

Obi-Wan receives a gift intended for his master.

Inheritance



Written by Qwae29

I neither own these characters or the literary universe in which they live, though there are a few new faces and places that are of my own design. I neither make nor intend to make any profit off of this writing, but indeed I expect die poor, clutching a legal pad and pen to my chest, a half-written chapter scribbled on the fading yellow page.

~INHERITANCE~

Chapter 1: Presents from the Past

“I never thought I’d be here again.”

“You came here with Master Qui-Gon?”

“Yes, when I was thirteen. We came to finally bring Master Qui-Gon’s rogue padawan, Xanatos, to justice,” Obi-Wan says with a heavy sigh. “That seems like a lifetime ago.”

Obi-Wan and Anakin exit their small shuttle and walk casually down the ramp, surveying their surroundings. They had landed in the main spaceport in the capital city of Thani on Telos IV. Two days ago, Obi-Wan had received a message from a minor official on Telos IV. Apparently while remodeling a wing of the palace the workers had come across something they believed the Jedi would find of interest. The Council had allowed Obi-Wan to go investigate and Anakin, of course, had insisted on accompanying him.

“You think this has something to do with Xanatos?” Anakin asks as the two wait in the large hanger for their contact to arrive. Obi-Wan watches as a trio of maintenance workers refuel a nearby transport, his hand slowly rubbing his beard.

“I’m not sure, but I don’t think it is a coincidence.”

“It is the planet where he was born.”

“And where he died,” Obi-Wan adds his voice tinged with regret and something else... something Anakin cannot quite name. Anakin knows that Xanatos took his own life rather than allow himself to be captured by his former master, Qui-Gon Jin. Anakin also knows that he was connected to one of Obi-Wan’s most painful regrets—the death of his age mate Bruck Chun. Bruck was Xanatos’s dark apprentice, but he fell to his death during a battle at the Jedi Temple. Obi-Wan had tried to save him, but in the end he was unable to do anything. It was not something Obi-Wan liked to talk about and Anakin knew better than to press for details, but at that moment he wished he knew more about Obi-Wan’s history with Xanatos. Before Anakin can ask anything further he sees a group of Telosians approach them. The lead one is dressed in long flowing robes trimmed with intricate designs. His white hair is slicked back against his head and his stride carries a graceful yet business-like efficiency.

“That is the official that contacted the Temple,” Obi-Wan whispers. “Tayn Arah.”

“And that must be whatever they found,” Anakin replies as he gives a nod toward the two fingers trailing behind the Arah. Between them they carry a fairly large, square case.

“Ah, Master Jedi. It is good of you to come,” Arah smiles as he steps before the Jedi and bows deeply. Obi-Wan and Anakin politely return his bow.

“It is our pleasure,” Obi-Wan starts. “I am Obi-Wan Kenobi and this is Anakin Skywalker. The Jedi Order is pleased to answer your call, but your message was awfully mysterious. Curiosity alone would have likely guaranteed our arrival.” Obi-Wan’s humor appears to have been lost on the Telosian who frowns.

“Yes,” he says his gaze briefly drifting to the floor. “I apologize for that, but... given... certain events... I felt discretion was appropriate.”

“Well, we’re here now. What did you find?” Anakin asks roughly. Obi-Wan throws a subtle glare at him, a silent chide of Anakin’s impatience. Anakin pretends not to notice. Arah snaps his fingers and his two servants carefully place the case they had been carrying before the Jedi. The two Jedi study the case in silence. After several moments, Obi-Wan kneels down and examines the case more closely. Though he never touches it, he subjects the dark box to intense scrutiny. Finally, he looks up at Arah.

“What is it?”

“We do not know,” Arah answers as he shakes his head. “But with it we found this,” he says as he places a small holo-recorder on top of the box. He activates it and immediately a small, blue hologram of a dark-haired young man appears. On his cheek he bears a scar, on his lips he wears a sinister smile. Anakin notices a tiny shudder pass through Obi-Wan’s kneeling figure.

“Hello, Master. It’s always such a pleasure to see you again,” the holo-message begins. Even though it is pre-recorded, Xanatos delivers his message as if it were live. “I hope you have been thinking of me because I know I have been thinking of you... In fact, I wish to thank you! Because of you I have found clarity and purpose and I wish to thank you for these gifts you have bestowed on me by offering you a gift of my own. Please accept my humble offering, Master Qui-Gon. It is from my heart to yours,” Xanatos says. Obi-Wan cannot help but think how sincere the young man looks, but he also knows how deceptively charming Xanatos could be and how dangerous that had made him. “It is not much, but it is everything you deserve,” he ends with a toothy grin that makes Anakin’s skin crawl. The recording completes and the image vanishes. Obi-Wan is silent for a few moments as he rises to feet.

“Yes, you were right to bring this to our attention,” he says still staring at the space where the image of Xanatos had been. He looks at Arah and nods. “We will be taking this back with us immediately.”

“Yes, yes of course, Master Jedi,” Arah nods energetically. Obi-Wan smiles and bows before the Telosian.

“Thank you for your help,” he says as a dismissal. The Telosian official understands that their business is concluded and politely nods before he and his servants make a hasty departure. Anakin crosses his arms over his chest.

“Is it just me or did they seem to be in an awful hurry to get rid of this thing?”

“Xanatos and his father did a lot of damage to this world. I’m sure discovering this reminder would be disconcerting to the Telosians,” Obi-Wan answers, his focus back on the dark case. “Well, I suppose we should get this onto the ship. We have a schedule to keep.”

Anakin opens his mouth to say something, but the sight of one of the Telosian maintenance workers under the shuttle’s starboard wing catches his attention.

“Hey, what are you doing?” he asks. The worker jumps at the suddenness of the Jedi’s yell. He is small framed and meek looking. His orange jumpsuit hangs loosely around his body. It seems a size or two too large. His long brown hair is tied behind his neck and his eyes are wide and staring as Anakin slowly makes his way to him.

“I was just cch...checking to see if you needed refueling... Mmm.... Master Jedi,” the worker stutters. “Please, I meant no disrespect...”

Obi-Wan subtly grabs Anakin’s arm as he moves past him and stops the Jedi’s advance.

“Thank you, but we have what we need,” Obi-Wan smiles at the worker. Happy to have not offended the Jedi and to not be cut into tiny bits by their laser swords, the worker visibly relaxes. He nods at Obi-Wan and runs quickly away from the pair of peacemakers before they change their mind.

“What was that for?” Anakin snaps once the worker was out of sight. Obi-Wan releases Anakin’s arm.

“Couldn’t you sense his fear? He was terrified of us.”

“All the more reason to find out what he was doing,” Anakin replies in huff. Obi-Wan simply sighs as Anakin walks under the wing to inspect for any damage. After several minutes of checking, he walks back to Obi-Wan.

“Well?”

“It appears to be fine,” Anakin grumbles. Obi-Wan knows better than to push the matter. Instead, he simply nods and turns back to the box. Wordlessly, both Jedi move to either side of the case and together they carry it into their craft leaving it in the small compartment directly behind the cockpit. Once inside, Obi-Wan secures the ramp as Anakin prepares to depart. Within minutes the shuttle is leaving the atmosphere and Telos IV is becoming an increasing smaller orb behind them.

“We should be right on time to rendezvous with Master Windu on the Resolute,” Obi-Wan says as he sits down in the co-pilot’s chair. Anakin is already inputting the coordinates into the navi computer. Soon, the ship lurches forward and the pair are sailing through hyperspace. With the system safely on autopilot, Anakin turns to his former master his eyebrows raised in expectation.

“Well?”

“Well, what, Anakin?”

“Aren’t you going to open it?” Anakin asks. Obi-Wan turns to him, a look of disbelief playing across his expression.

“I most certainly am not!”

“Why not?”

“Anakin,” Obi-Wan begins. He can feel the headache that usually comes when he has to explain the painfully obvious to Anakin beginning to form behind his eyes. “We have no idea what could be in there. It’s not safe to simply open it and take a peek.”

“Well,” Anakin started, “we could take a peek before we open it. We can use the ship’s scanners to see if it is anything dangerous.”

“Of course it’s something dangerous. It’s from Xanatos. Besides,” Obi-Wan continues, “the cruiser has better scanning equipment.”

“And it has a ship full of clones that we could be endangering,” Anakin counters. “If you think about it, it’s actually safer if we open it before we reach the cruiser.”

Obi-Wan turns away from his former padawan and closes his eyes. He takes in several deep breaths as he tries to think through the situation calmly, rationally. Obi-Wan knows he is right. The wisest course of action is to wait until they are aboard the Resolute and to use its superior resources to thoroughly check the box before attempting to open it. And yet, Anakin did have a point. If the box is truly dangerous, as Obi-Wan firmly believes it to be, opening it on a ship full of people seemed equally irresponsible.

Obi-Wan debates these points in his head for a moment, but in the end it is his own curiosity that wins out.

“Alright,” he says. “Use the ship to scan the box. We will open it here.” Before Obi-Wan can finish his statement, Anakin is on the move. Obi-Wan jumps up and quickly follows behind him.

“Anakin, wait!” he yells just as Anakin lifts the box and places it on the lowest of the two bunks on the port side of the shuttle. Obi-Wan steps behind him and places a hand on

his shoulder. The message is clear though Obi-Wan says nothing. Anakin slows down. He steps over to a wall mounted panel and taps in a few commands. There is a slight buzzing throughout the tiny cabin as thin green beams of light crisscross and dance over, around and through the black casing. Several seconds pass before the buzzing and the verdant light show cease. Anakin looks at the scan results. His brow creases and his mouth tightens shut making a hard, thin line with his lips.

“What? What is it? What did you see?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?” Obi-Wan repeats. “You mean the scanners can’t penetrate the casing?”

“No,” Anakin says turning to his friend. “There is nothing but a box inside the case and the box is empty,” he answers as his gaze drifts down to the case. Obi-Wan wraps an arm around his torso, the other absently strokes his bearded chin.

“Perhaps we can discover what the scanners could not,” he muses. “I’m going to open the outer casing then we will use the Force to see what is inside the box itself.” Obi-Wan steps closer to the case. He lightly runs his fingers over the smooth dark casing. Soon he finds what he is searching for as his fingers locate a small recessed button. He pushes the button and two panels on the top of the case recede with a click exposing the smaller box within. Obi-Wan carefully reaches inside and lifts the smaller box out and places it beside its casing.

“Do you feel it?” he whispers. Anakin’s expression remains grim.

“Yes. There is a strong dark side presence surrounding this box,” he answers. Both Jedi become acutely aware of the taint permeating the box the moment Obi-Wan frees it from its outer housing. The sensation is somehow both subtle and intense as it slithers up the Jedi’s spines and attempts to curl around their intestines with icy, thin tendrils. It moves through them in a slow and nauseating crawl... probing, delving into the depths of them searching for weakness. To say it was an unpleasant feeling is the most galactic of understatements. Obi-Wan’s organs feel like they are slowly being encased in ice, but he never takes his eyes off of the box. It is smooth on all sides save one—on the top of the box there is a slightly raised section. It is a familiar symbol.

“A broken circle...” Obi-Wan murmurs as an unwanted memory forces its way to the surface. ...You will never have the satisfaction of killing me, Qui-Gon Jinn... And I will never submit to anyone’s laws. Your hate drove you, though you won’t admit it. You destroyed me because you could not save me. I am your biggest failure. Live with that. And live with this...

“You know this symbol?” Anakin asks looking at his former master. The question promptly snaps Obi-Wan out of his reverie.

“Yes, it is the shape of his scar... It’s Xanatos’s symbol,” he says as he glances briefly at Anakin before his gaze returns to the box.

Obi-Wan takes a deep breath and as he exhales he consciously releases his feelings of dread and fear into the Force. His emotions calmed and his mind quieted, he touches the symbol on the top of the box. Soundlessly, the panel slides away. Obi-Wan leans forward and peers into the box. What he finds is only darkness...

Chapter 2: Crash Duty

Obi-Wan is uncomfortable. He cannot see anything. He is totally surrounded by darkness and something is hurting... something on him. His head. Yes, that's it. Obi-Wan's head is definitely hurting, but why he doesn't know. The pain won't let him focus and it is so dark. There is something hard beneath him. He feels bent at an awkward angle, his back against something not hard, but not soft either. It isn't comfortable. Now there is noise. Someone is talking... loudly. Obi-Wan is annoyed. He is annoyed and uncomfortable. Something else is happening. The darkness is being replaced by a painful, blinding light... and why is that person still yelling...

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"Obi-Wan? Obi-Wan!" Anakin says first in concern then he repeats it in panic. As soon as Obi-Wan leaned over the box Anakin had sensed... something... a shift in the Force. When Obi-Wan started to tilt backwards, Anakin was already rushing to catch him. Now he sat on his knees holding his former master in his arms screaming his name.

"Master, please!" Anakin begs. Slowly, a frown begins to crease Obi-Wan's face making him look remarkably grumpy for an unconscious man.

"Master!" Anakin yells his relief growing as Obi-Wan continues to stir beneath his gaze. After what seems like an agonizingly long time, he opens his eyes, blinking rapidly against the harsh light.

"Wha... what...," he half groans, half questions.

"Careful, Master," Anakin says as Obi-Wan begins to pull away from his embrace. Obi-Wan pulls gently at first, but once he senses Anakin's hesitation he snatches himself away more violently. Anakin doesn't try to stop him, but he can't help himself from staring at Obi-Wan in surprise.

"Obi-Wan," he starts, but he is immediately cutoff.

"Stop coddling me, Anakin. I'm not a youngling!" he snaps. Obi-Wan regrets his words before they even tumble out of his mouth, yet he is unable to stop or even slow them. Anakin stands, his expression no longer registering surprise, but instead worry and confusion. Obi-Wan's expression suddenly softens, his eyes wide and apologetic.

"I'm sorry, Anakin. That was..."

"Not like you," Anakin supplies. Obi-Wan wants to argue, but he is forced to quickly concede.

"Indeed," he says as he glances back at the open box. "I suspect that our little mystery b..." he begins, but Obi-Wan is unable to complete the thought as the small shuttle violently attempts to throw its meager crew into the wall. Both Jedi stumble, but both are able to remain upright. Anakin is the first to reach the cockpit. He slides into the pilot seat, his eyes quickly scanning various readouts, his fingers deftly flitting over the ship's consoles. Obi-Wan falls into the seat beside him.

"There was an explosion on the port side wing," he says as he glances at Obi-Wan. "Imagine that," he adds snidely. Obi-Wan has the decency to look a little abashed. Anakin doesn't push the issue, he has more pressing matters demanding his attention. He allows the small craft to tumble out of hyperspace. Obi-Wan begins scanning around the vessel as Anakin desperately attempts to hold it together.

"There!" Obi-Wan starts as he shows Anakin the coordinates of a medium size, non-descript moon. "Can you get us there?"

"I don't suppose I have a choice," Anakin answers through clenched teeth. Lights blink frantically all over the cockpit. A warning alarm wails noisily in the background as Anakin plunges the ship into the moon's atmosphere. The cabin trembles and shakes. A red glow can be seen just outside the window.

"Anakin..." Obi-Wan says as he grips his armrests tightly.

"Just... a little... longer..." he says. Obi-Wan's face grows pale and the blood begins to drain away from his knuckles so strong is the vice like grip he has on his seat.

"Anakin..."

"Almost..."

"Anakin!"

"Brace yourself!"

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"Ugh," is the closest thing to a verbal expression Obi-Wan Kenobi can muster at the moment. His last certain memory was of the ground hurtling towards them, or more accurately, them hurtling towards the ground. "Typical Anakin landing," Obi-Wan thinks to

himself. Now that he has his senses about him again, Obi-Wan takes a few moments to survey his surroundings. What is left of the cockpit is in complete disarray. Half of the windshield is blown out and every console is either smashed, sparking, on fire, or some deadly combination of the three. Obi-Wan attempts to sit up, but is surprised at the resistance he encounters. From the waist down he is pinned beneath some large piece of formerly essential machinery. Instinctively, Obi-Wan grabs the edge of the scrap to lift it off of him, but is stopped almost before he starts as a blinding bolt of pain rockets thru his right arm.

“Arrhhh!”

The exclamation escapes his lips before he has a chance to process the situation. Obviously, Obi-Wan isn't going to be able to free himself through conventional means. He closes his eyes and focuses his mind on the task in front of him. He slowly lifts his left arm, his fingers spread wide as he commands the heavy scrap into motion. Slowly, meticulously, Obi-Wan uses the Force to free his lower extremities. Once he is clear, he throws the scrap to one side and exhales loudly from the exertion of it. After a few recovery breaths and a check of his legs for injuries, Obi-Wan attempts to sit up again. This time he meets with success. Carefully, he rises to his feet, his right arm still hurting terribly. Obi-Wan's eyes scan the structure around him and soon he finds what he needs. He walks over to the remains of the threshold leading to the rear of the shuttle. He places his right shoulder against the right beam and leans forward. He takes a deep breath and prepares himself. Then in one quick movement, he rears back and then forward slamming his shoulder into the frame, knocking it painfully back into socket.

“Blazing mmmmmmpph!” Obi-Wan half yells, the ending muffled behind pursed lips. He cradles his arm against his torso and catches his breath. Now that the pain in his arm has been reduced from excruciating to merely agonizing, Obi-Wan is able to focus on other concerns.

“Anakin?” he calls out. He looks for his fellow Jedi, but he sees no sign of him and worse, he hears no sign of him. Obi-Wan activates his Jedi wrist communicator thankful that it is attached to his left arm.

“Anakin, come in. Can you hear me? Anakin, what is your position? Anakin?” Obi-Wan's entreats are answered only with silence. He holds his right arm tight against his torso and moves his lightsaber to the right side of his belt. He continues down the corridor only a few steps before he is standing in open air. It appears that during the “landing” the rear of the shuttle sheared off and now it sat in a heap some yards behind. Obi-Wan activates the locator function on his communicator and searches for Anakin's signal. Within seconds, he isolates Anakin's ping pulsing from a direction in front of the ship. As Obi-Wan walks around the wreckage he surveys the surrounding landscape. The moon is as desolate and empty as any he has seen. Yellow rocks and dry, hard soil reach out in every direction dotted all around by sparse patches of brown, wilting vegetation. A mountain system stands to the north. Obi-Wan makes his way through the barren terrain occasionally consulting his locator.

“That’s not good,” he remarks aloud as he approaches the still smoldering remains of one of the cockpit’s seats. Obi-Wan focuses his attention straight ahead, scanning for any sign or hint of his friend’s whereabouts. Then he sees it; a crumpled mass of black and brown robes some hundred feet ahead of him, half obscured in the brown grasses. Obi-Wan breaks into a run though the jostling is like torture to his injured arm. He reaches Anakin’s prone body and carefully rolls him on to his back. He is alive, but unconscious. Obi-Wan cannot tell exactly how bad his injuries are, but he does notice a nasty wound on Anakin’s left leg. Anakin still has on part of his cloak, though the edges are badly singed. Obi-Wan takes his lightsaber and very carefully uses his left hand to cut enough material to fashion a tourniquet and field dressing. Anakin’s immediate danger dealt with, Obi-Wan glances back north in the direction of the crash site. He cuts more of Anakin’s cloak and creates an impromptu sling for his arm. Once his sling is secure and as tight as he can manage, he carefully scoops up Anakin and places his limp body over his left shoulder. Then he begins the walk back to the ship. It is painstakingly slow progress, but eventually the two reach their first destination. Obi-Wan lays Anakin down on the ground and takes a moment to catch his breath. After he gets his second wind, he begins to scavenge the wreckage for anything he thinks will prove useful, particularly for making contact with Republic forces. Once he gathers everything of value, Obi-Wan uses a large sheet of metal, the remains of Anakin’s cloak, and several feet of wiring to create a simple travois. He loads the equipment and then carefully places Anakin on to it, securing him before he winds the remaining length of wire over his good shoulder in a makeshift harness. He looks to the north at the mountain range. Mountains mean caves and caves mean shelter, or so he hopes.

“Here we go,” Obi-Wan says, then he begins his long trek north.

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At no time in Obi-Wan’s recent memory can he recall being so tired. He is thoroughly exhausted and nearly every muscle in his body screams in pain. It took several hours for Obi-Wan to pull Anakin the long distance to the base of the mountains. Once there, Obi-Wan was delighted to find several caves able to provide the two Jedi with suitable shelter and defense, if needed. He pulled both the equipment and Anakin inside a medium size cave and then set to the task of building a fire. The twin suns of the moon were setting and the temperature had already begun to plummet.

The fire made, Obi-Wan finally allows himself a moment to relax. If nothing else, this tiny moon seems bent on reminding him that he is no longer a young man. He glances worriedly at Anakin. He had been unconscious now for hours. Several times Obi-Wan had stopped to check his vitals and each time they appeared stable so Obi-Wan could only assume that Anakin would wake when his body was ready. Obi-Wan stares absently into the fire light as he contemplates their situation. The Republic will come searching for them; of that he is certain. He is also certain that the Separatists will come searching for them too and probably much sooner. Obi-Wan’s brow wrinkles as he reaches for the ship’s

transponder. It, of course, had been damaged in the crash, but Obi-Wan is optimistic that it can be salvaged. He carefully pries off the back covering and sets to his work.

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The first sun has almost risen when Anakin begins to stir. The world is black, then bright and then blurry as he blinks his way back into existence.

“Ohhhh,” he groans as his worldly awareness begins to include such niceties as his body’s multitude of bruises. “I feel like a Bantha sat on my head.”

“You’re lucky to be feeling anything at all,” Obi-Wan smiles. Anakin pulls himself into a seated position, rubbing his eyes as he does so. He takes a moment to take in the unfamiliar surroundings.

“What happened?”

“You crashed the ship,” Obi-Wan pauses, then adds, “again.”

“Oh,” is all Anakin replies, his mouth curled in a playful grin. Anakin starts to stand up.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Obi-Wan warns without looking up from his work with the transponder. Anakin ignores his master’s odd warning and continues to rise. He places his weight on his left leg and violently crashes back to the ground. Obi-Wan shakes his head.

“I did warn you.”

“Okay,” Anakin says in defeat once he recovered from his sudden change in elevation. “Maybe you should catch me up.”

“The ship is beyond repair, the Separatist Army is undoubtedly searching for us and I can’t do a thing with this blasted contraption,” Obi-Wan says as he tosses the transponder unit to Anakin who catches it adeptly. Obi-Wan is frustrated and worse he is showing it. Anakin notices too. It isn’t like his Master to have his calm so easily disturbed.

“Master,” he starts, but Obi-Wan just smiles weakly and waves him off.

“I’m just exhausted,” he says. Anakin’s eyes fall to Obi-Wan’s arm.

“And the pain?” he asks. Obi-Wan glances at his sling with a slightly bemused expression, like he had forgotten the injury.

“Minimal,” he finally answers. He looks back to Anakin and offers a comforting smile. “I’m fine, Anakin. Truly.”

Anakin is still wary, but he accepts Obi-Wan’s response... for now. He watches as his friend stands up and readjusts his sling slightly.

“I think I’ll get some fresh air,” he says then he walks out of the cave without another word. Anakin sits unmoving for a moment, pondering Obi-Wan’s outburst. Perhaps it is nothing. Anakin doesn’t buy that. There is something amiss with his former master he just can’t put his finger on it. Obi-Wan would tell him to meditate on it. Anakin smiles. He will meditate—in his own way. Anakin outstretches his arm and summons to him the tools he needs satisfied, for now, to spend the next few hours tinkering and thinking.

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Obi-Wan walks a few meters away from the cave, stops, and takes a deep breath. “I am letting the stress of the situation get to me,” he thinks. “Or is it something more?” His thoughts feel clouded even to himself. He sighs and rubs the bridge of his nose between his fingers. He is quite tired.

“Unlike Anakin,” he thinks. “He’s not the least bit tired. He’s not the one who had to drag someone else and all the equipment over to these Sith forsaken caves. Oh no, never the dear Chosen One. Force forbid he has to do any hard work,” Obi-Wan rants, his mind and body tense with the thought. As quickly as the thoughts come to his mind they leave and in their place Obi-Wan feels tiny seeds of panic start to bloom. There is a knot of pain growing in his chest.

“What am I thinking?” he says aloud to himself. “Something is wrong... something is not right,” he mutters. Obi-Wan closes his eyes. He slows his ragged breathing. The pain in his chest flares briefly then begins to subside.

Down to his calm center.

“That is better,” Obi-Wan thinks to himself. With his next inhale he readies himself to release his dark thoughts and emotions to the Force...

Nothing happens.

Obi-Wan frowns slightly. He can still feel the Force around him, warm and comforting as always. He focuses his thoughts, concentrating. He tries again to release his emotions into the Force... and again he fails. Something is blocking him, stifling him.

“It’s probably nothing,” he says to himself, but even as he says it he knows he doesn’t believe it.

Chapter 3: Damaged Goods

“Feeling better, Master?”

“A bit actually,” Obi-Wan replies as he takes a seat on the ground across from Anakin. Anakin stares at Obi-Wan in silence for several moments. His brow wrinkles. To Obi-Wan it seems that Anakin is debating something with himself, which strikes Obi-Wan as odd. It isn’t like his former padawan to hold his tongue without prompting; usually prompting from Obi-Wan himself.

“Master,” Anakin begins noticeably hesitant.

“Yes, Anakin?” Obi-Wan answers mildly curious as to what could make someone as bold as Anakin suddenly become reticent. Anakin stares at Obi-Wan for a moment more than he looks back down to his work on the transponder as he picks up a hydrospanner.

“Nevermind. It’s... nothing,” he says finally. Obi-Wan briefly considers pressing the matter, but decides against it choosing to save his already beleaguered mind from what he is certain will devolve into an argument.

“Very well,” he says with a bit of a sigh. Anakin spares a quick glance and sees Obi-Wan rest the back of his left hand on his left knee as he sits, his legs crossed, his eyes closed. Anakin returns to his repairs as Obi-Wan settles and prepares to enter deep meditation.

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Anakin has seen many things in his life. He has seen excessive cruelty and unbidden kindness. He has seen wondrous things and things that live on the furthest edges of horror. He has seen things both ordinary and extraordinary; things that defied reason and things that surpassed his wildest imaginings... but the one thing he has never seen is Obi-Wan Kenobi not able to meditate.

Never.

Not once.

Ever.

Until now.

Anakin doesn't say anything. He waits for his former master to open his eyes, finally giving up on the attempt after nearly an hour. Obi-Wan sighs deeply, his gaze cast down on the cave floor. Anakin puts down his work.

"Master, we need to... talk."

"No, Anakin. We do not."

"Obi-Wan,"

"Oh just shut it, Anakin!" Obi-Wan barks. "If you had spent half as much time fixing that transponder as you do worrying about me we would be already off this wretched rock!"

"What's wrong with you?" Anakin yells back in exasperation. "This isn't like you, Obi-Wan. Something is going on. Why won't you tell me what it is?"

"There is nothing to tell."

"That's a load of bantha poodoo and you know it."

"Language, Padawan!"

"Padawan?" Anakin repeats, his tone a mix of shock, concern, confusion, incredulity.

"There is no... no center... Where is it?" Obi-Wan mutters so low Anakin can barely make it out. He reaches out his hand to his former master. Obi-Wan looks at the gloved hand hanging in the air between them. He knows it is an offering, a life-line flung into the murky waters of Obi-Wan's floundering self-control. All he has to do is take it, grasp it and he will find safe harbor. Anakin will anchor him. He needs only to take his hand.

But he doesn't.

Obi-Wan slaps the hand away and jumps to his feet.

"I need to find my center!" he yells. "I must find my center. I must... must find it... my center... I must," he mutters to himself as he turns and storms out of the cave. Anakin pushes himself up to follow, but his left leg stubbornly refuses to support him and he is forced to remain behind. Unable to follow Obi-Wan physically, Anakin closes his eyes and tries to track him through the Force. What he senses surprises him. Fear. Confusion. Doubt. Anger... Anakin can feel Obi-Wan's anger tremulous over their old bond. Then suddenly nothing. Obi-Wan forcibly shoves out Anakin's presence as he quickly erects thick shields around his mind. Anakin sighs deeply and despondently renews his moving meditation.

* * * * *

Obi-Wan is a tectonic plate grinding against itself, trapped on all sides by geothermic pressures roiling and churning its way to an inevitably violent eruption. He is angry. He yelled at Anakin. He lost his temper and stormed out of the cave knowing, thankfully, that Anakin could not follow. And the Force... the Force seems more elusive than ever. Obi-Wan is lost, unable to meditate, unable to release the growing shadow of dread, terror, and rage slowly engulfing his mind and rending his heart.

He walks. His pace is brisk, but he is in no hurry. Obi-Wan's thoughts are jumbled and disorganized. It takes significant effort to reign in his errant emotions and focus his mind to address his situation with some measure of reason.

"I am losing my ability to control my emotions... to control myself," he thinks aloud. "And the Force... I can't release my emotions to the Force!"

Obi-Wan feels a rush of panic sweep over his senses, but he is able to hold the queasy feelings at bay... barely. He focuses now only on his breathing, tracking the deep and rhythmic inhalations and exhalations in an effort to quiet the cacophony of unbridled feelings and wild suppositions clamoring for his attention, but something does draw him away. The Force, though elusive, has not abandoned him as it whispers a warning in his mind. With his left hand he reaches for his lightsaber. He lights it and stands en guard. Obi-Wan feels awkward and clumsy working from his left, but given the circumstances he feels he has little choice in the matter. He closes his eyes, listening, waiting. Then, acting on instinct as he has been trained, he spins around bringing his lightsaber up and over in a graceful arc where mid-way it connects with the black hull of a scout droid. The saber slices through the droid's metal skin cleaving it, its edges glowing from the heat of the blade.

"Where there's one there's more," Obi-Wan says to himself as he scans the horizon. Further west across a great divide he thinks he sees something, but without a pair of scopes he will have to get closer to know for certain. Obi-wan begins to cross the distance between where he downed the probe and the edge of the chasm. As he gets closer, the terrain becomes more hilly and full of loose rocks and gravel. He moves with his usual speed and deliberation as he climbs up a small hill. As he begins the meager descent, Obi-Wan loses his footing. He swings out his left arm in an attempt to recover his balance, but the single arm is not enough. He falls on his rear, bumping and sliding his way down.

"Blast!" Obi-Wan growls angrily. His frustration rearing its head again. Obi-Wan makes a conscious effort to push it from his mind. Calm again, he approaches the edge squatting low as he does so. From his new vantage point he can indeed make out something on the other side.

"Battle droids," he murmurs. The group is small. "A scouting party," he thinks silently, but he knows the main force would not be far behind. Suddenly, Obi-Wan clutches his chest. Under his robes his skin feels as if it is on fire. Without care and with both hands Obi-

Wan claws at his robe and tunics, exposing his bare chest to the early afternoon air. He looks down and sees a multitude of angry red and black lesions crisscrossing his abdomen and chest. Obi-Wan falls on his back writhing in the dirt as the burning reaches its apex. It is all he can do to choke back the scream trying to escape his throat. He still has just enough presence of mind to know that if he loses control and calls out, the droids across the ridge will surely hear him. Gradually the pain begins to lessen. Obi-Wan releases the death grip he has on the edges of his robe; his fingers aching from the prolonged intensity. He lies there in the dust and dirt trying to catch his breath. After a few minutes, no trace of the pain remains save the lesions which have spread and now creep up his left shoulder. Obi-Wan slowly gets to his feet. He looks across the chasm at the droid scouting party. It appears that his little episode has gone unnoticed.

“Small favor,” Obi-Wan thinks as he straightens his clothes, knocking dust off as he goes. He glances once more at his marked torso, sighs then closes his robes tightly. “This will complicate things,” he says as he begins to walk back to the cave.

* * * * *

Obi-Wan returns to find Anakin right where he left him.

“I don’t suppose you have contacted the Fleet and they are on their way with a rescue?” Obi-Wan says as he re-enters the cave. Anakin puts down the piece of equipment he had been soldering. He looks at his former master with an uncharacteristically serious expression.

“Master, what is going on?” he asks. Obi-Wan carefully sits down near the entrance and far from Anakin. He closes his eyes and tries to think of what to say. Finally, he opens them having decided that the truth seemed the most appropriate response.

“I don’t know,” he answers softly. “But whatever it is, it’s getting worse.” Obi-Wan stands up and tugs open his robe exposing a lesion covered patch of skin. Anakin’s eyes are wide as he looks from the exposed skin to Obi-Wan’s face.

“What is that?” he asks. Obi-Wan readjusts his robe and shakes his head.

“I don’t know, but it’s spreading and it’s affecting my ability to control my emotions...,” he hesitates, “and the Force.” Obi-Wan allows for the gravity of this revelation to wash over Anakin before he continues. “So, it may be prudent to get that transponder working and, I can’t believe I’m saying this, get me to a healer,” he says as he tries to lighten the mood. A smile tugs at his mouth, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. Anakin is still processing Obi-Wan’s previous confession and has to blink several times to get his mind to focus on the present. He picks up the equipment in question.

“Well, there’s good news and not so good news. The good news is I’ve fixed the transponder.”

“And the not so good news?”

“The power cells are completely spent,” Anakin sighs. “Was there anything left on the ship that might work?” he queries. Obi-Wan shakes his head.

“No, nothing of any value remains on the ship,” Obi-Wan rejoins. He places his hand under his chin. “But I think I know where we can get the power you need. As it so happens there is a recently disabled probe droid not far from here.”

“A probe droid?” Anakin repeats in surprise as he tries to stand up. Obi-Wan moves to help him to his feet.

“Not to worry. If it had transmitted any information we’d be overrun by now,” Obi-Wan says answering Anakin’s unspoken question as he allows the knight to place his wait across his shoulders. “But battle droids have landed. There is a scouting party not far from here.”

“Then we better hurry,” Anakin replies. The two Jedi slowly leave the cave.

“What an intimidating pair we are,” Obi-Wan laughs. Anakin smiles.

“I’m just glad Ahsoka’s not here to see this. I’d never hear the end of it.”

The two lumber on until they reach Obi-Wan’s damaged probe. He places Anakin on the ground where he can better dissect the droid, while Obi-Wan himself walks closer to the ridge edge. Anakin rips off the droid’s outer shell and begins to dig through its components. Obi-Wan watches as a full battalion of battle droids amass just across the breach. He walks back to Anakin.

“I trust this won’t take too long.”

“Almost…” Anakin replies without looking up, “got it!” He holds up a trio of small blue, glowing rods. “I can use these cells to power the transponder.”

Obi-Wan returns Anakin to his feet.

“Then let’s get out of here,” he says and they begin their journey back. By the time they reach their cave darkness has fallen, but their fire is still burning; casting shadows that move across the cave walls like primitives engaged in celebration. Again, Obi-Wan helps his former padawan to his work spot and again, Anakin commences to tinker away, but this time his task is much simpler. Within minutes he is snapping the console cover back into place. He sits the unit down and suddenly it springs to life.

"It's transmitting then?" Obi-Wan says as the transponder begins to hum gently.

"Yes, any Republic ship within a few parsecs should be able to pick this up," Anakin responds with a slightly self-satisfied grin playing across his lips.

"That's good, but I fear we are still in danger," Obi-Wan remarks, his face serious. Anakin's smile fell.

"We will hear any droids long before they reach us. We can fight or go further into the caves."

"Yes, but it's not the droids I'm concerned about."

"Oh," is all Anakin can seem to muster for an answer. Obi-Wan hangs his head low for a moment.

"Anakin, I..." he starts, but then Obi-Wan is suddenly hit with an overwhelming rush of anger. No, not anger. Rage. Obi-Wan is enraged. Anakin can sense it too.

"Master?" Anakin calls out tentatively. His voice is laced with concern. Obi-Wan feels the heat of pure, vile hatred rush through his limbs as his hands curl involuntarily into fists.

"No!" Obi-Wan spits through clenched teeth as he rises from his seat.

"Master, wait!" Anakin yells as he struggles to get to his feet. "Obi-Wan!" he yells, but it, of course, is too late.

Obi-Wan is already gone.

Chapter 4: Bad Blood

Obi-Wan runs. It doesn't matter to him where he is running only that he is running... only that there is increasing distance between him and the other Jedi. Even as he runs the feelings coursing through his hot veins grows stronger. Obi-Wan wants to strike things. He wants to hurt things. He wants to kill things. Mostly, he wants to kill Anakin.

"No!" he yells as he comes to a stop. "I must... focus," he whispers through clenched teeth. Slowly, bit by bit, breath by breath he fights to push back the dark thoughts racing through his mind. However, no sooner than he begins to make some progress and regain some semblance of himself the pain returns.

Obi-Wan doesn't have time to brace for it. He is immediately seized by the sensation that he is being immolated where he stands. He falls to the ground and begins to writhe and wriggle in the dirt uncontrollably. His eyes squeeze shut so tightly that stars dance behind his lids. He has no choice but to abandon himself to the pain as it is no longer confined to his torso, but has spread to his arms and back. He is currently incapable of checking for lesions, but he has no doubt that they have spread as well. The torture session is longer and stronger than the previous and Obi-Wan is helpless before it. It is all he can do to simply endure it. Finally, after what seems an eternity, the pain gradually abates. Obi-Wan lies still in the dirt for several minutes. If the next attack escalates as this one had... Obi-Wan is unsure of his ability to survive it. Slowly, he pushes himself up from the dirt, not even bothering to dust himself off. It is getting quite cold and Obi-Wan immediately misses the warm fire that is burning back in the cave with Anakin, but he can't go back. He had barely maintained control when the anger hit him. If he hadn't... If he had hurt Anakin... he would never forgive himself. No, he knows he has to stay away. Internally, he thanks the Force that Anakin is too injured to come and look for him. Obi-Wan looks down at his Jedi communicator and heaves a heavy sigh.

"Anakin."

"Obi-Wan? Where are you? Are you,"

"I'm fine... for the moment," Obi-Wan replies. "Anakin, I... I cannot return to the cave I'm afraid. I need you to keep that transponder transmitting and the moment help arrives I want you to get out here."

"Master, I'm not leaving without you."

"Anakin," Obi-Wan sighed. "For once I need you to listen to me. When the gunship lands I want you on it. Do not come looking for me. It's too dangerous and you know it."

"Obi-Wan, please... Talk to me. What is going on? Tell me where you are!"

"I'm sorry, Anakin. I can't... I can't risk hurting you... Goodbye," Obi-Wan ends.

"Wait! Obi-Wan! Obi-Wan!" Anakin's voice yells desperately over the comm. For just a moment, Obi-Wan feels his resolve waver, but he knows he is doing the right thing. He detaches the communicator and lays it on a nearby stone. He then smashes it under the weight of a smaller rock. Anakin will not be able to track him this way. The only remaining option is to track him through their bond. Obi-Wan closes off his mind, erecting the tightest and strongest shields he knows how. It is his only insurance to keep Anakin away. Now it is time to wait; time to wait and see what the Force has in store for him. And so he sits in the cold, darkness unable to release his emotions... utterly alone... and terrified.

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Anakin repeatedly taps his communicator trying to reconnect with his former master, but his efforts yield only silence. He tries to locate Obi-Wan's signal, but even that proves useless. Anakin roars in frustration. If only he could walk! If only he weren't injured he could be out there helping Obi-Wan instead of sitting in a cave utterly useless. He tries once again to reach out over their old training bond and once again Anakin's efforts are violently rebuffed. Suddenly, his holo-communicator beeps.

"Obi-Wan?" Anakin answers excitedly. A familiar figure suddenly appears in miniature over his holo.

"No, sir."

"Rex, it's good to see you."

"Yes, General. We picked up your signal. Have to admit we were beginning to wonder if you were still out there," Rex says. He doesn't come out and say it, but Anakin knows his Captain well enough to understand his subtle way of saying he was worried. "We're not far from your position. We should be able to reach you in just over nine hours."

"That's the best news I've heard all day," Anakin replies with a smile, but it is a weak smile at best and no amount of mirth reaches his eyes. It does not go unnoticed.

"Are you all right, sir? Is General Kenobi with you?"

"He," Anakin hesitated, "Yes, we are both here, but Master Kenobi will need medical attention once you arrive."

"Is his condition serious, sir?" Rex asks. Anakin sighs.

"I hope not," he mumbles to himself.

“Sir?”

“Nothing to serious, Captain,” Anakin replies.

“Very good, sir.”

“Oh, Rex, we’ve got droids here, but they haven’t found us yet.”

“I’ve never seen you afraid of a few clankers, General.”

“Oh, I just didn’t want you to get here too late and miss out on all the fun.”

“I see,” Rex smirks. “Don’t worry, sir. The 501st never misses a party.”

“See you soon,” Anakin nods and ends the transmission. He leans back against the rock wall. “At least something is going right.”

* * * * *

Anakin’s light sleep is interrupted by a slight tension in the Force. He opens his eyes, immediately alert. He scans the cave slowly, reaching out with his senses looking for any threat. A sudden movement catches his attention, but it is too fast to make out. However, Anakin can sense... a presence.

“Obi-Wan?” he calls out, but he receives no reply. There it is again! Anakin is certain someone is out there. He reaches for his lightsaber and activates it.

“Oh, we don’t need that, do we? And here I thought we were friends,” comes Obi-Wan’s voice. His gentle lilt floats through the cave in echoes making him seem everywhere at once. Anakin scans the shadows, but he sees nothing. Only the voice and a vague Force sense tell him the Obi-Wan is indeed nearby.

“Master, what’s going on?” Anakin says warily his eyes still searching.

“You know exactly what is going on!” Obi-Wan snaps. Anakin follows the sound and finds Obi-Wan perched like a pouncing nexu on a rock near the cave entrance; his eyes no longer blue-grey... but golden and bloodshot. Anakin has seen those eyes before. It is the look of someone who has given themselves over to the dark side... but how can that even be possible... This was Obi-Wan... Anakin’s grip tightens on his lightsaber.

“Little Ani is scared. He’s afraid of his mean, old Master,” Obi-Wan mocks. Then his smile fades. “He should be.”

“Come on, Obi-Wan. Snap out of this!”

“DON’T TELL ME WHAT TO DO!” Obi-Wan roars. He stands on top of his rock and points an accusing finger at Anakin. “Everyone tells me what to do! You, the Council, that little troll Yoda...” he murmurs looking down briefly. His gaze shoots back to Anakin. “Even Qui-Gon... train the Chosen One, train the Chosen One! He never even considered that maybe I didn’t want to train the Chosen One! Maybe I only wanted to be his padawan, but no.... No, he had to get himself killed! And his last words...” Obi-Wan whispers, his eyes narrowing in unbridled hatred. “His last words were of you!”

Suddenly, Obi-Wan jumps down off his perch and starts slowly advancing toward Anakin. Anakin, for his part, begins to hobble away from him in short hops. He has no expectation of “running,” but he is quite content to keep as much distance as possible between them.

“Obi-Wan, what are you doing?”

“Shouldn’t it be obvious?” Obi-Wan replies casually. “I’m about to kill you!” he answers. He leaps at Anakin who manages to get his lightsaber up just in time to block Obi-Wan’s crushing blow. Their lightsabers hum and crackle against each other.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” Anakin says through gritted teeth.

“Die!” Kenobi hisses, a wanton expression on his face. Anakin pulls up his right knee and violently pushes Obi-Wan back. Some distance now between them, Anakin gives another push, this time utilizing the Force. Obi-Wan is thrown up against the ceiling of the cave, down against the floor and then out of the cave. He hits the ground on his stomach letting out a loud “oomf.” The wind temporarily knocked out of him, he slowly gets to his feet. He glares at Anakin, his expression barely more than feral. Suddenly, he roars in frustration his rage and bloodlust unsatisfied, but he doesn’t advance. Instead he disappears into the darkness. And so, Anakin begins his long night of listening and waiting. He saber at the ready.

* * * * *

By the time the first rays begin to creep over the horizon Anakin is feeling the drain on his body from remaining on high alert for so long. Just as he is toying with the idea of taking just a few moments to relax, he senses someone approaching. He readies himself, leaning on the rock facing, lightsaber in hand. Slowly, a figure emerges from the dusty, orange twilight.

“General,” Captain Rex says as he holsters his pistols. Anakin powers down his lightsaber. He can see more clones following behind. Anakin reaches a hand out for Rex who immediately comes over and lets Anakin lean on him as they walk out of the cave.

“Are you badly injured, Skywalker?” a familiar voice asks. It isn’t a voice he expected, but not one that surprises him either.

“It’s not that bad,” Anakin replies. Master Windu nods and then looks around. “Where is Master Kenobi?” he asks. Anakin’s expression grows grim.

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen him since,” he pauses, “since he attacked me last night.”

“Attacked you?” Windu repeats his frown deeper than usual. Anakin shakes his head.

“Something is wrong with him... It is almost like...”

“Like what?” Windu prompts. Anakin sighs.

“Like the dark side of the Force,” he finishes. Anakin brow creases as he considers the one thought that had been nagging him throughout his weary vigil. “This has to have something to do with that box.”

“What box?”

“The thing we picked up from the Telosian authorities. It turned out to be a box left by Master Qui-Gon’s former apprentice,” Anakin reports. Master Windu’s customary frown grows even deeper more resembling a scowl with each passing moment.

“What was in the box?”

“Nothing. It was empty,” Anakin answers. Master Windu doesn’t respond immediately. Instead, he silently rubs his chin with his left hand. After several minutes of silence, Anakin feels his patience wearing quickly. Fortunately, the Master speaks before his patience wears out entirely.

“Where is this box now?”

“Still at the crash site I think,” Anakin responds. “Master Windu, we need to find Obi-Wan. He’s not himself... He... We need to find him.”

“This is troubling,” Windu says apparently returning to his deep thoughts “and very dangerous, but you are correct, Skywalker. We must find Kenobi and quickly.”

“Sir,” interrupts one of the clone troopers, “we already have.”

Master Windu looks up to where the trooper is pointing and sees Obi-Wan standing on top of the cave’s outcropping. He is glowering at them, lightsaber in hand. Windu and Anakin can easily sense the waves of malevolence rippling off of the man.

“How kind, you’ve brought me toy soldiers to play with,” he taunts. “I’m going to enjoy picking you apart piece by piece,” he adds with a smile. Master Windu takes several steps forward, never lifting his eyes off the seemingly dark Jedi.

“Master Kenobi,” he begins and for a second Obi-Wan’s eyes light on the Council Member. A deep sense of fear and confusion passes across his face. A flash of blue-grey eyes seem to plead for just a moment, but it disappears just as fast as it came, perhaps even faster.

“Ah, good ol’ Master Windu. How are you, Mace? Ruined any young lives lately? Thrown out some initiates? Perhaps strangle some younglings? No matter, I’ve waited a long time to,” Obi-Wan starts, but he is cut off mid-sentence as he is seized with another attack; this one exponentially worse than any before. His lightsaber falls carelessly to the ground and his body soon follows. Only Master Windu’s Jedi reflexes save Obi-Wan from hitting the hard soil. Windu holds his fellow council member in his arms. Obi-Wan is convulsing wildly, his eyes rolled back, foam frothing in the edges of his mouth.

“Medic!” Windu yells and soon a clone trooper is at his side. Master Windu lays Obi-Wan down and then stands up. He looks down at the medic.

“Get him stable and then get him on the gunship,” he orders calmly. He turns to Anakin and Rex. “Captain, get Master Skywalker on board then have a hazard team sent to the crash site. I want that box recovered.”

“I’m not leaving Obi-Wan! He,”

“Is being seen to, but we need to get you both to the cruiser’s medical facility,” Master Windu interrupts, his tone brooking no argument. Anakin nods reluctantly and allows Rex to walk him to the gunship. Not long after, Windu and the medic trooper joins them followed by a pair of troopers escorting Obi-Wan on a stretcher. The gunship’s doors close and the group lifts off the surface of the small moon whisking them to the familiar surroundings of the Resolute.

Chapter 5: Lying in Wait

“How is he?” Anakin asks as he limps to where Master Windu stands by Obi-Wan’s bed. When they arrived on the cruiser the medic trooper, Kix, saw to it that both Kenobi and Skywalker were escorted to the medical bay. From there, Obi-Wan and Anakin were separated. Anakin had waited, rather impatiently, as a medical droid placed a portable bacta tank around his injured thigh. The tank-cast was heavy and cumbersome, but Anakin did not care. His only concern was for Obi-Wan. As soon as the droid was done, he clumsily shimmied off his medical bed and hobbled through the bay looking for his former master.

“I’ve run every test we have, Generals,” Kix says lowering his datapad. “Except for his arm, which we’ve treated, and some bruises, I can’t find a single thing wrong with him, but there is this,” he says. He reaches over to the sheet and blanket that currently cover Obi-Wan’s sleeping form. He pulls them back revealing his patient’s bare torso. Master Windu crosses his arms over his chest, a deep furrow creasing his brow.

“It wasn’t as bad yesterday. It must have spread,” Anakin offers with a shake of his head. Kix nods.

“And it’s still spreading, sir. Nothing I do seems to stop it.”

“There must be something we can do,” Anakin cries, his voice wavering with fear and frustration. Mace shoots the knight a stern glare; an unspoken command to reign in his feelings. Anakin stiffens angrily, but says nothing. Mace turns to the medic.

“If we cannot stop it perhaps there is a way to at least slow it down,” Mace asks, but in truth it is more of a statement, a statement he fully intends to make fact as his thoughts drift to the precarious state of his friend. Kix glances down at his datapad and then to some of the monitors by Obi-Wan’s bed. He shakes his head.

“I just don’t know, sir. I recommend,” Kix starts, but he stops when Obi-Wan’s eyelids begin to flutter slightly. Anakin immediately hops closer to him and leans in. Obi-Wan’s eyes open and, to Anakin’s great relief, he finds himself staring into the familiar blue-grey eyes of his mentor. After a bit of disoriented blinking, Obi-Wan is able to focus on the room and those around him.

“Anakin?”

“Yes, Master. I’m here,” Anakin answers quickly, then he adds as an afterthought, “so is Master Windu.”

“Hmmm,” Obi-Wan groans. “Let me guess, Healer’s Ward,” he responds with a slight smile tugging at his lips. Despite the attempt, his humor does little to tamp down the tension in the room.

“How do you feel, Obi-Wan?” Windu asks. Obi-Wan shifts his gaze to his friend. Suddenly, his eyes widened in fear.

“Wait... If I’m here then...,” his words falter as the realization hits him. “It wasn’t a dream...” his voice trails off. He looks at his former pupil. “Anakin, I am so sorry...”

“Don’t worry about it, Master. We just need you to get well.”

“No,” Obi-Wan implores. He turns directly to Mace. “You have to restrain me. I have no control when it happens. I don’t know what I might do. You cannot risk me running loose on the ship.”

“I’ll see to it,” Windu responds, his face an unreadable mask. With the Council member’s promise Obi-Wan relaxes a little. “We’re taking you back to the Temple. Perhaps then we can find some answers,” Mace adds. Obi-Wan opens his mouth to speak, but his expression twists into an unnatural grin. The light in his eyes dims and flickers.

“You never should have brought me on board,” he screams as he reaches for Windu’s neck. Mace easily side-steps the attack. Anakin grabs one of Obi-Wan’s arms and pins it to the medical bed. Mace does the same with Obi-Wan’s remaining arm while Kix prepares a sedative.

“Let me go!” he screams, his voice cracking with rage as if his own hateful words were trying to rip their way out of his throat. “I hate you all! You will suffer for what you’ve done to me! I will see all of you burn, cast off and forgotten! I hate you! I HATE YOU!”

Obi-Wan continues to struggle, cursing in a variety of colorful tongues he has picked up in his travels across the galaxy. Finally, Kix injects the Jedi with a powerful sedative. Within seconds, Obi-Wan’s resistance melts away and he falls into a deep drug induced sleep. Anakin and Mace let go of his arms.

“I want him to remain sedated and restrained for the duration of this voyage,” Windu orders Kix. He turns to another pair of troopers who are standing nearby. “I want him under guard at all times,” he commands. Both troopers nod.

“Sir, yes, sir,” they answer in unison. Master Windu then turns back to the medic.

“Was the Captain able to retrieve the box?”

“Um... yes, sir. Captain Rex brought it in while I was running tests on the General. It’s in the hazardous materials lab.”

“Show me,” Mace says flatly and Kix nods. He motions for the Jedi to follow as he leads them through the back of the med bay keeping a slow pace, his medical training ever mindful of Skywalker’s leg injury. Neither Jedi speak a word as they follow the medic through various medical bays and passed operating rooms, but Mace can feel Anakin’s anxiety pushing outward like radiation from a super nova.

“Skywalker, be mindful of your feelings,” he whispers.

“Yes, Master,” Anakin says as he tries to squeeze down his emotions. “I am just worried for Obi-Wan.”

“I know,” Mace replies with a trace of sympathy in his voice, “but worry will not help Obi-Wan only clear minded, calm action will.”

“Of course,” Anakin nods. This is one of those times when Mace infuriates him most—when Anakin knows he’s right. Several compartments later, the trio enter a control room. Here there are long and varied consoles on one side of a large glass wall. On the other side is a fairly large and mostly empty room. In that room there is a table and on it sits an opened black box.

“We kept the box under a strict quarantine since it was retrieved,” Kix says as he moves to one of the consoles. He pulls up one of the holo-projectors. “My techs have run it through every scan we have. All the results are the same. It’s a cube object of unknown material with nothing inside it. It’s just an empty box, sir. No pathogens, no viruses, no molds, no matter, nothing.”

Mace steps closer to the window separating the two rooms. He turns his head to Kix.

“Thank you, Trooper. You may return to your duties,” he says as a dismissal. Kix nods and makes for the door when the General’s voice stops him. “Please keep Master Skywalker and me updated on Kenobi’s condition.”

“Yes, sir,” Kix answers, then, following another curt nod, he leaves the two Jedi alone in the lab. Anakin moves to Mace’s side. He says nothing as the Council member stares at the small box through the duraglass. After several uncomfortable minutes, Anakin finally can wait no longer.

“Well?”

“Tell me everything you know about this box. Start at the beginning. Leave nothing out,” Mace states. Anakin closes his eyes and takes a deep breath as he calls forth the memory in crystal clear detail in his mind. He tells Mace about their arrival on Telos, the nervousness of the Telosian party, the suspicious mechanic, the opening of the box, the feeling of darkness, Obi-Wan’s blackout, the explosion, and the “landing.” After this, Anakin’s report gets a little less specific as he was unconscious for some of it, but he resumes his previous level of Jedi precision as he relates the days leading up to their

rescue. Mace listens quietly never interrupting, keeping his questions to himself until after the tale has been told.

“You said you both felt a dark presence when you removed the box from its casing?”

“Yes, it was very strong,” Anakin answers. Mace stares at him with a raised eyebrow.

“And yet you still opened it?” he asks. Anakin shrugs not really knowing what answer he is supposed to give the master since the fact that they did indeed open the box is obvious. Mace turns his attention back to the small cube. He closes his eyes and reaches out with the Force. Anakin waits for a moment, then does the same. Both Jedi quietly extend their senses out toward the tiny object in the next room. They wrap the Force around it, turning it this way and that in their minds, scanning it, probing it deeply before finally withdrawing.

“I do feel a dark force within it, but it is very weak,” Mace says.

“It wasn’t like that when we opened it. It was almost like a slap in the face,” Anakin responds. Mace’s brow furrows.

“Perhaps it expended its energy when it first affected Obi-Wan on the ship.”

“His black out?” Anakin asks. Mace nods then he crosses to the rear of the control room and activates a comm. panel. In moments, the two Jedi are greeted by the familiar face of the Grand Master of their Order.

“Master Yoda,” Mace says with a bow of his head.

“Heard from you we had not. Concerned we were becoming.”

“I apologize, Master. Things are not... what we expected.”

“Hmmm, yes,” the little green Jedi nods with closed eyes. “Much trouble I sense. Tied it is with the dark side of the Force. In great danger I fear Master Kenobi is.”

“Yes, Master. It seems that Kenobi has been struck by... something,” Mace finishes unsatisfied with his own word choice. He motions for Anakin to step forward and then Anakin tells the ancient master the same story he told the Korun Council member moments ago. Mace takes over the story after the rescue. He reports on the status of Obi-Wan’s condition and his concerns over the box. Yoda sits patiently until both Jedi have relayed all there was to tell.

“Right to be concerned you are. Familiar this is not. Alert the Council and consult with Madame Jocasta I will.”

“Thank you, Master,” Mace bows thinking that the communication was about to end, but it appeared that the small master still had more to say though his mouth remained shut in a thin line.

“Is there something else, Master?” he asks. Yoda’s ears droop slightly as he knows his next statements will not be well received, but that it must be said.

“If infected by the dark side of the Force Kenobi is, best it may be for now to sever his connection,” he finishes. For a moment, there is a flicker of emotion across Mace’s usually inscrutably stoic expression. Anakin is oblivious to the Council member’s flash of feeling, but the subtle showing is not lost on the Grand Master. Mace sighs heavily.

“Do you truly believe that is the best course of action?”

“A solution it is not, but hope I do it is enough until an answer we may find. Contact you when more I have,” Yoda answers sadly. Mace nods.

“I understand,” he says then he terminates the transmission. He turns to Anakin with an uncharacteristically somber expression that immediately sets the younger knight on edge.

“What did he mean by sever his connection?”

Mace looks directly at Anakin.

“What do you know about Force collars?”

* * * * *

“Obi-Wan always said that these were abominations.”

“They are, but sometimes they are necessary,” Mace sighs almost inaudibly. Almost. Anakin turns the metal collar in his hand. He feels the weight of it, runs his fingers over the smooth cold surface, and studies the pale blue light emanating from its base. It looks so innocuous and yet, if he is to believe all he had heard about the device, he is holding evil incarnate wrapped in a shiny skin of metal.

“Have you ever...” Anakin starts, but for some reason his throat constricts and his mouth becomes instantly dry. Mace saves him the trouble of finishing.

“Yes,” he says with a nod. Anakin finally looks up from the device in his hands and meets the gaze of the Korun Council member.

“What does it feel like?” Anakin asks and for the first time in his life Anakin can see traces of emotion break through the master’s usually perfect mask of immutable serenity. Mace closes his eyes as his mind recalls the memory. When he opens his eyes again his expression reflects his typical Jedi stoicism.

“It feels like... soul death,” he answers finally. “But I believe Obi-Wan would prefer it to actual death and we are running out of time.”

The two Jedi stare at each other, their silence straining under the oppressive weight of what they know is to come. Clone trooper and 501st Chief Medic, Kix, had been standing on the other side of the bay attending to a clone trooper with a blaster burn on his shoulder. The medic is well aware of the topic under discussion between the two Jedi and he figures it will be best if he gives them a bit of space. He is just finishing wrapping a bacta bandage around his patient’s wounded shoulder when he sees General Windu wave him over.

“Yes, General?”

“We are ready to proceed,” Mace replies. He glances down at his fellow Council member and friend, then his gaze returns to the medic. “He will need to be awake for this. It is the only way we can be certain it is working.”

Kix nods and moves to collect the necessary stimulant. Hypo-injector in hand, he moves beside Windu, leans forward and injects his patient. It only takes a few seconds for the drug to take effect. Obi-Wan groans softly as he pushes back toward consciousness. Mace reaches over toward Anakin.

“We should do it now before he fully wakes up. It will be easier on him,” he says his hand asking for the collar, but Anakin stares at his former master, shaking his head.

“No, I’ll do it,” he tells Mace, who nods. Anakin leans forward and places the collar around Obi-Wan’s neck. Under him, Obi-Wan continues to stir, his eyes darting behind semi-closed lids. Anakin takes a deep breath and snaps the collar closed.

The reaction is immediate.

“Ugghhh!” Obi-Wan half screams, half moans as his eyes flash open. He pulls against his restraints, back arching, eyes wide with fear and panic. Mace leans forward and places a hand on his shoulder gently pushing him back against the bed.

“Obi-Wan, it’s alright. You’re alright. We had to put a Force collar on you. You must try to remain calm.”

“Master,” Anakin says leaning in. “I am so sorry, but we had to. You were dying and we had to.”

Obi-Wan stops pulling against his restraints. His body sags lifelessly back onto the bed, but he cannot calm himself. The best he can manage is to shut his eyes and fight to suppress the wracking sobs desperately trying to escape his body. The Force crippled Jedi only whimpers quietly as his sweat soaked form violently shivers.

“Is this... normal?” the medic trooper asks the two Generals. Mace nods.

“Yes. It should pass after a few minutes. The initial separation is always... traumatic,” he replies his hand still on Obi-Wan’s shoulder in an attempt to offer his friend some comfort. Anakin rests one hand on Obi-Wan’s chest the other on his forehead where he gently wipes away the beads of sweat and absently strokes sticky strands of ginger hair. Slowly, after several long and agonizing minutes, Obi-Wan’s frame ceases to tremble, his expression relaxes, and his eyes finally force themselves open.

“Master?”

“I... I’m... alright, Anakin,” Obi-Wan rasps. Kix disappears for a moment, returning with a glass of water. He moves to unfasten one of Obi-Wan’s wrist restraints when Mace stills his hands.

“Not yet,” he says flatly. Kix nods, albeit reluctantly. He holds the glass to Obi-Wan’s lips with one hand, the other he places behind Obi-Wan’s head to help support him and ease the strain on his neck and shoulders. Obi-Wan takes several satisfying sips of the precious liquid before falling back onto his pillow.

“Thank you,” he says, his voice clearer, but still weak. He lifts his eyes to Mace. “How long?”

“Just until we can determine what is causing this and how to stop it.”

Obi-Wan nods, but his friend can tell he is not pleased with the answer.

“If there were any other way,”

“I understand,” Obi-Wan says cutting the Council member off.

“How do you feel, Master?” Anakin asks then he realizes the stupidity of the question and feebly tries again. “I mean... other than... you know, the collar... do you still...”

“Want to kill you?” Obi-Wan finishes, his voice strangely detached from his words. “No, I don’t feel that anger, that,” he pauses as he searches for the right word. “That darkness right now.”

“That’s good. That means it’s working right?” Anakin says as he looks to Mace for confirmation. “We can take off the restraints.”

Mace looks to Obi-Wan who shakes his head.

“No, Anakin. I don’t think that is wise,” Obi-Wan says as he closes his eyes. For a moment he is silent as he grimaces and then swallows thickly. He opens his eyes and looks at his fellow Jedi.

“No,” he repeats. “When the... darkness takes me, I don’t have much warning. Until we know the Force collar is preventing that from happening again... it’s better to leave things as they are,” Obi-Wan finishes with a sigh. Mace nods and lightly squeezes his shoulder.

“Agreed. We shall reach Coruscant in two days. If you suffer no attacks during that time we will remove the restraints.”

“Right now, you just need to rest, Master,” Anakin says as he begins to stroke Obi-Wan’s forehead again. “We’ll get to the Temple, we’ll fix this, and then we’ll get this thing off of you. I promise.”

Obi-Wan nods his head and closes his eyes.

“I know, Anakin. Don’t worry, I’ll be fine,” he answers confidently, but his confidence is a lie. He only hopes that Anakin does not see his hollow words for what they are because Obi-Wan knows he has not the strength to comfort his former apprentice. It is all he can do to keep from collapsing into tears himself.

* * * * *

For Obi-Wan Kenobi existence has been reduced to a small square of white ceiling tile. There is no more and no less to life than this—a tiny blank patch, both white and empty. Such is his life without the Force.

Cloth-lined restraints on his wrists and ankles keep him uncomfortably immobile, but it doesn’t matter. He doesn’t care. He has no wish to move, no desire to be comfortable.

At first he had been cold. For this, Kix had provided him a blanket, then two, then he increased the ambient temperature of the room. It wasn’t until the medical bay had been made uncomfortably warm to its other inhabitants that Obi-Wan realized that the cold he felt was not from without, but from within. Understanding this, accepting it, Obi-Wan allows the chill to move over and through him. It painfully freezes his bones and tries to still his breathing. It is a soft suffocation he suffers; one that he knows will never end in death. It will simply never end.

He stares blankly at his ceiling, his little square of existence. He knows that if he looks to his side he will find Anakin asleep in a chair beside his bed, his leg propped up awkwardly on a stool. He knows that every four hours Mace will return, like a mother bird checking on her young. He will stand by his bed. His eyes will ask the question his lips will not.

Are you alright?

Obi-Wan will nod giving, wordlessly, the answer the other Jedi needs to hear.

I'm alright.

It is a lie.

The older master will touch his shoulder, nod, and leave. After the departure of the Council member, Kix will check on his Jedi patient. He, too, will ask questions, but he will use his voice.

"Are you hungry? Thirsty? Are you still cold? Are you in pain?"

To all of these questions Obi-Wan will give the same response. The same lie.

"No."

His duty met, the medic will return to his other patients. Now it is Anakin's turn. He will lean close to the bed and take Obi-Wan's left hand and squeeze it gently. He will speak his question softly near his mentor's ear.

"What can I do, Master?"

Obi-Wan will lie to this one as he has lied to the two who came before.

"I'm fine, Anakin. You should rest."

Anakin will reluctantly let go of the slightly clammy hand of his former master, but not before giving it another short squeeze, an attempted show of affection and reassurance. In four hours the broken dance will begin again. So, Obi-Wan will wait. He will stare blankly at his patch of ceiling white, now the sum total of his being, and he will wait.

Chapter 6: Forced Deprivation

“I have good news. We will be arriving at the Temple within the hour,” Mace says as he offers his friend a warm, and rare, smile. “As promised we can take these off of you.”

Obi-Wan, who until now had only been staring quietly at the ceiling now turned to his friend, a flicker of hope illuminating the previously dull blue-grey eyes.

“The collar?” he asks his voice quivering slightly. Mace’s smile disappears and his more characteristic frown returns. He places a hand on Obi-Wan’s shoulder and sighs.

“I’m sorry, Obi-Wan. I thought you understood. The collar has to stay on,” he pauses. “I’m sorry.”

“Oh,” Obi-Wan replies his eyes noticeably dimmer once more. He turns his attention back to the ceiling. “Of course.”

He stops and closes his eyes for a few moments as he searches for his center; something that days ago was effortless to find, but lately has proved ever more elusive. He begins to wonder if he ever really had a center at all. Obi-Wan opens his eyes again and turns his gaze back to his friend.

“Yes, it will be nice to move again,” he begins then he pulls lightly at his wrist restraints. “If you would.”

He offers Mace a weak smile pouring as much sincerity into the gesture as possible.

It is not nearly enough to fool the older Jedi.

“Obi-Wan,” Mace starts as he unlatches one wrist then the other. “I... know what you are feeling... what that... thing makes you feel,” he continues as he unfastens Obi-Wan’s ankles. He then turns and looks his fellow Councilor in the eyes. “I’m here if you need to talk,” he offers in a voice much softer than his usual tone. He takes one of Obi-Wan’s hands in his placing his free hand on Obi-Wan’s back as he helps the Jedi rise to a seated position.

“Thank you,” Obi-Wan mutters as he rubs one wrist and flexes his stiff fingers experimentally. Satisfied with the noted dexterity, he slides off the medical couch careful to allow his aching and complaining muscles time to adjust. Mace rounds the bed to stand beside him.

“Go slowly. You have been lying down for quite some time,” the older master admonishes as he reaches out to assist the younger man. Obi-Wan shoots a glare at him that could melt durasteel.

“Mace,” he warns as he pulls away from the other Jedi. “Don’t,” he finishes. Mace’s frown deepens as he crosses his arms over his chest, but he remains silent much to Obi-Wan’s relief. He had already suffered Anakin’s constant hovering and worry and he was grateful for the reprieve when Kix called him away to remove the bacta cast from his thigh. To Obi-Wan’s great annoyance, however, Mace entered the medical bay scant moments after Anakin’s departure.

Obi-Wan is tired. He is cold and he is miserable and Mace’s mothering was wearing on his already fraying patience. No, not patience. His patience had evaporated the moment that infernal contraption was placed around his neck. Mace is getting on Obi-Wan’s nerves. All of them were. Both Jedi’s presence, well intentioned as their motives might be, were overwhelming and grating to Obi-Wan, but he cannot, must not let them see that if he can help it. Mace studies Obi-Wan closely for several seconds. He opens his mouth as if to speak, but he aborts the attempt when the main door to the medical bay slides open with a quiet hiss.

“Master!” Anakin greets enthusiastically. Obi-Wan nods his response, attempting something akin to a smile through his tight lips. Obi-Wan may not have any access to the Force, but Mace does and he can sense the steady increase in tension from the ginger-headed Jedi.

“When we land,” Mace starts as he steps forward taking command of the conversation and the immediate attention off of Obi-Wan. “The Council will want to hear our report, but,” he pauses as he turns to Obi-Wan. “I believe Skywalker and I can handle it. You should go to the Healer’s Ward. If the Council requires additional information you can see to it later.”

“I should go with Obi-Wan,” Anakin protests, but Mace raises his hand calling for silence from the young knight.

“The Council will require a complete report, Skywalker. Your presence is mandatory. Kenobi’s is not,” he says in a tone that brooks no further argument. Even without the aid of the Force Obi-Wan can tell his former padawan is fuming. Though Obi-Wan is thankful for Mace’s help evading Anakin and the tediousness of the Council, Obi-Wan knows that he is more experienced with handling an angry Anakin.

“It would certainly be a great help if you could go in my place, Anakin. I am quite tired.”

Anakin turns his gaze to Obi-Wan, his expression immediately softening.

“Of course, Master. I’ll... come check on you later?” he asks oddly hesitant. Obi-Wan can tell that this whole... experience has unnerved the young man, but in his current state he cannot bring himself to help Anakin sort through his emotions when he hasn’t had a moment to deal with his own.

“Yes, I’d like that,” Obi-Wan answers. His words effectively mollify the knight, but to Obi-Wan they are indeed just words; a series of sounds strung together to appease those around him. Words, at the moment, are a means to an end for Obi-Wan—a way to, hopefully, get his well-meaning friends to finally leave him alone.

“We will be landing soon,” Mace intones interrupting the brief silence. “I put some clean robes in the refresher for you. I also left you my cloak. You can return it to me later,” he says then, with a nod, the Council member leaves the medical bay gesturing for Anakin to follow. For a moment, Anakin hesitates, but then Obi-Wan offers a half-grin and it seems to soothe the Jedi’s conscience enough to allow him to leave.

Obi-Wan sighs heavily, his head and shoulders drooping in an exhaustion that seems as mental as it is physical; perhaps even more so. Still absently rubbing at his newly freed wrists, Obi-Wan makes his way to the bay’s refresher. He steps inside and notes that the unit is larger than usual; most likely to better accommodate injured or recovering patients.

“Injured or recovering patients,” he thinks to himself as he sheds the dull white medical tunic and trousers. “I wonder which one am I?” With a shake of his head he steps into the shower. He adjusts the temperature to his usual setting and stands, eyes closed, under the jets of water, but the tepid deluge does nothing to warm him. Obi-Wan increases the temperature slightly.

Nothing. Still cold.

He raises the temperature again. The balmy droplets pelt his body relentlessly, but their warmth fails to penetrate the flimsy barrier of his skin. He does not raise the temperature any more because he knows that if he goes any higher his ablutions will end in searing skin and more frantic worrying from others. Instead, he gives up on being warm and begins to cleanse himself. As he does so his thoughts are vacant, his movements automatic until fingers brush across his neck and encounter the thick metal that rests there. Obi-Wan lets his fingers trace the smooth edge of his collar. His collar. A shiver races down the Jedi’s spine causing the small hairs on his body to stand over puckered skin. Obi-Wan shakes his head and releases a breath he had been unaware he was holding. He places his hands on the wall in front of him letting his head hang down limply between his arms. The jets of water beat out a calming tattoo on his back and shoulders, massaging tense and weary muscles. Drops splash against his head, traveling down the silken tendrils of his hair before running down the soft contours of his face; the warm waters joining the salty rivulets streaming in well-practiced silence from his eyes.

* * * * *

The Council meeting proceeded exactly as Mace expected. Skywalker, though clearly annoyed that his presence had been requested, dutifully recited the events leading up to his

and Obi-Wan's rescue including playing the message Xanatos had left with the box. From there, Mace took over explaining Obi-Wan and the mystery box's confounding test results, the placement of the Force collar, and the collar's temporary success. The different Councilor's had asked their questions, proffered different theories, suggested possible solutions and courses of action, but eventually the room of learned Jedi fell into a contemplative yet unmistakably melancholy silence born of an undeniable truth: none of them knew how to help Obi-Wan.

At the conclusion of the Council session, the various members had each gone about their way only Mace, Yoda, and Plo Koon remained in the now empty chambers. Together the trio moved down the halls, their pace slow to accommodate the eldest master.

"Your choice it was to hide Kenobi from the Council, hmmm?" the small master asks Windu as he pokes the Councilor in the leg with his gimer stick. Quite used to the Grand Master's wizened abuse, Mace simply straightens his robes with a light sigh.

"I did not 'hide' him from the Council. I just thought he might need... that he would be better off if..." Mace pauses searching for the right way to phrase his concerns without offending the masters.

"Without stares and questions from his fellows?" Yoda supplies. Mace nods. Master Plo quietly interlaced his long claw-like fingers.

"How is Kenobi faring under the collar?" the Kel Dor master asks, his baritone voice distorted by his antiox breath mask. Mace clasps his hands behind his back and shakes his head.

"He is struggling. Since he cannot release to the Force, his emotions threaten to overwhelm him and he is quite uncertain, but he is trying desperately to appear in control," he finishes. Master Yoda nods his head in agreement, his eyes settled on some distant memory.

"Yes, much like his master he is. Very stubborn he can be. Ask for help he will not."

"In light of this situation, perhaps, when this is resolved, our approach to training may reflect what we have learned. At least with the knights," Plo pauses in thought, "perhaps with the padawans and initiates."

Mace suddenly halts in his tracks. Not expecting the abrupt stop the other two masters pause a step or two ahead of the him. Plo turns to Mace who regards him with wide, incredulous eyes.

"Are you suggesting we put Force collars on children?"

Master Plo crosses his arms over his chest, his expression serene as always.

"I am suggesting we train Jedi to be prepared for the possibility of Force deprivation."

"But they're children!"

"They are Jedi," Plo answers calmly. It is the master's calm that reminds Mace to find his own. After taking a few centering breaths the Korun master resumes his argument.

"With respect, Master," Mace speaks his voice calm, his tone even. "You have never had to wear one of those things. It cannot be prepared for. And to voluntarily inflict it upon another... on one of our own..." he pauses. "I will have no part of it and I will fight such a policy if the Council ever considered implementing it."

"Premature this discussion is," Yoda interrupts drawing the attention of the two taller masters. "Focus we should on Kenobi. Help from us all he will need if this he is to survive."

Mace nods silently as he resumes their walk. The other Councilors fall into step beside him.

"Yes, we all need to work as one to find a solution, but I think we should be careful not to... smother him in our concern," Mace finishes his tone unusually hesitant and awkward.

"Are you saying we should isolate him?" Master Plo asks, his slightly mechanized voice ever serene. Mace shakes his head with a frown squarely resting on his features.

"No, not at all. I am only suggesting that, in the beginning, Obi-Wan may choose to isolate himself and that we should respect it."

Master Yoda's ears twitch slightly as he ponders the words of his fellow Councilor.

"Hmmm," the Grand Master replies. "Your thoughts on this we will abide. Give Kenobi time we will while a cure we find."

"Now, if only we can find a way to keep Skywalker from hovering over him..."

"Concerned I would not be," Yoda answers a knowing smile playing across his ancient features. "The Chosen One he may or may not be, still no match he is for Master Che..."

* * * * *

When Mace first offered Obi-Wan the use of his cloak he had wondered as to the Councilor's reasons, but as he climbed the steps to the Temple he was glad to have it. As the trio crossed the threshold, Obi-Wan had instinctively pulled himself deeper into the darkness of the cloak's hood. Usually, returning to the bright and vibrant halls of the Temple was a joyful, soul-warming experience. The presence of so many Force users always made the air buzz and pop with potential energy, yet it was tempered with an ever present undertone of peace and comforting tranquility. This was always how the Temple felt to him upon his many returns.

That is until today.

Today the Temple is a bleak and desolate place full of people yet woefully empty. Without his Force sense, Obi-Wan finds the once familiar halls barren, strange, and foreign. It seems to him as just another building, not his home.

For the first time since he was a teen and still growing into his body, Obi-Wan feels self-conscious. He feels that somehow all who pass him can see through the folds of his cloak to the cursed metal hiding underneath his chin and all the Jedi, despite their friendly faces and sympathetic glances, will suddenly recognize him for the Force forsaken wretch that he is. Obi-Wan tries to retreat further into his hood, his head hanging low. If his companions notice his change in posture, they don't speak it, but instead separate in silence as Obi-Wan makes his way to the only part of the Temple he has ever actively avoided—the Healer's Ward.

Still wrapped tightly in his borrowed cloak, Obi-Wan steps into the brilliantly white and sterile halls of the ward. He turns to the reception desk and finds a drowsy Zabrack padawan lounging languidly in his seat. Obi-Wan approaches the desk hesitantly. He knows he must lower his hood, revealing to the world the shame he most fervently wishes to hide.

With a deep breath, Obi-Wan steps before the counter, his hood falling away at the slight urging of two unsteady and calloused hands.

"Yes, I.. um, need to see a healer," Obi-Wan says. The Zabrack youth unsuccessfully tries to stifle a yawn as he leans forward to type into his console.

"Name?"

"Obi-Wan Kenobi."

"Injury or illness?"

"Umm... illness," he stammers. The youth glances up at the Jedi, a somewhat bewildered expression on his heavily tattooed face. For a moment his eyes light upon the Force collar causing Obi-Wan to tug at the edges of his cloak, pulling it tighter under his chin. Slightly abashed, the youth returns his gaze to the screen before him.

“Yes, umm, go right in, Master Kenobi. You are expected.”

“Thank you,” Obi-Wan murmurs with a slight perfunctory nod. As he walks through the large doors leading into the main hallway, Obi-Wan can still feel the padawan’s wide eyes upon him. He ignores the gawking and steps into the main hall. For a moment, Obi-Wan just stands there, clutching at his cloak uncertain of where he should go, but quickly his indecisive ponderings are interrupted by a suspiciously young Nautolan female with large dark eyes and cerulean skin and head tresses. The girl is positively beaming.

“Oh! Master Kenobi! We’ve been expecting you. You can follow me please,” the girl says as she suddenly grasps Obi-Wan’s free hand and gently pulls him down the hall and into a private room. Inside and to his left there is a small couch, two uncomfortable—no, make that torturous looking flimsiplast chairs, and a large window framing a small portion of the Coruscant skyway. On his right there is a medical couch flanked at its head by various pieces of equipment and monitors. The whole room is infuriatingly white.

The bubbly padawan pulls him to the medical bed. She stands him in front of the couch and holds out her arms expectantly. It takes a few seconds for the master to realize what the girl wants. With a quiet sigh he shrugs off his last sense of security and hands it to the younger Jedi. She takes the cloak, folding it reverently over one arm then motions to the bed behind him. Obi-Wan slides onto the bed sitting on its edge his legs dangling in the air.

“Don’t be nervous. My master is an excellent healer,” the Nautolan offers with a smile so luminous it rivals that of Master Fisto’s. So enraptured by that smile, Obi-Wan starts when an unexpected, tiny palm cups the side of his face. Immediately, the padawan’s smile disappears and in its place a frown forms.

“Oh,” she says softly as she closes her eyes. “You mustn’t be so sad. The cold lies. You are not alone and the quiet is not forever,” she whispers as she opens her eyes revealing those wondrous deep maroon orbs. Obi-Wan is speechless, his voice taken by the child’s unexpected words of comfort. For several seconds the two beings silently stare into each other, her hand still resting on his bearded cheek.

“Towani,” a voice calls out interrupting the momentary connection between the two disparate Jedi. The padawan snatches her hand back to her side as if suddenly the contact with Obi-Wan’s skin had turned painful. The bubbiness is gone, the girl’s vivacious spirit replaced by submissive posture and a cowered gaze.

“Master, forgive me,” the padawan answers softly. Master Vokara sighs deeply and when she speaks her voice is gentler than Obi-Wan has ever heard it.

“It is alright, child. We will speak of this later. Return to your duties,” the Master says with a carefully neutral expression that shifts to one of concern as her padawan hastily makes her exit. Once the two masters are alone Obi-Wan turns his gaze to Vokara.

“I did not know you had taken another padawan,” he says his voice and manner calmer than it has been in his recent memory. Obi-Wan’s words seem to snap the healer out of her reverie. Her eyes fall upon her patient as she crosses to stand before him.

“Nor had I plans to take another, but as I’m sure you can see, Towani is... special,” Vokara answers with a warm smile, her lekku twitching slightly.

“Indeed,” Obi-Wan answers and again it is his voice that seems to drag an unwilling master back to the present. Vokara Che’s gentle expression disappears behind her typical mask of neutrality, the twinkle in her eyes replaced by a coldness of practiced discipline.

“I have read the medic’s medical report, but I am eager to hear from you,” she says with the detached coolness Obi-Wan remembers, and loathes, so well. Wearily, he launches into the tale of the past few days, the brief tranquility found in Towani’s gaze all but forgotten under the scrutiny of Vokara’s eyes and the impersonal thoroughness of her Force probes and examination. Finally the master healer steps back and coolly eyes her patient.

“The collar?” she asks vaguely. Obi-Wan raises an eyebrow.

“Yes?”

“How are you feeling?”

“Never better.”

“Master Kenobi,” she replies her voice and tone laced with unmistakable warning. Fairly exhausted, Obi-Wan easily relents.

“I am... as expected,” he answers hoping his tormentor will be satisfied. “Healers,” he sighs to himself.

“Remove your robes.”

“Excuse me?” Obi-Wan starts, a noticeable heat flashing in his cheeks.

“I still have an examination to conduct. Now, remove your robes and tunic. I need to get a look at these lesions...”

* * * * *

Four scans, three blood samples, two biopsies, and a half-naked Jedi later, Obi-Wan is allowed to re-don his robes. He hears Vokara speak as he adjusts his under tunic.

“Your condition at this time does not require that you remain over,” she begins, but she is interrupted by raised voices from down the hall. Obi-Wan pauses, his hands stilling on the clasp of his belt.

“I want to see Obi-Wan!”

“Knight Skywalker, sir, if you just,”

“I want to see him now!”

Vokara turns her attention back to a frozen Kenobi.

“I will have someone bring you something for late meal and a change of clothes,” she says as she turns to leave. Driven purely by instinct, Obi-Wan jumps forward, reaching out a hand to stop the healer from leaving.

“Wait! You said I didn’t have to stay,” he nearly yells, a smattering of desperation leaking into his voice much to the Jedi’s dismay. Vokara turns to her frantic patient.

“If it is your wish to return to your quarters you may or,” the master healer pauses, a tiny smile spreading across her usually flat expression. “You may remain here for... observation. Of course that would mean absolutely no visitors during that time.”

Obi-Wan feels his momentary panic fade as understanding dawns over his addled mind. He straightens his posture, relaxing a bit as he casually strokes his beard.

“Well, when you put it that way,” he smiles a real smile. It is small, but it is the first time one has graced his face in quite awhile. He nods and returns to his bed. Suddenly, the smile fades, its life all too brief.

“Anakin will not be pleased,” he offers, his serious and weary tone returning. Both Jedi can still hear the commotion occurring down the hall as his former padawan relentlessly argues for admittance. Master Vokara crosses her arms over her chest, her left eyebrow raised, her twin lekku twitching like angry tentacles.

“His pleasure is not my concern. Skywalker will abide,” the Twi’lek answers, then with a nod she leaves Obi-Wan in the white room. He rubs his hand over his face and releases a desolate sigh. He is finally alone and alone he is finally able to address the abject loneliness he feels, especially in the presence of others. A loneliness that grows inside his soul slowly seeking to consume him from the inside out.

* * * * *

1 week later...

"I never thought I'd see the day that Obi-Wan Kenobi chose to stay in the Healing Ward," a deep voice calls from the doorway. Obi-Wan pulls his attention away from the window where he is seated and looks at his visitor with a blank expression. It is not unlike the typically Jedi detachment most of his fellows wear, but this expression Mace knows, is not reflective of calm emotions, but a bleak lack of them.

"Yes, well..." Obi-Wan answers with a slight shrug of his shoulders instead of his typical wit. "How did you..."

"Get past Vokara?" Mace finishes for him. "Believe it or not, we are old friends."

"Friends?" Obi-Wan repeats, his incredulity at this revelation showing clearly in his blue-gray eyes. "Hmmm, perhaps the two of you bonded over a deep love of frowning."

Obi-Wan's attempted teasing relieves a small amount of the tension created the moment the Councilor stepped in the room. Obi-Wan doesn't need to feel the Force to know that his friend is the appointed bearer of bad news. Mace's hesitation in approaching him is evidence enough. Obi-Wan rakes his fingers through his hair. He quietly steels himself for what he knows will be an unpleasant conversation.

"Let's hear it," Obi-Wan says. A flash of surprise passes over Mace's chestnut eyes, but then quickly disappears. With or without the Force, he knows Obi-Wan is ever observant.

"The Council has spoken at great length about you and your... condition."

"And?"

"And nothing," Mace concludes with a sigh. "We have no idea how to proceed. We have searched the archives and the Force, but an answer still eludes us."

"I see," is all Obi-Wan can say in response. Mace takes a few moments to study his friend. Obi-Wan looks tired. His usual boyish face is drawn in harsh shadows. Eyes that were once bright now are dim and sunken. His complexion pallid, his usually meticulous coif is lightly mussed upon his crown, a wayward strand hanging loosely over his forehead. He is not wearing his robes only a simple blue tunic and pants. Instead of his soft leather boots, his feet are bare against the cold floor. Mace's frown deepens. The Council leader is unsure whether his next words will foster hope or hurt in the man before him. He feels they will likely do both.

"Master Yoda would like to try something."

“Try?” Obi-Wan repeats with a slightly raised brow. Mace feels a slight tug at his mouth. True enough, the ancient master never tries to do anything. He either does or he does not.

“He wants to do something, but the... results are... far from predictable. The Council feels his proposal is... dangerous, but has agreed to allow it should you choose to proceed.”

“What is it he wants to do?”

“Remove your collar.”

Chapter 7: The Agony of Silence

“Summoned me you did. Come I have,” a gravelly voice calls out from the doorway to the small medical suite. Obi-Wan spins away from his view of Coruscant’s skyway, startled by the Grand Master’s seemingly sudden appearance. Obi-Wan sighs, his shoulders slumping noticeably. He is tired of being startled, tired of being surprised, tired of only being aware of the presence of others when he could see or hear them. The collar left him deficient, vulnerable and he abhorred the feeling. He resented the whole situation and he hated the Force for willing this to happen.

Obi-Wan unclenches his fists and takes a deep breath, then another... and another. It is several slow passing moments before he feels remotely calm enough to at least pretend he is in control of himself before addressing his visitor. Yoda waits patiently for the younger man to compose himself before tottering into the room and comfortably installing his diminutive form on to one of the flimsiplast chairs.

“Master,” Obi-Wan says giving the older Jedi a deep bow. Yoda studies him intently for a moment before closing his eyes. Obi-Wan, unable to wait patiently, quietly walks over to his medical sleeper couch and takes a seat, crossing his legs before him in a meditative pose. By the time he has made himself comfortable the large, golden eyes of the master are once again resting languidly upon him.

“Troubled you are. Very troubled.”

Obi-Wan’s lips thin into a flat line. That was an understatement if he ever heard one.

“Concerns you have about my proposal, do you?”

“Grave,” Obi-Wan replies. “Master, when it... happens, I am unable to control my actions. I fear what I may do.”

“To face one’s fears is the way of the Jedi.”

“I’m no Jedi,” Obi-Wan says sullenly. Without warning, a gimer stick strikes a defenseless shin.

“Ow!”

“Earned that you did,” Yoda nods as Obi-Wan absently rubs the offended body part.

“A vocalization of your disapproval would have been more than sufficient, Master,” he responds with a glare. Yoda, impervious to such childish displays, merely shakes his head.

“Have listened you would not,” Yoda intones then the small Jedi releases a touch of sorrow into the Force and a sigh into the air. He gazes upon the young man. “Not a Jedi, why think you?”

“A Jedi feels the Force. I cannot,” Obi-Wan answers plainly.

“Still inside you the Force is. Temporary is the block. Know this you do.”

“Do I?” Obi-Wan snaps. Immediately, his eyes widened in horror as he remembers to whom he is speaking. Quickly he drops his head as low as the bulk of the collar will allow.

“Forgive me, Master. I meant no disrespect.”

“And yet disrespect you do,” the ancient master replies accusingly. Obi-Wan lifts his head, his blue-gray eyes expressing a shame and hurt that his voice cannot.

“Yourself you disrespect,” Yoda adds finally. Some of the sting abates in Obi-Wan’s eyes, but the shameful truth of the Grand Master’s statement hangs heavy in his heart. The two masters sit in something less than companionable silence for a long while; one attempting to marshal his thoughts, the other knowing the former needed time to accomplish this. Finally, a soft dulcet tone disturbs the quiet.

“What is it you propose?”

“See the effect we must so to better understand we can,” Yoda answers calmly. Obi-Wan nods, but keeps his gaze firmly planted on a patch of white floor a half meter away from his bed.

“I will turn violent, Master Yoda. You must take appropriate precautions to ensure that I am not allowed to injure anyone.”

“Supervised by the full Council you will be.”

Obi-Wan’s gaze turns to the old master in unequivocal shock.

“I do not think that wise. If things go badly,”

“Hmmp,” Yoda interrupts as he bangs his gimer stick soundly on the floor. “Believe so powerful you are to defeat eleven masters, hmmm? Perhaps the Chosen One you are. Grand Master of the Order you should be, hmmm?”

A flash of crimson flares in Obi-Wan’s sallow cheeks.

“No harm to you or by you will the Council allow.”

"Of course, Master," Obi-Wan offers contritely. Yoda's golden orbs eye him warily for a moment, then his ears lower, his lids droop as a new comprehension dawns over the wizened master.

"Safety is not your only fear. More there is. Still disturbed you are," the green Jedi states as he points his gimer stick at Obi-Wan's chest. "What fear you?" he asks, but to this Obi-Wan cannot respond. He turns his head away unable to look upon the warm, gimlet eyes that offer the promise of a sanctuary he dare not seek, the pain all more despairing should he not find it.

"Release your fears you must."

"You know I cannot."

"Released to the Force it does not have to be. Speak your fear, name it, this too is release," the ancient one says with a pat to the younger's knee. Obi-Wan glances down at the small, gnarled claw resting on his leg. He lets his gaze drift slightly upward and settle upon the familiar visage of the small master. He swallows the large lump seeking permanent residence in his throat.

"I-I'm afraid of taking the collar off... of feeling the Force again only to... lose it once more," he says his voice dipping nearly to a whisper. "I do not think I can bear it..."

* * * * *

"Are you ready, Master Kenobi?" Master Plo asks serenely, his voice carrying no undercurrents of haste or worry, his Force signature its radiating its typical peaceful glow. Indeed to feel the Force in the room is to feel tranquility lined with clarity of purpose. Eleven Councilors and two master soul healers encircle the small space, their combined Force presence clarion bright even in a Temple filled with servants of light. The air itself seems to swell with a palpable serenity that warmly caresses the sentient beings found within its welcoming and familiar embrace. Every Jedi in the room can feel it, that is, every Jedi except... one.

That one feels nothing, no warmth, no welcome, and certainly no serenity. To him the room is cold, the air stifling. The thirteen robed figures that surround him are not bastions of peace, but matter without substance, placid facades masking unknown minds and uncertain motives. Still, Obi-Wan trusts them, but it is no longer the trust born of interconnectedness; this is a blind trust wrought as much from past experience as current desperation.

"Obi-Wan?" Mace calls, his voice calm, but a trace of worry glimmers in his mahogany eyes. It is then Obi-Wan realizes that he never answered Plo's question. More than ever

now he can feel the stares of his fellow Councilors, but without the Force he can feel nothing more. Nothing at all.

Obi-Wan sighs and nods his head, unable or unwilling to trust his voice not to betray him in front of his peers. For a moment, so short it is barely noticeable, Mace hesitates, but then he nods to Master Gallia who seals the room. Masters Piell and Tiin approach Obi-Wan in the center of the room. No sabers grace either Jedi's hips. None of the Council members or the healers are armed, a precaution Obi-Wan himself had demanded and to which the Council graciously conceded. Piell stands before Obi-Wan his remaining eye staring sternly up at the bearded master.

"Your hands," he orders in his heavily accented and gravelly timbre. Obi-Wan obediently extends both his hands and around his slender wrists a pair of binders is locked into place. Another precaution. Satisfied the restraints are secure, Piell looks up at Tiin with the briefest of nods. Tiin glances at Obi-Wan. He looks squarely into the blue-gray eyes before him holding the man's stare for several seconds before reaching around the man's neck.

"We are all here with you," he whispers softly, but his voice holds a determined will, a shared strength he is offering to the wounded Jedi. Obi-Wan closes his eyes.

"I am ready."

Tiin releases the collar.

He is not ready. He has been ready all his life.

If Obi-Wan had ever taken the time to ponder what it must have felt like to be born, he might have thought it felt like this. A sudden breath of air after near suffocation. A rush of blood to increasingly deadened limbs. An explosion of energy after a long period of idleness. Stars dance before his eyes, nameless and effusive joy binds to his every cell. Light blinding and pure, warmth pervasive and encompassing, and fullness, blessed fullness. He is whole again, complete. The sheer ecstasy of it brings him crashing to his knees in sublime surrender to the moment. His mouth opens with a gasp, but no words escape. The reunion is beyond words, beyond the limited confines and strictures of language. It is transcendent. It is transplendent. A few tears escape their watery blue-gray prison, salinated celebrants of the Jedi's unadulterated rapture.

It takes several moments for the Jedi to compose himself, but there is no rush, no hurried undercurrents or urgency. He is allowed to pass through his exaltations in his own time, permitted to linger in the wondrous, ephemeral abundance that is the Force.

A genuine and profound smile drifts lazily across Obi-Wan's face and settles comfortably about his eyes and mouth.

“Thank you,” he whispers, his eyes still closed. He doesn’t see it, but he senses Master Tiin’s nod of acknowledgement. Obi-Wan remains kneeling on the floor. Without further delay he seeks to plunge himself into a deep meditation attempting to lose himself in the warm and innumerable eddies of the Force, but just like before when he and Anakin were stranded on that empty moon meditation eludes him; the Force slipping out of his fingers like melted snow. He feels a familiar Force presence approach and settle down next to him. A hand lightly rests upon his knee.

“Let me help you,” the placid and regal voice of Master Adi Gallia intones. Obi-Wan nods and together they attempt to sink themselves deep into the arms of the Force. He allows Adi to be both his guide and his anchor, yet even with the master’s help, Obi-Wan is unable to rest inside the supernal currents. Both Jedi open their eyes. Adi shakes her head.

“I do not understand,” she says. Obi-Wan shoots her a contemptuous glare.

“Why does that not surprise me.”

Mace steps forward.

“Master Gallia, move away from him,” he orders, but his voice is calm, his serene tone seeming to belie the clear undercurrent of urgency. Adi does not hesitate and slowly pulls away from her position by Obi-Wan’s side. She reassumes her place within the circle of Jedi.

“So, I have the attention of the entire Council,” Obi-Wan sneers as he rises to his feet. “I feel so special.”

“Special you are.”

Obi-Wan’s gaze snaps around and lands savagely on the short Grand Master. His lips curl, his yellow blood-shot eyes narrow in unveiled rage.

“Oh now you think so! As usual the Council’s alleged wisdom comes far too late!” he hisses. Yoda places both hands upon the gnarled top of his gimer stick and shakes his head.

“Speak you do with the voice of Obi-Wan, but Obi-Wan you are not.”

“Is that what you tell yourself? Does that make you feel better, Master?” Obi-Wan snarls stepping forward. “I assure you I am Obi-Wan Kenobi. I am exactly what the Jedi made me!”

“Full of darkness you are. Made this the Order did not,” Yoda answers calmly, his gravelly voice echoing throughout the chamber. Obi-Wan does not respond, instead he lowers his head and closes his eyes, his hands still bound and resting heavily in front of him. The Jedi around him all tense as each can feel the stricken Councilor pull the Force into to him in powerful and sickening waves of malice. In mere moments, the Force around Kenobi sparks and ripples, dark tendrils writhing and snapping wildly in all directions.

Suddenly, he unleashes the gathered power. In a mighty Force pull, Obi-Wan reaches behind Masters Gallia and Mundi ripping the reinforced durasteel door off its hinges. The twisted sheet of metal flies across the room in a deadly arc, nearly crushing the Jedi standing on the wall opposite. Obi-Wan uses the surprise to launch himself into a mighty Force leap through the now open portal, but an invisible hand stops him mid-flight. Held in place by the unseen hand of the Force, Obi-Wan searches for the manipulator, his gaze seething as his eyes light upon the diminutive master once again.

“Release me you insolent troll!” he yells, but Yoda’s focus remains undisturbed, tightly drawn around the fettered man. Masters Tiin and Piell step forward grasping Obi-Wan by either arm restraining him as much by muscle as by application of Force. Yoda steps forward, his gimer stick held absently in one hand, his other outstretched as he compels the struggling captive to his knees. Plo and Mace step behind the ancient master all three directly in front of a kneeling Obi-Wan. His tiny clawed hand still extended, Yoda reaches out and places small fingers upon Obi-Wan’s left temple.

“What... What do you think you’re doing! Let me go! Get out of my head!” he yells, but Tiin and Piell hold him tightly in place. Obi-Wan can feel the old master’s mental presence force his way into his mind, easily shattering his hastily erected shields. Once a path is cleared, Obi-Wan can feel others join in the Grand Master’s search. At least five minds press into his their probes tearing at his mind like lashes from an electro-whip. The five push further in sending their probes deeper and deeper until Obi-Wan shudders, releasing a piercing scream from deep inside himself. After a sickening long moment, the minds withdraw. Obi-Wan pants heavily, his frame limply hanging between the two masters still gripping his arms. As ever a rush of agony sweeps through him always worse than the one before. Obi-Wan groans and wretches. His thoughts fall into incoherence. His senses blinded by inescapable and searing pain that radiates through his every nerve burning him from the inside out. Hands are all around him, pulling him, pushing him, pawing him. Voices carry on around his head, meaningless noise, static playing in the background of his pain. His muscles seize, his lungs spasm. Coughs, dry and raking, tear from his chest. The metallic taste of blood fills his mouth. The desperate call of oblivion dances around the edges of his vision. More hands. A pressure against his skin, smooth... cold... metal...

Obi-Wan is once again plunged into the empty dark.

Chapter 8: Required Assistance

Some hours later...

“It is far worse than we feared.”

“Yes. Much darkness he bears. Consume him it will.”

“You mean it will kill him.”

“To destroy from within and without it does.”

“Then there is only one alternative. He will not like it. I do not like it.”

“Demand much of its servants the Force does.”

“This may be too much...”

“Meditate later on this we will.”

“Ugghhh...”

“He’s waking.”

“More rest he needs. Stressful was the experience. Sleep, young one. Much strength you will need in the trials to come.”

* * * * *

Many hours later... perhaps even days...

Obi-Wan’s head hurts, in fact, the very word “hurt” seems a woefully inadequate descriptor. The throbbing between his temples is nothing less than torturous; ever increasing by incalculable degrees with his every attempt at thought. Obi-Wan is in a particularly foul mood, his present pain only adding to his general malcontent. The tremors and nausea are not much help either; all gifts of the rather invasive and down right vicious mind probe from earlier. These new miseries only serve to compound his abject state under the weight of the damnable collar.

He had been allowed to touch the Force again, to feel the warmth and comfort of its embrace, to once again lose himself in the ephemeral plenum only to have that peace torn from him, stolen with a chilling and thunderous “click.”

Bile once again rises in his throat, but it isn't his nausea stirring, it is something deeper—a personal revulsion to his pitiful state of being. He crosses the small distance to his 'fresher. He hovers for a moment, but the nausea passes. He stands there staring at the stranger that shares his features; his features, but not his eyes. The stranger's eyes are dull, empty, joyless, eyes that barely reflect light and no longer reflect a soul. Obi-Wan shakes his head. Those can't be his eyes. Can they?

Inside he knows the truth. Obi-Wan knows that his is a half-life; eclipsed from the Light, but not quite in darkness—merely shadowed. His whole existence now a darkened formless mockery of another life. A brighter life. A life lost to him for now and perhaps, he knows, forever.

* * * * *

Some few days later...

“Master Kenobi, I had not expected to find you here. Tell me, have you discovered yet another way to injure yourself?” a stern Twi'lek asks brusquely as she stands before the younger master. Obi-Wan raises his hands pacifically.

“No, new wounds I assure you, Master. Only a few questions, please,” he answers. Vokara Che's eyebrows lift slightly in... amusement? Obi-Wan is only truly acquainted with the master healer's scowl (a match for Master Windu's any day) so this new expression is mildly puzzling.

“Ask,” she orders. Obi-Wan does not hedge or hesitate.

“The collar, what would happen if it is removed... permanently?”

Vokara, too, does not hedge or hesitate.

“Based on all the evidence, you will enter again into a state of dark psychosis, accelerating the already prolific spread of your current lesions, followed promptly by a catastrophic nervous disruption and complete organ dysfunction.”

“Meaning?”

Vokara sighs, whether in sympathy or frustration, Obi-Wan is not sure.

“Meaning if you remove the collar the ensuing fit will most likely kill you.”

“I see,” Obi-Wan responds surprisingly indifferent about the rather definitive assertion regarding his foreseeably painful demise.

“Master, I have the results you asked for,” a voice calls cheerily from down the hall. Soon, the two masters are joined by a familiar pair of gimlet eyes and an exceedingly handsome smile; a smile that Obi-Wan finds himself genuinely returning.

“It is good to see you again, Towani.”

“Master Kenobi,” the young Nautolan greets with a deep bow. For a long moment her midnight eyes hold his blue-gray hostage before Obi-Wan is forced to yield under the girl’s intense scrutiny. With a bit more curtness than he intends, Obi-Wan bows his head to the two Jedi healers.

“Master Che. Padawan,” he says then he turns to make a noticeably hasty exit. A small and somber voice fills the space left by the fleeing master.

“He is running out of time.”

* * * * *

Many more days later...

Obi-Wan stares out of the window of his small monastic cell. The skyways of Coruscant teem with activity. Trillions of beings traveling to and fro, hither and yon, carrying on with their daily lives in the close companionship of others. In the Temple too life is all around him. He can hear it, see it, taste it, touch it, smell it, but he can no longer feel it. The cones of his eyes function normally, but the colors he sees are muted, washed out by an overlapping pall of gray, a half-world for his half-life.

The door chime sounds.

“Come,” Obi-Wan calls after releasing a heavy sigh. He sorely does not want visitors, but this desire, like many others of late goes unfulfilled as Anakin steps into the room.

“They had me off-world. I only just found out what they did,” he says. Obi-Wan does not need the Force to recognize the anger and resentment hidden within the rich tones of the familiar voice.

“Your anger is inappropriate, Anakin. The Council was only acting as it felt best.”

“It was wrong.”

“It was necessary.”

“It was cruel.”

“Yes, it was,” Obi-Wan concedes finally. “But still necessary,” he finishes as he turns to face his visitor for the first time since his arrival. He moves forward intending to take a seat, but his progress is interrupted when he clumsily stubs his toe on the leg of his small desk.

“Blast it!” he exclaims. Anakin has the good sense not to say anything. The Force is ever present in their lives. A constant whisper of danger, warning, instruction, direction, and even flashes of things yet to come. Its presence not only aides in supernatural feats of speed, strength, agility, and endurance, but also heightened reflexes, senses, and general awareness. As a result, Jedi simply do not bump awkwardly into things and they certainly never stub their toes.

Obi-Wan relaxes the fists suddenly clenched at his sides as he releases a slow and steady breath. He is far from calm, but he is at least closer to the appearance of it. He takes a seat by the Sith-forsaken desk. Anakin leans against a bookshelf. Neither man says anything, the silence between them growing heavier with unuttered truths. Finally the mutual disquiet is interrupted by another chime at the door. Without any consultation, Anakin waves the portal open inviting the Korun Councilor inside the tiny sanctum. Mace notes Anakin’s presence with a nod.

“Skywalker,” he says, his rumbling baritone as mellifluous as summer thunder. Anakin politely nods back. Mace then turns his attention to the room’s owner.

“The Council has received your... request,” the Councilor states, a trace of irritation in his voice. Anakin looks to his former mentor for insight, but Obi-Wan offers none, simply nodding an acknowledgement to the master’s statement. Anakin turns to Mace.

“What request?”

“He has asked for the Force collar to be removed permanently,” Mace intones. Anakin straightens from his relaxed position.

“I thought if the collar were removed,”

"I'd turn into a dangerous, dark-sided lunatic? Yes, I will," Obi-Wan completes for his former student. "My request proposes several appropriate precautions to protect others from,"

"You," Anakin finishes, returning the interruption. Obi-Wan nods acknowledging both the gesture and the statement.

"Yes," he answers simply. Anakin throws up his hands in exasperation at his former mentor's ridiculously calm demeanor. The Korun Councilor, however, is not frustrated so easily.

"Permanent removal of the Force collar is tantamount to a death sentence," Mace pauses, a single condemning eyebrow raised. "But I suspect you already know that."

"Master Che was very forthcoming in providing me the salient details, yes," Obi-Wan answers with apparent aplomb. Now, it is Mace's turn at exasperation, but unlike the Knight he doesn't show it, choosing instead to maintain his display of Jedi calm.

"Obi-Wan," he begins, his tone unusually softened, his manner entreating. "I understand what you are going through, the loneliness, the... unnatural emptiness of every moment, but it is endurable," Mace ends knowing that his words are far from comforting, but hoping they are at least somewhat salutary. With a shake of Obi-Wan's head his fleeting hopes are quickly dashed.

"With respect, Master Windu," Obi-Wan starts, his formal appellation not escaping Mace's notice. "You were imprisoned when you were forced to wear a collar. You needed only to survive in it. What you and the Council are asking, what all of you are asking," he says his gaze moving to encompass Anakin as well, "is for me to live in it. It is something I cannot do."

"Suicide is not the Jedi way."

"But acceptance of harsh realities and acceptance of death is," Obi-Wan counters. "Please, do not fight me on this."

Mace opens his mouth to say something, but promptly closes it upon a moment's secondary review. Instead he sets his jaw tightly, his traditional scowl returning to his stony features.

"The Council will consider your petition in tomorrow's early session," the Councilor informs his fellow icily. Both Jedi bristle at the master's cold intonation, but neither speak. Mace opens the door and steps into the corridor, but pausing.

"Skywalker, a word," he growls. Reluctantly, Anakin follows the master out knowing his compliance is not only expected, it is required. Finally alone again, Obi-Wan releases a breath he did not know he was holding. He stands and, quite attentively, crosses back to his

window, condemned to merely look upon the vibrant dance of life to which he is no longer a partner.

* * * * *

The next morning...

The Council chambers have never not been intimidating. For as long as Obi-Wan can remember the round room with its floor to ceiling window panorama of Coruscant and intricately detailed flooring has always made him feel small. However, surrounded by the wisest of all the living Jedi, their eyes assessing him, their minds searching him, Obi-Wan feels more than small. He feels naked, raw, vulnerable. His limited shielding an insubstantial wisp against all but the gentlest of probes. Unable to seek comfort or protection within the Force, he pulls uncomfortably at the edges of his cloak before willing himself to still by placing his hands in opposite sleeves.

“Masters,” Obi-Wan greets with a formal bow. As is his custom, Master Windu opens the session with the clear-cut precision of a saber blade at full power.

“Master Kenobi, you come before this Council requesting a hearing of your petition to permanently remove your Force collar. Is this accurate?”

“It is, Master Windu.”

“Have you fully considered the consequences of such action?” the soft and well-reasoned voice of Ki-Adi-Mundi inquires.

“I have, Master Mundi.”

“And yet you would proceed with this course of action?” asks Adi Gallia, her regal and velvety tones echoing sweetly in the open space of the chamber.

“With the Council’s permission, yes,” Obi-Wan replies evenly. A disapproving “hmmph” is heard from the oldest of the masters, but otherwise the wizened Jedi says nothing. Master Plo Koon leans forward in his seat.

“This request seems most imprudent. A Jedi should display patience even under the most disagreeable circumstances.”

For those that can feel it, the Force momentarily sparks with Obi-Wan’s irritation, but he is able to quickly sweep the emotion aside in lieu of true release.

“With respect, Master Plo, I have been patient. Even for a Jedi, a time comes when patience must yield to acceptance.”

“And you believe you have reached that point?” Saesee Tiin follows.

“I do,” Obi-Wan answers honestly. At that, the Grand Master can no longer keep his peace. The clack of his gimer stick striking the hard floor resonates ominously throughout the chamber.

“Reckless this is! And foolish you are to presume what you do!”

“That is your opinion, Master,” Obi-Wan answers in an uncharacteristic and frankly dangerous show of impudence.

“My opinion indeed it is, young Master, but out voted I am.”

Obi-Wan’s ire slips off of him and is quickly replaced by a state of shock. He looks upon his fellow Council members, his eyes wide in surprise and hope.

“You have agreed to grant my request?”

“Yes,” Mace answers as he leans back in his seat and steepled his fingers. “But the Council asks something of you in return.”

Obi-Wan frowns. He knew this had been too easy; the questions too superficial not the razor-edged scraping of his moral and ethical center he had expected of a request for what was essentially Council assisted suicide.

“What would you have of me, Masters?”

“There has been... an offer,” Mace answers cryptically. Obi-Wan regards his Korun friend quizzically.

“What kind of offer?”

“An offer to help you.”

“From whom?”

“She has offered her assistance in this matter,” Mace replies, one eyebrow raised in compliment to the slight quirk tugging at his mouth. Obi-Wan’s brow wrinkles.

“She?” he repeats, then shortly after a warm breath of revelation rolls quietly through the Force. Obi-Wan stares at Mace who confirms his conclusion with a single nod.

“The Council would like you to meet with her before you decide to remove your collar. That is our request.”

“Very well,” Obi-Wan nods. “How long will it take to arrange a meeting?”

“She left for Coruscant four days ago and will arrive tomorrow,” Mace smiles. “She had a feeling she would be needed.”

Obi-Wan allows himself a small smile as well.

“Yes, I bet she did.”

Chapter 9: Simple Confusion

“Okay, I give up. Who is she? Oh, and hand me that micro-fuser,” Anakin says, his voice muffled by the speeder he just rolled under. A day had passed since his last “conversation” with his former master and Anakin still felt unbalanced. His anger and frustration still was like a haze burning across his mind. He needed a distraction so he went to where he could indulge in his brand of moving meditation—the Temple’s main hanger. Upon arriving, the Knight quickly displaced some maintenance droids from their project and began to work on the malfunctioning speeder himself.

For his part, Obi-Wan didn’t need the Force to find his former apprentice. The master was quite aware of the young man’s feelings when last they spoke and, knowing Anakin as he did, Obi-Wan headed straight to the main hanger bay in search of the young Knight.

Obi-Wan searches through a box of tools to his left and, finding the one requested, places it into the outstretched hand extending from under the disabled air car. Anakin takes the tool and slides further under the vehicle’s body. Obi-Wan sits atop a nearby crate, his legs crossed in a simple meditation pose.

“She is someone I haven’t seen in a very long time,” the master finally answers. Anakin slides out from under the speeder with a lopsided grin.

“Really? Girlfriend or the one that got away?”

“Anakin.”

“What?” the Knight replies innocently as he adeptly dodges the oily rag his former master throws at him. “It’s a simple question, Master.”

“For the simple minded, perhaps,” Obi-Wan answers finally mustering up a wry grin for his friend. “We met when I was much younger, still a junior padawan to Master Qui-Gon.”

Anakin returns to his repairs as Obi-Wan explains.

“My Master and I had managed to get ourselves in a bit of trouble and she was... well, let’s just say she proved to be exceedingly helpful,” Obi-Wan says pausing for a moment then he adds with a smirk, “eventually.”

“So, who is she? Some sort of specialist? A healer? A researcher?”

“A Jedi.”

“A Jedi,” Anakin repeats sliding out again. This time he comes all the way out and stands, wiping his ungloved flesh hand with the once projectile rag.

“Who?”

“Her name is Nai’gia, but I wouldn’t expect you to know her. Only a few even know of her existence and most of those few don’t know her by name. Most only know her by her title.”

“Her title?” Anakin questions as he leans against the disabled speeder, his arms crossed over his chest, legs crossed at the ankles.

“In that regard, she is rather much like you, I suppose,” Obi-Wan offers somewhat distractedly. He turns his full attention back on the young man before him. “She is called the Vessel.”

Anakin just stares at his former master. His brow slightly furrowed in confusion. Obi-Wan is unable to suppress the roguish smile teasing at his mouth or the single eyebrow tugging upwards.

“You would think someone named in ancient Jedi prophecy would take the time to read through a few of them,” he lightly admonishes. Anakin opens his mouth to object, but Obi-Wan waves him off with a smile. “Prophecy holds that every so often the Force chooses a sentient being to act as its voice, its vessel, if you will. Nai’gia is that being.”

Anakin shifts his stance as he gives his fellow Jedi an incredulous snort.

“You really expect me to believe that?” he asks. Obi-Wan shrugs.

“You expect me to believe you’re the Chosen One?” Obi-Wan replies as he takes a moment to stretch his legs before standing.

“Alright,” Anakin says leaning forward a bit, disbelief still broadcasting clearly over his expression. “Let’s just say that I believe it, that this mystery Jedi is some “vessel” of the Force. Why keep her hidden? Why all the secrecy?”

“Think Anakin,” Obi-Wan says as he effortlessly slides into master mode with his former padawan. He crosses one arm over his chest, the other rests under his chin. “A single being with that much power would be a magnet for... beings with less than compassionate motives.”

“You mean the dark side.”

“Indeed, but there is another reason. Being so attuned as she is, it makes her... unstable.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Wait a minute,” Anakin interrupts as he steps closer to his friend. “The Vessel, the Voice of the Force, the woman you’re hoping can fix whatever it is that’s happening to you, you’re telling me that she’s kriffing crazy?”

“Language, Anakin.”

“Priorities, Master,” the Knight quickly retorts. Obi-Wan’s hands drop to his sides.

“She’s not crazy. Quilan, for example, he’s crazy. Nai’gia is... delightfully and frustratingly quirky.”

Anakin raises an eyebrow, clearly unimpressed with Obi-Wan’s distinctive wordplay.

“Quirky? Jedi typically don’t come in ‘quirky’.”

“Well, Nai’gia is not your typical Jedi and may I point out, neither are you.”

Obi-Wan watches carefully as Anakin mulls over the new information. He sees the young Knight’s jaw clench and his blue eyes narrow slightly. Obi-Wan knows that stubborn expression all too well.

“Absolutely not,” he answers peremptorily.

“I didn’t ask anything.”

“But you were about to and the answer is still no.”

“Even with that kriffing collar on you’re still a real son of a Hutt, you know that!” Anakin snaps, but the look on his former master’s face makes him instantly regret his words. Obi-Wan’s hand absently touches the cool metal of the collar. His expression loses the vitality it displayed only moments previous showing now only a dull, joyless slate; an amalgamation of shame, sorrow, and resignation. His gaze drops to the floor. Anakin’s anger quickly seeps out of him.

“Master, I’m sorry. I-I... didn’t mean...”

“It’s alright, Anakin,” Obi-Wan answers without looking up. “Anakin, it would be imprudent, I think, to have what are possibly the two most powerful beings of light in the same room. It is yet another reason she is not often at the Temple,” he pauses. Obi-Wan releases a long sigh and looks directly at his former padawan. “Despite my current circumstances, I am still a member of the High Council and a Master of the Order. I can order you to stay away, but I would rather just ask you to trust my judgment on this.”

“Fine,” Anakin grumbles reluctantly. He may be frustrated, he may even be angry, but Obi-Wan knows that Anakin will obey him in this... though he will undoubtedly gripe about it over the next few days.

“The next few days,” Obi-Wan thinks with an inaudible sigh. He cannot think about the next few days, he is incapable of such a feat. It is usually all he can do to make it from one moment to the next; the future just seems too empty a prospect to consider. Obi-Wan stifles quickly what would have been a rueful smile. He was finally living fully in the moment as his master had always admonished him to do, though both he and Qui-Gon would probably agree that what Obi-Wan is doing is not “living,” but merely existing in the present moment; neither regretting moments past or awaiting future ones. Well, there is at least one future moment that has his attention...

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Obi-Wan’s departure from the hanger bay had suffered under a very uncomfortable silence between the two Jedi to the point that he was happy he had an excuse to slip away. Now, he strolled down the quiet halls of the Temple, his hood up, a signal to all that the master desired privacy. All knew of and respected this time-honored request for solitude, all save one.

“Hide from us, you cannot. Still see you, we can,” comes a familiar and, under the circumstances, mildly irritating voice from behind Obi-Wan. He pauses before turning around using the precious few seconds to erase the pained look of annoyance from his features.

“I was not hiding, Master,” he says, then he notices that the Grand Master is not alone. Friend and fellow Councilor, Master Adi Gallia, is accompanying the diminutive Jedi.

“Master Kenobi,” she greets with slight bow of her head. Obi-Wan returns the greeting with a bow. “I must say I am pleased to see you out about the Temple. Your presence has been sorely missed and,” she pauses with a tiny smile, “Master Piell is not nearly as gracious a sparring partner.”

Obi-Wan manages to call up a smile for her, but it does not reach his eyes.

“No, I don’t imagine he would be,” Obi-Wan answers as the three slowly make their way down the corridor, the clack of Yoda’s gimer stick creating a distinctive and echoing tattoo.

“Has she arrived yet?”

“Yes, arrived she has. Awaits you she does.”

“Where?”

“You will meet in the Room of a Thousand Fountains. We have closed it off temporarily so that you will not be disturbed,” Adi answers, her tone rich and regal. Obi-Wan raises an eyebrow at the choice of location. The Room of a Thousand Fountains was a Jedi favorite. Many would argue that the large garden was the heart of the Temple itself. To close it off seemed unconscionable, almost blasphemous.

“She specifically requested it,” Adi says answering his unspoken question. “Her exact words were ‘Kenobi must tend his garden else the fire blossoms will suffer in ignominy.’”

“You call that a “specific” request?” he asks.

“A joke it was. Get it most did not,” Yoda says with a slight “hrrumph.” The Tholothian master shrugs lightly.

“Well, I suppose I should be on my way then,” Obi-Wan says to signal his imminent departure. He is about to increase his pace and pull away from the perambulating Councilors when a gimer stick suddenly blocks his path nearly tripping him.

“Stay a moment, you will. Something to say, I have.”

“Yes, Master Yoda?” Obi-Wan asks as the three stop in the middle of a junction between several main corridors. He kneels down so he is at eye level with the Grand Master. Yoda leans heavily on his cane, his eyes closed, his ears twitching faintly. The two masters wait patiently until the green lids lift revealing a pair of golden gimlet eyes. The ancient master lets out a heavy sigh as he looks to Obi-Wan with a mildly sorrowful expression, deep worry etched into the folds of his wrinkled skin.

“Hard it can be to search for the truth. Harder still it is to accept it once found. Certain I am that your path she will show, but difficult that path will be to walk. Yes,” the ancient Jedi grumbles, “very difficult. Alone you will be. Understand others will not.”

“I understand, Master,” Obi-Wan answers, then feeling his response is not reassuring enough he adds, “I will be mindful.”

Yoda studies the young Jedi for several moments before finally shuffling off with a snort. Master Gallia offers Obi-Wan a short parting bow before following after the Grand Master. Obi-Wan remains in the middle of the hall for a few moments before quietly moving to the Room of a Thousand Fountains.

Until now this has been a room Obi-Wan has actively avoided. Since he was an initiate, this room had always been his favorite garden, his favorite place in the Temple as it was for many Jedi. Here, more than any other place within the Temple’s walls, the Force

seemed to dance and swirl around all who enter, embracing its servants in its warm and soothing comfort like a parent embracing its child. It is a magnificent, ethereal feeling a Jedi receives when he or she steps foot in the living bounty that is the Room of a Thousand Fountains, which is precisely why Obi-Wan feels reluctant to step inside it now.

After three very slow, very deep breaths, Obi-Wan does what he must and crosses the threshold. Immediately he feels the light humidity of the room settle on him like a fine mist. He feels the artificial sunlight warm his skin. He feels the hard stones beneath his boots that mark one of several paths through the large garden room. He feels all of these things, but nothing else. Even here the Force is but a memory to him and a bitter one at that. The splendor of the garden is limited to his elementary senses; nothing deeper, nothing more substantial. He feels he should be used to it by now, the lack, but he isn't and part of him fears the day that he does become accustomed to this most perfect of losses.

"You've lost nothing, Padawan. You know exactly where it all is," a familiar, soft, and lilting voice calls to him from a few meters away. Further in the room lying on the grass is the girl, though now a woman, Obi-Wan remembers. Her vibrant crimson hair is splayed about her head on the grass. Her figure is slim and fragile in contrast to the athletic tone of most other Jedi. Her golden skin is bright to near luminescence rivaled only by the brilliant shine of the lavender eyes that hide coyly behind heavy, dark lashes.

Obi-Wan steps off the path and moves to where she reclines on the plush garden grass near a small stream parented by one of the room's many waterfalls.

"You know," Obi-Wan says as he takes a seat beside her on the grass. "I'm not a padawan anymore. I haven't been for a long time."

Nai'gia continues to stare languidly at the artificial sky, the tones of her voice wafting easily among the flowers, trees, and other greenery liken to the hum of nature itself.

"A child's first steps are always forward. Seeking the path ever more it toddles. Eternal padawans were are all."

"Sure... I suppose," Obi-Wan answers hesitantly. Though the Jedi never understood more than half of what she said he always enjoyed listening to her say it, now more than ever. When he hears her voice he can almost feel the Force around him. Almost.

Suddenly, she turns to face him, propping herself up on one elbow. It is then that Obi-Wan notices the gleaming silver band around her neck.

"Y-You're wearing a Force collar!"

"And you've grown hairier," she giggles. Obi-Wan does not feel like laughing.

"Why... why are you ...," Obi-Wan struggles against his brain's desperate urge to remain speechless. "Why are you in a Force collar?"

The question tumbles out of him in horror. Seeing that collar, that damnable choker around her neck... it is an affront, an abomination to the Force itself. How dare someone attempt to stifle something so beautiful, try to tame something so irrepressibly transcendent, it is a crime against everything for which the master stands. Anger runs through Obi-Wan's veins unchecked. His skin feels hot and tight as his hands curl into fists on their own accord. His teeth clench. The Force around him warps and twists as he sits there seething. Obi-Wan has never felt anger, no rage like this except for when he is under the influence of whatever dark force grips him when he is without his collar. Then Obi-Wan's rage falls away from him as a terrifying thought crosses his mind.

"Nai'gia, you aren't... ill, are you?"

She doesn't answer, only cocks her head in a slightly bemused expression.

"What I mean is... Are you like me?" he asks, but again he is answered with only a child-like stare showing an innocent lack of understanding. Obi-Wan sighs and closes his eyes. A soft, uncalloused hand slips onto his causing his eyes to open and meet her equally soft and uncalloused gaze.

"Ssh, ssh. It's much quieter now, my little dreamer."

Little dreamer. It's the nickname she had given him when they first met all those years ago.

"I don't understand," he replies softly. Nai'gia lifts her hand from his and makes a sweeping gesture indicating the garden around them. Obi-Wan obeys her wordless command and looks around them. Droplets of water and a few heavy stones hover silently in the air, bobbing weightlessly in defiance of both reason and gravity. It is an amusing and, in truth, slightly disconcerting effect of being around such a powerful being in the Force. As familiar as the Force demonstration is, Obi-Wan is still unable to contain his surprise because such a demonstration shouldn't be possible. He turns back to her lounging form, his wide blue-gray eyes meeting her serene lavender ones.

"But... how?" he stammers ineloquently.

"The pretty quiets not silences, at least for me, but," she says sadly, "it's far too quiet for you. My little dreamer's voice is but a whisper now."

Obi-Wan nods slowly.

"I think... I understand," he begins. "The collar doesn't block the Force from you, it... thins it, makes it power more manageable." He pauses, his gaze dropping to his hands as he twists a blade of grass between two fingers. "You have chosen to wear it."

"All choose balance," she intones somewhat melodically. Obi-Wan releases a heavy sigh, his fingers still absently tugging on the grass.

“This,” he says one hand lightly fingering the collar. “This isn’t balance. I didn’t choose this.”

“Hmm,” she murmurs thoughtfully, then she abruptly jumps to her feet, which Obi-Wan notices are bare. He had forgotten about her long war with shoes.

“Oh! Naughty, naughty boy! You’ve been hiding things from mommy!”

“What?” Obi-Wan replies as he also gets to his feet. Without warning, Nai’gia grabs at his robes wrenching the layers open exposing the upper portion of his lesion bedecked chest. Obi-Wan grabs her hands and wrists, delicately wresting them from his person.

“Nai’gia!” he exclaims. Suddenly, she stills in his hold. She stares at him with clear bewilderment.

“You expect me to see what is hidden, yet you hide what I must see. Why?”

Obi-Wan cringes, instantly regretting his earlier tone.

“Nai’gia,” he begins gently, “next time, please just ask before you attempt to forcibly disrobe me.” Obi-Wan releases her wrists and then removes his robes and inner tunics. He lays the garments on the soft ground and stands before her bare chested, blushing furiously as he feels her fingertips trace the patterns the dark lesions have etched over his pale skin. She places a palm flat against his sternum and gasps. Her eyes shoot up to meet his, her hand pulled away as if she were burned.

“What? What is it you sense?” he asks, desperation and fear tumbling roughly in his voice. She stares at him with wide, watery eyes.

“My dreamer dreams darkly,” she whispers, then she lightly pats his chest. Her lips bare a small smile. “We need more light,” she says. She takes a step back from him and reaches for the seam of her collar. Instinctively, Obi-Wan reaches out for her hand.

“No!” he yells. Nai’gia pauses, her head tilted to one side in question. “If you remove your... if you remove it, will... you be alright?”

Nai’gia looks at the worried man in front of her. As she speaks, Obi-Wan can feel compassion riding the mellifluous currents of her voice.

“Dreamer, I must be all right. I have never been all wrong,” she says, then with a subtle click and a thump the collar falls carelessly to the ground between them.

Obi-Wan remembers all too well his recent bitter-sweet reunion with the Force so he braces himself expecting to see in Nai’gia the same moment of ecstasy he had felt so acutely, but to his surprise her expression remains essentially unchanged. Obi-Wan thinks

he sees her smile widen slightly and perhaps there is a new twinkle of mischief in her eyes, but the changes are so minute he's unsure that there has really been any change at all.

Then she moves. She steps toward him with an odd hypnotic sway, her gaze glazes slightly as she cradles his bearded cheeks between her hands. Closer now Obi-Wan can tell she is humming softly to herself.

This is the Nai'gia of his memory.

"Made for the father. Sent by the son. Never was meant for Obi-Wan," she sings playfully as she drops both her hands to his chest. He gently holds her hands there, covering them with his own. Around him he is vaguely aware that everything in the garden that is not rooted or bolted to the ground is dancing casually in the air; floating and shifting to the beat of her humming tune.

"Made for the father, sent by the son," Obi-Wan repeats. "You're referring to Master Qui-Gon and Xanatos, aren't you? But what is it, Nai'gia? What did the son send?" he asks. Suddenly, the humming stops. Everything that was dancing in the air around them slows to tremulous hovering as if the Force itself is nervous with anticipation. She stares directly into his eyes.

"Darkness," she whispers. "Soul poison. A trap entwined with disease."

"I don't understand."

"A Force virus," she answers, her natural music drowned by the sorrow in her voice. "To turn or to burn, either way a morning star must fade. Dangerously complete is this dark," she sobs into his chest. Without conscious thought or hesitation, Obi-Wan cradles her head and shoulders in an intimate embrace.

"Is there really no hope?" he whispers into her scarlet mane. She glances up at him in surprise, a slow smile creeping across her lips.

"Hope is always there for those with eyes to see. Follow the Force and its will to let its dreamer be," she replies, her answers once again stubbornly cryptic. Obi-Wan takes her by the shoulders and holds her resisting the urge to shake the answers loose from her.

"Tell me. How do I escape this? What is the will of the Force? What must I do?" he begs. Nai'gia settles into his gaze and smiles sweetly.

"Only die."

Chapter 10: Promised Fulfilled

The High Council room is disturbingly quiet despite the presence of over half a dozen Jedi and several holograms. Obi-Wan Kenobi stands silently in the middle of the chambers, his hood down, his chin up, his shoulders squared. He stands there, his feet firmly planted a shoulder's width apart, his expression immaculately serene. He stands there like a Jedi. The Councilors around him stir uncomfortably in their seats. Even the ones present by holo-transmission seem disquieted.

Obi-Wan, for his part, has never felt calmer. It is the lingering effect of Nai'gia's gift. After her uncharacteristically blunt proclamation the master had fallen silent for a time, unable to move, speak, or think. It was Nai'gia who comforted him laying him down upon a blanket of grass humming softly to him as she moved slowly around his prone form; dancing as easily as a leaf on the wind. It was in that state, in that surreal moment that she helped him achieve something the master thought might be lost to him forever.

Obi-Wan Kenobi fell into deep meditation.

It wasn't so much that he fell into the Force, but instead it seemed the Force fell into him. Guided by her presence, somehow, in ways the young master may never understand, the Force allowed its Vessel to channel itself temporarily through his body. The collar he wore presented no obstacle to the living instrument of the Force's will. The transition was sudden, but gentle, apart from him yet encompassed his being. There was no desperate rushing ecstasy as before. No, this experience, this reconnection was deeper. It was the stomach tightening gasp of tremulously ebullient expectation, the soft embrace of a returning lover whispering warm and breathless nothings on his neck, the fantastically incandescent rapture of his soul being lifted and smiled upon by something greater than himself. In that instant, in the lush and lively gardens of the Room of a Thousand Fountains, Obi-Wan Kenobi was reborn into the Force. He emerged from his meditation with the open eyes of a newborn; seeing the world in unbridled wonder, his spirit resting in unparalleled calm.

Even now, away from her luminous presence and once again cut off from the Force, Obi-Wan is still settled deeply within his center; truly serene, truly tranquil, truly at peace with the moment. Truly a Jedi.

He only wishes his fellows could share his calm resolve.

"Is there no mistaking the Vessel's message?"

Obi-Wan shakes his head.

“No, Master Gallia. On this she was quite clear,” he answers. A slight rumbling can be heard throughout the chamber. It is Master Windu, however, who finally gives voice to the room’s displeasure.

“I do not believe this is the way.”

“You would question the Vessel? The will of the Force?” Master Tiin asks, his stony visage twisted in incredulity. Windu is not intimidated.

“I question the words of a powerful, yet notably unstable young woman,” the Master of the Order intones. Before Tiin can give a rebuttal, the clack of Yoda’s gimer stick striking the floor resonates through the chamber. All eyes fall at once to the tiny Grand Master.

“Enough. Spoken to the child myself, I have. Correct in this she is. A path she presents, but choose to walk it only one can,” he says pausing as he lets his gaze fall heavily upon the master standing serenely before him. “Go you must. Preparations to make you have.”

With that, the master bows deeply before his fellow Councilors. For a moment, Obi-Wan is faced with only silence thinking, perhaps, his dismissal, the traditional Jedi benediction is not forthcoming, but after a breathless minute Master Windu speaks, his intimidating baritone a gentle roll of thunder resounding within the chamber.

“May the Force be with you, Obi-Wan Kenobi.”

* * * * *

Things were not going as Obi-Wan had expected or, perhaps, they were going precisely as the master expected, just not the way he had hoped.

Obi-Wan watches silently as Anakin paces, easily traversing the short length of his quarters in a half dozen steps before reversing and returning the way he came. Though the master cannot feel it, the Force all but roils around the young knight. The master is unaware that the air around them is taut, heavy, and oppressive. He is unaware that flecks of crimson and black pop and fizzle around Anakin’s Force signature distorting his usually bright aura. With the collar on him, Obi-Wan cannot sense these things, but as Force blind as he is the master still feels Anakin’s anger in the room like a palpable presence.

It is with increasing difficulty that the master is able to hold on to Nai’gia’s parting gift of deep calm as his former padawan’s outrage lashes out wildly in all directions leaving stinging welts on the master’s heart with clumsy yet powerful verbal strikes.

“You’ve got a lot of kriffing nerve, you know that!” Anakin snaps as he suddenly halts his frenetic pacing. “I mean you walk in here, tell me you’re going to die, and then you just

stand there looking all calm and reserved like nothing's wrong! What in the Sith hells are you thinking?! When the Council hears about this,"

"The Council has already given their approval," Obi-Wan interrupts. Anakin's eyes narrow, his nostrils flare widely as his saber hand curls reflexively into a fist.

"Because of her," he growls. Obi-Wan is forced to take several deep breaths as a wave of defensive ire and resentment rise from an unexpected place within him. With the desperation of a drowning man he clings to his center.

"Because it is the right thing to do, Anakin. Because it is necessary and because I wish it," he manages to intone. Anakin takes a menacing step towards him.

"Then you are a coward and not the man I thought I knew," the young man sneers. Obi-Wan can feel his serenity slipping through his fingers with each wrathful glare from his former apprentice.

"Anakin, please, I want you to understand... I need you to understand that,"

"I will never understand how you can just give up like this," he interrupts in a low and icy tone. He advances again stopping only when he is directly in front of his former master. The difference in height allows him to look down on his mentor.

"Why did you come here?"

"I came because... if I... I wanted to say goodbye."

"Then say it and get out," Anakin snarls. Obi-Wan looks at his friend with wide, despairing eyes. When next he speaks there is more than a twinge of pleading in his voice.

"This is not how I wanted it. Please Anakin, don't let it end this way. Padawan, please."

It is a desperate ploy, a last ditch effort to reach the man he had raised from childhood. He needs that man now, that reckless and fiercely loyal lifetime brother if he is to face the awesome task that lies ahead of him. He hopes his supplication will be received, his love returned, but Anakin's eyes only grow harder at his words.

"You know," he begins, "most Jedi die fighting. Master Jinn did. I wonder what he would think of you now."

It is a vicious strike, a killing blow to be sure. Obi-Wan physically staggers back a step under the weight of it. His peace is ripped from him, shattered like glass into a thousand tiny pieces, the sharp slivers slicing through shallow skin.

He suffers from a harm the master had not thought his friend capable of inflicting because of the sheer cruelty of it. It appears that he is wrong.

It takes several seconds before the master recovers enough to speak.

“Goodbye... Anakin.”

“Goodbye, Master Kenobi.”

And with these parting words, a small piece of the master is dead already.

* * * * *

“I had a feeling I’d find you here,” Mace’s rumbling baritone calls from somewhere behind the younger master.

“Other than the gardens, he said this was his favorite place to think,” Obi-Wan answers without turning around. As usual, the Jedi map room is silent and dark save for the lazy blue glow of the galaxy spiraling slowly above the heads of the two Councilors. Obi-Wan stands hunched over a portion of the round central console, his hands propping his body up, his head hanging low seemingly oblivious to the multitude of stars dancing overhead.

Mace approaches his friend quietly. He stops and stands beside the somber Jedi, his own gaze drifting placidly toward the heavens.

“I knew your master since our time in the crèche. We were good friends, so I can say with fair degree of certainty that Qui-Gon would not be disappointed in you. In fact, I believe he would be proud.”

“With respect, Mace, please stay out of my head.”

“I apologize. It is not my intent to pry, but,” the Korun Councilor pauses as he turns his gaze to his friend, “the disturbance around you is rather... significant.”

“Hmm.”

“Having second thoughts?”

“More like fifteenth thoughts,” Obi-Wan says lifting his head and giving his companion a wry smile. “But I haven’t changed my mind,” he finishes. Obi-Wan notices his friend stiffen slightly at his words. He shakes his head despondently, turning his gaze away and focusing instead on a fixed point in the star field above.

"I thought at least you would understand."

"I," Mace starts. He hesitates then speaks again. "I am trying."

"Why is it so hard? This is the course of action the Force is willing us to take. We have trusted its guidance all our lives. We must trust it now. I must trust it now," Obi-Wan answers, his head shaking in clear exasperation. "Do you really think me so eager to die?"

"No," Mace intones. "Do you really not understand that there are many here who do not wish to lose you?"

"A Jedi must not form attachments."

"My reluctance is not attachment."

"Oh? Then what would you call it?"

"Friendship," he answers plainly. At this reply Obi-Wan is forced to look up at his fellow Jedi, his friend.

"No one wants to lose you, Obi-Wan, but each of us is prepared for it."

"Correct he is," a gravelly voice from the doorway interrupts. "Wish it, we do not, but prepared for loss a Jedi must always be."

"I fear Anakin is not in agreement on that matter," Obi-Wan says as he and Mace turn to greet the Grand Master slowly waddling towards them.

"Understand Skywalker will in time," Yoda nods with solemn certainty as he stops before his fellow Councilors.

"There is no hurry to do this, Obi-Wan. It need not be today."

"No," the master responds resolutely. "It must be done now. To wait may jeopardize my resolve and I know this is what I must do."

Mace gives an understanding, yet reluctant nod.

"Master Vokara will oversee the... procedure in a secure room within the Healing Halls. The precautions we agreed to will be in place and Master Yoda and I will remain with you at all times," Maces states succinctly. Obi-Wan gives a brief nod and a lopsided smile.

"Well, let's not keep the good Madam waiting."

* * * * *

How does one prepare for death? It is a question Obi-Wan Kenobi has been pondering for sometime and now, as the hour of his most likely death draws near, he finds himself no closer to an answer. Perhaps there is no answer, only the question and in the question lays the hope of quiet revelation.

He doesn't want to die, of that the master is absolutely certain, but the realization of what he must do, the necessary actions he must take to purge himself of this evil is also a surety known by every fiber within his fragile being.

"How feel you?" asks a deep, grumbly voice to the right side of his medical bed. Obi-Wan cranes his head to see the small speaker, his movements limited by the restraints placed around his wrists, waist, and ankles.

"Rather well considering," he smiles wryly. The Grand Master nods slowly, his ears twitching ever so slightly. Master Windu steps forward taking a position to the left of the bed.

"If things proceed as anticipated, the rage will begin shortly after the collar is removed. That will likely be followed by another painful attack," Mace says. He pauses, somewhat hesitant to continue. "Master Vokara will ease your pain as much as possible so that you do not suffer unduly, but,"

"Don't worry, my friend. I am fully aware of the... unpleasantness of each episode. I'm sure whatever relief Vokara can provide will be greatly appreciated," Obi-Wan replies. Before an uncomfortable silence can fall, the door opens and in steps a tall, female Twi'lek in blue healing robes. The master inclines her head to each of the room's occupants. She then turns her eyes to Kenobi.

"Are we ready to proceed?" she asks. Now all eyes are on the prone master. Obi-Wan is suddenly uncomfortable under their serious stares. A noticeable blush rises in his cheeks.

"I feel like I'm expected to perform a Eudorian fan dance with all this attention," he laughs weakly. Mace places a hand on his shoulder.

"We can wait for him to arrive," he speaks gently. Obi-Wan sighs and shakes his head slowly.

"No, he's not coming," he answers. Mace says nothing only nods his understanding. Obi-Wan turns to the master healer. "I'm ready."

The master healer's face reveals only the slightest hint of dolefulness as she moves to stand beside the Grand Master near the head of the bed. Master Windu looks first to Master Vokara then to Master Yoda who both nod solemnly. Then the Korun Councilor looks upon

his friend. Obi-Wan nods then closes his eyes as he feels Mace's calloused hands reach behind his neck.

Knowing what to expect does nothing to diminish the seraphic moment. Obi-Wan's first breath is a blunt force spiritual orgasm of miraculous proportions.

The darkness opens, the light pours in washing over him completely like baptismal waters. He is ensconced deeply into the bosom of the Force itself. A furious euphoria trembles in his stomach. His muscles and sinews vibrate with tumultuous bliss. His skin aches with the sublime tingle of anticipation. Every hair on his body dances, every cell thrums, his very blood quickens until his whole being brazenly screams life with each beat of his heart.

If only he would die now, in this rapturous moment, but fate would never be so kind and the Force is no nursemaid.

"Obi-Wan?" a baritone voice calls from beside his bed. He turns a groggy, smiling face to his dark-skinned comrade.

"Mace?" he queries. The Korun Councilor displays one of his rare smiles.

"For a moment, I thought you and the Force would need a moment or two alone," he laughs lightly. Obi-Wan joins him.

"We very nearly did," he jests. His face then becomes more serious, but his smile remains. "Don't take it for granted, Mace, not ever. The Force... it is everything."

"I won't," Mace answers. "And if I had my way no Jedi ever would."

Obi-Wan nods apparently satisfied at the Jedi's answer. He turns his gaze absently to the ceiling. He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. He releases the fear coiling in his chest with three long exhales. When he opens his eyes he can't help but notice the pleased look upon the Grand Master's face. Then suddenly the look is gone and in its place is one of great sorrow. Obi-Wan doesn't have time to ponder the master's change as he is forced into a change of his own.

"Why do you keep me here? What can you possibly hope to accomplish?" he snarls as he lays his head back onto the pillow of his bed. Mace leans back from the bed, but does not move away.

"To save you," Mace replies. Obi-Wan answers with a derisive snort.

"I cannot be saved especially by something as weak as a Jedi," he says turning directly to face the tall Council member. "You think you're so damn special. You and your precious Order. You're nothing. Less than nothing. You are a relic, a lingering stain of a forgotten time. The Jedi won't change and so you will all die. If not at my hands then by

someone else's. It is inevitable for a group that eats its own young," he finishes with a scathing and contemptuous glance. Obi-Wan then turns to Master Yoda.

"And you, you sniveling, cryptic little troll, I want you to know how much I hate you... How much I've always hated you. You and that damn Code have taken everything from me! EVERYTHING!" he yells as he surges against his restraints. Vokara looks to the wizened master in alarm, but Yoda stands unmoving, unshakeable in his calm. The small Jedi's failure to react only serves to infuriate the fettered master more.

"I could have been happy if it weren't for you! I could have had a life, a REAL life with love and a family, but no... the damn Code forbids that! You take children from their homes, brainwash them into believing they don't need love, and then send them out to hack and slash at the bidding of corrupt politicians. You Jedi are all cold, heartless sons of banthas and you, Master Yoda," he sneers, "are the worst of all claiming that we are all "luminous beings," that there is no death! Well guess what, we are not luminous beings, we are disgusting, selfish, lusty, greedy Hutts one and all and there is death. I only wish I could be there when you realize that. Let me out of these restraints and I will gladly teach you that lesson myself!"

None of the masters say anything in response to Obi-Wan's verbal attacks. Master Yoda himself only shakes his head, his grief for the young master written plainly on his aged features.

"And still, none of you masters have the courage to say anything... Weaklings all of you and I hate you. I hate you! I HATE YOU! I-I HATE..." Obi-Wan's vehement yells transform into a gasp then a scream so profound it seems to have been ripped from deep inside his core. Vokara responds quickly placing a hand on his chest another on his head. She closes her eyes and focuses solely on easing the pain of the attack through sagacious use of the Force. Mace helps to hold the master down as he pulls and bucks under his restraints caught in the grip of a vicious seizure.

Obi-Wan Kenobi is in a place beyond thought, a place where there is only pain. His screams reverberate in the small room painfully ringing in the ears of the other Jedi. Finally, Vokara makes some progress and is able to redirect some of the pain away from the master and release it out into the vastness of the Force. Obi-Wan begins to settle down. He is no longer seizing or screaming, but his frame is still tight with anguish as his body burns with sheer agony. A low moan escapes his lips as a violent shudder passes through his limbs then his body stills. Mace is still tentatively holding the master down when a new presence is felt and a voice speaks from the doorway.

"Am I too late? Is he..."

"No, not too late you are. Speak to him, you should," Yoda answers. Mace gives his friend one last look before releasing him and stepping aside to allow the knight free access to his former master. Anakin stands beside the bed. He takes Obi-Wan's hand in his own.

“Master?” he calls softly. Obi-Wan stirs. Another grimace, another moan. Finally, eyes blink and open, understanding pushes towards the surface of a battered mind and body.

“An..kin...”

“I’m here, Master. I’m right here,” the knight says as he gently squeezes the master’s hand. In between the painful spasms, Obi-Wan manages a weak smile as he gazes into his former apprentice’s sapphire eyes.

“I-I’m s-sorry, A-Anakin...” he whispers, each word a struggle to form, a battle to express and propel past dry lips. Anakin shakes his head.

“No, Master. I’m sorry... What I said earlier... I didn’t mean it, Master. I swear I didn’t mean it.”

“I-I know...”

“Please Master, don’t do this... don’t die...”

“There is no dea...”

The room stands in deafening silence waiting, wishing desperately for the oft repeated Jedi mantra to be completed, but its speaker is silent, his voice hushed, his body unnaturally still. Blue-gray eyes stare into nothingness.

Master Vokara lets her hand slide from the master’s forehead over his face, gently closing the soft lids. She glances at the chrono then at her fellow Jedi.

“Obi-Wan Kenobi, time of death 23:20.”

Chapter 11: Intestate

Obi-Wan is nowhere. He is surrounded by a vast and profound nothingness. It is not a void or an emptiness. There is a somethingness to the nothingness. This place is both the absence of substance and the substance of absence. Here there is light without shadow, but the light is dull, muted, suffused with the abundancy of nothing. All is a hazy shade of gray; a true colorlessness abides reaching from the edge of his skin out to a nearly visible infinity.

Obi-Wan closes his eyes. He breathes deeply and reaches out to the Force. What he finds is... puzzling. The Force is both here and strangely not here. Its presence is ghostly, ephemeral, almost notional, but not absent. The master can still feel it, touch it, pull it around him, protecting like a suit of armor, comforting like a thermal blanket, but its caress is wisp-like, bordering insubstantial.

He opens his eyes as a familiar something penetrates the omnipresent nothing. There is a shadow ahead in the distance. At first it is too far to be distinct, the clouded form too nebulous for recognition, but as it draws closer... a figure, humanoid. Closer... tall, broad shouldered. Closer still... beard, long hair, crooked nose...

"Master," comes a whispered gasp that is greeted with a lopsided grin.

"Hello, Padawan," answers the figure in that oh-so-familiar baritone. Only Obi-Wan's disbelief keeps him from dissolving into tears on the spot. Oh, how he has missed that voice!

"Master Qui-Gon, how are you here?"

"I am here because you are here."

"No, I don't understand. Am I... dead?"

"Yes, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon answers. A line appears between the younger master's brow as he looks out upon the vast grayness. The older master places a knowing hand upon his shoulders.

"You are dead, Padawan, but not yet one with the Force," he says. Qui-Gon places his hand under Obi-Wan's chin, forcing the younger man to meet his gaze. "I have missed you, my Padawan, but you are not supposed to be here."

"But I am," Obi-Wan stammers feeling very much like the awkward apprentice of his youth. "The force virus... the Vessel said... she told me I had to die, that I needed to,"

Qui-Gon places his large hands on both of Obi-Wan's shoulders, gripping them tightly to ensure the man's full attention.

"The Vessel told you what you needed to hear. Think, my Obi-Wan, what exactly did she tell you? What has the Force been telling you?"

"That... That I had to let myself die."

"Yes, but there is no death. There is only the Force," Qui-Gon answers releasing his grip on the master's shoulders. Obi-Wan's hands immediately rise to his chest, one placed thoughtfully under his chin in concentration.

"I was never meant to join the Force... only to die."

Qui-Gon nods displaying a proud smile on his leonine features.

"Exactly," he says, but the younger master is still confused.

"But why?"

Here the pleased expression Qui-Gon had worn since laying eyes on his former apprentice falls away and in its place Obi-Wan finds a frown heavy with regret and sorrow. The older man takes a deep breath.

"That is partly my fault," he says as he begins walking; his destination nowhere in the open grayness. Without hesitation, Obi-Wan moves to follow him, his position two steps behind and to the right. The old master releases a light chuckle.

"You have been a knight for many years, Obi-Wan, and now you are a master in your own right. Though you will always be my padawan, your place is beside me, as an equal," he says. Even in death, Obi-Wan can't help but blush at his former master's gentle rebuke. He moves to Qui-Gon's side. The two Jedi walk silently in the colorless pall for several minutes.

"Obi-Wan, what do you know about what has happened to you?"

"Nai'gia said I was infected with a force virus, one that was meant for you courtesy of Xanatos," Obi-Wan replies, then he pauses, a smirk flitting across his soft features. "At least I think that's what she said."

"Ah yes," Qui-Gon responds with an amused smile of his own. "I do recall her answers tended to favor the cryptic."

"Master Yoda is cryptic. Nai'gia is downright abstruse."

"Perhaps," Qui-Gon agrees with a grumbling laugh, but all too soon present realities cause his countenance to once again bear a frown. "But in this, as in many things, she is

right. The package you received on Telos IV was a “gift” from Xanatos meant for me. I regret that his need for revenge against me has once again injured you,” he pauses, lost in thought for a moment. “Still, the fact that you were vulnerable to his attack concerns me greatly.”

“Why? The virus would have infected the first person it came in contact with, or in my case, whoever first opened the box would it not?”

“No, Xanatos researched and obtained this virus because of the specificity of its targets. The virus was designed to feed off repressed negative emotions. Xanatos, of course, was well aware of the deep scar his betrayal left on my heart and though I had eventually moved on I had never truly let go of the grief... or the guilt.”

“So he chose to capitalize on your particular vulnerability.”

“More than that, Obi-Wan, the virus’s nature itself was to draw on those emotions and transform them, twist them toward the darkside all while corrupting one’s connection to the Force making meditation and release impossible. Pain quickly turns to anger and anger makes its victim lash out violently.”

“So the victim either goes mad or falls to the darkside before ultimately succumbing.”

“Yes.”

“Infecting you would have been the cruelest revenge Xanatos could have imagined. Whether you fell to the darkside or not, you would have been consumed by your own dark feelings about him,” Obi-Wan finishes with a shake of his head. “An ending as tragic as it is ironic.”

“Indeed. This method of revenge was tailor made for me, which is why, my apprentice,” Qui-Gon says as he stops his perambulation and turns to face his fellow, “I am deeply troubled to find you infected in my stead.”

Obi-Wan opens his mouth to respond, but no words he can form seem appropriate. There is no excuse to offer, no defense to give. The truth of the matter evinced in his very presence in this shadow near nothing world.

“Obi-Wan,” Qui-Gon continues, “the virus never could have affected you unless you were holding some deep and painful wounds in your heart. I had always hoped in this you would be a better Jedi than I and learn to let these hurts go,” he says as he lightly touches Obi-Wan’s bearded chin. “Holding stubbornly on to grief and guilt is not the inheritance I wished you to receive.”

Qui-Gon let his hand rest on the cheek a moment more before dropping it to his side with a sigh.

“Whatever it is you are hanging on to, you must let go of it, here and now. That is why you are here. That is why you had to die. The virus kept you from releasing your feelings to the Force, but here,” the older master says gesturing to the space around them. “Here you can touch the Force, release all that you have been holding on to. This you must do, my Padawan, lest the virus truly consume you. You are not meant to become one with the Force. Not yet. You still have much to do.”

Still Obi-Wan can say nothing. Of course he had wounds, deep weeping gashes that he knew would never heal, but he had learned to live with this pain, to bury the hurt until it was hidden in a secreted place down away from his heart where it could no longer harm him. But it wasn't hidden far enough. It has harmed him. It has killed him actually.

“Obi-Wan?”

His former master's resonating voice successfully pulls him out his darkening thoughts.

“Yes, Master?”

“What is it you are hanging on to? What are you afraid to let go?”

“I don't know... I've carried these things with me for so long... How do I know where they end and I begin?”

“You are not your pain, Obi-Wan,” Qui-Gon answers gently. Suddenly, large hands again rest on Obi-Wan's shoulders as a slight, but insistent pressure directs him downward.

“Meditate with me, Padawan. Together we will release all that holds you here.”

Together the two Jedi fall gracefully to their knees facing one another, but their eyes are closed. They sink down deeply into a familiar tandem meditation; their two minds mingling in the effulgent currents of the Force. Once the two had settled, Obi-Wan directs his focus inward as he has been trained to do as an initiate. With Qui-Gon's presence closely following his own, he travels deep inside himself sliding away mental shields with easy efficiency as they plunge deeper and deeper still until Obi-Wan feels himself brush against a resistance; a well-known inky darkness, a shapeless hurt hidden behind thick mental walls.

What is it, Obi-Wan?

Memories of a lush and beautiful world. A young woman. A feeling. A deep and precious longing shared.

Satine.

Ah. Our mission on Mandalore. A pause. Why does this memory bring you pain?

Not pain, Master. Remorse and... shame. I was... prepared to leave the Order, to... leave you... for her. She had only to say the word. It was the second time I betrayed you, you just never knew of it.

You have never betrayed me, Obi-Wan. Even on Melida/Daan. To have the courage to do what you have to, to follow your heart and the Force honors me and fills me with pride. There is no shame here, Obi-Wan. Let it go...

For a quiet moment the Force around them is still, then the air pulses and gathers itself in a slow, rolling undulation. Finally, a shuddering exhalation echoes through the limitless expanse.

Well done.

Thank you, Master.

The pair continue their journey only to be stopped by another mental barrier. The darkness here is energetic, almost frenzied in its movements. The sound of invisible blaster fire rings in their ears. Qui-Gon is about to ask what pain this is when Obi-Wan releases a heavy whisper.

Cerasi.

Let the guilt and grief go.

A shudder, an exhale, and the air around them stills in quiet, but guiltless mourning. Without a word they press further, deeper, delving until they hit another barrier. Another formless pain. This one burns and rages mephitic in its anger, yet unimaginably chilling in its despair.

Siri.

Let it go, Obi-Wan.

Not this. I can't.

Why?

If I let it go, I will lose her.

But you must, Obi-Wan, or you will lose yourself. Is that what she would want for you?

Then honor her. Honor her sacrifice. Honor the Jedi she was.

The Force gathers again, this time tremulous and uncertain, but after a few moments all is quiet. They move on to the next, but this barrier is much thicker than the rest; thicker and much, much darker. Pain radiates from behind its wall blasting the two pilgrims in angst ridden waves.

Obi-Wan reaches out to this memory, but his presence stills just short of the barrier. A deep breath is taken, a stern resolve takes hold. He pushes forward and the shield crumbles before him. Familiar scenes play before the Jedi; each image rippling with long held shame and sorrow. Qui-Gon is unable to stifle his own despondent sigh.

Oh, my Obi-Wan, I never knew you still carried this burden with you.

Bandomeer. How can I ever let this go? This is who I am.

I don't understand.

I was unwanted, unworthy,

Obi-Wan...

No, Master, not just by you, by everyone. You were but the last in a series of rejections. I **was** unworthy and the Order sent me away. My **family** turned its back on me. A weak laugh. You fear that you caused this pain, but Master, you are the only joy within this place.

You were never unwanted or unworthy, Obi-Wan. Things proceeded the way they did because it was the **will** of the Force. You must believe that.

I do believe that, which makes it all the more cruel.

The Force is neither cruel nor kind. It is what it must be to forge us into what we must become; to forge you into the Knight and Master you are. The Jedi who makes me proud to have been his master.

But there **is** truth here, Qui-Gon. There are other wounds... much deeper... but they share this same truth.

Obi-Wan steels himself for an argument, prepares to hear Qui-Gon's oft used mantras, platitudes, and koans, but what is said surprises him.

Show me.

The amorphous dark shifts and churns, folding in on itself many times over before reflecting a familiar visage.

Anakin?

Another dazzling failure.

You trained him, Obi-Wan, brought him to knighthood. I could ask for no more.

He is still willful, reckless, and far too passionate. Balance eludes him. This is the effect of my training and now the galaxy may suffer for my inadequacy should he truly be the Chosen One.

Obi-Wan, there is...

Gods no, not this one. Not again.

A deafening scream echoes through the space surrounding them. The darkness takes another shape. The air is charged with a sudden burst of anguished rage. The image of a young man cradling an older man in his arms flickers before them. Their senses are filled with the aftermath of battle, the deep swell of despair, the stench of burnt flesh, the cold caress of the dying.

Why? Why must I relive this?

To free yourself you need only let it go, my Padawan.

I can't and I *have* tried, Master, but this is... anchored to me and I to it.

Silence prevails between them as the monstrous dark shifts from images of Bandomeer to Anakin to Qui-Gon's death and round again. Finally, the older master speaks.

Why these three, Obi-Wan? Why are these your deepest wounds?

Because they show the truth.

What truth is that, Padawan?

That I am not... enough. That I have never been enough. A pause. I wasn't good enough for the Order. I wasn't wise enough to train Anakin properly. I wasn't fast enough to help you... to save you.

I think... I understand. These memories have been linked together and, as such, cannot be released individually. They are not anchored to you, Obi-Wan, they are tethered to each other. To release them you must release the tie that binds them. You must accept their lessons and then let them go.

I must accept that I am not enough.

No, you must accept that *no one* is ever enough to save everyone, to be everything.

But...

No buts, Padawan, not in this. I have known you since you were a boy, watched you grow into a man, a master, and a wise and noble Jedi. The many trials you have faced have shaped you, prepared you for the difficulties you have yet to face. Oh, my Obi-Wan, the Force has such great plans for you. *It* believes in you. I believe in you. Now, you must believe in yourself, without doubt or reservation. Believe, Obi-Wan, or else die right here.

A ripple in the air. The Force gathers, contracts, then stillness. The amorphous black writhes angrily.

There is no try, Obi-Wan.

Again the air quivers, then shakes violently. The darkness reacts with fierce paroxysms, spasming viciously, its inky tendrils lashing out like whips brutally slashing at their presence. The Force churns and whirls savagely about them. Space contracts, pulling in on itself, closing, collapsing...

* * * * *

“No response.”

“Again.”

“Nothing. It’s been too long...”

* * * * *

All tightens in on itself. The pain before them continues to flail and thrash under the strain. A wind emerges from the subtle non-existent atmosphere of Obi-Wan’s mindscape. It picks up, growing stronger with his mental exertions. Soon the Jedi are caught in a maelstrom. The darkness erupts powerfully, its thrashes intemperate, its lashes vehement in the extreme...

* * * * *

“Anything? Anything at all?”

“No. Nothing.”

* * * * *

A burst of breath, a gasp of light. The blackness convulses, shudders, and, in a sudden roar of sound and fury, it dissolves away, melting back into the insubstantiation from whence it was born.

* * * * *

“Wait! I’ve got something!”

* * * * *

Quiet settles. The air stills. Peace enters where pain once had reign.

You are free now, Obi-Wan. You are free and now you must return.

Obi-Wan can feel his former master’s presence begin to pull away from his mind. Instinctively, he moves to follow.

Wait! Master!

So proud of you, my Padawan.

The voice retreats further, faster than Obi-Wan can follow. A dull light obscures his vision. It glows brighter and brighter.

So proud...

* * * * *

The brightness is too much, glaring. Obi-Wan shuts his eyes against it, but even with eyes closed the light is painfully, blindingly bright...

“He’s coming around.”

“Dim the lights,” an unknown voice calls out. Obi-Wan pushes forward toward consciousness, his thoughts slow, muzzy unable to comprehend the chatter buzzing around him.

“Master?” a familiar voice queries cutting through the previous verbal chaos. Obi-Wan blinks rapidly, his beleaguered lashes feeling like leaden weights.

“A-Ana... kin?” he rasps. Without a spoken request water is offered, the glass gently held to his dry and cracked lips. Obi-Wan drinks greedily; the cold liquid as refreshing to his parched palette as it is to his soul. When he has drunk his fill he carefully pulls back from the proffered vessel.

“You had us worried for a moment,” Mace says. “We thought you had become one with the Force.”

“You thought no such thing. You were just hoping for first dibs on my bottle of Correllian whiskey, Mace. I know you’ve been eyeing it,” Obi-Wan smiles, the mirth shining brightly in his eyes despite his ashen complexion. The tension in the room relaxes noticeably with the return of the master’s humorously acerbic wit. Master Vokara frowns.

“I assume the return of your trademark impudence means you are feeling well,” she intones with a raised eyebrow. Obi-Wan turns to her with a sincere and serene expression.

“You assume most correctly, Master. I feel...,” the master pauses as he vainly searches for the right word. “I feel as I should,” he finishes. The hand enclosing his tightens minutely.

“Master,” Anakin whispers, his eyes red, his face marked with the shimmering tracks of recently shed tears.

“Don’t worry, Padawan. All is well between us. You have my word.”

“Different you seem. Hmm, yes changed you are,” a grumbly voice says from Obi-Wan’s left. “New wisdom have you, hmm?” the ancient master states as he pokes the younger master’s leg with his gimer stick.

“Yes, Master. It appears my master still had one more lesson to impart,” Obi-Wan replies. Mace cocks his head to the side his eyebrows raised.

“Your master?” he repeats, but before Obi-Wan can answer Vokara raises her hands.

“Enough of this. The patient needs his rest not a bunch of masters pestering him with needless questions or ancient, yet suspiciously cryptic wisdoms,” she says with a deliberate glance at Yoda. The Grand Master stands unperturbed, but also noticeably unchallenging of the healer’s statement. Mace nods at the master healer, but places a hand on Obi-Wan’s leg.

“We will return later,” he says warmly. Obi-Wan gives his friend a smirk.

“Don’t worry, I promise not to go anywhere.”

* * * * *

Epilogue – 72 hours later

Obi-Wan Kenobi has never felt better. With the care evocative of a sacred ritual, he lowers himself onto the plush and vibrant carpet of grass beneath him. He folds his legs, kneeling, his hands resting comfortably on his thighs. He closes his eyes. A brook babbles behind him. Various and innocuous mammalia scurry about in the shadows of the verdant foliage. A Carbraxyn lizard lounges languidly on a small boulder to his left. An iridescent insect flits and darts under the heavy leaves of a Njolla sapling to his right.

Obi-Wan finds the Room of a Thousand Fountains to be welcoming and peaceful.

The Force hums quietly around him as he enters into a light meditative trance. Colors varied and nameless dance and vibrate in threads and ribbons in spiderweb connections between him and the greater world surrounding him. The master is pleasantly adrift in the currents of the Living Force. His thoughts are unworried and easy. His countenance serene; the turmoil of the past weeks a memory, not forgotten, but held loosely—acknowledged then released.

For three days, Obi-Wan had been required to remain in the Healer’s Ward; restrained and under guard for the first day, only guarded for the following two. After the seventy-two hours of constant observation and numerous mental probes from healers and Council members alike, the master was finally deemed healthy and free of any trace of the force virus’s influence. The virus did, however, leave its mark on the man in the form of the numerous scars that now transversed his body. No longer did angry red and black lesions cover his trunk, arms and neck. In their place, only pale, winding patterns of scar tissue remained. There eventually would be reports to the Council, explanations of what happened in those quiet minutes of his death. He knew they would ask about his scars, why he chose to keep them. Obi-Wan had long meditated during those hours of observation and had ultimately decided not to have the scars removed. He would hold on to these scars, not

as a reminder of the pain he had suffered, but instead as a memorial of the trial he had overcome. But Obi-Wan did not concern himself with that now. Those discussions would come later. Now, he only reflected on what had occurred to remind himself of what he had survived and what was made better by its happening.

Many things had changed for the master. The sudden lightening of his burden had revealed a peace Obi-Wan never knew could be obtained. It isn't the same heady and rich calm given to him by Nai'gia. No, this feeling is understated, subdued, but sustainable.

Yes, things are better.

His relationship with Anakin has improved. The near death, or near permanent death, of his former master has forced some of the knight's long held resentments and anger to the surface and slowly, together, the pair is working through each emotion, each memory, each perception sorting them, disentangling them, analyzing them, and ultimately releasing them.

Obi-Wan had fought hard to finally learn that lesson and it is a knowledge that he hopes to impart to his padawan. It is what he hopes to leave as his inheritance.