in a way, hear his thoughts, though it was transposed by this dreamscape at the moment, melded together like they were.

“Me too,” confessed Steve. “When we first thought we were developing a bond, I read everything I could find on the subject. They are deeper than the training bond between master and apprentice. Some masters and apprentices can communicate through emotions and sometimes telepathy but bondmates almost always can. And distance doesn’t matter. One bondmate could be on the other side of the galaxy and the other would know when they are in trouble.”

“Neat.”

“There are cases where one bondmate can tell the exact location of the other, like trailing a scent through the Force.”

“That will come in handy for whatever missions Yoda has in mind for us,” Bucky commented, gripping Steve tight and dragging them to the ground as if his legs no longer held them both up.

The aurora above them shone brighter and brighter. Steve tried to look up at it, but it was like looking at twin suns, burning his retinas and forcing him to look away. The colors were so intense that the two men seemed surrounded by a rainbow.

Steve buried his face in Bucky’s shoulder but even then the light wormed it’s way in. “Too bright,” he muttered, lifting his face from Bucky’s shoulder and squinting at his love. Bucky’s eyes were tightly closed. “What do you think it means?”

“I think it’s supposed to burn us up and make us new,” murmured Bucky. “Can’t you feel it singing?”

It was like singing in a way, Steve realized. A buzzing sensation tingling throughout his body, a melody that did not repeat but continued in a flowing manner. He lost himself in the consciousness around him, that was both he and Bucky as one. They seemed merging. He could hear Bucky’s real thoughts of wishing he could go back and save his master from her horrible end and his own abusive future. He was immersed in the tightness of Bucky’s chest, the dropping sensation in his
belly, his throat squeezing shut. He at first couldn’t identify the emotion and realized it was Bucky humbled by what was happening to them.

Steve send a wave of reassurance along the strengthening bond, despite his own nervousness. He trusted Master Yoda, knew the old Jedi would not steer them wrong. He believed in the Force and above all, he loved Bucky. Nothing else in this moment mattered more than Bucky.

The array of colors grew so bright they bled to white and Steve was burning like a candle wick. He wanted to scream, he wanted to run from the intensity as it was overwhelming but he couldn’t move. But as intense and painful though it was he relished it. It meant he was becoming a new being, he was uniting with his other half. For Bucky, for himself, he could withstand this pain.

It took him awhile to realize the light was fading as was his awareness of himself as an individual. He was Bucky and Bucky was Steve. They were joined irrevocably now. There was no turning back.

Okay, Buck?

Yeah. This is weird. I feel weird.

I feel whole.

There was laughter through the mental bond. It’s amazing.

“Open your eyes, you will, face me as bondmates,” commanded a voice Steve vaguely recalled belonging to Master Yoda. He was awash in the elation, humility, fear and wonder that Bucky was feeling.

He reluctantly opened his eyes and found himself staring into Bucky’s grey-blue eyes.

“Look at me both of you will.” They turned as one to look at the small wizened green Jedi master, who grunted in satisfaction. “Bonded quickly you did. Fastest I have ever seen. Strong bond. Sense it I can in the Force.”

“Is that bad?” asked Steve nervously.

Yoda shook his head and got to his feet. “No, indeed. Rest. Be one with each other and the Force. Give Steve several rotations to help Bucky heal. Be given larger quarters at the Temple you will so that room for both of you there shall be. Time you will need to explore this bond before first mission you go on.”

Steve bit his lip and eyed Bucky. Bucky was watching Yoda stand.

"That’s it?” Bucky asked bluntly.

“More you expected?” asked Yoda with a mischievous glint in his green eyes.

Bucky didn’t respond but shrugged.

“Explore you will. Learn the extent of your bond over these next few weeks. Train. Allow you a lightsaber I will.” Yoda wagged a finger. “Red it will not be.”

Bucky shook his head emphatically. “But will I be allowed on Ilum to get a new crystal to construct a new saber?”

Yoda considered a moment. “Many fallen or deceased Jedi are there. A lightsaber of their’s you
can use until construct a new one you may. Transport with new initiates to Ilum there will be in one rotation. Go then you will, as if a new initiate.” At Bucky’s grimace, Yoda added complacently, “Not only adult you will be. Other Jedi seek new blades to align with new talents. Be with them you will.”

That was more acceptable to Bucky for he nodded and gave a sitting half bow to the ancient Jedi master. “Thank you, my master, for your assistance with our bonding.”

Steve copied the gesture. “Is there anything we should know? Should we hide the bond?”

Yoda huffed a laugh as he made his slow way to the door. “Hide it you cannot. All in tune with the Force will know the moment they meet you. Worry about the Council you will not. Handle them I will.”

That sounded ominous to Steve so he let the matter drop.

*Okay, Buck?*

*I’m tired. Let’s get back in bed and rest.*

*Yes, let’s.*

The two Jedi watched as Yoda exited the room, then stood up on shaky legs, fighting lightheadedness and queasy stomachs, to make their way to Bucky’s bed. Both clambered on it and Steve wrapped Bucky in his arms, despite the tight fit.

*It feels right talking to you like this,* Steve said in their mind link.

*Yeah. Gonna come in real handy when I mentally heckle Master Gomm.* Master Gomm was a stickler for the rules and was the bane of the Jedi who more loosely interpreted the Code, like Steve.

*Once you’re physically released from the infirmary we should start testing distances on this link,* Steve thought.

*Our lightsaber battles will be interesting as well, especially if we can anticipate each other’s moves.*

Steve hadn’t thought of that. *Perhaps we should find knights and masters to fight against, test the bond that way. Plenty of Jedi off duty at the temple looking for sparring partners.*

*And lots willing to see how well a bond works,* added Bucky with both a physical and mental yawn.

*Sleep, my love, and then we’ll see what the future has in store for us,* Steve told his bondmate. He knew the moment Bucky drifted into an easy slumber.

Yoda had unknowingly, or perhaps knowingly, affirmed he and Bucky’s own code of the Jedi:

*There is no emotion, there is peace.*

*There is no ignorance, there is knowledge.*

*There is no passion, there is serenity.*

*There is no chaos, there is harmony.*
There is no death, there is the Force.

Love Above All

Content that his future with Bucky was bright and clear, Steve too drifted off into slumber. There was only the Force and the Force was with them.

~fin~

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