

THE FORCE OF PROVIDENCE SERIES

UNDONE

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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.

Author's Note: This is the second book of my series The Force of Providence. This series follows Obi-Wan Kenobi's apprenticeship with Master Qui-Gon Jinn and is projected to end somewhere approaching the Phantom Menace timeframe, but of course that can and probably will change. Though this will have some similarities, and thus some spoilers, with the Jedi Apprentice book series by Judith Watson, this is still most definitely AU. Please enjoy.

Italics indicate emphasis, visions, personal thoughts and flashbacks. Context should illustrate which device is being used. / / indicates mindspeak.

Chapter 1: Withdrawal

Day – 99

(the present)

Ripped.

Snatched.

Stolen.

He was stolen from him. Taken away from right under him. This is why he never wanted another padawan. It was because of what he feels now that he had purposefully hardened his heart, encased it in durasteel, and allowed it to freeze over as he hid it away from the world. But in time he had relented. He had allowed the boy to sneak his way past his defenses, past his stubbornness and touch the dark hole of his grief. And slowly, piece by piece the boy had put an old man back together, his heart scarred, but healing.

Now, the boy gone, his work came undone. The old wound tore open. The pieces collapsed in on themselves falling into a jumbled, disjointed heap. He was broken again. The fracture, he knew, was far worse than before. The fragments were too small, the cracks too numerous. He knew the longer the boy was lost to him, the more irreparable the damage and should he never return... the thought alone was nearly enough to end him.

Qui-Gon sat on his sleeping couch, his elbows rested on his knees, the heels of his palms pressed hard into his eyes trying to hold back the torrent that, if released, would certainly drown him.

He had tried to be strong. For twenty weeks, nearly three standard months, he had held his doubts at bay and clung tenaciously to hope. He followed every lead, investigated every avenue only to be led around blind turns that revealed only dead ends. Everyday he asked the Force for guidance. He begged it for some comfort some reassurance that his padawan lived; that his padawan would return to him. But the Force remained aloof, distant. It provided no answers, no light, no peace. That, by itself, had begun to wear on the old man, but it wasn't until yesterday that Qui-Gon Jinn lost his faith. It was the day when the Force he had loved and served his entire life turned cruel. For weeks he had pleaded to the Force to send him a sign to let him know that his apprentice still lived on the other side of their silent bond. Yesterday the Force finally answered.

Qui-Gon had been meditating with Master Yoda in the Grand Master's private chambers when the bond shared between he and his padawan flared to life. In a sudden rush, Qui-Gon was slammed by one hundred emotions at once, but one feeling stood out amongst the chorus-- pain. His padawan was in pain. He was being tortured and with their now open bond, his master felt every lash, every burn, every cut inflicted upon the boy. The

agony was unyielding and merciless. Qui-Gon fell off his floor cushion, curling into a ball. The pain was unbearable and yet he and his apprentice were forced to bear it because there was nowhere to hide from it. The promise of unconsciousness kept out of reach by the multitude of drugs Qui-Gon could feel coursing through the boy's system.

A clawed, green hand tried to calm the Jedi. It urged him to close the bond, but he could not for if the sensation of his padawan's suffering was overwhelming, the next sensation was devastating. The boy's screams carried over the bond; first incoherent, then pleading, begging to any who would listen to make the pain stop. But the pain did not stop. It continued to hammer away without mercy, without compassion, without compromise until nothing remained. Then came the moment that shattered the older Jedi. It was the moment he felt his padawan break.

The bond closed. The Force had given its answer. To know that his padawan lived the Force allowed Qui-Gon to feel the moment his apprentice longed for death. The answer was as clear as it was brutal.

How he made it to his quarters, the old master did not know, but he had not left since. What once was full laid empty. What once was a home now was like foreign soil. What once was a sanctuary was now a tomb. Here, in the darkness, Qui-Gon ceased his struggles and allowed himself to sink down into his inner depths. Down past his thoughts. Down past his pain. Down past himself. What he was doing is not the way of the Jedi, but it didn't matter because he was not a Jedi at the moment. He was not a master. He was not a man. He was a collection of failures, an amorphous mass of sorrow and guilt. And so he permitted himself to fall carelessly, effortlessly into the gaping maw of inky blackness where once his soul resided.

Tahl was the first to try and the first to fail. In the past, she had always been able to talk to him. She had always provided him the safe harbor he sought when he was adrift in the violent seas of his inner turmoil. When he lost Xanatos to the Dark, Tahl found her ministrations lacking. She could not heal so deep a wound as the wayward padawan had left, but she had tended it, cleaned it, and kept it from festering.

Now this hurt she found to be beyond her care. She could not reach him. Without moving, he had pulled far away from her, from everyone, from the galaxy—far away, far enough where none could touch him, where none could hurt him. She knelt before him and forced dark blue eyes to meet green and gold stripped ones. Her eyes reflected concern. His eyes reflected emptiness. It was a feeling heavier than mere nothingness. It was a deathly void as powerful as a black hole. He was a hollowed man.

Masters Yoda and Windu were next to try, but they too fail. He had withdrawn so far into himself that even the ancient master could not touch him. It was cold, where Qui-Gon was, cold and blessedly numb.

Master Windu knelt beside the Grand Master as they both hovered in the doorway.

"I've never seen him quite like this before. Even after Xanatos..." the Korun Master started, but his voice trailed off as the words he needed escaped him. "Perhaps we should call a Soul Healer."

"Help it would not," Master Yoda sighed. His voice sank lower as if physically weighted by the sadness in his heart as he looked upon his former pupil. "Pulled away he has. Choose to return to us he must," the wizened Master answered. Windu shook his head.

"I don't believe he will choose to unless we find Obi-Wan."

"Find him we must or two lives we will lose."

"It has been three months with no leads and He has sent no further messages," Master Windu responded grimly. Master Yoda closed his eyes, his chin resting peaceably on small hands atop his gimer stick. Mace recognized the expression on the old master's face, so he waited patiently for his mentor to finish his communion with the Force. After several silent moments, green ears twitched and green lids rose to disclose golden orbs that seemed to reflect both sorrow and hope simultaneously.

"Search for Kenobi we need not," Yoda said as he looked confidently at his fellow council member. "Find us the lost padawan will."

Chapter 2: Bruises

Master Jinn stood at the door to his apartment for several minutes as he released his anger into the Force. That particular emotion was dispatched easily enough, but the old man was having a far more difficult time parting with his frustration and disappointment.

Qui-Gon sighed heavily, then palmed open the door and stepped inside. He casually looked around the apartment. His apprentice was nowhere to be seen. He closed his eyes and reached out over their bond. Obi-Wan was in his room hiding behind closed doors and heavy shields, yet even so, brief wisps of anxiety leaked across the bond confirming the boy's worry like sea spray confirmed the presence of an ocean.

"Padawan."

A door quietly opened. A sheepish looking teenager stepped out, his head down, his fingers nervously pulling at the hem of his robes. At first Qui-Gon thought the boy was staring at his boots simply to avoid his master's gaze, but as he studied his apprentice further it seemed Obi-Wan was hiding something else from him.

"Come here, Padawan," he said his voice stern, but not hard. Obi-Wan obeyed and stepped forward until he was standing directly in front of his master. Qui-Gon noticed that the boy had still not raised his head and the old master had a reasonable suspicion why.

"There is no sense trying to hide. Let me see," he gently ordered. Obi-Wan sighed, but obediently lifted his head so that his master could properly see his face. As the old man suspected a deep purple and black bruise rested puffily around the boy's right eye. Qui-Gon's finger traced the outside edge of the bruise. He saw his apprentice flinch under even this light touch. For a moment, the paternal part of Qui-Gon considered using the Force to speed the healing of the black eye, but the mentor in him thought perhaps this lesson might be better learnt if the discomfort remained.

"Sit," he said as he gestured to the large couch of their common room. Obi-Wan complied and slogged dejectedly to his seat. He slouched into the cushions and absently wrung his hands. Qui-Gon went into the compact kitchen and retrieved a small flimsiplast bag that he began to fill with ice. He then returned to his charge and handed him the compress which the student both reluctantly accepted and dutifully placed against his swollen face.

"Now, my young apprentice, care to explain how this occurred?" Qui-Gon asked as he crossed his arms over his chest. Obi-Wan glanced up at his master with his uncovered eye before returning his gaze to the floor, a flush creeping up his ears.

"There is no excuse, Master. I let my anger control my actions. I know better than to do that," he paused. "I'm sorry."

"You are right, Padawan and I am very disappointed in you." Qui-Gon could see the boy wince under his words, but he continued. "There is no excuse for your behavior, but I would like to know the reason for it," Qui-Gon finished. The old man had already been told the gist of the situation by the boy's saber instructor who had caught him fighting with another padawan, Bruck Chun. Qui-Gon was well aware that Bruck had been somewhat of a bully to Obi-Wan over the years, but now that the boys were padawans Qui-Gon had hoped they had outgrown such behavior. It was now clear to the master that that was not the case.

Obi-Wan raised a cautious eye to his master who greeted the boy's unspoken inquiry with a raised eyebrow. Obi-Wan sighed defeatedly.

"You know how he is, Master. I tried to ignore him. I tried to remain calm and just walk away, but... Bruck always knows..." he said his voice trailing off until his last words were lost to Qui-Gon.

"Bruck always knows what?" he asked. Obi-Wan shifted uncomfortably. He looked away from his master before answering.

"He always knows exactly where it hurts," the boy answered quietly.

Qui-Gon knew his apprentice was not referring to any physical pain as he felt something stir within the boy. A deep sense of shame and sadness permeated across the bond despite Obi-Wan's attempt to shield himself. Qui-Gon thought carefully before speaking. He did not want to pain the child further, but he had to get to the root of things if the problem were to be resolved.

"What did he say to you?" he asked finally. Obi-Wan's head snapped up at his master in horror. Such was the padawan's fear that he failed to notice that his ice pack had dropped out of his hand and fallen to the floor with a muted thump. It had never occurred to the boy that his master would want to know what Bruck said that had driven him to anger. Qui-Gon could see the plea in his apprentice's uninjured eye and though his heart ached, his face remained neutral and his gaze still awaited an answer. Obi-Wan shook his head and stared at his master's boots.

"Please, Master. It's... personal. I'd rather not say."

"It was not a request, Padawan," his master replied. Obi-Wan's frame trembled for a moment, then stilled as he desperately fought to hold back tears. Qui-Gon waited patiently for the boy to collect himself.

"He said that..." Obi-Wan started weakly, his voiced choked on the lump lodged deep in his throat. He paused, took a deep breath and began again. "He said that bringing me back from Bandomeer was... a mistake. That it was only a matter of time before you and the

Council realized that... it was... the will of the Force that I not be trained as a knight. That I... didn't deserve... to be a Jedi... That you only took me as your padawan out of pity..." Obi-Wan finished. He had thought hearing himself say the words aloud had been uncomfortable, but the quiet that followed felt far worse. Just before the silence became too deafening, Qui-Gon sighed.

"Look at me," he said softly. When Obi-Wan didn't respond he tried a sterner approach. "Padawan."

As he expected, Obi-Wan would not disobey what he perceived as a direct order from his master. Slowly, blue-gray eyes rose to meet dark blue ones.

"Do you believe it?"

"Master?"

"Do you believe what Bruck told you?" he asked again. Obi-Wan shook his head emphatically.

"No, Master. Of course not," he replied. Qui-Gon continued his quiet stare. Obi-Wan strained uncomfortably under his master's gaze and finally he stopped shaking his head. His eyes dropped to once again scrutinize the patch of floor in front of his boots.

"Yes... sometimes... maybe..." he answered softly. For several moments the deafening silence returned.

"I think you should spend the next few hours meditating on your actions. When I return we will speak more on this," Qui-Gon said. Obi-Wan lifted his gaze, his uninjured eye opened wide.

"But... but I was supposed to go swimming with Bant and Garen," he pleaded.

"That was before."

"But, you said yesterday that I could."

"Obi-Wan,"

"But you said,"

"Do not try my patience further, Padawan," Qui-Gon interrupted his voice low and his words slow and punctuated. Obi-Wan's mouth immediately snapped shut. He looked once again at the floor. His shoulders slumped as he took a deep breath and calmed himself before he addressed his master again. After several seconds, he looked up.

"May I at least let them know that I'm not coming?" he asked his tone soft and respectful.

"I will inform their masters," Qui-Gon answered. Obi-Wan nodded and started towards his room. "You are to meditate and remain in these quarters until I return."

"Yes, Master," Obi-Wan said turning briefly to his master. He then went into his room and closed his door behind him. Qui-Gon let out a heavy sigh. The boy wasn't the only one who needed some time in deep meditation, but he didn't want to do it here. No, he would go where he could be immersed in the Living Force. Without further thought, Qui-Gon left the apartment and made his way to the Room of a Thousand Fountains. Once there, he went to his favorite spot, an alcove by a shallow pond shaded by a small tree. Quickly, he pulled out his comm. and contacted Garen's master and Bant's crèche master to inform them of Obi-Wan's absence. That business taken care of, he knelt down, closed his eyes, and began to breathe deeply. He allowed his thoughts to drift back to Obi-Wan. The shame and sorrow he had felt from the boy disturbed him. Qui-Gon knew of his padawan's insecurities, particularly because he was responsible for causing or at least exacerbating most of them. He knew that his initial rejection of the boy had caused Obi-Wan to further doubt his self-worth. He continually questioned his place within the Order and his place at Qui-Gon's side. The deep seeded fear that he would be abandoned by the Jedi... abandoned by his master was a shadow ever gnawing at the boy's heart.

Qui-Gon allowed himself another heavy sigh. Obi-Wan would have to get over his fear and Qui-Gon needed to find a way to help him do it, but the master was at a loss as to how. How could he convince the child that it was, in fact, the will of the Force that he took him as his padawan and that his initial reluctance was because of his master's failings not his own?

The old master took another deep breath and allowed himself to fall deeper into the Force. He could feel its warm eddies and currents pass through him and over him. He felt wrapped in an almost palpable serenity, but something was... off. There was a whisper, a slight tugging in the back of his mind. A warning? Qui-Gon tried to focus on the niggling, but every time he tried to grasp it, it seeped through his fingers like a fistful of sand.

Mildly frustrated and no closer to any of the answers he sought, Qui-Gon opened his eyes. It had been several hours since he had left his padawan. Obi-Wan would be tired and hungry by now.

Qui-Gon headed back to the apartment. Maybe he would just tell Obi-Wan the truth, straight forward and plainly. He would simply make the boy understand how special and truly wanted he was. Yes, Qui-Gon would not rest until his apprentice knew and believed that he was meant to be a Jedi and that he was honored to be his master.

Qui-Gon entered the dark apartment. It was quiet and Obi-Wan's door was still closed. The master didn't bother to reach out with the Force. Instead he just went to his apprentice's door and knocked.

“Padawan?” he called, but there was no response. Perhaps the boy had fallen asleep. “Obi-Wan?” he called a bit louder, but still he was greeted only with silence. Qui-Gon opened the door to Obi-Wan’s room. The small room was empty. Qui-Gon frowned. He had given the boy strict orders to remain in the apartment and it was not like his padawan to blatantly disobey his orders. He closed his eyes and reached out to their bond. He was met with... a void. Obi-Wan’s side of the bond, the usually bright, warm light ever present in his master’s mind, was now silent and empty. A feeling of extreme unease settled in the core of the master’s body as the reality of the situation washed over him.

Obi-Wan was missing.

Chapter 3: No Safe Quarter

Day – 0

It should have been impossible. He knew that. If his apprentice had gone missing on a mission that would be one thing, but to go missing from the Temple? It was not only unheard of, it should not have been possible.

Qui-Gon had checked the gardens, the training salles, even the Healer's Ward, a place Obi-Wan would never have entered voluntarily, and found nothing. He had visited the masters of his apprentice's closest friends, Bant, Garen, Reeft and Quinlan. None of them had seen him.

Now, Qui-Gon stood before another master's apartment door, but this time he found himself hesitating. He closed his eyes, tightened his shields, and tamped down the panic trying to gain a foothold in the pit of his stomach. He pushed the door chime and waited. He did not wait long. The door slid open and there stood another Jedi. He was as tall as Qui-Gon, but his skin was deep russet and his head was bald.

"Qui-Gon," Master Windu greeted pleasantly, but then he noticed the subtle waves of anxiety rolling off his friend's Force signature. "What has happened?"

"Obi-Wan is missing," he answered flatly. Windu stepped aside allowing Qui-Gon entry into his quarters.

"I'm starting to worry, Mace," Qui-Gon said as he took a seat on the couch. Master Windu closed the door then took a seat across from his distraught agemate. Windu leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers. Qui-Gon absently carded his long, dark bistre locks before speaking. Mace waited patiently for the other Jedi to collect his thoughts.

"He was in a fight earlier today and I left him in our quarters to meditate on his actions and his punishment. When I returned, he was gone," Qui-Gon paused to clear the small catch he felt form in his throat. "It is not like him to disobey me. I have checked with his friends and with the Healers. No one has seen him."

"And your bond?"

"Is completely silent. I feel nothing from him," Qui-Gon answered. Mace's brow furrowed and his characteristic frown returned to his face. After a few moments thought, Mace stood and crossed to the comm. panel.

"Temple security."

"Master Lo-Cha," Mace said in greeting. The Iktotchi Jedi on the screen nodded in deference to the Council member.

"How may I be of service, Master Windu?"

"We have a missing padawan. Kenobi. I want you to organize some knights to search the Temple grounds. The child may be unconscious or injured. Also, his master and I will need to see the security footage outside the Jinn/Kenobi apartment starting from..." Mace paused as he turned to Qui-Gon.

"1500 hours," he supplied. Mace turned back to the comm. screen.

"1500 hours," he answered. "We will join you shortly."

"I will start immediately, Master," Lo-Cha nodded then he terminated the link. Mace paused silently by the comm. panel before turning around.

"I think we should alert Master Yoda," he said. Qui-Gon gave no verbal response only a curt nod before returning his chin to its position of rest on his interlaced fingers. Mace eyed his long time friend for a moment more before turning back to the comm. panel.

"Master Yoda."

"A problem there is. A disturbance I have felt," the wizened Jedi stated rather than asked. Mace nodded grimly.

"Yes. Qui-Gon's padawan, Obi-Wan, is missing."

"Sense him he cannot." Another statement. Mace didn't stop to ponder how the Grand Master always seemed to be one step ahead when being given information—telling the answer instead of asking the question. Over the years, the Korun Council member had just grown accustomed to the quasi-precognizant green entity.

"He cannot."

"Hmmp," Yoda paused, his small clawed hand tapped his chin. "To my chambers when done with Master Lo-Cha you are."

"Yes, Master," Mace said with a bow of his head. He ended the transmission. When he turned around Qui-Gon was already on his feet.

"Let's go," he said and then he immediately left the apartment. Mace followed right behind. The two Jedi traversed the grand corridors of the Temple in silence—one not wanting to give voice to the terrible, anxious images laying siege to his thoughts, the other not knowing the words to use to bring any comfort to his friend. So they carried on in silence until they reached the Temple's Security Station. Once the two stepped inside, Master Lo-Cha moved to meet them.

"Masters," he nodded. Mace and Qui-Gon politely nodded back. The Iktotchi Master gestured to the main security station which was flanked by one large holo-monitor on both sides and one directly in front.

"I've dispatched four knights to sweep the building with the assistance of the Temple Guards. I also have droids checking the services entrances and maintenance hatches. If the padawan is in the Temple we will find him," he said speaking directly to Jinn who nodded. All three Masters stood before the main station as a young Cerean male with long black hair manned the console. Lo-Cha rested a hand on the youth's shoulder.

"This is my padawan, Bur-Lan-Ty," Lo-Cha introduced as the young man swiveled around in his seat to greet the masters. Both Jedi nodded in acknowledgement. "Bur-Lan has pulled the footage you requested, though we have not had an opportunity to view it," Lo-Cha finished as his apprentice swiveled back to face his console and key in the necessary commands. Instantly, an image of the corridor outside Jinn's apartment appeared on all three holo-monitors. Each displayed a slightly different angle.

"So, this is the hall at 1500 hours," the Cerean said then he pushed a button and the time frame sped forward. He released the button as a tall, robed figure exited the quarters.

"That's when I left for meditation in the gardens," Qui-Gon stated.

"And where was your padawan at that time?" Master Lo-Cha asked.

"Meditating in his room with orders not to leave until I returned," Qui-Gon answered. He leaned forward resting one hand on the outer edge of the console and one on the back of Bur-Lan's seat.

"Speed it up again," he told the apprentice who dutifully obeyed. "Stop! There!" Qui-Gon yelled. As requested, the image on the monitors froze.

"Who is that? Another Jedi? Were you expecting someone to visit your quarters?" Master Windu asked as all four Jedi stared at the back of the hooded figure that stood outside Qui-Gon's door.

"No, but perhaps he may have noticed something that may shed some light," Qui-Gon muttered. "What is the time index?"

"1820 hours," Bur-Lan replied.

"Unpause it," Lo-Cha instructed his apprentice. With the push of a button, the figure on the monitors palmed the door to the Jinn/Kenobi quarters open and stepped inside.

"He did not request entry," Mace noted. "Perhaps Obi-Wan expected him?"

"I do not know," was Qui-Gon's only answer. "He seems familiar, but I still can't place him," he murmured, mostly to himself. The four waited, three of them patiently, one less so, as they watched the monitors, the minutes ticking away in real time. Finally, the door opened and out stepped the hooded figure once again except this time he carried a very large, reinforced duffle bag. Then the figure did something completely unexpected. He looked directly into one of the cameras. The face was that of a young man with pale skin, somewhat delicate features, and piercing azure eyes. On his cheek he bore a distinctive scar.

"Xanatos," Qui-Gon growled. As if on cue, a cruel smile spread across the young man's face. He patted the duffle bag lightly and winked at the camera. A realization took hold. A gasped followed.

"He has Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon whispered to no one, his eyes locked on the screen before him. Xanatos reached into his cloak and placed something on or near the camera. He smiled again and gave a tiny nod to the camera before continuing down the hall with his prize. Mace turned abruptly to Master Lo-Cha.

"I want you to review all of the footage for today. I want to know how he got in and how he got out."

"Yes, Master," Lo-Cha answered with a quick nod. Mace turned to Qui-Gon who simply nodded, already knowing the Councilor's thoughts. Hurriedly, but not running, the pair of Jedi made their way to Qui-Gon's quarters. As soon as they entered the corridor, Qui-Gon immediately crossed over to the camera in question, subtly mounted in a faux sconce located high on the wall. He patted around until his fingers brushed against a small, round object. He removed it, stepped back, and shared his finding with Mace.

"A holo-recorder," Mace stated needlessly. Qui-Gon wasted no time activating the device. A tiny, blue image of his former apprentice sprang to life.

"Hello, Master," the holo-Xanatos smiled as he gave his intended audience a mocking bow. "It's been a long time. They say you can never go home again, but... I found it rather easy. You may want to consider stepping up your security. You wouldn't want the wrong kind of people just walking in..." he paused and smiled. "You know, being in the Temple again, walking the old hallways, seeing our old quarters, being in my old room... it has left me rather nostalgic. I can't help but think about all the things lost to me since that time... all the things I will never again have... all the things that You took from me!" the holo-Xanatos yelled, his rage evident in the harsh lines of his expression. "But," he began, his voice returning to the calm and cold timber of before. "I cannot get those things you stole from me back so instead I have chosen to settle for an exchange. A future for a future. A life for a life," he finished his tone unmistakably dark. "Feel free to meditate on that, Master. I'll be in touch."

* * * * *

The message terminated and the Council chamber was plunged into a heavy silence. Qui-Gon's expression was unaffected by the holo-recording as by now he had heard it many times. First in the hall with Mace then again with Master Yoda in his chambers, and now in the Council room, but these instances were but a mere trifle compared to the number of times the master had replayed the message in his head. Each time he studied every word, every expression, every inflection, gesture, intonation, looking for something, anything that might reveal a clue to help find Obi-Wan. But Qui-Gon knew from experience that Xanatos would reveal only what he wanted and nothing more. Still, something had felt off about Xanatos's behavior and though Qui-Gon could not determine what that was the feeling still plagued him. The old master was forced to be patient—a skill learned early in the life of a Jedi and a skill that quickly waned from this particular Jedi with each passing moment.

"You said you felt something during your meditation?" Master Adi Gallia questioned breaking the uneasy silence. Qui-Gon nodded.

"Yes. It was very strange, but very faint. I... I was unable to recognize it for what it was," he said shaking his head in frustration. "I know now that it was a warning."

"Yes," Master Yoda interrupted. "A disturbance I felt. Clouded it was."

"How did he even get in?" Master Even Piell's heavily accented voice sounded in the chamber. Master Windu shook his head and steepled his fingers.

"Based on Master Lo-Cha's review of the security footage for the Temple Xanatos was able to simply walk in. However," he paused. "Not long after leaving the corridor outside Jinn's quarters he simply disappears from view."

"Disappears? Caught him leave no camera did?" Master Yaddle questioned.

"No," Mace replied. "However he left he managed to avoid all of our surveillance."

"And we have no leads as to where he may have taken the boy?" Master Ki-Adi-Mundi asked.

"None," Qui-Gon answered succinctly. His jaw was clenching and unclenching as his patience continued to evaporate under, in his view, the unnecessary discussion. It wasn't the time for words, it was the time for action. With each passing second his apprentice and his capture drew further and further away.

"And still you can sense nothing through your training bond?" Master T'un asked. Qui-Gon sighed.

“Nothing, Master. I can still feel his presence. It is muted though... distant,” he said as he closed his eyes. He searched the bond again, but the result was the same. Silence. He opened his eyes and looked to the Council.

“I can only sense that he is alive,” Qui-Gon finished sadly. Master Yoda looked at his former pupil, his golden eyes brimming with compassion and resolve.

“Continue the search for him we will, but trust in the Force we must.”

Chapter 4: The Waiting Game

Day – 15

Three weeks. Three whole standard weeks had passed and still there was nothing. Nothing. Not one clue. Not one lead. Not one word or feeling. It was like the dark of the galaxy swallowed the boy up and with it threatened to extinguish a true, bright light of the Force.

No I must not think that way, the weary master reminded himself. It was an ever-constant rebuke he imposed on himself throughout each day's long and hellish hours.

In the beginning time passed quickly. Almost too so, the minutes and hours racing to keep time with the unnaturally hastened tattoo of the master's heart. First they closed off the spaceports. No small feat on the immense city planet. The Coruscant Security Agency was put on high alert. Images of Xanatos and Obi-Wan were placed on every available holo-surface. Every available knight and master was sent out into the city to aid in the search. A temporary headquarters had been established inside the main offices of the CSA. Masters Qui-Gon Jinn and Ki-Adi-Mundi were assigned by the Council to head the search efforts. The two Jedi supervised the search teams remotely, allocated resources, and liaised with the Council. In the early days, Qui-Gon advised search leaders and other Jedi on everything he knew about his former apprentice's thoughts, motives, and tactics. When the briefings were done, Qui-Gon and Ki closely observed each team's progress. In the spare moments between orders and updates, Qui-Gon searched the bond. Each probe proved fruitless, but each failure only strengthened his resolve.

That had been the routine for the first two weeks, but as the third week began Qui-Gon noticed fewer and fewer teams were dispatched. Resources were re-deployed to other security matters and all but a handful of knights had been recalled to the Temple, the Masters having left the week before. By day thirteen, their makeshift command post was reclaimed by its original owner and the Jedi supervisors were sent back to the Temple. Once the pair of masters had returned, the Council member set off to perform any number of his previously neglected duties while Qui-Gon struggled to find an outlet for his need for activity, a focus for his anxious energy. So he walked. Long strides and booted heels carried him thoughtlessly down the corridors. When his feet finally came to a halt Qui-Gon was somewhat surprised and dismayed to find himself standing outside his quarters, quarters he had not returned to since...

Qui-Gon felt a spear of ice pierce his stomach and slowly curl its icy fingers around his intestines. He had intentionally stayed away from this place. It hadn't proved that difficult a task. Meals had been served to the Jedi at the Agency, not that Qui-Gon had eaten much of the offerings. Sleep had been provided via a rear room that housed half a dozen sleep couches, not that Qui-Gon had sought its refuge. No, he had far too much to do those days making avoidance easy, but now...

Qui-Gon palmed open the door and stepped inside. Everything about the apartment was just as he last left it. Every datapad, every memento, every pillow and indented seat cushion was exactly the same and yet somehow everything was horribly different. Upon closer examination, the old master found that the apartment was not real. It was not... right. The items he glimpsed were but shadows, dark reflections of a life shared. There was no warmth within these walls, no warmth and no life. This was a withered husk, a discarded carapace, a grotesque approximation of his former home. And he knew it would remain so until the boy returned.

He opened the door to his padawan's room. The old man knew what to expect, what he would see and yet the emptiness of it still clutched at his heart and stole his breath.

How long he stood there, breathless in the threshold, he did not know. Not very long was likely as one typically cannot stand overly long without breathing. Still, reason aside, the old master would have sworn the time was nothing short of an eternity, the infinite length of its passing interrupted by the soft weight of a hand on his shoulder, a welcomed and honeyed voice in his ear.

"I came as soon as I could."

"Thank you," he murmured. He didn't turn around. His gaze was stuck on the painfully empty bedroom, his thoughts locked on the sweet child who was taken from between its walls.

"Come," she said as she gently pulled him away from the threshold. He allowed her to move him, allowed her to guide his stiff and heavy legs over to the couch of his common room. She pushed him down to sit, her touch light, but firm. The female Jedi knelt before him, her gold and green stripped eyes staring worriedly at her friend's solemn expression and haggard appearance. Softly, she touched his cheek with the back of her hand. Instinctively, he leaned into the touch and closed his eyes.

"Oh, Qui," she said her melodic voice just scarcely above a whisper. She remained there, still, for several moments before she pulled herself away. She journeyed to the kitchenette and filled the well-used teapot with water. She placed it on the cook top and then returned to her friend, this time sitting by his side.

"How are you?"

"I'm fine," he answered mechanically. Silence followed. Even without turning his head he could feel her glare upon him. He sighed and let himself fall back into the cushions of the couch.

"I'm managing," he finally answered as he let his head fall back and his gaze flit to the ceiling. "It has... not been easy..."

Satisfied with the truth, she patted his leg before disappearing back into the kitchen. After a few quiet moments she returned with two mugs. She handed one to Qui-Gon who took it with a weak, but sincere smile. He didn't drink from it right away. Instead, he simply stared at the calm, dark liquid, his face betraying nothing of the conflict within. For several minutes, the two sat in nearly companionable silence.

"Tahl?"

"Yes, Qui?"

"The last time I spoke to him... it was a reprimand. I... I told him... I was disappointed," he said finally looking at her. "What if I never see him again? What if he," he started, but his panicked and guilt-ridden ramblings were halted by one of Tahl's thin fingers across his lips.

"No more of that, Qui-Gon Jinn," she said sternly. First surprised, then embarrassed, he finally nodded and she allowed her finger to drop from his mouth. She then took his hand and held it between her own.

"You told me yourself, quite convincingly I might add, that it was the will of the Force that you two were to become master and padawan or have you forgotten that? Honestly, Qui, sometimes I think you have the brains of a bantha," she smiled. Qui-Gon looked at his closest friend, finally seeing her for the first time since she came into his quarters. Blunt honesty and scathing wit aside, he was grateful for her presence both in his life and at this moment. From inside her he could grasp the calm he so desperately needed, yet couldn't find within himself. At times, he felt closer to Tahl than anyone else in his life. She had known him since they were both eager initiates yearning to catch the eye of the one of the Temple's esteemed knights or masters in the hope of an apprenticeship and the fulfillment of the dream of knighthood. It was a dream shared by his current apprentice as well. That the boy's dream could now be in jeopardy shook the master to his core. Qui-Gon closed his eyes and took several calming breaths, drawing on Tahl's serenity to help foster his own and to allow some of his fear to be released into the Force. He was unable, or perhaps unwilling, to let go of all his fear, but at least he was now unencumbered enough to think clearly once more.

"You are right," he answered finally as he patted the hands that encased his. "In both regards," he smiled back and in that smile Tahl was able to glimpse, albeit briefly, a hint of her old friend's true personality peek through the cloak of despair he currently wore.

"Oh my, you are in a bad way if you agree with me!" she replied in feigned horror. The two Jedi shared a meager laugh. It wasn't riotous or long, but it was genuine and welcomed.

"Alright," Tahl said after a few quiet minutes. "We're going to put some food in you and then, Master Jinn, you are going to bed," she proclaimed. Qui-Gon immediately stiffened.

"Tahl."

"Qui-Gon," she answered evenly. It only took a raise of a single eyebrow for the old man to realize this too was an argument he would not win.

"You know, there are times when I very much dislike you," he growled, but there was no frustration in his tone, only a sense of deep affection. Tahl weaved her arm around his and smiled mischievously.

"I know. It's odd how those are exactly the times you need me most."

* * * * *

Despite his melancholic and half-hearted protests, Tahl made good on her promises and stuffed Qui-Gon full of Ghuhorian stew and then promptly sent him off to bed. Before he even had a chance to argue that, tired as he was, there was simply no way he would ever be able to sleep then she slapped him with a Force sleep suggestion that had all the gentleness and subtlety of a stim-enhanced gundark. Subtle it may not have been (he had received vicious blows that more gently eased him into unconsciousness), but as Qui-Gon awoke many hours later feeling more centered than he had felt in days, he couldn't argue with its effectiveness.

Qui-Gon reached over his head and stretched his weary muscles. Refreshed and clear headed, the master knew that now was the time to plan his next move, but with no clues and no leads what was he supposed to do? Where should he go? He didn't have these answers and, for a moment, frustration and despair prepared to steal his new-found peace away from him, but then he remembered his training and Yoda's words. In this, as in all things, he would have to trust the Force. Without any further preamble or internal debate, Qui-Gon crossed to the middle of the floor of the common room and knelt down. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. He let his mind rise high above and away from his worries and anxieties and then fully immersed himself in the brilliant wonder that was the Force. He allowed the Force to move freely through his being before he brought his concerns to bear. He thought of Xanatos, of Obi-Wan, of the galaxy, and the infinite majesty of the Force. The master put forth his queries and patiently waited for the Force's answers, but all that was offered was the continued feeling that he must be patient.

With a heavy sigh, Qui-Gon slowly brought himself out of his meditation. Just as he moved to his feet, his personal comm. beeped.

"Jinn," he answered as he brought the small unit nearer his face.

"Qui-Gon," Mace Windu's voice carried over the comm. "The Council requests your presence."

"Has there been any news about Obi-Wan?" Qui-Gon asked unable to keep the faint, but powerful tinge of hope from his voice. For a moment the comm. was completely silent.

"No."

With that simple word, the stone that was the core of Qui-Gon's peace cracked horribly, but did not shatter. He took a deep breath and squared his shoulders.

"I see," he answered flatly. "I'm on my way."

Qui-Gon grabbed his cloak and headed out the door. He walked with purposeful, long strides down the corridor ending at the ante chamber of the Council room. He stood there only a few moments before the double doors slid open beckoning him inside. The Jedi walked to the center of the room and bowed his head low.

"Masters," he said. It was only then that Qui-Gon noticed that the Council chambers were nearly empty. Only Master Yoda and Master Windu sat in attendance.

"If I had requested you simply meet with me you might have declined," Mace offered, answering the master's unspoken question. The fact that he had been manipulated into appearing irked Qui-Gon to no great end, but he decided that that... discussion could be addressed at a later time. It didn't mean, however, that he had to completely hide his annoyance.

"And what was so urgent that deception was necessary to secure my presence?" he asked, his face neutral, his expression serene. He knew with his words he was walking a thin line between impertinence and downright disrespect, but it was a line this particular Jedi was familiar with and he knew its boundaries well. If the two Council members were disturbed by Qui-Gon's words they didn't show it letting the comment pass without rebuke.

"Concerned we are," Yoda responded to his question. Qui-Gon raised an eyebrow.

"About?"

"You," Mace answered with a hint of incredulity and exasperation. "Despite your... opinions regarding certain Council decisions you must know that we are still your friends, Qui-Gon."

Qui-Gon nodded feeling a little abashed as all the traces of annoyance drained out of him in an instant.

"Of course. My apologies, Masters."

"How are you, Qui-Gon? I have to admit you certainly look better since last I saw you," Mace smiled lightly. Qui-Gon answered with a wry grin of his own.

“Master Tahl paid me a visit.”

“Ah, wise Jedi she is. Her counsel you should heed,” Yoda informed him. Again Qui-Gon went to nod, but suddenly he felt his training bond with Obi-Wan flare to life and he was inundated with successive waves of emotions: fear, loneliness and despair. The initial burst was so strong it caused the Jedi to stagger back and place a hand on his throbbing skull. Then he heard it.

/Master?/

/Obi-Wan? Are you alright? Where are you?/

/I’m... alright, Master, but I don’t know where I am./

Qui-Gon allowed himself to breathe a little sigh of relief. At least the boy was unharmed... for now. He immediately sent wave after wave of love, comfort, and reassurance through the bond. He felt the boy’s fear diminish slightly and a sense of calm began to grow.

/It’s going to be alright, Padawan. I *will* find you. I promise./

Silence.

/Obi-Wan?/

Qui-Gon felt the boy’s fear spike suddenly.

/He’s here./

/Xanatos?/

/Yes... He... He wants me to tell you that... it’s no fun if you’re peeking and... that you’ll hear from him soon./

/What? I don’t understand, Padawan. What does he mean?/

Suddenly, the bond was flooded with blinding pain. Qui-Gon could feel his padawan’s agony and it dropped him to his knees.

/Master!/

Obi-Wan screamed then Qui-Gon was hit with a mental sledge hammer as half the bond went completely silent.

/Obi-Wan! Padawan! Answer me!/

Silence. The silence was deeper than before. From the bond Qui-Gon could feel... nothing, not even the barest hint that his padawan lived.

"Oh Gods no," he whispered, still on his hands and knees. The master's mind still reeled as he felt a pair of hands at his side. There were voices in his ears, but his wounded mind could not make sense of their words. For a long time he just knelt there, numb to his surroundings until slowly the fog of shock retreated from his mind and he was able to think again.

"Qui-Gon?" Mace asked worriedly. "Are you alright?"

"It was..." Qui-Gon began, startled by the weakness in his own voice. "It was Obi-Wan. Whatever veil Xanatos is using to block him was lifted."

"A reason had he?" Master Yoda said. He was standing a few feet in front of the kneeling form of the younger Master.

"He wanted Obi-Wan to deliver a message," Qui-Gon answered swallowing thickly. "He said it was no fun if I could peek and that... I would hear from him soon... Then I felt..." he paused as he forced himself to get a tighter reign on his rampant emotions. "I felt that my padawan was in great pain, torturous pain... Then the bond slammed shut. I feel nothing... not even his life force..."

"Alive your padawan is," Yoda said answering the question Qui-Gon had no intention of ever asking. Mace nodded his head in agreement and then turned to his friend.

"He is trying to unbalance you," Mace said. Qui-Gon rocked back to sit on his heels, his head still hanging low.

"He is succeeding."

Chapter 5: Hide and Seek

Day – 15

“If hear him you can on Coruscant your padawan must be,” Master Yoda said as he rested a tiny claw on the long-haired master’s shoulders. Qui-Gon had not risen from his position on the floor of the Council chambers, the event that sent him to his knees still fresh in his mind.

Everything was so far out of hand, so unreal... He had just begun to let the shadow of his former padawan go so he could truly accept into his heart the sweet boy now in his charge. The old man knew he had wasted those first few moments with his apprentice. He had shunned him, rejected him not once, but over and over. Each time the child had reached for him and each time the old fool had refused. Even when he finally took the boy’s hand and agreed to guide him, the master had kept his distance; the fear left by the former child proved too great to overcome. More time wasted. Precious time. Only recently had he let the boy in. Only now was he getting to know the incredible young Jedi the Force itself had brought into his life and now... Now, the child had been taken from him, snatched nearly from his very arms. Perhaps this too was the will of the Force. As punishment for his earlier neglect, the Force would withhold from him the boy that had healed him, the light that had promised him redemption because the master had proven himself no longer worthy.

“Being punished you are not, tested though you may be,” Yoda offered seeming to know the younger master’s thoughts. Qui-Gon stared into the calm, golden eyes of the tiny Grand Master, his own eyes weighted with unshed tears, stony with unexpressed anger.

“If it is a test it should be mine, not his. He should not suffer for my failures,” Qui-Gon replied his usually mellifluous baritone now gruff and jagged.

“A test of the bond it may be,” Yoda nodded calmly. “Doubt you that the Force’s will it was to pair master and apprentice, hmmm?”

“Never.”

“Then trust in the pairing now you must. Trust in your apprentice. Trust in yourself and trust in the Force.”

With a deep sigh and a centering breath, Qui-Gon finally nodded, his thoughts and emotions a little calmer as he considered the ancient master’s words. After a few quite minutes he was able to rise to his feet, his clarity returned, his determination adding strength to his focus.

"It would make sense that Xanatos would keep him on Coruscant. He always liked to hide in plain sight to better see the devastation he had..." Qui-Gon's voice trailed off as a long-buried memory rushed to the surface. Mace studied his friend for a moment, his usual frown deepening.

"What is it?"

"A strategy from a tyrant on the outer rim. A strategy that Xanatos would know far too well," Qui-Gon muttered. He then looked both Jedi in the eye. "Disruption. Demoralization. Distraction. He will use these three to reap devastation. The disruption is clear. He kidnapped Obi-Wan from, what should have been the safest place on Coruscant, the Temple."

"If you are correct, then demoralization will follow," Mace added. Qui-Gon nodded slowly, a pained expression flickering through his calm exterior.

"I feel that is the current stage. He will continue to torment me by tormenting Obi-Wan, but he will eventually seek to distract us from his ultimate goal."

"Yes, but what is his ultimate goal? Obi-Wan? You? Or something else?" Mace asked.

"That I do not know," Qui-Gon answered gravely. Suddenly, the loud thud of Yoda's gimer stick striking the floor echoed throughout the chamber.

"Focus we should on the young one taken. On his recovery all else depends."

* * * * *

Day 16

It was decided the next day that Qui-Gon would be assigned a team of Jedi to assist in his search of the city-planet for his lost padawan. The Council met, discussed, and decided to leave the assignment of team members to Qui-Gon provided he limit his selection to masters and knights already at the Temple and not ones currently on missions. For Qui-Gon the decision was easy. Two of his best friends, both masters in their own right, were currently between assignments and resting at the Temple.

His first choice was easiest, Master Tahl Uvain, one of his closest and dearest friends. Luckily for Qui-Gon, Tahl was also an unparalleled investigator and a superb Jedi. The moment he asked for her help she had readily accepted, immediately grabbing her cloak and following him out the door.

Qui-Gon's next choice was also decided quickly. In fact, it was decided the moment he discovered his long-time friend and agemate, Master Vresh Tivi, was also stationed planet-side and thus available to serve on his team. Though he was happy to see his friend and even happier that Vresh had agreed to join him, Qui-Gon was a little concerned when he remembered that his friend, too, had taken a padawan, a young felinoid named Lantis Mir. It wasn't that Qui-Gon had anything against the girl. It wasn't that at all. The master was just... uncomfortable placing another's padawan in danger while he desperately searched for his own. However, Vresh was as stubborn as Jinn himself and so, reluctantly, Qui-Gon agreed to include young Lantis. The team—three masters, one padawan—had but two goals: find Obi-Wan quickly and find him alive. In truth the first was a goal while the second was a genuine hope, but all four Jedi were determined to make that hope a reality. That was their objective. That was their mission.

The three masters had gathered in Qui-Gon's quarters to strategize while Lantis was completing a class exam. Vresh placed the datapad he was holding on the table and leaned his chair back to the point it was balancing on two legs, his own legs playing counter-point. He raked his long fingers through his shorn and shock white locks. Vresh was a large fellow, roughly as tall as Qui-Gon though of slimmer build. Where Qui-Gon's skin was fair, Vresh's was sun-kissed. Where Qui-Gon had long chestnut hair, Vresh kept almost a padawan look, his white hair in short spikes atop his head. To Qui-Gon's sparkling midnight blue eyes, Vresh's eyes gleamed a ghostly silver. Partners in crime since their days in the crèche, the two men had made an intimidating pair and that perception had only intensified through the course of their knighthood. In fact, it was Qui-Gon's opinion that the scar carved down and across his friend's left eye had only contributed to the man's no-nonsense demeanor and rakish good looks.

"I think small writing was created by the Sith to torture Jedi who read off datapads," Vresh announced, his cultured voice filling the room in a way that always reminded Qui-Gon of his former master, though, he had to admit, Vresh's voice had a warmth and depth that Dooku's forever lacked.

"I don't think that's a plot of the Sith, my friend. Just a sign of your age," Tahl said with a smile as she glanced away from her own reading. Vresh abruptly planted his chair, his face contorted in mock affront.

"You wound me, my lady."

"I'll wound you alright," Tahl answered as she threw a datapad at the master who caught it easily. Qui-Gon, who had stepped away from the table, returned carrying three steaming mugs. He placed one before each master before taking his seat and holding his own mug reservedly between two unhappily idle hands. Suddenly, both Vresh and Tahl fell silent, the mirth quickly disappearing from their eyes with one glance at their somber friend. Tahl placed a light hand on his.

"Qui?" she asked, her voice as gentle as her touch. Qui-Gon pulled his gaze away from the contents of his cup and looked at Tahl. He nodded.

"I'm fine," he said then he turned to Vresh. "What do we have?"

"Ah," Vresh began as he picked up his previously discarded datapad. "Yes, based on what we know about Xanatos, how he operates, his knowledge, his contacts, his habits, we have compiled a list of primary locations to investigate."

"Locations he no doubt would have anticipated we would suspect," Qui-Gon interrupted. Vresh merely nodded and continued.

"Which brings us to our list of secondary locations; places we would have absolutely no reason to suspect. And finally," Vresh said handing the pad over to Qui-Gon for inspection. "A list of tertiary locations based on an algorithmic progressive search pattern and a bit of instinct."

"Reasoned guesses, mathematical equations, and instinct," Qui-Gon hissed as he laid down the pad and shook his head. "This is all we have."

"No," Tahl said as she stared at her friend, her gold and green striped eyes daring him to hold her gaze.

"We also have the Force."

* * * * *

Day 51

It had been one standard month since the search team was assembled and for that standard month each day they searched new locations. Each week they traveled to new sectors of the planet. Time not spent eating, planning, or resting was spent searching and yet, for all their efforts, they had uncovered no trace of the lost apprentice.

Qui-Gon moved silently down the hallway of the small shuttle. The sectors the four had been investigating lately were on the opposite side of the planet and travel from the Temple took many hours by shuttle. As a result, the Jedi would spend several days at a time searching a large area before returning to the Temple to rest, regroup, and resupply.

The troubled master began to make his way to Tahl in the cockpit. He had ventured to the small hold in a vain attempt to meditate, but as it had been of late, his grasp on the Force was tenuous, strained, and desperate. He had therefore abandoned the effort and was making his way to sit with Tahl when he passed the opened door of the ship's tiny sleep compartment. Qui-Gon glanced inside the darkened room and silently watched the two Jedi. Lantis was fast asleep on a sleep couch, curled into a small ball, her sharp ears and

thin whiskers twitching every so often in response to dream images privy to no one but she. Her master tenderly stroked her furry orange and black spotted mane as he tucked a blanket tightly over her slender shoulders.

"They always seem so much younger when they're sleeping, don't they?" Vresh asked, his eyes never leaving his feline charge.

"Were we ever this young?" he asked finally turning to his friend. Qui-Gon leaned heavily against the door jamb and crossed his arms over his broad chest with a wry smile.

"In years if not in spirit," he answered ruefully. Vresh turned his gaze back to Lantis.

"I hadn't planned on taking another one, you know. I figured two was enough; time for an old man to take a break. No more tripping over datapads or boots left in the middle of the floor. No more bedside vigils over nightmares or fevered brows. No more soothing saber burns, and thank the Force, no more discussions about changing bodies and hormones," he said with a slight chuckle. Qui-Gon nodded, a small smile tugging at his own lips at memories of giving "the talk" to his previous padawans.

"I never asked you, what changed your mind?"

"In a word?" Vresh answered as he placed his calloused hand lightly on his padawan's crown. "Her."

He paused for a moment trying to collect his thoughts, to link his feelings to words, but finally he just shook his head.

"I don't have the words to explain it. From the moment I brushed by her in the corridor there was... something. Then later, I saw her in her saber class," he spoke. Vresh closed his eyes as he pulled forth the pleasant memory. "She was still working with Shii-Cho, but was in the midst of a very well executed, very Ataru style double backflip when inexplicably she lost her focus. She landed badly on her right leg. I saw it happening and, I swear to you Qui, I had her in my arms before her tail touched the ground."

Vresh opened his eyes and turned to the quiet Jedi with a lopsided grin.

"By latemeal, I had asked her to be my padawan, gotten the Council's approval, treated her injury in the Healing Ward, and moved her into my apartment. I have never acted so impulsively in my life since leaving the crèche and I'm eternally glad I did."

Qui-Gon carefully studied his longtime friend. He could honestly not recall a time when he had seen the man happier. Not that Vresh was ever a dour sort. No, the initiate made padawan made knight had always been calmly content, but with his second padawan, Vresh too had suffered through a dark chapter in his life. Both masters had sworn never again to take on an apprentice. The risk of pain was too great. However, the man before Qui-Gon now was more than calmly content, more than happy, he was... joyful, ebullient

within his serenity and though it pleased Qui-Gon to see his friend so deservedly Force blessed in his pairing, he could not help but feel the pangs of regret over the difficulties he caused with his own apprentice and the despair and guilt that now threatened to overwhelm him in the young boy's absence.

"I don't know how you are still upright, Qui," Vresh began again as he brought his tender gaze to his apprentice. "If it were she who was... I don't think I would be strong enough," Vresh finished softly as he placed a kiss upon the brow of the sleeping child before rising to his feet and turning to his friend. Qui-Gon shook his head as he stood up straight, a solemn expression seen plainly on his features.

"You would be strong enough," Qui-Gon answered definitively. The master's answer seemed so certain, so confident that Vresh couldn't help but question it.

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because," Qui-Gon replied as he glanced sadly at the slumbering padawan. "She would need you to be."

Vresh didn't know what to say to that, so he said nothing at all only nodded his understanding. The two Jedi embraced the quiet for a moment longer before Qui-Gon turned to resume the short journey to the cockpit. Vresh followed wordlessly behind him, however the dark-haired master had barely taken two steps before he froze in his tracks, his breath caught at the return of a familiar and missed warmth in the back of his mind.

/Padawan?/

/M-master?/

Qui-Gon's heart wretched at the abject sorrow, fear, and pain that came crashing through the reopened bond. That uncertain, yet hope laden question, that single heavy word spoken so innocently, the voice so small and vulnerable. Vresh placed a hand on the master's shoulder.

"Qui-Gon?"

"It's Obi-Wan," was all he said before turning all of his attention inward once more.

/Master, are you there?/

/Yes, Obi-Wan, I'm here./

/I... I'm sorry, Master./

/For what, Padawan?/

/I haven't been a very good Jedi... I... I've been afraid.../

Qui-Gon swallowed hard.

/I have been afraid too, Padawan. You have done nothing wrong./

/Really?/

/Yes, but when you feel afraid I need you to remember that I am always with you, Obi-Wan, that the Force is always with you. You are **not** alone./

Qui-Gon closed his eyes and sent wave after wave of love and warmth over the bond. He pushed those feelings with everything he had, determined to give the child as much comfort as possible until he had him back safe in his arms.

/Padawan, I need you to tell me where you are./

/I... I don't know, Master./

/Focus, Ppadawan! Tell me what you see, what you hear or smell! Can you sense anything? Tell me, no matter how small./

/There's... nothing, Master... just cold darkness. He... keeps me in the dark until.../

/Until what, Padawan?/

/Until he wants to hurt me... T-that's a different room.../

Qui-Gon could feel fear and panic begin to rise in his apprentice. He sent more waves of peace and comfort, siphoning his strength and sending it to the boy to buoy his own.

/Master, please... I... I need you to find me... I need you./

/Listen Obi-Wan, I'm coming for you! Just hang on, Padawan! I **will** find you!/

/Master, I.../

Silence.

/Obi-Wan? Obi-Wan!/

"No!" Qui-Gon yelled as he slammed his fist against the hard wall of the tight corridor.

"What's going on back there?" Tahl yelled from the cockpit. Vresh gave the shoulder under his hand a small squeeze.

"You must stay strong, my friend. He needs you to be."

* * * * *

Day 73

"This is pointless!"

"Pointless, yes, if your frustration to control you you allow."

"I cannot access the bond! I'm being blocked at every turn! How can I not be frustrated?" Qui-Gon roared at the diminutive master as he jumped to his feet and began to pace the small room. Master Yoda closed his eyes and shielded himself as he was assaulted by the powerful waves of anguish and anger rolling off the distraught Jedi before him. Over the past few weeks, as fewer and fewer locations had cause to be investigated, Yoda had convinced Qui-Gon to meditate with him. Together they would search the Force for any hint as to the whereabouts of the lost apprentice, but with each passing day the Grand Master could sense the younger man was less and less able to reign in his focus and delve deeply into the Force because of his growing fear and guilt. Yoda was about to say something to the anxious man pacing angrily in front of him when his comm. beeped.

"Master, you are needed in the Council chambers. Qui-Gon as well," Mace said over the comm.

"On our way we are," the Grand Master answered as he rose to his feet with a "hrmmph," then he and Master Jinn made their way to the Council chambers. Once inside, Yoda took his seat while Qui-Gon stood expectantly in the center of the floor. Mace did not keep the anxious master waiting.

"A package was delivered to the Temple moments ago. The courier droid had neither a record of the sender nor knowledge of where the package came from, only directions on where to deliver it," he paused, "and to whom."

"It is for me," Qui-Gon easily deduced. Why else would his presence be necessary? Mace nodded and brought over a small golden box that rested on his open palm. Qui-Gon took the box from him, but surprisingly the Councilor did not return to his seat. Instead, he hovered by the master's side as if he knew he needed to remain close at hand. Qui-Gon chose not to ponder the Councilor's continued proximity and instead turned his attention to the box. Carefully, with a palpable dread agitating his every nerve, he opened the tiny package. For a moment, his heart stopped. His breath vanished. His mind failed. His senses deafened. His eyes closed. His knees buckled. Had Mace not been at his side, the master would have surely hit the hard floor, but as it was the Korun Councilor caught him with

ease. Mace cradled Qui-Gon on his way to the floor, a stubby padawan braid still clutched tightly in the stricken master's hand.

Chapter 6: Senseless

Day – 73

“Good... good... Now, lessen your grip and open your center line then step, turn, cross, step, strike.”

Master Tivi moved through the steps of the kata with a practiced ease. The move completed, he turned to his padawan.

“Now, you try.”

“Master, there is no try,” Lantis laughed, her lips curled up in a smile revealing two rows of tiny pointed teeth and a pair of long, sharp canines. Her master placed his left hand at his torso and bowed deeply.

“My apologies, Padawan. It is your turn to do,” he replied giving the young felinoid girl a wink. The girl’s grin grew wider then disappeared completely as her expression became one of sharp focus. She checked her grip, checked her stance and, once satisfied, took a deep breath releasing her trepidation into the Force.

Step. Turn. Cross. Step. Strike. Smile.

“Excellent!” Vresh exclaimed to his beaming apprentice. “Now, the next part is a little trickier. You turn, sweep, strike...” Vresh’s voice trailed off into silence as he froze midway through his demonstration of the saber technique. The Force trembled in the air around him not in warning, but in... worry? Vresh stood up straight and closed his eyes as he searched for the source of the disturbance.

“Do you sense that, Padawan?” he asked his eyes still closed. Troubling as the feeling was, he was still a master and every moment had the potential of a lesson. Lantis closed her eyes, her chin tilted up slightly as she drew in the Force around her. Vresh could feel the girl searching, probing, reaching out with her senses as she had been trained to do. He opened his eyes and watched his apprentice carefully. Her right ear twitched slightly. She had caught something.

“I sense... trembling... like the air is... nervous,” she intoned softly as she opened her eyes and gazed upon the neutral expression of her master. Vresh nodded.

“Yes, that is it exactly,” he offered in agreement. Lantis wrinkled her brow, her tongue danced at the edge of her short muzzle.

“The question then is... why?” she said. Vresh watched the main door to the training salle open. Tahl stepped inside, her eyes quickly sweeping the room before locking on to him.

"And here, I think, comes our answer," he said gesturing to the approaching master. Lantis turned around to find Tahl nearly at her elbow. Vresh looked his friend over. Tahl's carefully schooled expression betrayed no disturbance, but her eyes... her eyes told the whole story of her terrible concern, easily discernible to those who knew her well.

"What has happened?" Vresh asked skipping any pleasantries.

"Come," she ordered as she turned on her heel and led the master and apprentice out of the salle at a hurried pace. "Mace just contacted me. Qui-Gon... collapsed in the Council chambers."

"Collapsed?" Vresh repeated as the trio swiftly traversed the wide Temple halls at Tahl's direction. "Is he ill?"

"No. Not ill."

Vresh's brow knitted.

"If not ill then....," he paused, his expression suddenly grim. "Obi-Wan."

It was not a question and Tahl gave no answer, only nodded confirmation of his conclusion. Vresh prepared to ask the question that naturally followed such a realization, a question he wasn't entirely certain he wanted an answer to, but before he could give the dreaded inquiry voice Tahl shot him a hard look then glanced at his padawan with narrowed eyes. Vresh understood immediately.

"Lani."

"Yes, Master," the girl answered as she glanced up at her tall master. The girl was forced to take double steps to keep up with her master's long strides.

"I need you to return to our quarters. Complete the focus meditation set I showed you earlier. Afterwards, you may join your friends for midday meal then attend to your classes. I will return by latemeal."

"But, Master," the felinoid protested, "if Master Jinn is hurt or in trouble I want to help him."

Vresh stopped in the middle of the corridor and knelt before his young charge. He placed a hand on her slender shoulder.

"Your open heart serves you well and I am thankful for it, young one, but right now I require your obedience, not your compassion. Now, follow my orders and return to our quarters."

"But,"

"Padawan," Vresh snapped his tone hard as stone and sharp as a vibroblade. Instantly, any protest the girl had planned died on her lips. Her head, ears, and tail dipped low in submission to the greater will.

"Forgive me, Master. I will go immediately," she spoke contritely in soft purring tones. With a short bob of her head she turned and hurriedly scampered away in the opposite direction. Vresh watched her until she disappeared around a corner, then he stood and continued with Tahl to their destination.

"Obi-Wan," he prompted. His padawan gone, Vresh knew he would now get an answer, but the fact that Tahl had required his padawan be dismissed before giving that answer made the master horribly uneasy.

"Xanatos sent another message."

"Through the bond?"

"No, through a courier droid," Tahl answered grimly.

"What... what was it?" Vresh asked hoping the other master had not noticed the slight wobble in his voice. The two Jedi suddenly came to a stop outside the door to the Jinn/Kenobi apartment. Tahl turned to him.

"Obi-Wan's padawan braid."

"Oh, Force!" Vresh whispered as Tahl turned back to the door, opened it, and walked inside. Vresh followed his friend into the apartment's common room where Mace immediately greeted them.

"I'm glad you're here. I must return to the Council," he said evenly. Vresh nodded.

"Of course, Master Windu. We can take it from here."

"I am not a youngling! I neither desire nor require your supervision," a gruff voice barked from deeper in the room. Qui-Gon sat in an arm chair, his elbows on his knees, his face partially obscured behind a curtain of dark brown and graying hair, his hands nimbly and numbly fingering an auburn lock. The two male masters exchanged a quiet concerned look, but Tahl burst unhesitatingly into action.

"Good thing we're not here to supervise you then," she said as she crossed over to the where Qui-Gon sat. She took a seat near him on the couch. "We're here to keep you company."

Qui-Gon growled under his breath.

"I do not want your company. Please, leave me."

Mace gave Vresh a quick glance that seemed to say “yeah, have fun with that” before he slipped out of the apartment to return to his duties as a Councilor. For several minutes the remaining Jedi were motionless, engulfed in a heavy silence, none of the masters brave enough to break it.

Qui-Gon stared down at the small braid cradled between three fingers. The braid itself was so short, just barely begun just like the boy’s apprenticeship, just like the boy’s life. The master had re-plaited the braid just the day before the boy disappeared. He remembered the pride and affection radiating off the boy as he knelt before his master. Qui-Gon had felt his own measure of pride and awe as he once again recognized the honor granted him to be allowed to guide this child of light down the road not only to knighthood, but to manhood as well. The braid, still in its infancy, bore only one marker: a yellow bead to signify the beginning of the master/padawan journey.

So much still lay ahead of the boy! Qui-Gon had eagerly looked forward to placing more markers along the lengthening lock, the physical representation of his apprentice’s commitment under his tutelage and the union of the student, the teacher, and the Force.

What would bear those marks of achievement now? What markers should the master bear to denote his failure to protect his padawan?

Qui-Gon turned the braid over in his hand once more, his eyes drawn to a previously unseen detail. He stared at the top of the braid. The ends were not uniform and even as he would have expected after its shearing. No, the top of this braid was rough, the hairs jagged and... tinged with shades of pink and red.

Qui-Gon gasped at this revelation. His throat tightened. His blood thundered in his ears. Obi-Wan’s braid had been torn from him, cruelly ripped from its living host. Rage and anguish battled for control over the master’s fragile soul.

Rage was winning, spurred on by the bloodied braid balanced between three fingers.

* * * * *

Day 99

Pain. Agony. White hot and sharp blazing bursts of jagged, tearing, blinding hurt. A torturous symphony of suffering accompanied the desperate cries of one who long ago abandoned calm and peace. Or had they abandoned him? It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered because this orchestra only played one song, one tune, one discordant melody, a cacophony of misery conducted under an expert hand.

Another shattering stab of pain. Another scream was mercilessly coaxed out of a throat already raw from past torments.

/Padawan!/

No answer. Only more agony and shrieks of incoherent suffering.

/Padawan!/

A thought pushed to the surface. A plea was given and all but withered voice.

/P-Please! Please... make it stop... Anything... do anything... to stop... P-Please.../

/Padawan! Hang on, please! I'm here! I am with you! You are not alone! Do you hear me? Obi-Wan, you are not alone!/

/M-Make it... s-stop... P-Please... just let me die... I-I can't... anymore... J-Just let me die... P-Please.../

/Obi-Wan! No!/

/...let me die... Force... let me die.../

* * * * *

Day 102

"There now. That's better," Tahl said as she neatly bound some of the long, chestnut tresses with a leather tie. After a great deal of pushing, pulling, and pleading, she had managed to get Qui-Gon into the refresher and into some clean robes. In near catatonia for three days, Qui-Gon had become a great weight on her heart and, she had to admit, the master was getting a little ripe too.

He had not spoken a word since he last felt his padawan through their training bond in Master Yoda's meditation room. As a result, no one knew exactly what had happened only of Qui-Gon's resulting withdrawal from the world. Mace feared that perhaps the boy had died having finally, and perhaps mercifully, succumb under the hand of his torturer, but Master Yoda had been adamant that the boy still lived and no one wanted to challenge the Grand Master's proclamation, silenced as much out of fear as hope. So what had happened was still anybody's guess, but whatever it was, whatever Qui-Gon was forced to witness had proven too much for the old master.

Tahl sat her friend in his favorite chair. She knelt before him and placed a hand on his cheek. He did not lean into her touch as he had before. In truth, he gave no response at all, no notice of her presence.

“Oh, Qui,” she pleaded softly. “Come back to me, dear heart. I miss you so much. You must come back to me.”

Tahl leaned forward and rested her head on Qui-Gon’s knee. She was just about to close her eyes when the door to Jinn’s apartment slid open. Mace’s figure stood in shadowy silhouette against the backlight of the outer corridor. Tahl lifted her head and stared at the Councilor.

“What is it? What’s happened?”

“We’ve found him. We’ve found Obi-Wan.”

Chapter 7: Small Talk

Day – 0

“He’s going to kill me,” Obi-Wan sighed defeatedly. Rationally the boy knew that he was not in any actual danger of becoming a victim of homicide, but the thought of violently joining the Force seemed preferable, at least in the apprentice’s eyes, to the hard look of disappointment he would inevitably be forced to endure once his master heard of his padawan’s most foolish failure to date.

Obi-Wan grimaced as the bitter all too recent memory played unceasingly behind closed eyes.

“Where do you think you’re going, Oafy-Wan?”

Obi-Wan didn’t bother to look up from packing his gym bag; he didn’t have to. He knew that voice. It was the same voice that he had heard tormenting him for many of his short years, the same smug, self-satisfied, taunting voice of newly made Jedi Padawan Bruck Chun. Obi-Wan sighed as he folded his towel and placed it in his bag.

“Leave me alone, Bruck. I have nothing to say to you.”

“Well maybe I have something to say to you!”

Obi-Wan closed his small bag and placed it on his shoulder. He turned to face his would-be tormentor.

“I’m leaving,” Obi-Wan said as he moved toward the door of the changing room. Bruck immediately blocked his path.

“You know it’s only a matter of time before they change their minds,” the white-haired bully sneered. When Obi-Wan didn’t take the bait and remained silent, the boy pressed on. “It was a mistake, you know, recalling you from Bandomeer. The Council is already beginning to recognize their error.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. Master Jinn chose me. It was the will of the Force that I became his padawan,” Obi-Wan spat. Bruck smiled. He knew he was getting to him.

“Why? Because he asked to be your master **after** you nearly got him killed?” Bruck laughed, his dark eyes reflecting no mirth, only malice. “No master **wanted** you. The Council sent you away. Master Jinn rejected you over and over before finally taking pity on you. The Council opposed him taking you. Face it, Oafy, it was the **will** of the Force that you never become a knight. I know it, you know it, the Council knows it, and your master knows it too,” Bruck finished, a malevolent smirk plastered on his lips.

Obi-Wan could feel his whole body quietly shake with anger. He tried to calm himself, to focus on his breathing, but Bruck's words had hit their mark with stunning accuracy. The boy knew all of Obi-Wan's still tender wounds and he struck out at them with the precision of a surgeon, the cruelty of a Sith.

"Step aside," Obi-Wan muttered through clenched teeth. Bruck crossed his arms defiantly over his chest, his expression twisted into a cold sneer.

"Why, so you can run away and cry? No wonder the Force doesn't want you as a Jedi."

That was it. That was the moment when something inside of Obi-Wan snapped and he found himself lunging at Bruck. The two boys were a tangled mess of arms and legs as they grappled at each other, rolling back and forth across the changing room floor. The Force swirled chaotically about them riding currents of rage and jealousy. Bruck used his greater bulk to roll on top of Obi-Wan. From his superior position, the boy began to rain blow upon blow on the other padawan's head. Obi-Wan blocked the punches as best he could, but inevitably some were able to painfully connect with the soft tissue of his face. Suddenly, a voice tore through the frenzied haze of the two combatants causing them to freeze in their struggles.

"Enough!" Weapons Master Cin Drallig roared. Immediately, the boys disengaged from one another and stood before the master, their heads bowed, their hands held tightly by their sides.

"Padawan Chun, return to your Master Tourin at once. I will speak with her shortly," Drallig ordered tersely. Bruck bowed before the master and ducked hastily out of the room, but not before shooting one last glare at Obi-Wan.

"And you, Padawan Kenobi. You will return to your quarters. I will inform Master Jinn of this... incident. I do not believe he will be pleased."

"Yes, Master," Obi-Wan replied softly, his head still cowed in shame.

"Go. Now."

That had been nearly two hours ago and the apprentice knew that the time of his master's return was fast approaching. Obi-Wan drew his legs in closer to his chest and rested his head on his knees, his arms tightly hugging his huddled form. He had done it again. He had let his anger govern his actions and expressed himself in a fit of violence.

A tear escaped its auburn lashed prison. The solitary offender soon joined by many others as an anguished riddled whimper fled from a tremulous frame. Shame fueled his sorrow and each tear further evidenced his damnation. He was not a good padawan. A good padawan did not indulge taunts. A good padawan did not strike in anger. A good padawan did not weep uncontrollably on his bedroom floor. Only bad padawans engaged in such foolish, un-Jedi like behavior and bad padawans never became knights.

His master deserved better.

Obi-Wan clumsily wiped the tears from his face, wincing slightly as his hand passed over the brilliant and swollen purplish-blue and black bruise that covered his right eye, a physical marker of his folly.

Suddenly, he heard the outer door slid open and a familiar presence entered the apartment. The wait was over. His master had returned to mete out punishment on he who had yet again proven himself unworthy of his title of padawan learner.

* * * * *

For all his bluster and his “maverick” behavior, Qui-Gon Jinn was a fairly predictable Jedi. So when the master had ordered meditation instead of immediately imposing the terms of his padawan’s punishment, Obi-Wan was left to ponder the implications of his master’s actions and ponder he did. He had little else to do as he found himself unable to sustain any real connection to the Force. His mind was too unsettled, his thoughts a jumble of skewed memories, half-truths, and self-deprecating rationalizations. So it was in this frame of mind that Obi-Wan came to the only conclusion he could have to explain his master’s decision to treat his apprentice with impunity.

He was going to release him, repudiate him before the Council, and send him somewhere far, far away where the growing taint of his padawan’s failure would no longer fill his senses.

Once again Obi-Wan could feel a watery pressure build behind his eyes, but this time he was determined to deny his tears release. He had just about regained some semblance of control, bleak acceptance if not actual calm, when a somewhat unfamiliar Force presence suddenly entered the apartment. Curiosity pulled Obi-Wan to his feet and out into the common room. In the middle of the room stood a tall young man with stunning blue eyes, alabaster skin, and raven hair. A circular scar rested on one cheek. He was dressed in Jedi robes, but Obi-Wan knew this man was no Jedi.

“Well hello there, Padawan Kenobi. You certainly look very sleepy...”

* * * * *

Obi-Wan awoke to unfamiliar surroundings. He felt stiff and groggy, a result of the aggressive sleep suggestion imposed on him by his captor.

“Xanatos,” Obi-Wan remembered grimly. He shuddered. He was achingly cold, like his insides had been left out overnight and exposed on the frozen and brutal landscape of Hoth

or Ilum. As Obi-Wan lay on the floor, his eyes still closed he realized he was much more than simply cold, he was... empty, profoundly and pathetically so. He felt as if he had awakened in his body, but without his soul.

Obi-Wan opened his eyes slowly. He was in a cell and he was alone, but what Obi-Wan felt was the he was utterly alone. Instinctively, he reached out to the comforting presence of the Force, but was met by a disturbing void. Panic flared inside his mind, easily displacing the fragile calm that resided before. He swallowed thickly as his chest tightened and blood began to pound in his head like a herd of crazed banthas. Desperately, the boy called out over the bond.

/Master?/

Once again, the young Jedi encountered silence, a vast emptiness both from within and without. Against his express consent, his bottom lip quivered and tiny shivers ran loose down his limbs. He sat up and pulled his legs in close to his body. As he did so he felt a strange pressure around his neck. With trembling fingers he reached up. The boy gasped slightly as his fingertips brushed metal. Was this a... Force collar? Obi-Wan wondered. He had heard mention of such devices before in whispers and hushed voices around the Temple. A new and unpleasant weight settled uncomfortably in his stomach.

Obi-Wan was cold. So very cold and so very, very alone.

* * * * *

Day 1

"My apologies, little Jedi, for not being here to greet you properly upon your waking, but I had some... duties to attend."

With considerable effort, Obi-Wan lifted his head off his knees and turned an empty gaze to the man on the other side of the ray shield. Xanatos offered a mocking bow to the Jedi before pulling his ebon cloak around him as he took a seat directly in front of Obi-Wan's cell door.

"I trust you slept well?" he asked, his effete voice dripping with false sincerity. Obi-Wan felt like his brain was encased in mud. His thoughts were sluggish, heavy, his very mental processes snagged, caught, and pulled down helplessly into the putrid mire. His raven-haired captor sat patiently, content to observe the young man's struggle to commend his thoughts into words. After several quiet minutes, Obi-Wan found enough focus to address his kidnapper.

"What... do you want... from me?"

"Right now, only to talk."

Obi-Wan let his fingers brush across the smooth metal around his neck.

"Can't... think," he muttered. Xanatos nodded in understanding.

"Yes, it is unfortunate, but necessary I assure you," he answered with a frown. "The... effects will lessen over time... or at least that's what I've been told," he finished with a careless shrug. Obi-Wan said nothing only tightened his grip around his legs as a violent shudder slammed through his weakened frame.

"Let's talk."

"Nothing... to say to you..."

"Come now, I'm certain Qui-Gon has taught you better manners than that," Xanatos said as he wagged a long, thin finger disapprovingly at his prisoner. He crossed his legs and settled his hands upon his lap.

"We will start with something simple," he smiled flashing his brilliant, all too white teeth. "Your black eye, how did you get it?"

For a moment, the boy's brow wrinkled as he gave his jailor a quizzical look, but then his body was again assailed by more powerful tremors causing his expression to revert to one full of despair born of deep longing.

"It is not a difficult question, little Jedi."

Obi-Wan lowered his head back onto his knees.

"Nothing to say," he mumbled. Xanatos released an exaggerated sigh and patted his thigh.

"You need time to rest I see. We can continue our talk later," he said as he stood up and briskly walked out of the room leaving the chilled and weary padawan to his confusion.

* * * * *

Day 2

By the next day, Obi-Wan was still freezing cold, but now the frost seemed to be strictly on the inside. His head was clearer, but he still felt the crushing presence of his... nothingness. This was not like the Force blindness he suffered on Bandonmeer. That blindness, though disturbing, had been the result of a natural slide, but what the collar imposed was anything but natural. The lack within his mind was suffocating and yet he continued to breathe. It was a conundrum too complex for his addled mind to tackle so instead he sat huddled tightly in a corner of his cell content to think of nothing at all.

* * * * *

Day 3

Obi-Wan quietly gripped his stomach as it voiced yet another audible protest at its present condition. His head was clear now, the tremors that had wracked his body all but a memory, only the chill and interminable void remained leaving his mind and body free to address other concerns and none seemed more pressing at that moment than his gnawing hunger.

The boy's stomach growled again and as if on some well-rehearsed cue, the far door slid open and Xanatos stepped through, a covered metal tray in his hands.

"I trust you're feeling better, little Jedi," the kidnapper smirked. Obi-Wan climbed to slightly wobbly legs, fists clenched tightly by his sides.

"I question your sincerity regarding my well-being," the boy said flatly. Xanatos placed the large tray on a nearby table and stepped closer to the cell door.

"I assure you I have no desire to harm you at this time."

"My abduction is a harm. My imprisonment is a harm, and this," he said as he stabbed a finger at the collar, "is most definitely a harm!"

"All fair points," Xanatos replied, his hands raised in mock surrender. "I shall rephrase. I have no desire to see you suffer any further harm at this stage in our relationship."

"And what stage is that?"

"The talking stage," Xanatos smiled. "Are you hungry?" he asked as he moved to the table on his right. His hand hovered over the covered tray for a moment then, with a refined and well cultured grace, he unveiled the treasures previously hidden by the silvered dome. As soon as the cover was removed hearty and heavily spiced smells wafted freely in the small room, the mouthwatering aromas effortlessly penetrating the cell's powerful ray shields.

"You must be hungry," Xanatos said evenly. Obi-Wan wasn't hungry. He was famished, but he said nothing, unwilling to confirm his captor's most reasonable suspicions, but in a moment of unadulterated mutiny Obi-Wan's stomach roared noisily, its deep rumbling like an angry gundark. Xanatos's smile grew larger.

"Alright, little Jedi, I propose this. I will give you this tray of food if you give me something in return."

Obi-Wan lifted his previously transfixed gaze from the near-yet-still-so-far bowl of stew and fresh spice bread to look his captor in the eye.

"What do I have to do?"

"Talk to me. I want an answer to my question. How did you get the black eye?"

Obi-Wan gave his captor a wary look as he struggled to uncover the man's motives.

"So," the apprentice began slowly as he moved closer to the front of the cell. "All I have to do is tell you how I got this bruise,"

"And you can eat your fill," Xanatos finished. Obi-Wan pondered the odd bargain a few seconds more, but another voracious grumbling from his abdomen sufficiently ended the internal debate. A short nod sealed the deal. Xanatos lifted the tray and walked before the cell door. The ex-Jedi paused over the control panel having noted the boy's eyes dart quickly over the lightsaber on his hip.

"You would do well to remember that I was nearly a knight when the Order and I chose to part ways. You are weak from hunger and Force deprivation. An attempt to escape would be... foolhardy, little Jedi," Xanatos warned. Satisfied the child would be compliant, Xanatos lowered the shield and handed the tray to Obi-Wan who took it warily before backing up a few steps, sitting down, and launching eagerly into its contents. Xanatos stepped back and reactivated the shield. He took a seat and watched as the teenage prisoner attacked the culinary offering with wild and reckless abandon. He crossed his legs and placed his interlaced fingers casually upon his lap, a smug smile tugging at his thin lips.

"Now, my payment," he began, his tone genteel. "Who were you fighting?"

"How do you know I was fighting?" Obi-Wan mumbled between mouthfuls of bread and stew. "Maybe I just fell or walked into a wall or something."

"No apprentice of Qui-Gon's would be so clumsy."

Obi-Wan glanced up briefly and found Xanatos waiting patiently for his answer. He returned his attention back to his tray of food, a little of his initial zeal gone.

"It was with another padawan."

"A rival."

"A bully."

"And what prompted the attack?" Xanatos asked. Obi-Wan paused, choosing his next words carefully.

"He was spreading lies about the Council and... about Master Jinn," he answered finally. Xanatos tilted his head in thought.

"The lies angered you?"

"Yes."

"So, you fought the boy in anger?"

"Yes."

"That wasn't very Jedi of you."

"No, it wasn't," Obi-Wan replied as he held the dark-haired man's gaze, his eyes showing a strength and defiance that his weakened body could not.

"I was wrong and I confessed as much to my master."

Xanatos nodded casually, unaffected by the glare of the young apprentice.

"During my time as Qui-Gon's apprentice, I saw my share of... mistakes and each came with a rather swift punishment—essays, push-ups, laps around the Temple, even scrubbing the stones in the meditation gardens with a microbrush. Tell me, what odious penance was placed on you?"

Obi-Wan shifted uneasily, a hand bearing a piece of bread hung frozen in the air for a beat before returning from whence it came.

"He... he told me to meditate on my actions."

"Meditate?" Xanatos repeated, a lone eyebrow raised in apparent incredulity. "I find that... surprising."

Obi-Wan had no response and so he offered none. After a few moments, Xanatos decided to forge ahead.

“Well, I’m sure he had his reasons,” he said as he stood and moved to the door. He paused before exiting, looking back over his shoulder at Obi-Wan.

“Your eye, Qui-Gon saw it?” he asked, his tone almost... kind. Obi-Wan hesitated before answering, unsure of where the conversation was going.

“Um... yes, he did.”

Xanatos turned fully to face the boy.

“And he did not heal it for you?”

No response followed. None was needed, the answer lay brazenly displayed discolored and swollen on the boy’s face. Xanatos frowned, but offered nothing further as he left the boy to his meal. Obi-Wan was left alone, his captor’s last question hanging heavily in the air. He quietly pushed the half-eaten tray of food away, his appetite suddenly gone.

* * * * *

Day 7

Each “day,” at least that’s how Obi-Wan chose to count the cycle of repetitions that had become his life in captivity as he had no view outside or external time keeper, was the same: wake, attempt meditation, fail, brood over said meditation failure, “wash” in basin provided, brood some more, sleep, wake, do calisthenics, sit, eat, brood, brood, brood, sleep, repeat.

The meals were the worst as the cost was always the same: discussions with his master’s former and fallen padawan. None of the “talks” had any real substance, the topics innocuous and yet after each the young apprentice felt... hollow. Most likely an effect of the collar and not the conversation. Most likely.

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Day 9

"You know what I always dreaded? Dinners with Master Dooku. Why Qui-Gon seemed so determined to parade his padawans in front of his master like prized pets I will never understand. How many of those dinners has he made you suffer through so far, little Jedi?"

"Um... I haven't had an occasion... to meet Master Dooku... yet."

"Oh... I see. Well, lucky you I guess."

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Day 11

"How old are you, little Jedi?"

"13 standard."

"Ah, so Qui-Gon has given you your thirteenth naming day gift then."

"Um... no."

"No?"

"Things were a little... different on my naming day."

"Odd... Qui-Gon has always been meticulous about things like that. Even if a mission prevented a timely delivery Jenavin and I were always presented with some gift or token. Oh well, I suppose it's like you said. I'm sure he had a good reason..."

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Day 15

For three weeks the schedule had been the same. Well not counting those first few days where I was unconscious, Obi-Wan thought to himself wryly. Each day, since then had been the same and, though he was loathe to admit it, the routine was something he had come to rely on; a constancy in a world of uncertainty and chaos. So it was rather unsettling when Xanatos arrived at his cell without his customary tray of food.

"What's going on?" Obi-Wan said as he rose to his feet and approached the cell door. Xanatos met him on the other side leaving the two, Jedi and former Jedi, separated by only a meter and a thin shield.

"This," Xanatos said holding up a small remote-like device, "controls the different aspects of the collar you're wearing. This button here deactivates the Force suppression feature and this one here..." he said as his finger lingered just above another button. "Well, this one stimulates nerve clusters throughout your body. The result is quite... painful."

"I thought you said you had no desire to harm me," Obi-Wan intoned determined not to allow his jailor the pleasure of seeing him afraid. Xanatos nodded.

"At that stage, no. There was no need to harm you, however, we have progressed to the next stage of this relationship, little Jedi and though much of it will be unpleasant for you, I assure you it is all necessary."

"Suffering is never necessary," Obi-Wan hissed.

"Oh, but it is," Xanatos smiled. "Through suffering we will create something beautiful, something unique. It will be a work of art worthy of presenting to our shared master and you, my little Jedi, will be the canvas..."

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After Xanatos's frightening speech about beauty and art he had left Obi-Wan in his cell unharmed. Why, the boy did not know. Perhaps he wanted to unbalance him with fear. If that was the plan he would likely succeed because despite Obi-Wan's best efforts to stifle the panic and wild anxiety rumbling in his chest, without the Force his best efforts were woefully inadequate. Suddenly, Obi-Wan's mind and body were flooded with warmth and light and... fullness. It was like being trapped under water blocked from the surface by a sheet of ice only to finally break through and take a wondrous deep gasping breath of pure air. The Force was back and so was his access to the bond.

/Master?/

/Obi-Wan? Are you alright? Where are you?/

/I'm... alright, Master, but I don't know where I am./

Suddenly, Obi-Wan felt warm waves of love, comfort, and reassurance sweep towards him over their bond. His heart settled down and his breath steadied.

/It's going to be alright, Padawan. I *will* find you. I promise./

Just as his master gave him words of reassurance, Xanatos stepped back into the room. He studied Obi-Wan in silence for several moments considering something in his head before speaking.

"You've made contact with Qui-Gon by now I assume," he stated. Obi-Wan simply nodded figuring that prevarication would get him nowhere.

/Obi-Wan?/

/He's here./

/Xanatos?/

"Tell your master I have a message for him," Xanatos said with a wicked smile. "Tell him that it's no fun if he's peeking. Tell him that he will hear from me... soon."

/What? I don't understand, Padawan. What does he mean?/

Xanatos stepped closer to the cell door holding the tiny remote in his hand.

"Sorry, little Jedi, but there is one other message I need you to send," he said. He pushed a button on the device and every nerve in Obi-Wan's body seemed to light up at once. Pain as he had never felt before raced through his limbs with nauseating intensity, ravaging his flesh unimpeded as he was deprived of the calming presence of the Force. Just when he didn't believe he could stand anymore, Obi-Wan's world went thankfully, mercifully dark.

Chapter 8: The Silent Dark

Day – 102

A compact tornado of movement tore silently through the solemn halls of the Jedi Temple. The flurry of movement so fast it could easily be dismissed as a trick of light or shadow, the presence so quiet the mover was more wraith than man. None stood in purposeful opposition to his progress, the unfortunate few caught in his tornadic path were saved from collision and injury only by the grace of refined Jedi reflexes.

From the moment Mace had stood at his threshold and uttered those momentous and long-awaited words, Qui-Gon Jinn was in motion, tearing out of the apartment without a second or even a first thought, only propelled by raw need and piercing desire to find his padawan. Mace held his tongue rather than reminding the master of the prohibition and general inappropriateness of running down the corridors like a crazed youngling, but given the circumstances he allowed the moment to pass without rebuke. That, at least, was the main reason. A second, far less compassionate reason might have been that the Korun Councilor was hard pressed just keeping up with the man.

The three masters reached the Healer's Ward in record time; a record the Councilor hoped would remain private and not evolve into a challenge posed to roaming and restless bands of junior padawans and initiates.

Qui-Gon didn't bother stopping at the reception desk. He burst through the double doors, his eyes settling on the flurry of activity down the hall leading to a room on the left. Without further hesitation he barreled down the small, white corridor and charged into the room. A bevy of healers and their apprentices bustled about the small space, some spouted commands, others serenely sought to their execution, all wore slightly grim expressions, but there... deep in the center of the throng and press of physicians laid both the wellspring of his heart and the fount of his despair.

The old man pushed his way forward uncaringly displacing healers as he made his way to the figure on the medical couch. The small body appeared to be stripped in every way possible. The healers had removed the boy's clothing, save for his small clothes, in preparation for what looked, to the master's eyes, to be a lengthy stint in a bacta tank for the boy was riddled with hideous injury. Welts, cuts, slashes, and burns streaked across the pale body in shades of vibrant crimson, purple, and pink, the skin around it sallow, taut, and sunken. The body was very small, underweight, emaciated, skeletal. Bones protrude where muscle had atrophied. Dark craters rested under closed eyes standing as mute sentinels over hollowed cheeks devoid of their natural pallor.

Qui-Gon carefully lifted a small, bony hand holding it lightly in his large, calloused one. A hand touched the master's shoulder.

"Why can I not feel him?" the master asked quietly as if he were afraid his voice alone was enough to shatter the brittle frame below.

"He still has a lot of Force suppressant drugs in his system," the healer replied then paused. "Which means we cannot effect any significant Force healing. We must place him in bacta immediately."

Qui-Gon nodded, but was unable to release the hand or his gaze. It was not until Tahl stepped forward that the healers were able to gently disengage the pair and whisk their patient away.

For many moments, Qui-Gon was silent, standing stock still, rooted to his present space in the universe. A plethora of unbridled, unbalanced, and unnamed emotions coursed through the master's mind, his soul. The unexpected weight of it temporarily overwhelmed him. His knees buckled, but quick and steady hands caught him, their support unwavering as they led him to a seat. Tahl sat beside him. Mace knelt before him. It took several breaths, but eventually the placid presence of the other masters allowed Qui-Gon to re-center himself; a long exhalation into the Force relieved some of the twisted tension knotted painfully in his chest.

"Where did you find him?" he asked.

"We didn't. He found us," the Councilor answered. "Just like the old troll said," Mace added to himself. Both Qui-Gon and Tahl's brows wrinkled in confusion and disbelief. Mace stood up and gave a quick tilt of his head to the door.

"Come. There is someone you should speak to," he said, but Qui-Gon shook his head in protest.

"No, I will not leave him."

"Qui,"

"No!"

"Qui-Gon Jinn," Tahl barked in the voice she usually reserved for unruly younglings, disobedient padawans, and one particularly stubborn Master Jedi. "The boy will be unconscious and in bacta for hours. Now, you are going to follow Mace, listen to whomever he tells you to, then we are getting some food and you are going to sleep so you will be ready for Obi-Wan when he will need you or so help me, you Sith-forsaken son of Hutt I will tan your hide with your own lightsaber!" she finished, her eyes narrowed, her jaw set in steely determination. As usual, Tahl's tone had the desired effect. Qui-Gon sighed, but nodded his reluctant assent. As the two masters followed Mace out of the ward and through the halls, he wondered if he should recommend Master Uvain for a Council seat just to keep

the old rebel in line. A smile found its way to his face and was then quickly disposed of lest his reputation be ruined.

The three made their way through the winding Temple halls at a much calmer pace than previously displayed causing them to reach the front steps of the Temple in a less dizzying speed. As soon as the trio of masters crossed the threshold, another Jedi moved to greet them, his padawan learner in tow, a traditional step behind.

"Masters Windu, Uvain, Jinn," the Dressallian Jedi nodded to each master in turn.

"Knight Cib-Tan and his padawan, Eudo Orn," Mace introduced. Both Tahl and Qui-Gon politely bowed their heads.

"Cib-Tan," Qui-Gon began, his mind still half in thought. "You were apprenticed to Master Shenuss?"

"I was."

"Your master and mine are good friends," the tall Jedi nodded. Mace stepped in closer to the cluster of Jedi.

"It was Cib-Tan who first saw Obi-Wan," he said focusing the conversation like a Force crystal. Qui-Gon looked to Mace then to the Knight, his expression suddenly stern.

"Tell me," he said.

"Of course, Master," the Dressallian nodded. "Yes, I was here on the steps waiting for my padawan to finish re-examining the folly of a recent decision... as a part of a moving meditation," he finished with a smirk. Qui-Gon eyed the young Zabrack with a raised eyebrow.

"Dare I ask how many laps, padawan?"

The teenager grimaced slightly.

"Five," he answered sheepishly. Tahl whistled.

"That... is impressive, young one. Let's hope its cause it not repeated else Master Windu may be forced to name the perimeter concourse after you," she said with a frown, but a sly wink to the teen quickly sent the boy into an embarrassed blush. His master cleared his throat bringing all attention back to him and the present story.

"Eudo had just completed his last lap and we were going to return to our quarters when I felt a disturbance in the Force."

"What kind of disturbance?" Qui-Gon interrupted. Cib-Tan shook his head.

"It is difficult to explain. It wasn't a warning so much as... an announcement," the Knight continued though still clearly vexed. "At that moment, an air taxi pulled up and out dropped a bundle of some sort. The taxi then sped away. I, of course, moved to investigate. As I walked closer, I realized that the bundle was in fact a boy, a padawan. After I checked his vitals, I picked him up, sent Eudo off to inform the Council, and I hurried him to the healers."

"Did you see anyone else? Sense them? Did you note the air taxi number or its registration?" Qui-Gon asked, the questions spilling from him like an over-filled cup.

"I'm sorry, Master Jinn. I didn't sense anyone, not even your padawan. The air taxi had no registration or number, only the generic markings of the trade. I did not think it unusual at the time."

"Forgive me," Jinn started with a rueful smile. "I am grateful you were here. Both of you," he said with a glance at the padawan who respectfully nodded.

"The Council will still require a full report from both you and your padawan," Mace stated. The Knight bowed.

"We will of course be available at the Council's request."

Without another word, the five Jedi entered the Temple and immediately upon doing so divided into three groups, each with their own duties to attend; however, it was Master Uvain who had the most arduous task.

"Oh no, you don't. You still have a feeding and a nap to get before I allow you to return to the Healer's Ward," Tahl warned as she physically steered the large man in the direction of the Temple's senior refectory.

"You needn't treat me like a crechling," Qui-Gon grumbled.

"And once you stop behaving as one I will most happily comply," she teased, then her face became more serious. "You know I'm right, Qui. You will be of no help to him if you have no strength to lend him."

"Yes, you are right," he replied, his tone softened in surrender and gratitude. "However, let us be clear," he growled. "I require rest, not a nap."

* * * * *

Day 103

As expected, Master Uvain ultimately got her way and the old master was both fed, though he ate sparingly, and put to bed, though his sleep was restless and disturbed. When the master finally abandoned any further attempts at slumber it was well into the early hours of morning.

Qui-Gon stood and began a stumbling journey to the refresher. He leaned over and splashed cold water across his haggard features. He tamed a few unruly locks before stepping out of the fresher, grabbed his cloak and headed out the door. He did not run through the wide corridors this time, but his pace was hurried and his stride over long, devouring the marbled distance between the master and his destination. In less than three minutes he was passing through the double doors of the Healing Ward and upon his entrance he was quickly waylaid by Master Healer Ar Songe who seemed to have been expecting him.

"Master Jinn, a word please," the aged Mirialan said as he gestured to his office at the end of the long hallway. The Jedi Master nodded and followed the healer to the specified location where he was silently directed to a seat while his host sat himself behind a pristine and ordered desk.

Healer Ar Songe had been a staple in the Healing Halls since Qui-Gon himself was a crechling. Of average height and slight frame, Songe did not appear to be an intimidating figure... at a distance, that is. Up close one could see the unmistakable passion burning in his uniquely orange eyes. The healer's pale green skin contrasted starkly with the numerous dark tattoos beautifully etched across his forehead, cheeks, and chin; painfully artistic cultural markers of past trials, achievements, and acquired masteries. His face was thin and long, his high cheek bones accentuated his upswept raven hair secured in a tidy and severe topknot.

From behind his desk, the healer leaned forward, steeping his fingers. Though the Mirialan was shielding normally, Qui-Gon could feel the subtle ripples of concern rolling quietly off the older man causing his own anxieties to make a more determined press to the surface. Qui-Gon exhaled slowly.

"Something is wrong with Obi-Wan," he concluded.

"He has been removed from the bacta. There were no complications and he is resting well. Thankfully, aside from severe malnutrition and dehydration, the worst of his physical injuries were a broken right wrist, two hairline rib fractures on his left side, and a dislocation of his right shoulder," the healer paused. Qui-Gon felt the tension in the Force tighten considerably around him.

"Master Jinn, electropulsars were used on him... extensively from the looks of it. Though I feel there is little chance of permanent nerve damage, he will likely have to endure several months of muscle spasms and tremors in his extremities. Your padawan will also need to see a Soul Healer at some point for the psychic trauma the experience has inflicted," he finished with a weary sigh.

Qui-Gon leaned forward, dragging his hands across his face before resting his elbows on his knees. He held his head down, his chestnut and silvered locks falling limply against either side of his face. He steeled himself for what was yet to come and after a brief moment, the span of a few recently calmed heartbeats, he looked up at his fellow master.

"There is more," he intoned. It is not a question, but Master Songe still provided an answer.

"Yes," he nodded. Qui-Gon sat up straight in his chair. He would be strong. He had to be. There was no try.

"Tell me."

"When he first arrived here, you saw his wounds, no?" Songe asked. When he received Qui-Gon's silent nod he continued. "It was expected that the prolonged bacta treatment would accelerate the healing on all the wounds resulting in minimal scarring. However, what the treatment revealed was most disturbing... Many of the fresher wounds were superficial, there purpose to obscure the more serious wounds underneath. These wounds were significantly older, too old for optimal healing," the Master Healer said then he paused to allow his words to sink in. When he noticed the master's brow beetle together, the healer stood and walked around the desk to the door.

"Come."

Qui-Gon followed the master healer out the door and into the main hall of the ward. After walking only a few meters the healer stopped outside a closed door and turned to the taller master.

"I wanted to mention the scars to you to prepare you, Master Jinn. His captor went to... considerable effort to achieve this result."

The healer's choice of words sat uneasily in the air between the two masters, but to their credit neither Jedi shrank from the unpleasant reality of the situation. Satisfied his warning was well-heeded, Songe opened the door, immediately stepping aside to admit the other master. Qui-Gon stepped into the small and sterile space, his midnight blue eyes resting on a pale face barely rising above the dull gray of a thermal blanket. He stepped forward cautiously, almost tip-toeing towards the unnaturally still form of his apprentice; his only assurance that boy was alive was the subtle rise and fall of his small chest and the quiet in and exhalations of his shallow breaths.

"See for yourself," the healer softly ordered from the doorway. With growing trepidation, Qui-Gon complied. He reached for the edges of the multiple layers of blankets and sheets obscuring what the old man feared would be the subject of many nightmares to come for both master and padawan. Shaking and calloused hands gently pulled back the covers and the master who had seen bodies ravaged by plague, the master who had seen bodies rendered bloodied and formless by encounters on the battlefield, the master who had seen bodies sundered under another's cruel ministrations couched in the mollifying terms of interrogation and discipline, the master who had seen bodies laid low and mutilated, flesh and bone evidence of prurient minds, the master who had seen all of these evils, enough defilement for a lifetime, this master was still unable to stop a horrific gasp from escaping his bearded lips. Nearly every square inch of the boy's body bore some kind of scar etched painfully into his pale skin, unholy carvings wheedled with a child's suffering. 'X's made by the biting lash of an electro-whip marked his arms, legs, and the back of his hands. A look to the boy's back revealed a large 'XDC' carved with a vibroblade of some sort, but it was the child's chest which truly stopped the master's heart cold. Upon the pale and slender frame sat a scar rendered in the form of a broken circle.

"This was done by a lightsaber," Qui-Gon muttered, his usual full baritone a distant echo of itself.

"Scars can be removed through several grafting methods, but each involves a very long, very painful process. Considering the extent of his scaring... I would not in good conscience recommend such a procedure," Songe offered from his position in the threshold. "It will still be several hours until he wakes. If you need anything you need only ask. I will check on him again later," Songe finished. He expected no reply so he turned to leave, but a gruff voice from the room stopped him.

"Thank you, Master Songe."

* * * * *

Qui-Gon was a patient man. He was patient as he carefully cradled the smaller hand in his. He was patient as he tenderly moved a wayward auburn lock from a ghostly pale forehead. He was patient as he longingly awaited for darkened lids to lift and reveal to him the luminous blue-gray eyes that he missed so much he physically ached in his need.

"Please, Padawan. Open your eyes. Open your eyes for me," the master begged, but his pleas went unanswered. He continued his solemn bedside vigil in silence and patience.

* * * * *

"I hope you haven't been here all night."

"No, not all night."

"Good," the honeyed voice answered from the doorway. Tahl walked in and crossed to the opposite side of Obi-Wan's bed. She placed a gentle hand across his cheek and was dismayed by its coolness. She turned her gold-green eyes to Qui-Gon.

"Have you spoken to the healers yet? How is he?" she asked softly, her whispered tone both seeking answers and fearing them as well. Qui-Gon sighed.

"Xanatos... he didn't just... torture him, he... butchered him, Tahl," he said as he lifted his weary gaze to hers. "He marked him with a saber."

Tahl stared at him uncomprehendingly as he stood up and gently pulled down the boy's covers. She too gasped, a hand covering her mouth, her eyes searching her friend for answers he himself had yet to find.

"Qui," she started, but she was interrupted by the sudden swish of a cloak and a warm familiar voice.

"I just heard," Vresh said as he slowed his previously un-Jedi-like pace to enter the room. The newcomer searched his friends' faces, but only Tahl met his gaze and in the depths of her eyes he saw a sadness he had never before witnessed there, even at the death of her own master.

Vresh swallowed thickly as he slowly inched closer to the unmoving figure on the bed.

"Is he...?"

"He is alive," Qui-Gon's baritone rumbled softly. The knot tightening in Vresh's chest suddenly loosened slightly with the master's simple proclamation. Qui-Gon gently squeezed his padawan's hand before releasing it. He stood and stepped away to the room's only window, his back to the bed and the boy in it. He knew what must happen next, but right then it was a sight he did not want again to witness.

"Show him," he intoned. Vresh looked to Tahl in confusion, but her expression was beyond neutral, the Jedi emotionless mask presented in the extreme. She inclined her head inviting him to step closer. He pulled beside the bed, his eyes flitting despondently over the child's wan features.

"He's so small," he whispered. Tahl said nothing as she lightly grasped the boy's covers. She gently pulled them away from the sorely abused body.

"E chu ta!" he muttered breathlessly. Tahl carefully replaced the boy's blankets. Vresh fell back several steps before he stopped and composed himself.

"Is he in custody?" he asked, the anger welling in his chest faintly coloring his inquiry.

"No," Qui-Gon answered, his back still turned from the pitiful scene. Vresh could feel the Force twisting and churning around the three master Jedi, the usually serene currents now muddled eddies of sorrow, revulsion, and anger... lots of anger, much of it his own. He closed his eyes and took a moment to steady himself.

"Where was he found?"

"Someone left him on the steps of the Temple," Tahl answered quietly.

"Who?"

"We don't know," she replied with a sigh. The master then slipped from her place beside Obi-Wan's bed and moved to the small open space between where Qui-Gon stood and where his apprentice laid. Without a word she knelt on the floor, her hands resting on her thighs, her eyes closed. Qui-Gon turned around, his dark blue eyes heavy with unshed tears. He took a step away from the window and knelt near his friend. Vresh followed suit completing the small triangle of Jedi. No words were needed, so none were spoken. The three friends together sank deeply into the Force allowing its timeless plenary to smooth the rough edges of their battered hearts.

* * * * *

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Three minds released themselves into the ether.

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep.

Inhale.

Anger. Released.

Exhale.

Inhale.

Despair. Released.

Exhale.

Three minds floated freely, weightless in effusive light.

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep.

Inhale.

Serenity.

Exhale.

Tranquility.

Three minds centered, at peace.

One mind lost in chaos.

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep.

* * * * *

Seconds before the medical monitors bleated out their warning in shrieking digital blasts of sound, Qui-Gon Jinn was snapped out of his meditation by the return of a familiar presence tickling the edges of his perception.

/Obi-Wan!/

Qui-Gon jumped to his feet. The machines monitoring the young patient flared to life, their high pitch warnings brought the remaining Jedi out of their own meditations. Qui-Gon raced to his padawan's side. He held the small, limp hand in his large calloused one, his other hand rested on the child's forehead. He closed his eyes focusing only on the bond they share.

/Padawan? Padawan! Can you hear me?/

Tahl and Vresh stood a respectable distance behind the concerned master as Healer Songe entered the room and began to assess the child's condition.

/Padawan! Obi-Wan!/

"He's coming around," Songe said as he silenced the wailing machines. Tahl and Vresh stepped in a bit closer as the small body began to stir. Eyelids fluttered then finally opened revealing glassy unfocused blue-gray orbs.

"Obi-Wan, can you hear me?" the master healer called. "How are you feeling, young one?"

The small mouth did not open. The open eyes stared, unseeing at the ceiling above. Qui-Gon spared Songe a questioning glance. The Master Healer placed one hand on the boy's forehead the other on the boy's chest. He closed his eyes examining with the Force, but his probe was deflected by what seemed to be thick shields around the boy's mind, blocking any sense of emotional presence. When the healer again opened his eyes his head was shaking.

"He's in shock from the trauma. He has withdrawn into himself."

"How... How do we bring him back?" Qui-Gon asked not taking his eyes off his padawan.

"Given time he may come back on his own, but I think it would be best if you lead him back, Master Jinn. Use your bond to bring him here. Let him know that he is safe and he should return," Songe answered with a soft expression. "I will be back to check on him," he said. He nodded to Masters Uvain and Tivi, then left the room closing the door behind him. Vresh and Tahl crossed to the opposite side of the boy's bed. Qui-Gon remained still except for the occasional gentle stroke of a thumb across the child's forehead. If the padawan was aware of the three masters who worried beside him, he made no show of it. Obi-Wan stared blankly at the ceiling above in eerie quiet. Qui-Gon closed his eyes.

/Padawan! Obi-Wan, hear me!/"

The master allowed himself to plunge deeper into the bond, crossing it. From the boy he felt nothing, no pain, no emotion, nothing at all. Qui-Gon assumed that Obi-Wan was hiding behind thick mental shields, so he very carefully began to probe the child's mind, waiting to encounter the expected resistance of a mental barrier, but the master was able to penetrate into the boy's mind easily. Obi-Wan was using no shields at all! His mind was completely open and vulnerable and yet... his master still sensed nothing. His apprentice's mind was a void, a darkness limitlessly stretching over the boy's psyche.

Qui-Gon pulled back with a fearful gasp. He opened his eyes to find his friends staring worriedly at him. Tahl was the first to speak.

"What is it? What did you sense?"

"Nothing," he answered, still shaking his head not believing what he knew to be true.

"What do you mean 'nothing'?"

"I mean nothing, Tahl."

"He's shielded too strongly?" Vresh asked.

"No shields. Not one," Qui-Gon answered. "See for yourself."

At first, both masters were extremely hesitant to enter Obi-Wan's mind without his consent, but after a moment they accepted that present circumstances would excuse the violation. Both masters closed their eyes and extended themselves to the boy. It only took a few seconds before their eyes flashed open in horrific disbelief.

"I-I don't understand," Tahl whispered. "How is this even possible?"

"This isn't just a simple retreat from pain... He's... hollow," Vresh stammered, then he looked to Qui-Gon. "Is this something that Xanatos could have done to him? Could he somehow have... emptied him?"

"Empty the boy is not. Still there Obi-Wan is," answered a gravelly voice from the doorway. All three masters turned and bowed their heads to the ancient Jedi joining them.

"Master Yoda, I cannot sense anything from him. It's like there is a void inside him," Qui-Gon said, his dark eyes imploring the Grand Master to give him some reason, some explanation to help staunch the terror welling inside his heart. Yoda leaned heavily on his gimer stick, his eyes closed.

"Veiled himself he has, obscured by a blanket of darkness," the old master intoned as he opened his eyes. "Lost he is. Find his way back he may not."

Qui-Gon snatched his gaze away from the diminutive Jedi and returned it to the unseeing blue-gray eyes of his padawan.

"I cannot accept that."

"Help him you cannot. His choice it must be. Patience it will require, Qui-Gon. Great patience."

"I will do whatever it takes for as long as it takes. I'm not going anywhere and neither is he."

* * * * *

Day 107

For four days Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn had kept his patient bedside vigil. He had not slept, not truly, in that time. The healers, realizing that the master would not be leaving, had provided him with a small cot on which to rest. At times sleep had been attempted, but

these attempts were met with failure. The best Qui-Gon could manage was a light meditative trance to stave off the worst of his exhaustion. And he was exhausted. Patience was exhausting. Waiting was exhausting, but the silence... that was by far the worst of it.

Qui-Gon shifted in the uncomfortable flimsiplast seat.

The silence was like a physical presence in the room for always there was the master, the apprentice, and the heavy silence. Vresh and Tahl took shifts visiting the pair and staying with them for long hours until duty pulled them away. They had tried to fight the silence, tried to banish its smothering weight from the room, but despite their struggles they could only manage to relegate it to a dark corner as they spoke in hushed voices telling the padawan stories of past missions, funny memories from the crèche, and even lending their voices to the occasional song. During those times the silence was weakened, subdued, but once the story was told, the memory shared, the song ended the silence always returned, its weight doubled, its presence stifling.

All the while Obi-Wan simply laid there, present yet absent, found yet inexplicably lost. Asleep he was silent. Awake he was silent. When awake he was still, completely unmoving save for the intermittent slow blinking and the steady rise and fall of his chest. He continued to stare out into the empty space above him unaware or unconcerned with the world happening around him. A series of tubes, lines, and humming machines took care of his body's needs, but his master's unwavering presence was provided to take care of the needs of his soul. Qui-Gon's presence was all the master was able to give his padawan within that prison of silence, so he gave it freely without consideration, condition, or compromise.

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Day 109

"Well you look awful," Tahl teased from the doorway, Vresh stood directly behind her. The two stepped inside. Tahl frowned slightly when her jest went unanswered. She moved behind where Qui-Gon was sitting and placed a delicate hand on his broad shoulder.

"Has there been any change?" she asked quietly. He shook his head.

"None. I'm beginning to think... beginning to wonder if..." Qui-Gon's words drifted off into the ether unable to speak aloud what he feared in his heart to be true. Tahl tightened the grip on his shoulder.

"You can't let yourself think that way," she said, but he shrugged off her hand as he stood and crossed to the solitary window. The master stood staring out onto the Corsucant skyline for several seconds before speaking.

"If I lose him..." he muttered, his shoulders tensing, his hands curling into fists seemingly on their own accord. Vresh moved a little closer to his friend, but was careful to keep some distance between them.

"You must let go of your anger, Qui-Gon."

"No. Not until Xanatos pays for what he has done," he replied, his back still turned to his friends.

"There is no room for revenge, Qui. Not for a Jedi. You know that," Tahl offered, but the distraught master spun around to face them, his features twisted in a state of rage neither Jedi had ever before seen.

"I don't care, Tahl! Xanatos butchered him! Carved him up like a piece of meat and then dumped him on our steps like yesterday's refuse!"

"Qui-Gon, I understand your anger, we both do, but," Vresh started, but Qui-Gon immediately cut him off.

"Do you know what I heard, what I felt the last day Xanatos unblocked the bond? Do you know what he made me witness?" he paused as the two masters stared at him, their eyes widened in apprehension. "My padawan," he continued, "my Obi-Wan begging to die! He begged him to let him die! Now, you tell me, Master Tivi, what you would do if it had been Lantis begging to die!"

The words hit their mark like a saber strike. Vresh blanched momentarily and his breath caught as the unwanted images of his mangled, mutilated padawan flashed across his inner eye. By sheer force of will he banished the heart rending pictures and took a deep cleansing breath, releasing the tension in his mind and body into the arms of the Force.

"I would want to kill him," he began, in a low and even voice, "but I would hope that I would have the strength not to, that I would have friends to keep me from making a serious mistake."

"This would be no mistake. It would be justice!" Qui-Gon snarled.

"It would be revenge," Vresh countered.

"It would be your fall," Tahl added.

"Then so be it," Qui-Gon spoke coolly and then a quiet dulcet tone pierced the pall of the heated exchange, the voice so soft and airy the whisper was almost missed.

Almost.

"No. No, Master. Please, no."

"Obi-Wan?" Qui-Gon said as he ran to the boy's side. Blue-gray eyes no longer stared at the ceiling. Now those eyes sought his own and stared at him with immeasurable sadness.

"Please, no... don't fall to the dark side... Master, please," Obi-Wan whispered, his voice still hoarse for disuse. Qui-Gon took the boy's hand between his.

"Padawan..."

"Promise me..." Obi-Wan rasped. His eyes demanded what his voice could not. His blue-gray eyes reached his master's heart and touched the place where he had residence, banishing the cancer that moments ago threatened to displace him. Qui-Gon was rendered helpless under his apprentice's gentle attack.

"Alright, my Padawan. I won't fall. I promise."

Chapter 9: Truth and Daring

Day 110

Qui-Gon should have been relieved, but he wasn't. Obi-Wan was awake and responsive, though admittedly not as responsive as his master would like, but the boy was once again at least part of the large world. He was scarred, yes, but in time Qui-Gon believed he could heal, they both could. So why did he still feel like his padawan was lost?

Qui-Gon watched his apprentice through the tiny window imbedded in the door to the private medical suite. The teen was awake and sitting up with his back against the head of his medical couch, his knees pulled tightly against his chest, his arms wrapped around his knees. He was protecting himself, but from what exactly, the master didn't know. Surely the boy knows he is safe in the Temple? The idle thought made Qui-Gon's heart stop. Why would he feel safe? He was taken from the Temple while under his master's care, his master's protection!

Qui-Gon closed his eyes. It was his fault Obi-Wan was anxious and fearful in the one place in all the galaxy he should feel safest. It was his fault that he was taken in the first place. Xanatos was his problem, his mistake, his enemy. Obi-Wan should have never been subject to suffer for his master's sins, but suffered the boy had and greatly. He was still suffering, his physical torment only transmuted into a different kind of pain.

Qui-Gon shook his head, his jaw tightened in new determination. No, he would fix this. He would not fail his padawan again.

Qui-Gon gently pushed open the door to his padawan's room with one hand; in his other he carried a small tray. Obi-Wan didn't move out of his protective ball, he only stared at his master with wide and anxious eyes. Qui-Gon could feel the Force around the child tense dramatically at his presence. A trace of fear crept over the bond despite the boy's impressive shielding. Very slowly so not to further frighten the boy, Qui-Gon moved into the room. He held up the tray and smiled gently at his apprentice.

"I thought you might be hungry. It's pakki broth, your favorite," he spoke warmly. The reaction he received was not the one the master expected. Obi-Wan stiffened at his approach, the Force around him nearly screaming in panic. Qui-Gon immediately halted his slow advance.

"Padawan, what's wrong? Are you not hungry?"

"I-I... don't want to... talk," Obi-Wan whispered. Qui-Gon frowned slightly, but quickly recovered.

"We do not have to talk if you do not wish it," he replied gently. Immediately he sensed the teen relax a little, but not much. "There is something else?"

"Could you... can I... eat alone?" the boy asked so quietly Qui-Gon had to strain to hear him. The master did not understand the reason for the request, but one look at those pleading and frightened blue-gray eyes was all it took to decide the matter for him.

"If that is what you want, Padawan," he answered as he set the tray on the medical couch, then backed away. Just before he stepped out he paused and turned back to his padawan noticing that the child had made no move towards the tray of soup and bread.

"I will be back to check on you later," he said. He wanted to say more, but he didn't know the words. Instead the master settled for a smile and a quick burst of love and reassurance across the bond, but as expected his efforts were rebuffed against the boy's mental shields. That would have to be addressed at some point, but not now. Somewhat sadly, Qui-Gon left the room closing the door behind him.

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Obi-Wan breathed a sigh of relief the moment Qui-Gon left the room and immediately he felt guilty. He should not have felt relief when his master left him and he should definitely not have felt afraid by his master's presence and yet he felt both these things.

Obi-Wan picked up the rapidly cooling bowl of pakki broth. His master had brought him his favorite food to eat when he was sick. It was a small gesture and Obi-Wan knew it should warm him, but it didn't. It only reminded him of the overwhelming panic he felt when his master entered his room holding the tray.

You must be hungry, little Jedi...

Obi-Wan set the bowl back down on its tray, his appetite banished at the return of the unwanted memory. He put his head down on his knees, biting his bottom lip hard to stop its trembling.

He was home. He was in the Temple, protected by Jedi, by his master. He should have felt safe, but he didn't. He was home before. He was in the Temple, protected by Jedi, protected by his master before and he was still taken. It was impossible for someone to sneak into the Temple. Impossible. So the only explanation was that Xanatos didn't sneak in. The Jedi must have allowed it. It was the only thing that made sense. There were simply too many powerful Jedi in the building for such a dark presence to go unnoticed. Masters Yoda, Windu, Gallia, Uvain, Tivi, his own master, all of them would have surely sensed a threat. Wouldn't they? Unless... unless there was no threat. Unless the Council permitted him to be taken, after all they had gotten rid of him before and almost prevented him from returning. Why would they be on his side now? And what of his master? True, he knew that Qui-Gon had not wanted him as his padawan at first, but over the last few months he had begun to believe his master cared for him. Had he been wrong? Xanatos was his former

apprentice. Obi-Wan knew his master had loved the man like a son. Surely, he would have sensed Xanatos's presence in the Temple? Unless he did, but he didn't care.

Qui-Gon saw your eye? And he did not heal it for you?

What was he thinking, of course his master didn't care. He was already planning to get rid of him, repudiate him before the High Council. Why not leave him to his fate? But he was looking for you. He told you so himself. You heard him over the bond. You felt him! a voice nearly yelled in his head. Obi-Wan covered his ears vainly trying to quiet the arguing voices, the desperate feelings threatening to tear him apart from the inside.

"Stop, please just stop. Leave me alone, please," he sobbed, begging to the empty space around him, but, of course, no one heard him and no one came. He was alone.

* * * * *

"Hello, Master Jinn."

"Hello, Lantis," Qui-Gon greeted as he took a seat next to Tahl and across from Vresh and his padawan. Vresh looked to his friend in mild surprise.

"I thought you were taking midday with Obi-Wan," he said. Qui-Gon placed his elbows on the table and interlaced his fingers.

"He preferred to eat alone," he answered evenly, but both Tahl and Vresh know there was more to that answer than the expression of simple preference.

"Is... Obi-Wan alright, Master Jinn? I have been worried about him. I mean, I know that he's got the healers and the Force and you taking care of him, but I still worry," the teen felinoid offered meekly in her characteristic purring tones. Qui-Gon gave her a warm smile in return.

"I know you do, young one, but there is no need. Obi-Wan will recover in time."

"Can I see him?" she asked, her triangular ears rotating forward with hope. Qui-Gon was loathe to disappoint the girl, but he knew that his apprentice was not ready for casual visitors right now.

"Not just yet, I'm afraid. Obi-Wan still needs a lot of rest," he responded, delivering the blow as gently as possible. The girl still seemed visibly deflated by his answer. Her master turned to face her. He lovingly stroked her cheek being sure to brush against her whiskers—a sign of affection among her species.

"Patience, my Padawan."

"Yes, Master."

"Now, off with you scamp. You have Galactic History in seven minutes," her master ordered with a teasing tap on her nose. Lantis smiled (a terrifying thing to Qui-Gon's mind, far too many sharp teeth). The child picked up her tray and bowed politely to the table.

"Masters," she said and then she was gone leaving the three elder Jedi alone at the table. Tahl wasted no time.

"What happened?" she asked turning in her seat to face Qui-Gon more directly. The master lowered his head.

"Honestly, I'm not sure," he began. He raised his head looking to both of his friends as he spoke. "When I walked in with the food he... panicked."

"You mean you startled him?" Vresh inquired. Qui-Gon shook his head.

"No, he was not surprised by my presence. He was alarmed by it. It was almost as if..."

"As if what, Qui?" Tahl prompted gently. Qui-Gon took a moment to swallow the lump that seemed to have spontaneously formed in his throat at that very second.

"As if he were afraid of me."

"Well, he probably was, Qui," she replied. The master turned to her in shock. A look of immense hurt flashed across his face causing her to immediately curse her word choice. "What I meant was he is probably afraid of everyone and everything right now. I wouldn't be surprised if he's jumping at shadows for the next several weeks."

Qui-Gon shook his head as he leaned back in his seat.

"I don't know," he mumbled. "It feels like more."

"What else did you sense from him? Did he tell you why he wanted to eat alone?" Vresh probed as he pushed his neglected meal to the side.

"He's shielding heavily from me."

"From everyone," Tahl corrected.

"Everyone including me," Qui-Gon replied sharply. "And no, he didn't say why he wanted to eat alone, but he did make it very clear he did not want to talk to me." Here the master paused as he reflected back on the puzzling exchange. "In fact, it seemed as if the thought of talking to me is what frightened him most."

"Understandable," Vresh responded. "Talking about his experience will force him to re-live the whole ordeal and right now... well, he's just not ready for that."

"How can I help him if I can't sense him or talk to him? How can I help him if he fears me?" Qui-Gon asked pleadingly, his deep baritone made deeper with his frustration and desperation. Tahl took his hand in hers squeezing it gently.

"You help him by giving him what he needs."

"He doesn't want me around," Qui-Gon countered. Tahl shook her head.

"This isn't about what he wants, Qui-Gon. You are his master. You must give your padawan what he needs," she told him bluntly, but not unkindly. With his free hand Qui-Gon rubbed the bridge of his nose, his eyes closed. The master sighed and opened his eyes.

"You are right, of course," he replied then he turned to Vresh. "Thank you both."

"You know we are all here for you and Obi-Wan," Vresh stated as he placed his hand on top of his friends' clasped hands. "Now, off with you too, scamp. Go see to your padawan."

Qui-Gon nodded and rose to his feet. He paused before stepping away from the table. The master looked to his white-haired friend.

"By the way," the master glared, "had you attempted to tap my nose you would have lost the hand."

Vresh smiled and threw up his hands in mock surrender as the dark-haired master stalked away.

"Wouldn't dream of it, scamp!"

* * * * *

Obi-Wan was still huddled into himself when he heard a knock at his door. Surprised and confused the young Jedi said nothing at first, but soon a second round of knocking followed. Obi-Wan decided it may be best to answer.

"C-Come in?" he squeaked. Instantly, Obi-Wan frowned at the child-like tenor of his own voice. The door to his room opened slowly revealing the tall figure of his master.

"How are you feeling, Padawan?" the master asked still barely inside the room. Obi-Wan was puzzled by his master's hesitation, but was secretly glad for the distance.

"I'm fine, Master," he answered. Qui-Gon slowly stepped further into the room. He spied the still full bowl of soup and untouched bread.

"You didn't eat," he said. Obi-Wan dropped his gaze becoming intensely focused on his bare toes.

"No, Master," he replied in a small voice.

"Why?"

Obi-Wan shrugged.

"I lost my appetite," he replied still entranced with his feet. Qui-Gon took a few steps towards the medical sleeper couch and reached out for the tray. Obi-Wan instinctively scrambled back from his master, pressing himself into the wall at the head of his bed aggravating his still healing ribs, wrist, and shoulder in the sudden movement. He saw his master cringe slightly, but then his face returned to its usual neutral expression. Only the sadness in his dark blue eyes betrayed his master's true feelings.

Qui-Gon removed the tray and placed it on the bedside table. Instead of returning to the bed, the old man walked over to the window, his back to the apprentice. For several long moments he didn't speak. Obi-Wan didn't know what to do with himself in the silence. Inside his head conflicting emotions battled for his attention. Part of him wanted nothing more than to call his master to his side, wrap his arms around his strong frame, and scream, cry, and gnash his teeth weeping into his master's robes in unabashedly un-Jedi like behavior. But there was another part of him that feared his master's presence; a part that jumped every time the tall man opened his mouth or reached out to touch him.

"Master," he began hesitantly, "I want to... ask you something, but you must answer me honestly or not at all." Obi-Wan knew his demand of his master was inappropriate. It was not an apprentice's place to require anything of his master other than to be taught, but Obi-Wan didn't care about being appropriate. There was something he had to know. For his part, Qui-Gon didn't reprimand the apprentice for his boldness. Instead, he answered the request calmly and directly, but he did not turn away from the window.

"Ask. I will answer," his master replied. Obi-Wan took a deep breath. Here goes.

"Are you going to dismiss me as your padawan? Repudiate me before the Council?" he blurted out quickly lest he paused and lose his nerve. At that his master did turn to face him. Obi-Wan noticed his master's eyes were rimmed in red, a shimmering trail was barely visible tracing down his cheeks and disappearing into his beard. Had his master been... crying?

"Of course not! Why would you think that?" his master answered. Obi-Wan could not be sure, but it almost seemed as if he had hurt his master's feelings with the question, but that couldn't be true. The evidence was clear, his logic infallible.

"After my fight with Bruck you... you didn't punish me..." Obi-Wan replied, his voice trailing off. His argument seemed so weak as he spoke it, but he was right, wasn't he? It made so much sense earlier.

"Padawan, I didn't punish you right then because... I wasn't sure if you deserved it. While it is true you should not have allowed yourself to lose control, the fault was not entirely your own," the tall master said. Then he did something totally unexpected. Obi-Wan watched as his master dropped to one knee, his head held low in a traditional pose of submission.

"Padawan, I have been a poor master to you. At the Temple and on Bandomeer, I rejected you out of my own fear and stubbornness. It was never any fault of yours, Obi-Wan, only my own. I was a fool and a poor servant of the Force. I was blind and, though unintentional, my actions harmed you, yet even so you have always honored me with your compassion and selflessness. I have been unworthy of you and your loyalty, my Padawan. My behavior was ill befitting a Master of the Order." Here his master paused. He raised his gaze and looked directly into Obi-Wan's eyes.

"I will never dismiss or repudiate you, Obi-Wan. You are my padawan from now until your knighting if you will still have me. I humbly beg your forgiveness and for a second chance to serve as your master. I will... understand if you choose not to grant me this."

Obi-Wan was wide-eyed and speechless. He had imagined many different outcomes, many different answers to his question, but never had he imagined that his master, possibly the greatest Jedi in the Order next to Master Yoda himself, would ever prostrate himself and beg his apprentice for forgiveness. He had not imagined it because such a thing was unimaginable and yet the scene had just played out before his very eyes.

His eyes. Qui-Gon was still looking at his eyes waiting for his answer. Did he even have one? Honestly, Obi-Wan wasn't sure. Qui-Gon frowned slightly, but otherwise remained unmoved.

"You do not wish me as your master," he stated in a subdued, but even tone.

"I do! I do want you as my master. It's just that..."

"You fear me."

"No, I don't fear you, Master," Obi-Wan answered. A rueful smile graced his master's face as he seemed to realize the answer that Obi-Wan himself didn't know.

"You don't trust me," Qui-Gon intoned. Obi-Wan was unable to hold his master's sad gaze. He looked down choosing instead to focus on his toes.

"I-I want to, but... no, I don't trust you."

* * * * *

The boy's words hit the master like a punch in the gut. Obi-Wan didn't trust him, but as hurtful as that truth was, the irony of it was not lost on Qui-Gon. It was his own misplaced fear of betrayal that caused his padawan's current mistrust of him as the boy's master. Trust was the foundation of the master/padawan partnership, without it there was nothing. There could be no team if there was no trust.

"What happens now?" a small voice asked pulling the master from his thoughts. Qui-Gon slowly stood, but he stepped no closer to the teen. He knew that rebuilding a broken trust would be a difficult path for both of them, but he also knew that since he was the cause of the break the first step must be his.

"What happens now is you reopen the bond and I show you."

"Show me what?"

"Everything," Qui-Gon answered and with that final word he dropped all his shields offering the child unfettered access to his most inner self. Obi-Wan sensed the change and shook his head furiously.

"No, Master. I can't. It isn't right," he stated defiantly. Qui-Gon smiled warmly at his charge.

"I trust you, Padawan and I want you to trust me. The only way for that to happen is for you to know the truth," he replied and then he closed his eyes. Obi-Wan was hesitant at first because it was several moments before Qui-Gon felt the boy's presence timidly brush against his mind. Slowly, the boy's probe pushed deeper and Qui-Gon offered no resistance allowing the apprentice to move about his thoughts unrestricted.

At first, the survey was superficial, merely testing the sincerity of the offer, but then Qui-Gon sensed a sharp narrowing in Obi-Wan's focus. He was looking for something. Suddenly, both Jedi were inundated with the master's thoughts, feelings, and impressions about his apprentice. Obi-Wan wanted to know what his master really thought of him, what Qui-Gon truly felt. Images flashed across his inner eye: a pair of deep and penetrating blue-gray eyes, a flawlessly executed saber kata, a warm and mischievous grin. There were sounds as well: a boy's laughter, an accented voice speaking in lilting, dulcet tones, the whirring hum of a lightsaber. But mostly there were feelings: pride, amusement, joy, respect. Love. He felt Obi-Wan pause here basking briefly in the revelation, but then his focus changed. He had another question that needed answering. The young Jedi dove beneath the master's feelings about his padawan traveling down until he reached another level of emotions—Qui-Gon's feelings about himself regarding his apprentice. The sounds and images here were dark and disjointed, often passing too fast to catch more than a general impression: the sound of sabers clashing, bright blue eyes filled with hate, bright blue-gray eyes filled with hope, the sound of sizzling flesh, a boy with a broken circle, a man

with a broken heart. The emotions that accompanied the impressions were just as discordant, but powerful: sadness, grief, betrayal, despair, pain, shame, fear. Guilt. Tremendous guilt. Guilt for the past. Guilt for the present. It was the heavy guilt of failing not one, but two padawans.

Obi-Wan's probe pulled away quickly, an audible gasp echoing in the small room. Slowly, the master opened his eyes. Qui-Gon looked to his apprentice, but the boy refused to meet his gaze.

"I'm sorry, Master. I shouldn't have..."

"It is alright, Obi-Wan. I should have shared these things with you from the start and I apologize for that, but I'm glad you know now," he said. Finally, the boy raised his head and looked to his master.

"I'm glad too, Master."

* * * * *

Day 111

"Good morning, Padawan."

"Good morning, Master."

"I've brought you firstmeal," Qui-Gon stated as he sat the tray of juice, fruit, and pastries on the foot of the bed. He pulled back to the door. "I'll be back to check on you," he said as he turned to leave. Obi-Wan bit his bottom lip as he debated with himself, then suddenly he found his hand surging forward.

"Master!" he yelled. Qui-Gon stopped halfway through the door. "You can stay, Master. That is, if you want to," Obi-Wan finished softly. Qui-Gon carefully schooled his expression trying to keep hidden the delight and hope he felt warming his chest.

"I would like that, Padawan, but only if it is something you are comfortable with."

"I am," Obi-Wan answered, then he quickly added, "but you can't sit in that chair and... you need to eat with me not just watch me."

Qui-Gon's eyebrows raised minutely at the strange requests, but he nonetheless acceded to them without hesitation.

"As you wish," he answered as he walked back into the room and sat on the edge of the boy's bed, sliding the tray of food between them. He picked up a cubed piece of fruit and popped it into his mouth. Obi-Wan smiled slightly as he began to eat as well though with more enthusiasm than his master. After eating for several minutes in silence Obi-Wan's hands fell into his lap, his gaze following them.

"You're wondering why I made you do it this way, aren't you?" he asked without looking up at his master. Qui-Gon placed the fruit in his hand back down on the tray.

"I am, but I will not push you to tell me," he responded. Obi-Wan wrung his hands before releasing a long and heavy sigh.

"He would always bring me food. He would sit in a chair and watch me. I-I could only eat if... if I would talk to him," he replied without looking up.

"Is that why you don't want to talk?" Qui-Gon pressed gently. Obi-Wan nodded still determinately fixated on anything other than his master. "What did he want you to talk about?"

"Nothing really," he answered then he looked up at his master. "But every time we talked afterwards I felt... empty," he nearly whispered. Qui-Gon was silent for several moments then he took a deep breath still watching his apprentice.

"When Xanatos talked to you, he would ask you questions?" the master inquired. Obi-Wan nodded, but said nothing. "Alright then, we shall talk, but this time, Padawan, you will ask the questions and I will answer. You will be in complete control. You will decide what we talk about and when the discussion is over. Can you do this?" the master asked. Obi-Wan stared at his master for sometime before answering.

"Yes, Master. I think I can do that," he replied. Qui-Gon gave him a small nod and waited for him to begin. Suddenly, Obi-Wan didn't know what to say. He felt a blush rise in his cheeks and he turned his gaze away from his master choosing instead to absently push a pastry around on the nearly empty tray. Finally, a thought did come to his mind.

"Your master, Master Dooku, you still... talk to him right?" he asked without lifting his head. Qui-Gon was surprised by the choice of topics, but he was careful not to show it for fear of discouraging his apprentice from continuing.

"Yes, we contact each other on occasion. At times I still seek his advice," he answered. Obi-Wan found himself nodding as this answer was expected.

"Your first padawan, Jenavin, she met Master Dooku?"

The line of questioning was getting stranger and stranger to the old man, but once again he answered his apprentice unerringly.

"Yes, I believe she did."

"Xanatos met Dooku too?"

"Yes."

"Why... why haven't I?" Obi-Wan asked finally looking up at his master. Qui-Gon was unable to prevent the frown that flickers across his expression.

"Do you want to meet him, Padawan?" the elder Jedi inquired. Obi-Wan just shrugged his left shoulder, his right still sore from the dislocation.

"I don't know, maybe. It's just that... I know now how you feel about me, but..."

"But you think because I didn't introduce you to my former master that I am ashamed of you somehow?" Qui-Gon finished for him. Obi-Wan nodded, biting at his bottom lip. His gaze once again dropped from his master to a spot on the tray.

"Xanatos said that you liked to show off your padawans to your master, that you would have dinners with Master Dooku so he could see how good your apprentices were."

Immediately, Qui-Gon's mouth set into a hard line, a ripple of frustration and anger pulsed in the Force around them. Obi-Wan's gaze shot up to his master at the disturbance. It took the master a moment to release his ire and return his focus.

"Obi-Wan, I can tell in absolute honesty that I have never presented my padawans to anyone for the sole purpose of bragging. Though they have met, there were no dinners with Dooku for my former padawans. Any meetings were created by circumstance, not design," Qui-Gon replied. He paused as his expression softened some. "Master Dooku was a good master and I am thankful for everything he taught me, but... we never had the relationship I had hoped for. It is not often that we speak, but if you wish to meet him I will not deny you."

"Thank you, Master," Obi-Wan replied softly, not really knowing what else to say. Xanatos had lied to him. He shouldn't be surprised at that and yet a small part of him was. A tale-tell line appeared between Obi-Wan's furrowed brows and his master knew the boy was thinking through something difficult, sorting evidence from emotion, fact from feelings. The master waited patiently for several minutes before saying anything. Eventually he spoke, placing a hand on the boy's uninjured shoulder.

"Obi-Wan, we will have to... talk about what happened to you," the master informed him, his deep baritone oddly gentle and comforting. Obi-Wan nodded his head.

"I know, Master, but... can it just... not be today?" he asked looking up into his mentor's midnight colored eyes. The boy's request was rewarded with a soft smile.

"No, my Padawan, it need not be today."

Chapter 10: Terms and Consequences

Day 113

"You're supposed to be resting, Padawan."

"I'm not sleepy."

"Don't tell me you're already hungry again," Qui-Gon said with a smirk. "Perhaps I should have the healers check you for parasites."

"Very funny, Master," Obi-Wan replied with a mild glower. "Actually, I am a little thirsty."

Qui-Gon rose from his chair by Obi-Wan's bedside and crossed to the small table to his left. He filled a small flimsiplast cup with water from a nearby pitcher. He handed the cup to his apprentice who took it with an appreciative nod and smile. The master gave a small nod in return and turned to resume his post when an unexpected exclamation stopped him.

"Kark!" Obi-Wan yelled. The master turned to his apprentice, eyebrow raised at the expletive. "Sorry, Master," the boy mumbled. Qui-Gon picked up the now empty cup from where it threatened to roll off the small sleeping couch. He watched as Obi-Wan cradled his still shaking hand to his chest in an attempt to arrest its tremulous motion. Except for the hard line of his mouth, the boy's face is expressionless, but more than a whiff of frustration leaked over the bond. Qui-Gon removed the damp blanket and the empty cup.

"It's alright, Padawan. It is just water. No harm done," he spoke gently as he replaced the blanket. He poured another cup of water and moved towards his apprentice. He raised the cup to Obi-Wan's lips in an offer to help him drink, but the teenager turned his head away; shunning the help and unintentionally flooding the bond with more frustration with added traces of shame and despair. Swallowing a sigh, Qui-Gon set the cup on the small bedside table. He reached for the child's still trembling hand pulling it gently, but firmly away from his chest. The master turned the hand palm up and began to massage and smooth the many twitching muscles.

"Do you remember what Healer Songe said about these muscle tremors, Padawan?" the master asked.

"Yes. He said it is a side-effect of the electropulsars Xanatos used," the boy mumbled. Qui-Gon nodded.

"Yes, but Healer Songe also told you that the tremors would abate in time. Be patient, Padawan, and in no time you will be back in the salles besting your agemates with ease," he smiled.

"How can you say that," Obi-Wan snapped, incredulity and outrage warring on his face. He tried to snatch his hand away, but the master held both his hand and his gaze firmly.

"Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon began, but Obi-Wan interrupted him.

"I can't even hold a cup! How could I hold a lightsaber!" the boy yelled. His eyes became glassy as tears threatened. He turned his head away, but a hand under his chin and his master's stern voice force his gaze to return.

"Obi-Wan, you have been injured, badly, and it will take time to recover, but you will recover, that I promise you," the master responded. Obi-Wan opened his mouth to protest, but an unexpected voice stopped the apprentice before he could begin.

"I hope I am not disturbing you," a deep voice called from the doorway. Qui-Gon turned his gaze to the door never ceasing his massage of his apprentice's hand.

"Not at all, Mace. My padawan and I were simply discussing the Jedi tenet of patience," he answered pleasantly ignoring the sever glare of his apprentice. Mace gave a knowing nod and stepped fully into the room. Only then did the teenager truly notice the Korun master's presence. The boy's response surprised his master. Qui-Gon frowned as he sensed the abrupt change in his padawan. His eyes widened, his entire body tensed, and tendrils of fear and discomfort leaked through the boy's shields. The response increased in intensity with each step the Councilor took. Mace must have sensed something as well as he stopped himself short of the foot of Obi-Wan's medical couch. Nothing, however, appeared on the Council member's face outside of his typical calm expression.

"How are you feeling, Padawan Kenobi?" the Councilor asked. The boy didn't respond only continued to stare wide-eyed at his visitor. Qui-Gon was concerned with his apprentice's reaction, but even so he could not let the breach in protocol go unanswered.

"Padawan," he began sternly, "Master Windu has asked you a question."

The use of his masterly tone prompted the desired result. The boy shook himself out of his mute and frozen state, but Qui-Gon could tell that the boy's fear remained.

"My... apologies, Master Windu. I am feeling much better, thank you," Obi-Wan replied meekly, but respectfully. Mace shot Qui-Gon a discreet glance and the master responded with an equally subtle nod.

"The Council will be pleased to hear you are," the Councilor began as he advanced toward the bed, but, though he reached his destination, he never got to finish his statement.

Seemingly the moment he began his approach the young Jedi sprang into desperate action yanking his hand from his master's grasp and scrambling gracelessly out of his bed and into the room's far corner; leads and sensors ripping off his body, blood dripping slowly from the wrist that previously held his IV. The shrill alarm from the medical monitors echoed loudly in the room, their siren wails playing a harsh counter-point to the stillness of all three Jedi.

Before the trio could move, Healer Songe swept into the room, his sharp orange eyes taking in the entire scene before settling on his patient who was currently backing himself into a corner. The healer moved cautiously towards the boy, silencing the alarms with a gentle application of the Force. He studied his patient closely as he drew near. Obi-Wan didn't appear to notice the healer's approach, the child's eyes instead glued in wide-eyed terror to the Council member standing a scant few meters away. Even when the Mirialan was right in front of the boy his presence was ignored. Qui-Gon took a single step forward, the medical couch still separating the master from his charge.

"Padawan?" he called, but Obi-Wan's gaze never lifted off Master Windu's tall and stoic figure. Songe's eyes drifted over the droplets of blood collecting noiselessly on the floor. He looked back up at the young Jedi before him.

"Obi-Wan, can you hear me?" the healer inquired gently. "Look at me, Obi-Wan."

The boy's eyes never moved, but when Mace took an experimental step forward, Obi-Wan's entire body tensed as he pushed himself harder against the wall as if he were able to fall through it by sheer dint of will. Songe had seen enough. He placed two fingers on the boy's forehead.

"Sleep," the healer commanded and instantly the child's eyes closed and his body fell limply into the healer's waiting arms. Songe cradled the small form then laid him gently back onto the bed.

"Anyone care to tell me what that was about?" he said as he cleaned the child's slightly bloodied arm and replaced his IV. Qui-Gon placed one hand on his padawan's brow the other held the boy's right hand. He shook his head.

"I have no idea. From the moment Mace walked in he was in a state of fright."

"I'd describe it more as terror," Mace intoned. Qui-Gon nodded as he absently watched Master Songe replace the sensor leads monitoring Obi-Wan's heart and respiratory rate.

"I have never seen that kind of fear in him, not even on Bandomeer," the master replied. He turned a worried gaze to the master healer. "What would cause this sort of reaction? What I felt through the bond was... visceral, almost primal fear... and at Mace... why?"

"I do not believe it was just at me," Windu interjected. The two masters looked at the Councilor waiting for him to continue. Mace frowned, his brow creasing in deep thought. "The Force disturbance his fear created increased exponentially when I mentioned the Council. I think he was more afraid of what I am rather than who I am."

"The question still remains as to why," Qui-Gon reiterated. Healer Songe closed his eyes as he performed a detailed Force scan of Obi-Wan's body. He placed his hands at the boy's temples, his own brow wrinkling in concentration. When the healer opened his eyes, the two masters were staring at him intently.

"If I were to hazard a guess, I would say that the boy has been subjected to some sort of conditioning," Songe began, but then he shook his head. "In truth, such things are beyond my area of expertise. You need to consult a soul healer sooner rather than later, but I see no reason he has to remain here during that time. When he wakes I can discharge him to your care, Master Jinn, along with instructions detailing his continued recovery," the healer said as he gave the surrounding monitors one last appraisal.

"Obi-Wan has never been overly fond of the Healer's Ward," Qui-Gon answered with a wry smile. "I am sure that he will be happy to continue his recovery in his own quarters," Qui-Gon stated as he straightened his back and looked directly at the master healer. "I will make the necessary arrangements with one of the Temple's soul healers and will strictly follow any instructions you provide."

Ar Songe nodded his acknowledgement, but offered nothing more. Mace crossed his arms over his chest. He stared down upon the young sleeping Jedi before him, a frown still sitting heavily on his normally neutral features.

"Master Songe, alert the Council if you have any needs regarding Kenobi's recovery and provide us with regular updates on his progress or changes," the Councilor spoke to the healer who nodded. Mace then turned his attention to his friend. His expression softened slightly. "Qui, you have my personal assurance that all of the Temple's resources are at your disposal," he said. Qui-Gon was unable to keep the emotion from his voice or face as he responded to the Councilor's heartfelt offer.

"Thank you, my friend."

* * * * *

Obi-Wan awoke to the contentedly dull state of confusion that usually accompanied the grogginess of deep sleep. Unfortunately, his happy ignorance did not last as the moments just before his forced slumber came crashing back into his memory.

He remembered he had been scared. No, not scared, terrified.

A collection of the most powerful Jedi in the Order...

When Obi-Wan originally noticed Master Windu had come into his room his first instinct was to run. He thought of the window, but that was sealed and he would also have to get past his master to follow that route. The door was a no-go as Windu himself stood nearly in front of it. That's when Obi-Wan realized he was trapped.

They can sense disturbances in the Force from across the galaxy...

So preoccupied with his need to escape he had failed to notice that the High Council member had addressed him. It had taken his own master's irritated admonishment to remind him of his expected role. Obi-Wan remembered answering the Councilor's question about his health with some degree of calm, but then... then he saw the master move closer to him... cornering him... trapping him.

And yet you believe that somehow I just walked in without any of those esteemed masters even batting an eye...

Obi-Wan knew he had to get away from that man. Jedi or not, he was a member of the Council and everything inside Obi-Wan screamed that he could not be trusted. He had to get away. Had to run, but there was nowhere to run to.

Nowhere to run.

Acting purely on instinct, he had jumped out of his bed, paying no heed to the monitors he launched into alarms, only dimly aware of the IV that had ripped from his arm, and completely ignorant of the blood that must have flowed from the resulting open wound.

And you believe you can trust them...

The last thing he remembered was pulling himself deep into a corner and the Councilor still advancing on him... still advancing... advancing...

Even the memory of the event caused that same fear to grow inside his stomach. He forced himself to take a few calming breaths.

"You're awake."

Obi-Wan reluctantly opened his eyes, turning his head to the side until he met his master's gaze. He had not been sure what he expected to see in those familiar dark blue eyes... disappointment... anger maybe... but what he did see surprised him. His master's eyes seem... worried, maybe even a little afraid.

"Yes, Master," he replied as he pulled himself into a seated position. Qui-Gon remained seated by his bedside, his hands clasped, fingers interlaced and hanging low between his widely planted legs.

"Padawan," he began and Obi-Wan knew what was coming next; the inevitable questions about why he had tried to flee from a Council member. Qui-Gon paused, seemingly mulling over his words before speaking again. "Master Songe has agreed to release you to my care. We can return to our quarters whenever you wish."

The statement took Obi-Wan by surprise.

"Our quarters?" he repeated softly. His master frowned.

"I would think the prospect of escape from the Healer's Ward would have elicited a stronger reaction," the tall master stated, then he leaned forward, a deep trench creasing his brow. "You do want to go home, don't you Padawan?"

Obi-Wan could see the slight plea in his master's gaze. The silent entreaty pulled at his heart compelling him to do something that until that exact moment he had never once considered doing. Ever.

Obi-Wan lied to his master.

"Of course I want to go home, Master. When can we go?" he answered. The smile he saw blossom on Qui-Gon's face was enough to wash nearly all of the guilt from his mind. Nearly.

"I will fetch Master Songe and then we can be on our way."

* * * * *

The walk "home" was, in a word, torturous both physically and mentally for Qui-Gon's padawan. When Obi-Wan was discharged, Healer Songe had suggested the boy use a hover chair for the several minute walk to his quarters, but in an almost endearingly familiar bout of obstinate self-sufficiency, the teenager had refused any assistance insisting that he could walk the meager distance. Initially, both masters had objected, but in the end they had allowed the boy's stubbornness to win out.

So master and padawan had set about their journey home at a subdued pace. The halls had been busier than the master would have liked, but most of the unwanted glances and outright stares were easily diverted by his own masterly glare. The two Jedi were about half way to their apartment when Qui-Gon noticed his apprentice had begun to lag behind. The master slowed to a halt, turning to study his apprentice. He saw that the boy

was winded and trying desperately not to show it. He also noted that Obi-Wan's entire face was lined with exhaustion, his body appearing as if it would give out at any moment.

"Perhaps it would be best if I carried you the rest of the way to our quarters," the master suggested. As he anticipated his offer was immediately and rather defiantly rejected.

"I can walk, Master."

"Yes, but you are clearly exhausted, Padawan," the master replied. The boy opened his mouth to protest, but Qui-Gon's raised hand forestalled the objection. "It is not weakness to listen to and respect the limits of one's own body particularly during times of injury or illness."

"Master," the boy pleaded, "I can do this."

With a heavy sigh and a purposeful disregard of his better judgment, Qui-Gon acquiesced. The pair resumed their slow and steady pace towards their destination. They had just turned onto the hall that housed their apartment when Qui-Gon sensed a flicker of distress across the bond. He turned around just in time to see the tremor begin in his padawan's left leg. A second later, the boy's knee buckled, but his master's quick reflexes caught him before he hit the floor. Before his apprentice could voice any further protest, his master scooped him up and carried the teen the remaining distance to their shared quarters. Once inside he placed the boy on the large couch of their common room and proceeded to massage the new spasm away. After the boy's muscles were successfully quieted, the master covered his charge with blanket then stepped away to brew some tea.

Since that time the two had remained in uncomfortable silence until the master decided that the necessary conversation could no longer be avoided.

"Padawan."

"Yes, Master?"

"We need to talk about what happened earlier today," Qui-Gon said as he quietly set down his empty cup. He looked to his apprentice, but Obi-Wan didn't meet his gaze determinedly fascinated with his own cooling cup.

"I know, but... I don't really know what happened, Master."

"Then it is something we will figure out together," the old master replied as he watched his apprentice set down his beverage and turn to face him; a look of fear and resignation on his young face.

"Obi-Wan, tell me what were your first thoughts when Master Windu came to visit you?"

“Run,” the boy answered without hesitation. “I felt an overwhelming urge to escape the room at any cost,” he replied then a sheepish grin crept across his face. “I even briefly considered tackling you so I could escape out the window, but I thought better of it.”

Qui-Gon quirked an eyebrow at his padawan.

“You grow wiser every day, my Padawan,” he responded dryly. “Why did you feel you needed to escape?” the master asked, his demeanor serious once more. The smile faded from his apprentice’s face as well.

“I just knew I wasn’t... safe anymore... not with him there...”

And you believe you can trust them...

“Can’t trust them... any of them,” Obi-Wan intoned, his voice almost mechanical to his master’s ear.

“The Council?” he asked. The question caused the boy to start, snapping him quickly out of the brief trance.

“What? I-I’m sorry, Master. I must have lost focus. What were you saying?”

“I asked was it the Council you felt you couldn’t trust,” Qui-Gon repeated, but Obi-Wan’s expression was still one of intense confusion.

“Why wouldn’t I trust the Council?”

Chapter 11: Weak Stomachs and Waning Appetites

Day 113

Despite his trepidation regarding the inevitable conversation on the weird events of earlier, Obi-Wan had at least hoped that talking things through with his master would answer some of the questions bouncing around his skull. Yet after the discussion he felt more confused than ever.

Obi-Wan reclined on the couch thinking. He could hear his master fussing nearby with a datapad, probably catching up on his correspondence or some personal research. For the first time in a long while, the silence between the Jedi was comfortable if not companionable, that was until Obi-Wan's stomach decided to break the peaceful quiet. His master's voice immediately followed the intense growling.

"Blast it!"

"Master?" Obi-Wan replied worriedly as he sat up. He watched as his master rose from his seat at the small table near the shared balcony wearing an apologetic half smile.

"I'm sorry, Padawan, that was not directed at you," he said as he came to stand before him. "I was just remembering that I had agreed to have latemeal with Master Tahl here in our quarters. I had not known then you would be released and I can appreciate it if you are not yet up to receiving visitors."

Obi-Wan knew his master was offering him a way out, a no-apologies-or-explanations-necessary reason to say no to their potential dinner guest and for that the padawan was relieved, but Obi-Wan also knew that Master Tahl was one of his master's closest friends and one of the masters who had volunteered to search for him. Search for you but not find you, the voice in his head sneered, but Obi-Wan easily dismissed the unfair criticism. He had met Master Tahl on several occasions and she was always nice and warm to him, plus she meant a lot to his master and that, by itself, was nearly enough to make the decision for him.

"No, Master, I would welcome Master Tahl's company and it would give me an opportunity to thank her for her help in searching for me," he replied in his best approximation of his master's mask of serenity. The effort seemed to be appreciated as his master smiled warmly and a sensation of pride and love was sent over the bond.

"In that case, I suppose I ought to make my way down to the refectory and get us something to eat," his master answered as he reached for his cloak. "I will only be a minute," he said as he headed to the door.

Before Obi-Wan had a chance to think, he tossed off his blanket and jumped hurriedly to his feet, his arms outstretched towards his master.

"No! Don't!" he screamed, then he remembered himself. He put his hands by his sides and lowered his head to his chin. Obi-Wan took a deep breath. "Forgive me, Master."

Qui-Gon did not move. He remained frozen in place, his expression unreadable as he studied his apprentice.

"Perhaps I can persuade Master Tahl to procure our meal. That way she can choose what she would most enjoy, after all, she is our guest," the master offered after a long moment's thought. Obi-Wan was unable to hide the relieved smile that came to his lips.

"I think that would be best, Master."

* * * * *

Outwardly, the master was calm, his expression a well-worn mask of serenity, but inside his mind Qui-Gon Jinn muttered a long string of curses that would make even the slimiest Hutt blush to hear it. What had he been thinking! The truth was he had not been thinking. Indeed, the master's past few hours had been an ill-timed exercise in rampant unmindfulness.

First, he had allowed the boy to walk to their quarters when clearly the teen had not recovered enough strength to attempt such a task. Then he had allowed his dinner plans with Tahl to utterly slip his mind only remembering them half an hour prior to the agreed upon dinner hour. And now... now the old master's thoughtlessness had reached new and dizzying heights. Qui-Gon had all but sent the boy into a blind panic. How could he have been so foolish as to forget that the last time Obi-Wan was in their quarters his master had left him alone and, subsequently, the boy had been abducted, abused, disfigured... broken. The old master inwardly shuddered. He was being careless when what his padawan needed most from him was care. Obi-Wan needed his master to be in the moment, fully. It would be his attentive guidance and support that would be the key to navigating the child through the over three-month long nightmare.

Qui-Gon closed his eyes for a moment and silently made a solemn vow to the Force that he would not fail this child again. Just as he opened his eyes, the door chime sounded. Qui-Gon opened the door with a wave of his hand and in stepped Tahl; her dark hair pulled tightly behind her, her gold and green striped eyes flashing brightly as they locked with his. She held several neatly stacked boxes in her hands.

"Dinner has arrived," she opened with a smile as she walked to the small dining table and began to unload the steaming portions. The door to the fresher slid open and out stepped an auburn-haired apprentice. Qui-Gon watched as the teen drifted over to the table pulled almost magnetically to the feast being laid out before him.

"Ah, there's my other handsome Jedi. I forgot that food is always the best bait to catch a padawan... and the occasional master," she smiled with a wink to Obi-Wan. Just as the master planned, her teasing words instantly disarmed the boy and put him at ease.

"Good evening, Master Tahl," he greeted with a slight bow. He sat down and hungrily stared at the food in front of him, but made no move towards it. Tahl regarded him thoughtfully then looked to Qui-Gon.

"Well, your padawan has impeccable manners, though I suspect that has little to do with your influence, Qui," she laughed. Qui-Gon made his best attempt at appearing wounded by her jest as she turned her attention back to Obi-Wan. "No need to stand on ceremony with me, Obi-Wan. Dig in."

Qui-Gon's apprentice needed no further prompting as he indeed began to "dig in" heaping mountains of spicy la'tan noodles on to his plate. The two masters took their seats and moved to fix their plates as well.

"You would not believe who comm.'d me today," Tahl said as she spooned out a serving of parilap bar-b-que onto her plate.

"Who?" Qui-Gon asked as he shoveled in a mouthful of salad greens.

"Oman Ralote."

"No," the master answered with an incredulous, but slightly mischievous smile.

"My hand to the stars. He messaged me completely out of the blue."

Finally, Jinn's poor padawan could take it no longer.

"Who is Oman Ralote?" he asked hoping desperately that he was not overstepping his bounds. Tahl turned to him with a smirk.

"Oman Ralote is a rather officious merona from Apri VI."

"Merona?" Obi-Wan asked between mouthfuls. Qui-Gon turned to his apprentice.

"An official of diplomatic standing somewhere between a barrister and a,"

"Serrellian chuc lizard," Tahl supplied. The old master quirked an eyebrow at his friend.

"I was going to say senator, but I suppose chuc lizard will do," he replied in his typical diplomatic tones. Obi-Wan couldn't help but grin at the friendly banter of the two masters.

"So how do you know him?"

“Master Tahl and I were on a mission together on Apri VI; a simple observation and evaluation of their major elections. Merona Ralote was one of the officials assigned to liaise with us as representatives of the Republic. Unfortunately, Ralote seemed far more interested in liaising with Master Tahl,” Qui-Gon finished with an odd lopsided grin. Tahl smiled back at the master, but then she noticed the furrow in the boy’s brow.

“Oh, you’ve got a sweet one here, Qui,” she said with a wink to the master, then she turned to the apprentice. “What your master means is that Ralote was more interested in pursuing a romantic relationship with me rather than attend to his duties for the mission.”

“Oh,” Obi-Wan mumbled, a blush rising brightly in his cheeks. Qui-Gon put a hand on the boy’s shoulder and smiled.

“The long and short of it, Padawan, is that Ralote’s numerous advances and entreaties were beginning to wear on Master Tahl’s patience.”

“My patience?” Tahl repeated indignantly. “By the time we reached the official closing banquet you looked ready to throttle him!”

Obi-Wan looked to his master with slack-jawed wonder. Qui-Gon couldn’t help but laugh at his apprentice’s unadulterated shock.

“Yes, my very young apprentice, even my Jedi serenity has its limits,” he chuckled. “But then again, I wasn’t the one who dumped the contents of a large bowl of muja fruit punch on him either.”

Now it was the honey-skinned master who received a stare of patent disbelief from the wide-eyed teen.

“Master Tahl, you didn’t?”

“Of course not,” she replied, her hand clutched to her chest in mock affront. “It was not my fault that the table that held said punch clearly had some latent structure defect that just happened to make itself known while Merona Relote was in some proximity to it,” she explained and at that all three Jedi burst into riotous laughter.

Much of the latemeal passed in a similar combination of good food and pleasant conversation, but as the night drew on and adult bellies began to reach their fill Qui-Gon noticed that his apprentice’s plate was uncharacteristically not scraped bare or, in the alternative, heaped with seconds or thirds. The master frowned.

“Padawan, I noticed you have not finished your food. Is everything alright?” he asked, his concern showing plainly in his eyes. The boy gave the master a smile that did not reach his eyes.

"I'm fine, Master. I guess I'm just full," the teen replied. Tahl let out an exaggerated gasp.

"A teenage boy... full? We should alert the Council!" she teased, but her jest was only met with weak laughter. The old master silently studied his apprentice noting with a certain unease that the boy's hands had been quietly folded in his lap for sometime.

"Master, I'm actually quite tired. Would it be alright if I retire for the evening?"

"Of course, Padawan," Qui-Gon answered, his careful gaze scrutinizing the boy's every movement. Obi-Wan turned to their guest.

"Master Tahl, thank you for a lovely latemeal and," he started, then he paused for a moment, "thank you for your help in searching for me."

"I'm glad you enjoyed the food, Obi-Wan, because I know I enjoyed the company," Tahl smiled. She paused as she leaned in slightly, her gold and green eyes locked on to his blue-gray ones. "And as for the rest... I could do no less for someone whom I love so much," she said, then she spared a look at Qui-Gon before returning her gaze to the boy. "Two someones. I only wish..." she stopped, her words trailing off. Obi-Wan nodded.

"I know," he responded politely. He stood carefully and quickly, his hands always positioned slightly out of view. "Masters," he intoned with a quick bow. Qui-Gon nodded and watched as his apprentice beat a hasty retreat to his room closing the door behind him.

Dishes put away, for just over an hour the two masters continued their post meal banter, catching up on galactic politics and Temple gossip interspersed with a fair share of friendly teasing, but as enjoyable as Qui-Gon found the conversation he could only participate with a distracted interest. His thoughts were somewhere else entirely—namely, the small room approximately ten meters from his seat.

Ever since his apprentice retired to his room, the master had kept a close eye, actively monitoring the bond. First he had sensed vague feelings of embarrassment and frustration. In time, those feelings had given way to a low-grade anger. It was only when the master felt the stinging wave of despair and shame that he found himself struggling to remain in his chair instead of charging into the room to sweep the boy up in a comforting embrace. Finally, however, the boy's mind calmed and the intense emotions began to ebb, sliding heavily down into a placid muteness. The master allowed himself a small smile.

"Well, it's about time."

"Hmm?"

"Whatever you were waiting for finally happened," Tahl stated assuredly. The master nodded.

"He's finally asleep," he said as he moved to the small kitchen and prepared some tea. Tahl moved to the worn couch of the common room and stretched out; her head on an armrest, her feet crossed at the ankles, her hands resting comfortably across her stomach.

"Good, now maybe you can tell me what supernatural Sith-spawned superweapon was used to separate your padawan, a growing teenage boy with an appropriately voracious appetite, from second helpings or, Force help us, dessert?" she teased as she watched the tall master return to the common room with two steaming mugs of tea. He handed one to Tahl before taking a seat at the far end of the couch, lifting her legs so he could sit down then laying them down across his lap.

"He was experiencing muscle tremors in one or both of his hands. He did not wish you to see," he answered between sips of his tea. Tahl gave him an exaggerated sigh.

"What did I do to warrant befriending the two most prideful, bantha-headed Jedi in the Order?"

"I am not prideful," Qui-Gon retorted with a snort. Tahl lifted an eyebrow.

"Really?"

"Really," he repeated stiffly. Tahl shot up from her reclined position swinging her legs off his lap in the process.

"Qui-Gon Jinn you are the most prideful Jedi I have ever known," she began. Qui-Gon opened his mouth to object, but Tahl continued before he had a chance. "For eight years, eight years you buried your feelings, your grief and hurt, from Xanatos's betrayal. You wouldn't talk to anyone, wouldn't tell anyone what you were really feeling."

"That was different."

"Emotionally perhaps, but you and your padawan both employ the same motive: you don't want to show any weakness lest you disturb your image as the perfect master, the perfect padawan."

"There is no such thing as a perfect master or padawan."

"I know that. The question is do you? And does your padawan?" she retorted. Suddenly, her face softened as she slid down the couch to sit beside the old master. She took his large hands in her smaller ones. "He looks to you, Qui, for how to handle what is happening to him, what has happened to him, not just to your example, but for your approval. You can't just be there to help him. You're going to have to show him it's okay to need help and how to ask for it."

"I know," Qui-Gon said with a heavy sigh. He removed one hand from her grasp and placed the now free arm around her shoulders pulling her in close to him. The two sat

quietly for several moments as he collected his thoughts and steadied his own ragged emotions.

“Tahl?”

“Hmm?”

“Something... happened today in the Healer’s Ward. Something I don’t understand... something that frightens me,” he finished, his deep baritone almost a whisper.

“What is it, Qui? What happened?”

“Mace came to see him and Obi-Wan... was terrified of him, so much so that he ripped out his IV trying to get away from him and then here in our quarters when I tried to talk to him about it he said that he couldn’t trust anyone on the Council.”

“But... why? Did he tell you why?”

“When I asked him, he didn’t even remember saying it.”

Much time passed before either master was capable of speaking. So much was already said in those last few words that further speech seemed reckless, even dangerous. Tahl continued to lie against Qui-Gon’s side his arm draped over her shoulder; both masters stared out into nothing as thoughts and feelings roam unbound, unmarshaled in their heads. Finally, one proved brave, or desperate enough, to break the silence.

“He’s going to have to talk about what Xanatos did. I mean, he would have had to eventually, but now... I don’t think we can afford to wait.”

“I know,” Qui-Gon sighed. “We are going to meet with a soul healer tomorrow. Perhaps then...” he paused, unable or unwilling to verbalize the remaining thought. Tahl nodded quietly leaning snuggly against his strong arm, gracing his palm with a tiny kiss before sitting up and turning to face him.

“Whatever you two need...”

“Thank you,” he replied. Tahl stared into the warm midnight eyes of the tall master. She cupped his cheek and smiled.

“Go to bed,” she ordered, but her tone was warm and gentle. Qui-Gon regarded her with a wry grin.

“Yes, Master.”

* * * * *

...not safe in the Temple not safe anywhere no one to protect you vulnerable open unwanted they knew they knew they didn't care sent you away before sent you away again with him allowed it condoned it can't trust won't trust not safe should have felt the darkness the darkness is coming the darkness that already came is coming again looking for him it wants to bring him back take him away again searching unstopped unchecked unbound allowed again he can sense it so they all must sense it its coming closer they have to know closer must know must not care must not want closer its back he's back he's back he's here oh gods no no no no no no no...

"No!" he screamed and faster than conscious thought he was out of bed and through his door. Obi-Wan stepped into the common room, his hands in tight fists. The door to his master's room opened only a moment later. He had his lightsaber in hand, but it remained unlit as the tall man's eyes searched the room for danger before finally settling on the apprentice's frozen, battle ready stance.

"Padawan?"

"He's here. He's in the Temple. I felt him."

"You think Xanatos has returned to the Temple?" the master asked as he slowly approached his apprentice.

"He is here. I felt him, Master," Obi-Wan stated emphatically. Rather than argue, Qui-Gon closed his eyes and reached out into the Force. He extended himself from their quarters through the hallways and corridors of the Temple complex searching for that oh-so-familiar Force signature of his once student. Finding nothing, he opened his eyes.

"Padawan, I don't sense,"

"I know what I felt, Master!" the boy yelled. Despite his hesitation the master stepped close and knelt before his apprentice.

"Obi-Wan, is it possible you were dreaming? That you only dreamed you felt his presence?"

"No..." the teen answered, but his voice was soft, his conviction ebbing away rapidly with each ticking second spent under the concerned gaze of his master.

"Reach out with your senses. What do you feel now?" his master asked. Obi-Wan closed his eyes and stretched out his awareness just as his master had done only moments ago. After a few moments, he reopened his eyes.

"I-I don't feel him..." he answered quietly, a slight tremor in his voice.

"It was only a nightmare, Obi-Wan. It's alright," the master stated as he drew the small body into his own and held him in a tight embrace. The two Jedi remained in the comfort of each other's arms for a few seconds before embarrassment made the boy pull away. His master said nothing about the teenager's blush to the show of affection, instead he stood and led the padawan to the couch and seated him. The master then went to the kitchenette. When he returned it was with a pair of mugs. He handed the padawan a steaming cup and waited for him to take a few sips before speaking.

"Padawan?"

"Yes, Master?"

"I think it's time we talked about what happened to you," his master spoke gently. Obi-Wan sighed and was silent for several minutes, contented to stare into the dark waters of his cup while he collected the equally dark memories in his head.

"Yes, Master," he replied then he took a deep breath. "I had just given up on meditating and was in my room when I heard the outer door open. At first, I thought you had return, but then I felt it... a familiar yet unfamiliar Force presence... I opened my door to see who it was and he was standing here, right in front of me..."

Chapter 12: Painstaking Efforts

Day 15

When Obi-Wan awoke his first clear sensation was pain. It wasn't an active pain, but instead the echo of it that seemed to reverberate through his very skin, his muscles tight with the dull ache of it, his bones still chilled with past agonies. He didn't dare open his eyes or even move. Instead, the young Jedi was content to lie in his current stillness and quiet pain hoping fervently that he would be left undisturbed. It was not meant to be.

"Every padawan tries it and every padawan fails at it," a familiar and thoroughly unpleasant and cultured voice crooned. "I know you're awake, little Jedi."

Reluctantly, Obi-Wan pushed himself up into a seated position; his muscles fairly screaming in protest. He stifled a grimace as he lifted his gaze to meet his captor's stare with his own glare of unwavering determination and a degree of contempt. Xanatos frowned.

"Tsk ts. Such anger in you, little Jedi. That's not very Jedi like."

Obi-Wan's expression remained the same, but internally he balked. Xanatos was right, he wasn't behaving as a Jedi and in doing so he was dishonoring both himself and his master and that was something he would not allow. Obi-Wan took a deep breath. He may have been unable to release his emotions into the Force, but he could at least push them to the side, tuck them far away to be dealt with at some later time. Once he had achieved some semblance of calm serenity he returned his attention to his jailor who greeted him with a smile.

"I'm impressed, little Jedi, very impressed. You have learned your lessons well, but I wonder, will it be enough?"

"Enough for what?"

"Enough to endure the new lessons I will teach you."

"There is nothing you can teach me," Obi-Wan intoned. Suddenly, Xanatos surged right up to the thin barrier of the ray shield, his mouth twisted into a cruel smirk that sent chills down Obi-Wan's spine.

"Oh, but that's where you're wrong, little Jedi. You are going to learn so very, very much," Xanatos hissed, then he tapped a button on the comm. link he wore on his left wrist. "And your first lesson will start right now."

Just as he finished his statement, Obi-Wan watched as he pulled out the small remote he had shown him earlier. The young Jedi took a breath and, knowing what was to come, tried to brace himself against the impending onslaught.

It was in vain.

Neither knowledge nor memory could prepare him for the pain that sought him, touched him, claimed him for its own. Molten rivulets of searing agony raced through every line of his body. Conscious thought was impossible. The comforts of reason and discipline aching out of reach as his body writhed and spasmed wildly on the floor. Finally, the torturous stimulus ceased leaving the apprentice in a ball, curled in on himself an unconscious moan escaping his lips as his body endured the still suffering trembles across his overactive nerves. Obi-Wan kept his eyes closed, though through foggy thoughts he heard the ray shield lower and felt himself hauled to his feet and dragged unceremoniously down several corridors by large, rough hands. His eyes were still squeezed tight when he felt his arms pulled up over his head, his wrists placed in restraints. His ankles were then similarly shackled to the floor leaving his small frame pulled taut between the opposing fetters, his weight balanced precariously on the balls of his feet and the pull of his shoulders. He stubbornly kept his eyes shut when he felt the cold sweep of metal kiss dangerously close to his skin as his Jedi robes were carefully rent from his hanging form, stripping him down to his small clothes. Then suddenly, the metal and the large hands were gone. Heavy footsteps retreated followed by an opening and closing door. Lighter footfalls approached him now stopping in front of him. A single fingertip skimmed across the flesh between his jaw and collar bone. Instinctively, Obi-Wan's body tensed as he flinched away from the feather-like stroke. The finger pulled away with a throaty chuckle.

"Oh, mine is not the hand you should fear, little Jedi." A pause. "Open your eyes, little Jedi. There is someone I'd like you to meet."

Finally, slowly, Obi-Wan forced his eyes open. He gazed lazily about the room, his eyes first lighting on Xanatos's cruel figure, clad in black from head to toe. Then his focus shifted to the slightly smaller figure beside him. He was Devoronian, the red hue of his skin and dual, slightly curved horns a dead giveaway. He, too, was draped all in black, but his attire was faded, well-worn, and of a far less affluent variety than Xanatos's garb. The impish alien wore a jumpsuit with a thin belt similar to those of engineers or mechanics, but his ebon attire displayed no logos or emblems of his employer or his trade revealing only that he was a worker or craftsman of some sort and yet... Obi-Wan noted that his uniform was free from the typical dirt or grime that oft accompanied such professions.

"Little Jedi, meet Enredar Shirperna."

"Forgive me if I don't shake hands," Obi-Wan answered dryly. Xanatos laughed haughtily.

"You see! What did I tell you? The boy has impeccable manners. Impeccable," Xanatos crooned. The Devoronian said nothing, but continued to leer at Obi-Wan's nearly naked

form in a way that made the Jedi's skin crawl. Xanatos turned to his horned companion, his expression serious.

"You know what I want?" he asked to which the other answered with a nod. "Good. I want it precisely as I diagramed, no more, no less. I want this to be prefect," he finished as he cupped Obi-Wan's chin in his hand. He held him there for a moment before stepping back and taking a seat several feet away. Xanatos relaxed into the chair, leaning back casually, legs crossed, hands resting gracefully on his thighs. Shirperna slowly walked around Obi-Wan his rough fingers tracing uncomfortable lines across his exposed skin. Finally, he came to a stop in front of the boy. He reached to his waist and began to remove the thin belt around his jumpsuit. It was only then that Obi-Wan realized that the thin flexible cording was no belt at all. In the distance he could hear Xanatos laughing at his sudden, yet belated understanding.

"Yes, little Jedi," he said coolly, "your eyes do not deceive you."

Indeed, Obi-Wan's eyes were still fixed on the former belt now turned electro-whip. Shirperna stepped back away from the small Jedi. He thumbed a button and the whip flared to life with a sharp hum. The Devoronian made a few test strikes snapping the whip against the open air with a flick and flourish of his wrist. It was all Obi-Wan could do to suppress the urge to flinch at each electric crack of the nimble instrument.

"Fear not, little Jedi. Enredar is an absolute master at what he does, a true artist of the flesh. I could offer nothing less than the best for our master," Xanatos said. He gave a slight nod to Shirperna and the imp's smile grew wider even as his eyes narrowed in concentration. A moment of quiet and then a loud hiss-snap cut through the air and a strip of fire blazed to life on Obi-Wan's right thigh. His mind had just barely finished processing the pain and damage to his body when an identical swathe of agony sliced across his left thigh pulling a hiss out of him.

And so it went for a time unknown to Obi-Wan though it felt like forever. A pause then a hiss-snap followed by a bright new line of searing pain and a choked whimper. Always the same and seemingly never-ending the macabre master abused the pale skin of his legs and arms as Xanatos prattled on in the background about art, beauty, and the aesthetics of suffering. Eventually, the moment of silence beginning each concatenation endured uninterrupted by another flesh ripping strike. Obi-Wan tried to steady his breathing and slow his racing heart, but the fire burning across his limbs made the endeavor supremely difficult. He had finally managed some degree of control when Xanatos approached him. The ex-Jedi circled the boy slowly as if he were inspecting some priceless piece of art for hidden defects—perhaps he was. Finally, the inspection stopped and he stood before the pained apprentice with a toothy grin.

"Simply beautiful, Enredar," Xanatos exhaled. "Your reputation is well deserved... Truly marvelous," he whispered in obvious awe. If Obi-Wan were not concentrating so hard on diffusing the pain in his extremities he probably would have been utterly disgusted by his jailor's morbid enchantment with the results of his torture. As it was, the Jedi settled for

a determined glare reflecting his calm resolve despite the trembling that had begun to take over his body. Obi-Wan's show of will only served to delight Xanatos further as his smile widened into a disconcerting smirk.

"Easy, little Jedi," Xanatos said then he leaned in close to whisper in Obi-Wan's ear. "We are just getting started."

* * * * *

Day 18

Obi-Wan's arms and legs still hurt, though the initial blazing burning had receded to a continuously throbbing, heated ache. Even the rough hands of the guard, a guard he recognized from Bandomeer, a Codru-ji called Gyter, is careful around his numerous lash wounds lest he disturbs the delicate scarring beginning to form and upset his master.

In the days since his flaying, Obi-Wan had been visited in his cell several times by his captor. In those visits, Xanatos would clean his wounds and apply a salve to prevent infection. During his ministrations, his touch was delicate almost tender, his words soothing and oddly comforting considering it was he that had wounded Obi-Wan in the first place. This "tender" Xanatos only served to confuse Obi-Wan more, but the apprentice found himself too weak to sufficiently care. He had been provided food and water sparingly; enough to prevent his death or illness, but not his infirmity. Xanatos wanted him weakened, not dead, beaten not broken.

Obi-Wan suspected that would come later.

Even now the apprentice felt himself one step closer to that inevitability as he sat bound to some kind of odd chair—his chest supported by a padded bench, his hands bound in front of him, his ankles secured on either side of the seat, his back open and exposed. Xanatos sat behind him, his hands constantly moving across the wide expanse of skin, but there was nothing tender or comforting in his touch now. Instead of soothing wounds he was inflicting them, plunging the edge of a vibroknife into his flesh and carving into his back like an engraver carving into metal. Each stroke was excruciating requiring all of Obi-Wan's control not to cry out. Instead, he bit fiercely into his lip, blood running freely down his chin as he swallowed yet another scream.

But worse than the pain was the voice over his shoulder.

Xanatos was talking again, speaking to Obi-Wan his voice calm and even as if he were engaged in casual conversation and not a brutal torture session. He spoke with every stroke, but he only recited the Code.

Blinding, burning pain...

"There is no emotion, there is peace."

Flesh ripping, tearing...

"There is no ignorance, there is knowledge."

Skin torn, jagged, and bloodied...

"There is no passion, there is serenity."

Another stab. Another swallowed scream...

"There is no chaos, there is harmony."

Salty clear streaks mirror coppery crimson ones...

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

Darkness. Numbness. A welcoming oblivion...

* * * * *

Day 19

"You're angry with me."

"Jedi don't feel anger."

"Ah, but you do, little Jedi," Xanatos replied as he finished tending to Obi-Wan's freshest wounds. He rocked back on his heels, studied the prone apprentice for a moment and then stood high above him.

"I have an offer for you, little Jedi. A wager if you will," Xanatos said then he paused waiting for a reply. Obi-Wan continued to lie unmoving on his stomach unwilling and uninterested in turning his body or craning his neck to face his abductor.

"I decline," the apprentice answered, his voice slightly muffled by his position.

"I think you will reconsider once you hear it," Xanatos continued completely undiscouraged by his prisoner's lack of enthusiasm. "A duel is what I propose. A very proper, very Jedi lightsaber duel."

"Not interested."

"Not even for your freedom?" Xanatos asked. His words were a lure, a trap and Obi-Wan knew it, but he also knew it was something he couldn't ignore. Obi-Wan slowly pushed himself off the floor, the lacerations on his back igniting with every move. He managed to place himself into a meditation posture, his hands resting on his thighs, his expression reflected a calm he certainly didn't possess.

"What must I do?" Obi-Wan intoned as he looked up at Xanatos.

"Defeat me," the ex-Jedi replied. Obi-Wan snorted.

"Torture and starved... hardly seems like a fair fight," he answered. Xanatos cocked his head to the side in thought.

"Three days."

"What?"

"Three days. I will give you three days to recover your strength. In that time I will still have your wounds tended to and I will see that you are provided with adequate food, water, and rest. Then we will duel."

"You've been torturing me for over a week. Three days is not enough time to recover."

"Take it or leave it, little Jedi," Xanatos retorted as he crossed his arms over his chest. Obi-Wan stared into those hard, cobalt eyes searching for... something, but whatever it was he sought he did not find it.

"If I win?"

"You are free to leave."

"And if I lose?"

"You will remain as my guest a little longer and... I get to sign my work."

That last statement made Obi-Wan's blood run cold, but he kept his features neutral, his cleft chin held high.

"I accept."

* * * * *

Day 22

Surprisingly true to his word, Xanatos left Obi-Wan unmolested for the entire three days of his hurried convalescence. In addition to the welcomed lack of abuse and torture, the apprentice had been supplied with food and water both of necessary quantity and quality to be restorative. His wounds still pained him, however, but little could be done about that save an extended immersion in a bacta tank or falling into a deep healing trance neither of which were offered him.

In the course of the seventy-two hour recovery period, Obi-Wan had indeed regained much of his strength. It was his center that eluded him and with his access to the Force still blocked he found his confidence faltering with the approaching hour. His resolve, however, never wavered.

He would duel Xanatos and he would win.

He had to.

* * * * *

Day 23

He was ready when Gyter came for him. He considered attacking he, using his newly returned strength to attempt to overpower him. Without the Force or his lightsaber taking on the four-armed Codru-ji in his current state would be difficult, if not impossible. But what concerned him most was what would come after. He didn't know where he was, (except that he was still on Coruscant since he could "hear" his master's voice through the bond) where an exit would be or how many security features or personnel he would have to bypass or get through to escape. Without access to the Force there were just too many "what-ifs" to comfortably embrace or counter, so the idea of an aggressive assault was abandoned shortly after it was conceived. Instead, the apprentice allowed himself to be bound and herded down several long corridors to a large oval shaped room with a hard-paneled floor and a high ceiling. Gyter removed his ankle and wrist restraints before he stepped back and took a position by the closed door. On the wall opposite the Jedi's position a door opened and through it walked a thoroughly annoying and familiar figure with a thoroughly pretentious and familiar strut. He walked to the center of the room and stood there. After only a moment's hesitation, Obi-Wan joined him in the center of the

room, but remained a short distance away from him. Xanatos leered at him amusingly. He reached down to his belt and pulled off a saber.

"Are you ready, little Jedi?" Xanatos asked as he handed Obi-Wan his own lightsaber. The apprentice took the weapon in his hands and held it as reverently as he had the day he made it. A lightsaber was an extension of the Jedi who wielded it. To be without his for so long was nearly as painful as being without the Force. The Force! Obi-Wan suddenly remembered the collar around his neck. In this duel he would be made to fight without any connection to the Force against a near-knight who would still have that connection. The situation was getting further and further from ideal.

"No," Obi-Wan answered steadily. "There is another matter."

"Oh?" Xanatos inquired almost politely. Obi-Wan reached up and tugged at his collar.

"If this is to be a fair fight, you have to take this thing off me," he said flatly. His jailor studied him for a moment, as if deciding on what to do, but then he reached behind him and unclipped something from his belt.

"A fair fight you shall have, but I'm not so foolish as to remove my primary means of control over you," he replied as he revealed an identical collar hanging over two gloved fingers. He then reached up and placed the collar around his own neck, the band sealing with a click. A flash of discomfort flew across his expression, but it was gone as quickly as it had come.

"Force deprivation while not pleasant can be easily endured, if one is strong enough," he said. Obi-Wan had to admit to himself he was a little disappointed. He had briefly hoped that Xanatos would indeed remove his collar increasing the odds that he could not only win this match, but if he should fail that he might still be able to effect an escape. That hope was now out the window, the frame and glass shattered with the click of the other Force collar. Xanatos stepped back two paces and brought his saber up and swiftly back down again in a traditional salute. Obi-Wan answered with a mirrored salute and the bout was on.

Immediately the room erupted into flashes of light, blue on crimson, the colored columns flashing and whirling relentlessly in a beautiful yet deadly dance. This was no practice round; both sabers were powered to full. A touch would be extremely painful. A direct hit would be extremely mortal. Obi-Wan drew on all of his training, limited as it was by his young age, and launched into a full-scale assault relying on his proficiency in Shii-Cho while augmenting it with the few moves from the Ataru style his master had taught him. His flips were not as high or as graceful as usual since he was unable to enhance the aerials with the Force, but he was still a more than fair gymnast. In saber class, Obi-Wan was a star pupil, eager to learn, quick to catch-on, and completely involved in the moment when he was engaged, but still he found he was no match for the nearly fully trained knight that Xanatos was. Obi-Wan would thrust, lunge, slash, and sweep while Xanatos calmly parried and deflected his strikes as if he were some bothersome insect buzzing about him on a summer's day. All too quickly, Obi-Wan found himself tiring out, his moves becoming

sloppy, his body struggling to obey his mind's commands. Then without warning, Xanatos sprang forward with a brutally aggressive assault advancing on the young Jedi so fast Obi-Wan had no choice but to retreat several steps as he desperately tried to defend himself against the blurring crimson onslaught. Xanatos lunged and, with a flick of his wrist, wormed through his opponent's defenses and sent his saber flying with a lightening fast disarming maneuver. Weaponless, Obi-Wan continued to back up. He glanced over to where his lightsaber had fallen, but without the Force he had no way to retrieve it. Xanatos reached out with a long leg and swept him off his feet. Obi-Wan hit the ground on his back with a loud whomf! as all the air rushed out of his lungs. Xanatos stepped over him, placing a booted foot on his abdomen and the tip of his saber at his neck. He reached back and removed the collar from his own neck clipping it back on to his belt before looking down at his felled opponent.

"I yield," Obi-Wan growled angrily. He was as angry at himself as he was at Xanatos. He had had a chance for freedom and now that chance was gone crushed under the weight of a shiny ebon boot.

"I accept, little Jedi," Xanatos smiled, "but now it is time to collect on our wager."

Without any warning, Xanatos drew the tip of his saber down onto Obi-Wan's exposed chest. He pulled the blade lightly across his skin burning the tender flesh below. Obi-Wan screamed. He couldn't help it. He would have been twitching and writhing on the floor were not Xanatos holding him still with the Force. Xanatos seemed to drag his blade down Obi-Wan's skin forever. The pain was so intense, so blinding that the boy couldn't think, couldn't form the words to even beg the man to stop. Instead, he lay there, pinned, sobbing, and helpless; unable to escape the pain physically or mentally. By the time Xanatos disengaged his saber, Obi-Wan was blessedly unconscious.

Chapter 13: The Loss

Day 29

Tired. Obi-Wan had never so tired in his life. Tired. Weary. Exhausted. Utterly spent. Each word fell unbelievably short when trying to describe the bone deep fatigue of the young apprentice. The little strength he had regained a week ago had long since departed; the feeling of well-rested and full-bellied “able-ness” a distant memory. It had been days since he had been offered food or water. His stomach ached terribly all the time constantly churning and folding in on itself. His tongue felt thick and heavy in his mouth impossibly filling the dry cavern making swallowing unreasonably difficult.

Then there was the saber burn on his chest.

Nothing he had ever experienced had hurt quite like that before. Generally, injuries caused by lightsaber were far less agonizing, even gentle when compared to other popular weaponry. With a lightsaber, strikes were fast, clean, and instantly cauterized resulting in bloodlessness and swiftly severed nerves, but Obi-Wan had fallen to no strike. He had been subjected to a slow burn as his tormentor carefully directed the tip of his saber slowly across his skin causing the flesh beneath to curdle, melt, and blacken in its wake. Even now the broken circle wound crusted and oozed, but it wasn't nearly as painful now as it had been. Obi-Wan wondered grimly if it were possible that his body was also tired of feeling pain and so had simply abandoned the effort and settled for a dull, muted ache if not quite numbness. It didn't matter. He would take what escape he could get, so it was only natural when Obi-Wan allowed himself to slide back into the familiar darkness of semi-consciousness and fitful, restless sleep.

* * * * *

Day 34

Obi-Wan missed his bed. He missed the slightly starchy quality of freshly laundered sheets and the fresh and light scent of detergent still clinging to his pillow casings. He missed the pungent and spicy smell of tea that drifted into his room filtering through his muzzy senses as he pushed toward early morning wakefulness. But more than anything he missed his master. More even than he missed the Force, Obi-Wan longed for the calm, steady, and bright presence in his mind; the presence that kept him grounded, anchored amidst the chaos. He would do nearly anything, give nearly anything to have that feeling again.

Becoming Qui-Gon Jinn's apprentice had not been an easy process. Indeed, it had hurt him deeply to have his only hope, to have the master he knew he was destined to have turn away from him not once, but over and over again before accepting him and even then, Obi-Wan soon realized, it was only a partial acceptance. He knew his master had let him into his home and into his life, but not into his heart. Understanding that had hurt too, but Obi-Wan decided it was a hurt he could learn to live with. Oh, but what he would give to be let in, to be with his master now, held tightly in his arms and loved strongly and uncompromisingly. It was a hopeless and futile wish, but he wished it all the same. That want, that deep longing was all he could think about as he lay curled up in a ball in his tiny, dark cell.

He had had many "visitors" over the past few days. Twice someone had shown up with a ration bar and a bottle of tepid water, but there were many more times when his "visitors" came with something else entirely. Sometimes they came with stun sticks or with that Sith forsaken remote. Sometimes they only brought their bare hands, but whatever their choice of instrument the intention was the same: to torture or beat him until he fell unconscious or was too insensate to scream. During those times, Obi-Wan would try to remain calm, would try to relax his body so that the pain washed over and through him as he was taught to do as an initiate, but he had had the Force then; the Force, the crèche masters, his own master, something or someone to help him through, but not now. Now he was alone. Alone in his head. Alone in his suffering. Alone in the dark.

Alone.

By the end, Obi-Wan was nearly always left sobbing hysterically, his throat raw from the duraglass shattering screams they mercilessly wretched from his beleaguered frame.

Obi-Wan pulled his knees closer to his chest wrapping himself into an impossibly tighter ball. Yes, he wanted his master. He needed his master, but his master was not coming. He knew that, so he did the only thing he could. Obi-Wan closed his eyes and buried himself deep within his own misery.

* * * * *

Day 46

How long had it been? Days? Weeks? Months? Obi-Wan did not know, for he had lost all sense of time long ago. The contemplation of time, the apprentice found, was an overly taxing mental concept and he needed what little reserves he had left to... To do what? Survive? Endure? That took no energy at all. To do that all he had to do was continue to exist, to refuse to expire and even that was less a matter of his prerogative than his jailor's. Until Xanatos decided otherwise, Obi-Wan would survive. He would be forced to endure.

Obi-Wan wanted to believe that he endured because he was a Jedi, but a small insistent voice in his head would only cruelly remind him that, in the end, he endured because he really didn't have a choice.

* * * * *

Day 51

Another blazing wave of pain rocked through Obi-Wan's body causing him to convulse wildly in the restraints that held him nearly dangling in the air. His shoulders ached, dangerously close to being pulled completely out of socket as Xanatos finally released the button on his remote and Obi-Wan was allowed a moment to catch his breath.

"You must have been a truly awful initiate, little Jedi, for the High Council to have gone to such lengths to get rid of you," Xanatos stated calmly. He leaned in close to the apprentice's sweat covered and trembling body. "Yes, even now, I bet you're still willing to defend them, willing to trust them. They abandoned you, little Jedi. They left you... to me," he whispered.

"No," Obi-Wan rasped, his voice weak, but his tone unquestionably defiant.

"Yes, little Jedi," Xanatos sneered as he stepped away again. "Do you really still think it possible that I could have walked into the Temple undetected?" Xanatos asked. When he received no answer he pushed the button and immediately Obi-Wan's body drew taut as stretched wire, bolts of pure agony arcing across every nerve in his body. Then just as suddenly as the pain had emerged, it ceased.

"Temple security didn't see me?"

Another round of pain.

"The Council didn't feel me?"

More pain.

"Master Yoda didn't sense me? How is that possible, little Jedi? How? What is the only answer? Answer me!" Xanatos yelled as he pushed the button again and again the boy's small figure twitched and writhed, bucking fruitlessly in the air in a futile, but instinct driven attempt to escape the painful stimulus. Xanatos released the button.

"How, little Jedi? What is the only way I could have gotten in?"

"They... They... let..."

"Who, little Jedi? Say it. Say the name. Say what you know to be true."

"T-The Council... let... y-you in..." Obi-Wan stammered between gasping breaths and full body tremors. Xanatos cupped his chin in a gloved hand.

"And why would the Council do that, little Jedi? Why would they give you up to me?"

Obi-Wan felt something deep inside him shudder and break as a voice he did not recognize issued forth from his own mouth.

"Because... they don't want... me."

* * * * *

It was not long after that "lesson" with Xanatos that Obi-Wan was brought back to his cell. Gyter had dropped his small body on the floor in the middle of the tiny space and it was there he continued to lay, ragdoll limp and unmoving. His whole body still ached, his nose still stuffy from crying, his voice still hoarse from screaming. He closed his eyes and tried to will himself unconscious, but his pain filled body was stubbornly determined to keep him awake. Obi-Wan felt himself sinking down, deep inside himself, moving closer to a place of constant darkness, yet caring less and less about it when suddenly a warmth filled him, its light sending the encroaching shadows into the corners of his mind once again. The presence was so missed, so longed for, so welcomed, Obi-Wan at first doubted it to be real that was until he heard that voice, that blessed baritone echoing through his mind.

/Padawan?/

/M-master?/

Obi-Wan's heart lifted as his master's presence washed over his tortured spirit like a soothing balm. He waited for an answer, but he was greeted with silence. Had he imagined it? Was he so desperate for his master's presence that his mind conjured up the reopened bond? Just as suddenly as hoped had flooded into his heart, Obi-Wan felt it sweep out with the all too familiar pangs of sorrow and fear taking its place.

/Master, are you there?/

/Yes, my Obi-Wan, I'm here./

That simple response brought forth a wave of relief unlike any he had ever felt. He was still in pain, still trapped and subject to Xanatos's cruel whims, but he had his master

with him, for however briefly he had him, right now and for once, now was all that seemed to matter.

But the joy caused by his master's presence soon became over shadowed with a deep shame of how he had surely disappointed this man he revered so highly. He had cried, wailed, screamed, and had no sense of calm. Worse, he had been afraid, was still afraid. A true Jedi had no fear, but he did. He did.

/I... I'm sorry, Master./

/For what, Padawan?/

/I haven't been a very good Jedi... I... I've been afraid.../

A long pause. So he was disappointed in him. Not half a year his padawan and already he had shamed his master.

/I have been afraid too, Padawan. You have done nothing wrong./

His master? Afraid?

/Really?/

/Yes, but when you feel afraid I need you to remember that I am always with you, Obi-Wan, that the Force is always with you. You are *not* alone./

Though his mind doubted his master's words his spirit felt buoyed as wave after wave of warmth and, yes... love crashed through him over their training bond. The sheer intensity of it nearly caused him to weep uncontrollably like a crèche child.

/Padawan, I need you to tell me where you are./

/I... I don't know, Master./

/Focus, Padawan! Tell me what you see, what you hear or smell! Can you sense anything? Tell me, no matter how small./

Obi-Wan's eyes desperately darted around his cell and the small room just beyond it. He closed his eyes and thought back to his trips down the corridors. Unfortunately, most of those times he was only semi-conscious, but still he tried to find something, anything he could tell his master that would help him find him, find him and rescue him from this Sith spawned hell. But there was nothing. No sounds. No smells. No windows or doors, or anything that would hint to his location.

/There's... nothing, Master... just cold darkness. He... keeps me in the dark until.../

/Until what, Padawan?/

Even in his mind, Obi-Wan could not stop his voice from cracking under the all too painful memories of what had passed and what he feared was yet to come.

/Until he wants to hurt me... T-that's a different room.../

His master must have sensed his panic because, once again, the bond was inundated with comfort and clam. Obi-Wan wasn't certain, but he almost thought he could feel his master's strength flowing into him, bolstering his own depleted reserves. Though the sensations pleased him, comforted, and consoled him, it also released a desperate need in him, one so strong it shamed him, but he was unable to stop the plea that rushed from his lips.

/Master, please... I... I need you to find me... I need you./

/Listen Obi-Wan, I'm coming for you! Just hang on, Padawan! I *will* find you!/

He was coming for him and he would find him. Obi-Wan believed that and he took that belief and wrapped it tightly around himself like a cloak. The apprentice barely had a moment to bask in the temporary security before reality walked through the portal dressed, as always, in full black wearing a smile as dark as his clothing. There wasn't much time left.

/Master, I.../

"I think that's enough, don't you?" Xanatos smiled as he pushed a button on his remote and, just like that, his master's presence was ripped from his mind, shunted away, and blocked from his reach. Xanatos knelt before the ray shield and quietly regarded his captive who still curled into a protective ball deep in a corner of his cell.

"I trust our master is well?"

"He is not your master! You don't deserve him!" Obi-Wan snarled. Xanatos chuckled lightly.

"And you do?"

To this, Obi-Wan gave no answer. Truth be told he wasn't sure he did either, but he wasn't about to admit this fear to Xanatos, but something in the man's twisted smile and the deadly glint in his eyes told Obi-Wan that he already knew.

"Want to prove it, little Jedi?"

"How?"

"Another duel," he answered. Obi-Wan opened his mouth to object, but Xanatos held up his hand forestalling any protests. "I will give you more time to recover say... four standard weeks? Of course you will receive food and water and rest, as before, but otherwise, you will be left... undisturbed," he finished with a wink.

Obi-Wan frowned. Four weeks? The suggested length of time both appealed to him and appalled him. He did not want to remain in Xanatos's custody for nearly another month, but who knew when he would ever be free of him? Or worse, if he would ever be free of him.

On the other hand, four weeks of humane treatment might actually be enough to make a difference in a fight with Xanatos. It wasn't a sure thing, but it was, at least, a true fighting chance and maybe, just maybe, it would give his master the time he needed to find him.

"If I win you will let me go?"

"Yes."

"And if I lose?" he asked, his hand absently drawn to his burn with a shudder.

"If you lose you stay here with me and you prove me right, that you are undeserving of Master Qui-Gon's attention as a padawan... maybe as one of his strays, but not as his apprentice, not as his legacy," Xanatos replied coolly. "So, little Jedi, what do you say?"

"I accept."

* * * * *

Day 72

He was rested. He was restored. He was ready.

Over the past few weeks, Obi-Wan had been an apprentice on a mission. At first, he had used the precious recovery time to simply rest and replenish his body's empty stores, but after the first week Obi-Wan devised his own training and exercise regimen which he meticulously followed for the remaining three weeks. He practiced saber drills he had learned as an initiate open-handed in the empty air imagining he could feel the weight of his saber hilt in his hand as he executed each strike. He practiced every kata he had ever learned both in his crèche classes as well as those few new ones his master had taught him. He practiced them daily, both in the "morning" and at "night" (times he based on the frequency and quality of his meals). He drilled over and over, engaging each repetition with

an intensity that bordered on obsession. Throughout his “training” his body complained mightily. His myriad wounds and scars pulled and throbbed in their various stages of healing, but he ignored the pain, pushed past his discomfort, and narrowed his focus to one singular goal: defeating Xanatos.

That was all that mattered.

So as he once again stood in the oval chamber staring at his opponent, matching collar around his neck, lightsaber hilt in hand, Obi-Wan cleared his mind of everything but the task at hand.

Xanatos winked at him and they were off.

In the blink of an eye two columns of concentrated colored energy sprang up from their respective hilts. Unlike before, Obi-Wan did not immediately launch into an aggressive assault preferring this time to let his opponent initiate the first clashes of the deadly dance.

Xanatos moved them about the room leading with elegant Makashi strikes, lunges, and feints testing the padawan’s defenses and footwork as though the two were engaged in a casual lesson at the Temple. Obi-Wan parried another strike and decided in it was time to make a push. He began a complicated series of strikes and aerial maneuvers from the Dancing Leaves kata his master had recently taught him. At first, his captor was taken by surprise, but he recovered quickly and easily countered the familiar routine. Obi-Wan had anticipated this and soon deviated from the routine changing from the early kata steps of the Slender Flower to the most complex he knew, the Pounding Wave (a kata he and his master had only recently begun) only giving each kata a few strikes before switching to another. The strange mix made his attacks jerky and less fluid, but it also kept his opponent off balance so Obi-Wan pushed forward. Xanatos fell back several steps, but always seemed to eventually regain the ground again only to lose it later then regain it again. Obi-Wan could feel his arms beginning to tire, his breathing slightly more labored. It was only then, when he made a sweeping overhead slash that was deftly blocked by Xanatos that he realized all his efforts had been for naught. Xanatos wasn’t off balance in the least! The whole time he had been toying with him and as this realization fell like a shadow over Obi-Wan’s eyes Xanatos winked at him.

And in that moment, all was lost.

The momentary distraction was enough. Xanatos surged forward, catching Obi-Wan transitioning from one kata to another. He stepped in close to Obi-Wan grabbing his right wrist and twisting the saber out his hand as he plunged an elbow hard against the boy’s sternum. Obi-Wan grunted, his knees buckling as his lightsaber fell from his grasp. Xanatos, still holding his wrist yanked the apprentice towards him and then struck him hard with a back fist. He released him at the moment of impact so the strike sent the boy staggering backwards into the wall behind him, his head cracking against the hard surface with a sickening thud.

Obi-Wan felt himself slide down the wall to the floor. His stomach roiled, his head pounded, and his breath tore raggedly through his chest under the pain in his sternum. Through blurry vision he watched Xanatos approach and kneel in front of him. He reached out and Obi-Wan braced himself for another brutal strike, but Xanatos instead took hold of his padawan braid gently turning it over between two fingers. He then turned his gaze to Obi-Wan.

“No matter what you do, no matter how much time or training is spent on you, you will never be worthy of being Master Jinn’s apprentice,” he said almost sadly, then without warning his grip tightened around the small stubby braid and he pulled... hard. The swift yank ripped the braid from his skull by the root taking skin and blood with it. Obi-Wan screamed, though whether it was from the physical pain of the braid’s removal or the emotional pain its removal represented, he didn’t know; he would never know. All Obi-Wan knew at that moment was that Xanatos was right.

He wasn’t worthy.

And he would never be.

Chapter 14: Living Expenses

Day 73

Desolate. Inconsolable. Fantastically aggrieved. Bitter. Bottomless. Empty. Guilty. Shamed. Bound. Pained. Numb. Cold. Small. Irrelevant. Unworthy. Tainted. Trapped. Anguished. Despairing. Hurt.

Alone.

This was what it was to be Obi-Wan Kenobi, former padawan of Master Jedi Qui-Gon Jinn, now a nobody, a nothing.

No. Not just now. Always. Always nothing.

The Council had seen it.

His master had seen it.

Even his torturer had seen it.

Now, Obi-Wan saw it for himself. He knew. He had always known really, but he had hoped... No. No more of that. It was time to grow up and face the hard truths; truths that had been evident since before his banishment to Bandomeer, truths going back to his initiate days in the crèche. He had always been... different... angry... unbalanced... un-Jedi. Perhaps... perhaps Bruck was never a bully at all. Perhaps he was a teacher, of sorts, trying to show him the truth only Obi-Wan had been too blind to see it. And Master Goor Pama and Master Jinn... perhaps they had been right the first time, right that he was better off as a farmer. If he had listened, if he had just accepted the transfer to the Agri-Corps none of this suffering had to take place. Not his. Not his master's.

He could see now, the Council had tried to do him a kindness and he had thrown it back in their faces, coercing Master Jinn to make him a padawan out of the man's misplaced sense of honor. Now the Council was reprimanding him; showing him the consequences of his arrogance, his obstinance, his continued and unquestionable unworthiness.

That he was here was right. It was just. It was what he deserved.

"Um... Are you okay?"

Obi-Wan chose not to lift his head off his knees at the soft and unfamiliar voice. When he heard the sound of the ray shield drop and someone enter the cell, Obi-Wan only tightened his grip around his knees and tucked his head down even closer.

"I... I won't hurt you. I promise. I-I... just thought... I just came to see if you were okay. Are you? Okay I mean..."

The voice was close now and yet still very soft, even... gentle. Finally, Obi-Wan looked up, his sense of morbid curiosity winning out. What he saw surprised him. Kneeling a meter or so away from him was a rather scrawny Rattataki male. Bald with the snow colored skin, dark tattoos, and white eyes characteristic of his species, the male had a haunted look though he didn't appear to much older than Obi-Wan himself. The Rattataki was dressed in a worn and ratty set of overalls whose threadbare condition shown in the numerous old patches and new holes that covered most of its surface.

"What do you want?" Obi-Wan finally asked as he looked at the boy in a dead stare. The teen seemed startled by his coldness and retreated back a half meter seeming to debate whether a full retreat was necessary. The boy stopped moving and squared his shoulders; his decision made.

"My name is Adaenkinith Ryl," he said extending an open palm to Obi-Wan; a gesture of good will. It was not returned.

"What do you want?"

"I wanted to see if you were okay," the boy answered suddenly cool himself. "Perhaps this was a mistake," he said as he rose to his feet and backed out of the small cell. Once clear he reactivated the ray shield, but he didn't leave. Instead he stared at the slightly hooded blue-gray eyes in the cell.

"It isn't right what he's doing. I'm sorry," he said quickly then he turned away and disappeared out the door.

For reasons he could not explain, Obi-Wan felt even more alone than before.

* * * * *

Day 75

Obi-Wan was resting uncomfortably in a corner of his cell when the dull hiss of the main door opening brought him to complete wakefulness. He watched warily as the slight figure entered the room. The figure walked up to the shield and stood, hesitating before turning and moving towards the door again.

"Wait."

The figure stopped mid-stride then turned around slowly.

"What?" the figure asked sharply, but quietly; irritation and concern clearly at odds in both his eyes and voice. Slowly, carefully, Obi-Wan climbed to his feet. He moved the short distance to the front of his cell. The boy on the other side also moved closer until the two were separated by only a meter and a ray shield.

"You said yesterday... you said that you wouldn't hurt me."

"I won't."

"Then... why are you here?" Obi-Wan asked. The boy dropped his gaze to the floor, a few quiet seconds passing before he answered.

"I don't like what he is doing to you."

"Can you help me get out of here? Maybe get a message to my master or get this collar off or," Obi-Wan started his hope bursting out of him before prudence and reason could tame it. The Rattataki never lifted his eyes from the floor.

"No," he replied shaking his head. "I'm sorry."

The weight of the past weeks crashed down on Obi-Wan all at once; his body literally crumpling under the pressure. The Rattataki sank to the ground with him though they were still separated by the shield.

"I'm so sorry," he repeated this time looking at Obi-Wan, but now it was Obi-Wan who stared away absently. The boy shifted slightly on his knees, his hands fidgeting and twisting in his lap. "I shouldn't even be here... I'm taking a big risk even talking to you."

Obi-Wan looked up; blue-gray eyes meeting white ones in shared understanding.

"You're a prisoner too," he said sadly. It wasn't a question, but the other teen felt compelled to answer anyway.

"I suppose, yes," he replied. Obi-Wan nodded and then sighed heavily as he let hope out and reality in.

"You said your name was Adaenkinith?"

"Yeah, but you can call me Adaen."

"Obi-Wan Kenobi."

"Yeah, I know," Adaen answered rather sheepishly. At that he received a quizzical look from his, hopefully, new friend. "He... well, he talks about you... a lot."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

"So... why... does he keep you here?" Obi-Wan asked tentatively. Adaen ducked his head down suddenly fascinated by his well-worn boots.

"I was an orphan living on Nar Shadaa. I-I joined a gang, the Black Suns. In exchange for food and shelter they made me do little stuff for them because I was small and... well, innocent looking, I guess," he paused shaking his head. "Anyway, I was pick-pocketing for them outside one of the casinos and, well, I picked the wrong mark."

"You tried to pick-pocket Xanatos," Obi-Wan supplied. Adaen nodded.

"He stopped me, grabbed my arm so hard I thought it was going to break then he loosened his hold a little and told me I was coming with him. I went with him... I thought..."

"You thought he was rescuing you," Obi-Wan once again filled in what was left unsaid and, once again, Adaen nodded.

"But he wasn't, not really. Now, I just do things for him instead of the Black Suns."

"Does... does he hurt you?" Obi-Wan asked. Adaen didn't look up, in fact, his eyes and head were lowered the entire conversation.

"A lot at first. Not so much now. After seven years, I guess I've kind of figured out how things work," he said then he finally looked up at the boy in the cell. "It's not all bad. Sometimes he's really nice to me. He teaches me stuff, tells me stories about the places he's been... it's nice," he said with the ghost of a smile, but after a moment it was gone. "But I know he doesn't actually care for me and that's okay, you know. I can live without it," he finished with a slight shrug. "It could be... It has been a lot worse, so I can live with it."

Obi-Wan didn't say anything opting to pick at his toes instead. The truth was he knew exactly what Adaen felt. It was the same realization he had come to with his own master. In some ways, Adaen's enslavement seemed more honest than his apprenticeship. No. Former apprenticeship he reminded himself.

A shift from Adaen brought Obi-Wan temporarily from his grim musings as he watched the Rattataki rise to his feet.

"I should go. If I'm missed..." he began nervously. Obi-Wan nodded his understanding.

"Go. It's okay," he said then just as Adaen turned to leave he added. "Thank you."

"I will come back when I can," Adaen offered. Obi-Wan smiled lightly.

"I would like that."

* * * * *

Day 78

"Ugh," Obi-Wan hissed.

"Sorry," Adean answered as he continued to apply a sour smelling salve to Obi-Wan's new wounds. The young boy hissed again as Adaen's fingers ran over a particularly painful bruise on his ribcage.

His "visitors" had arrived early that morning and seemed to be in a right foul mood. Not wasting time with discrete strikes punctuated by taunts and insults, the group immediately set to pummel the boy into a squishy sack of bone, blood, and bruises. When they finally tired and left him, someone else came to examine his injuries, "treating" him just enough to prevent infection and death. Some agonizing hours later, Adaen had managed to sneak in a visit carrying with him a pungent, but pain numbing cream.

"There. Give that a bit of time and you should feel at least a little better," Adaen said smiling weakly as he recapped the small container. Obi-Wan stretched himself stiffly, grimacing at the dull, sharp, and throbbing aches throughout his body. He leaned his back against a cell wall and allowed his muscles to relax a little. Adaen remained where he was, one knee bent up in front of him the other tucked under him as he sat back on his heel. He quietly picked at the fraying hem of one pant leg while he studied his friend.

"You still miss them, don't you?" he asked softly. Obi-Wan didn't bother with pretending not to understand.

"Very much."

"But... why?" Adaen asked unable to hide the staggering incredulity from his voice. He continued before Obi-Wan could answer. "They turned their back on you! They tricked you!" he cried as he rose to his feet and began to pace the length of the small room. "Xanatos told me what they did to him, how they tricked him and sent him on a mission to kill his own father... and when he wouldn't, when he couldn't they abandoned him!" he yelled. He stopped pacing and turned to face Obi-Wan. "And then they let this oh-so-dangerous dark Jedi take you, knowing that he would... would..."

"Hurt me?" Obi-Wan offered in a small voice. Adaen collapsed on the floor and nodded sullenly, his angry energy spent.

"Yes," he answered his head shaking as he still searched for understanding. "So, why do you miss them? I mean, they tricked you, the Jedi, the Council, they used you, Obi-Wan..."

"They're the only family I know," the former apprentice replied almost shamefully. Adaen shook his head.

"No. I don't remember much about my family. Most of my memories are of either life with Xanatos or the gang and I know both of them used me just like the Jedi used you, just like they used him. Family doesn't do that, Obi-Wan. They just... don't."

Obi-Wan didn't answer. He couldn't answer. There was no argument to refute Adaen's words because he was right. Obi-Wan never knew his family either, being taken to the Temple as an infant, but in his heart he still knew that his friend was right, that family didn't use each other, didn't trick each other, didn't abandon each other, and they definitely didn't leave each other to be purposefully abused by others.

Obi-Wan pulled his knees in tight to his chest, his arms wrapping fiercely around his own starved form.

"I'm... I'm sorry," Adaen said just barely more than whisper. "I shouldn't... It's not my place to,"

"It's alright," Obi-Wan interrupted. The two youths sat in silence for several minutes before Adaen reluctantly got to his feet and left the cell.

"I'll come back when I can," he said then he raised the ray shield and left the room.

* * * * *

Day 81

"Here. I managed to sneak a couple of ration bars from the stores."

"Thanks!"

"Look, I'm sorry about what I said before... you know about the Jedi..."

"It's fine. Just... just drop it."

"Okay, but I never meant that all Jedi were bad. I mean, you're nice and I think maybe Xanatos was nice once... a long time ago, and I know how both of you love this Jedi Jinn so I

guess what I'm saying is... all Jedi aren't totally awful... just most of you. There. Done. Finished. Dropped. Promise."

Silence.

"What do you know of Master Jinn?"

"Only what I've heard him say. I know he raised him, cared for him, loved him. They were like father and son, I think. He doesn't like to show it, he doesn't think I see it, but, despite what the Council did to drive them apart and what he's become since... I can see how badly it hurt him..."

"It hurt my mas- Master Jinn too."

"Just like it's hurting you both now."

"No... It's different with me..."

"What do you mean?"

Pause.

"It's just... different. He wanted Xanatos..."

"So, he didn't... Oh."

* * * * *

Day 87

"Ow!"

"Well if you stopped moving it would hurt less!"

"If it didn't hurt so much I wouldn't have to move!"

"There! Done! By the stars, Obi!"

Grumble.

"I'm sorry, what was that?"

Mumble.

“What?”

“I said thanks, okay?”

“Yeah well, you’re welcome, you big baby.”

Smile. Silence. Frown.

“Adaen?”

“Hmm?”

“He’s never going to let me go, is he?”

“Is that what he told you?”

“Would it matter? It’s not like I can trust anything he says.”

Silence.

“Adaen,... do you trust him?”

“I-I... trust him to look after his own interests.”

“That’s not trust.”

Pause.

“If you get too close to a red-tail scorpion what can you trust it to do?”

“Sting you, of course.”

“Exactly.”

* * * * *

Day 92

“Still sore?”

"A little," Obi-Wan said as he rotated and stretched his joints and limbs. It had been several days since his last "visit" and his body was enjoying the brief respite to heal itself, though without the Force the process was painful and slow going.

"I still have some salve left, but... maybe I could try to sneak some bacta..."

"No," Obi-Wan told the other boy flatly as he stopped his motions and looked directly into his pale eyes. "That's far too much of a risk. It would be noticed immediately if any went missing... besides, if I heal too fast that would get noticed too."

"I know," Adaen replied sullenly. "I just hate... this," he said waving his hands around to augment his statement and his displeasure. Obi-Wan just sighed, his shoulders slumping forward.

"I know, but you're the only thing making this bearable. I don't want to see anything happen to you," he finished. Adaen laughed ruefully.

"I was thinking the same thing about you," he said then both teens sat in companionable silence for several minutes before Adaen began to rise to his feet. "I should go," he said and then it seemed like all the air rushed out of the room. Both boys were stunned into silence as the outer door slid open and Xanatos stepped inside.

"Leaving so soon?" he said calmly. As if the sound of his master's voice snapped him out of his panicked stupor, Adaen walked out of the cell and knelt before Xanatos.

"My master, I was just checking on your prisoner to make sure that he was not overly damaged," he offered, his gaze settled squarely and submissively on the floor.

"No one asked you to do that, Ratare," Xanatos replied never taking his eyes off of Obi-Wan who was still seated in the cell though the shield was not yet reactivated.

"No, my master, but I was only looking after your interests... I hoped it would please you..." Adaen said contritely. Finally Xanatos deigned to look down upon his servant. He put a hooked finger under the boy's chin and gently tilted his head up so that they were looking each other in the eyes. Then Xanatos sighed.

"Oh, if only that were true, Ratare," he said not unkindly. There was a moment of stillness, of quiet, but even with the Force collar on Obi-Wan could feel the promise of danger inherent in that single moment. He jumped to his feet and tried to make a run for the door of the cell, but Xanatos was faster and suddenly the thin red skin of the ray shield was in place blocking Obi-Wan from both freedom or helping his friend who now was the subject of Xanatos's attention.

The dark haired ex-Jedi raised his hand curling his fingers in the air as if grasping something. Immediately, Adaen's hands went to his throat, his lungs tightening and seizing as they searched for air that did not come.

“Stop! No! Please! Don’t hurt him!” Obi-Wan yelled, as angry at his own powerlessness as he was at Xanatos’s cruelty.

“Sorry, little Jedi, but Ratare here has broken the rules and must be punished accordingly. Isn’t that right, Ratare?” he asked coldly as he released his Force grip on the boy’s throat. Adaen fell to the floor gasping for breath.

“Y-Yes... my... ma-master...” he rasped out weakly. With that Xanatos turned and walked out of the room, Adaen following meekly behind. Just before the door closed Adaen glanced over his shoulder. Obi-Wan’s and his eyes met for a moment then he turned away and was gone.

Chapter 15: Escapism

Day 94

The body could sustain an active state of anxiety only for a so long before rapidly depleting resources demanded an end to sweaty palms, roiling stomachs, tight chests, and an overabundance of adrenaline and neurotransmitters coursing unchecked through the blood stream. Eventually, the body calmed down, yielded, subject to the strictures of its own physicality, but the mind... the mind was not so easily brought to heel. It could wallow in its disquiet, conjure disconsolate images, and repeatedly review doleful scenarios. It could brood interminably drawing life from the vast well of the soul, consuming and destroying the whole one melancholic thought at a time.

Such was the pitiful state of one Obi-Wan Kenobi.

It had been two days since Xanatos discovered Adaen in his cell. He had heard nothing since then, not even some cruel, mocking taunt from Xanatos and it was the silence that terrified him all the more; leaving his grim imaginings free reign to visit all manner of horrors on his worried thoughts.

Obi-Wan wearily rubbed his eyes with the back of his scarred hands. He let out a long, drawn-out sigh that at any other time would have bordered on the melodramatic as he tried to relax his tired body and still his frantic mind. The door suddenly hissed open. The figure that darted inside immediately brought Obi-Wan to his feet and up to the cell door.

"Adaen!" he all but yelled. Obi-Wan took a moment to take in his friend. He looked worn down, exhausted, with dark circles around his eyes and a forlorn expression on his face, but he could see no cuts, no wounds, abrasions, or bruises, no visible signs of abuse. Obi-Wan decided to believe that it was a good thing, but the look in Adaen's eyes forced him to doubt that assumption.

"Adaen?"

"I don't have a lot of time," the other boy answered, his voice just above a whisper. "I just came to tell you that... whatever happens... it's not your fault okay?"

Obi-Wan frowned and stared at his friend.

"Adaen, what's going to happen? What is he going to do?" he asked, but the Rattataki shook his head warding off the desperate questions.

"Just promise me you won't blame yourself."

“Adaen, I,”

“Promise me!” he yelled. Obi-Wan bit his lip and held back the protestation on his tongue. Slowly he nodded his acquiescence.

“I-I promise,” he said. Adaen nodded with a small and rueful smile then he darted out the room; gone as suddenly as he had come. Obi-Wan hoped that the somber observation did not prove portentous of their relationship. He was more afraid now than ever of what Xanatos might be capable of. What he had done to Obi-Wan had been done out of some twisted sense of pleasure; a perverse attempt at artistry, but with Adaen... Xanatos would be furious and knowing what he had been willing to inflict in joy, Obi-Wan scarcely wanted to consider what the dark Jedi might impose in rage. And despite what he said, what promises he had made to his friend, Obi-Wan knew the truth.

Anything that happened to Adaen would be his fault.

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Day 95

He came for him early the next morning. Gyter did not wait for the possibility of compliance, opting instead to immediately assail the young boy with an electrostaff set on nearly the highest level. By the time he began dragging him down the halls, Obi-Wan was struggling to remain conscious and cognizant of his surroundings. He was pulled into a familiar large room, but this time he was placed in a simple wooden chair, his ankles, legs, waist, chest, wrists, and head placed roughly into leather restraints. Before him the pale figure of a nude Rattataki male hung from all too familiar durasteel chains in the center of the room. Hesitant blue-gray eyes rose to meet despondent white ones.

“Adaen.”

“Obi-Wan.”

“I’m so sorry,” Obi-Wan whispered, but the young man shook his head.

“No. Not your fault, remember?”

“On the contrary, I believe this is entirely the little Jedi’s fault,” Xanatos sneered, his slightly lilting cultured voice carrying effortlessly across the wide room. Still dressed in his customary black togs the ex-Jedi sauntered over to where his teenage slave lay suspended from the ceiling. He reached out and cupped the young man’s hairless chin in his hand.

"Indeed, I fear that were it not for the influence of you, my little Jedi, my poor, loyal Ratare would not be in such a dire predicament, hmm? But," Xanatos continued. "I don't suppose, in the end, it really matters. I will miss you though, my pet," he finished as he patted Adaen on the cheek. Obi-Wan felt his heart nearly seize at Xanatos's choice of words.

"What do you mean you will miss him? What are you planning to do?" he asked quietly. Xanatos gifted him with a slightly bemused expression.

"My servant has disobeyed me. He betrayed me. There can be only one response," he paused and then turned to look directly at Obi-Wan. "Death."

"No!" Obi-Wan yelled as he pulled futilely against his restraints. "Please!"

"Please what, little Jedi?" the dark Jedi inquired innocently. Obi-Wan took a deep breath. He was prepared to give him what he wanted. He would beg, plead, prostrate himself before his jailor if it meant sparing his friend's life.

"Please, do not kill him. I beg you," Obi-Wan stated humbly. Xanatos studied the boy silently for several seconds before answering.

"What are you willing to give me in return for his life?"

"What do you want of me?"

"First, you must admit your guilt in this," he replied coolly. Obi-Wan nodded. That was easily done as he knew he was in fact responsible for Adaen's predicament.

"Adaenkinith is your loyal servant. It is because of my influence, my selfish attempts to turn him to my side that he has acted against you, his lord and master."

"Obi-Wan, no!" Adaen yelled, but the other teen ignored him, his gaze locked onto Xanatos's cold blue eyes.

"His failure is my fault and I take full responsibility for my actions. I ask you, no I beg you, please spare him. Punish me instead. I am to blame. Exact your punishment on me."

"That was well said, little Jedi, well said indeed... and... I admit your words have swayed me," he paused, "to a point."

"What more must I do?" Obi-Wan asked soberly.

"Well, my little Jedi, while it is true that it was your influence that corrupted my servant, he still is far from blameless. Some degree of punishment is warranted and must be meted out, but I have decided that he need not die provided you are willing to take responsibility with more than just pretty words," he responded. Now it was Obi-Wan's turn to wear a mildly bewildered frown. Xanatos flicked his wrist in Obi-Wan's direction and,

with a touch of the Force, instantly all of the chair's leather restraints flew open. The boy leaned forward tentatively instinctively flexing and rotating his newly freed wrists and ankles. Xanatos reached under his ebon cloak and brought forth a small cylindrical object which he held out to the confused teen. Obi-Wan reached out and took his lightsaber from the man, eyes wide in question. Xanatos stepped back, one hand resting casually on his hip over his own saber in clear warning.

"You want to spare his life?" Xanatos asked.

"Yes," Obi-Wan answered.

"Then you will punish him," Xanatos intoned. "Burn him as I burned you. It will be a reminder as to whom he belongs."

Obi-Wan's eyes grew wide in panic and disbelief. His left hand floated up to his chest, his fingertips ghosting across the rough scar tissue of his broken circle burn. He shuddered involuntarily at the light contact.

"No," he barely more than muttered, "I can't."

Xanatos sighed heavily.

"I thought you wanted him to live. I thought you were truly willing to face your responsibility in this," he said. "Perhaps I was wrong."

"Please," Obi-Wan whimpered softly. "There must be another way."

"No, little Jedi. This is your choice, burn him or bury him."

Obi-Wan's stomach was instantly filled with lead, his chest felt locked in a vice, his thoughts caught in a maelstrom of aching emotion. How could he do this? How could he not? He looked down at the saber hilt in his hand. After several moments he slowly raised his eyes to meet the steady gaze of his friend. Obi-Wan swallowed thickly.

"Adaen... forgive me," he murmured. Adaen in turn nodded his acceptance, his eyes showing only solemn understanding of his friend's impossible decision and somber resignation to his fate. Obi-Wan ignited his saber, the familiar blue collimated energy sparking to life in his tremulous grasp. He took several deep breaths to steady himself knowing that shaky hands would only make matters worse for his friend. Xanatos regarded him coolly.

"You must draw your blade slowly or else you will have to retrace the line over again," he offered his voice so casual and calm it seemed all the more cruel. With grim determination Obi-Wan lifted his saber. Adaen closed his eyes.

Then the screaming began.

* * * * *

Day 96

Obi-Wan Kenobi was soul sick. That was the only word for it. His hand, his saber, his fault... Adaen's screams. That was the sum and total of Obi-Wan's world; his guilt and Adaen's cries of torment. He was more than simply guilty though. He was complicit in Xanatos's acts of cruelty. Not quite a servant of darkness, perhaps, but far, far the child of light he once was. The taint of it all sickened him and he knew there was nothing he could ever do to excoriate the soul deep stain of his actions.

He had intentionally inflicted pain on another living being, with his hands, with his saber...

* * * * *

Day 99

Obi-Wan stood once again before Xanatos. Well, perhaps stood wasn't quite the right word. Cowered before him would have been more accurate. Knelt. Crawled on hands and knees. Panting. Humiliated.

Xanatos had come to his cell in what he figured was the middle of the night rudely awakening the teen with a jolt of pain from the electropulsar built into his Force collar. Obi-Wan was immediately pulled out of slumber by the sensation of being on fire, his every nerve lit up like a star gone supernova under his skin charring his very bones and boiling his internal organs in their own fluids. All the while the man asked him questions, yelled at him demanding responses that Obi-Wan was barely coherent enough to give.

"You still haven't learned have you, my little Jedi? What's today's lesson, hmm?" he barked as he pressed the button on his remote again sending Obi-Wan's body into painful convulsions. Finally he let go and the boy struggled to catch his breath and clear his head. He lay on the floor unable to move. Even his thoughts seemed to ache under the constant strain of his torture.

"What is today's lesson, little Jedi?"

"I-I... I don't... know..." the boy gasped. He shrieked as another wave of agony tore through his limbs causing him to writhe aimlessly on the cold cell floor. Xanatos released the button.

"The lesson?"

"Please..." Obi-Wan sobbed, "I don't know... I don't know what you want..."

"I want the truth, padawan. The real truth."

"The... truth? About what?"

"Your real truth. The fact that you still believe someone will rescue you, that you still believe you won't stay here with me forever."

"I don't..."

"You're lying, little Jedi," he said as he pressed the button again and again white hot agony raced through Obi-Wan's veins. He held it down for much longer this time. When he finally released the button, Obi-Wan's body revolted; his stomach wrenching and spasming, vomiting up what precious little food and water he had been given earlier.

"You still carry hope in your heart, little Jedi..."

"...No..." he whispered. Again and again the button was depressed, held for longer and longer increments with each denial. Each jagged burst of pain tore a scream from his rapidly rawing and abused throat. Finally the torment proved too much and Obi-Wan felt himself slipping towards the welcomed arms of oblivion.

"Oh no you don't," he heard a voice say from somewhere in the distance. Then he felt something cold pressed against his thigh followed by a sharp poke. For a moment he thought the assault was over and he waited patiently, longingly to enter that numbing blackness, but instead he found his heart was racing, his limbs itching and twitching, his mind forced back to pain ridden consciousness.

"No!" he yelled as even this small escape was denied him.

"You think there is still hope for you!"

"I-I..." he stuttered only to descend once again into incoherent shrieks of suffering.

"What do you believe, little Jedi? Tell me!" Xanatos demanded as he pressed the button once more. Another scream ripped from the boy's wretched form.

"...no... hope..."

“What did you say?”

“...no hope... nothing left... nothing...” Obi-Wan whispered more to himself than to Xanatos. The ex-Jedi smiled.

“I almost believe you,” he said pressing the electropulsar into action again, but also pressing a different button on the remote.

/Padawan!/ His master called out to him over the now open bond, but Obi-Wan did not hear him, could not hear him for the blinding torment of the device.

/Padawan!/

Obi-Wan couldn't even scream, his body too wrecked to give further voice to his agony. Only his mind continued to protest, his face frozen in a silent mask of anguish.

/P-Please! Please... make it stop... Anything... do anything... to stop... P-Please.../

/Padawan! Hang on, please! I'm here! I am with you! You are not alone! Do you hear me? Obi-Wan, you are not alone!/ His master begged to be heard, but nothing could get through to the boy now. All he was was now centered on one desperate plea.

/M-Make it... s-stop... P-Please... just let me die... I-I can't... anymore... J-Just let me die... P-Please.../

/Obi-Wan! No!/

/...let me die... Force... let me die.../

* * * * *

Day 102

He knew it when he saw the boy that morning lying quiet and still in the middle of the cell. He knew he didn't need to call for his guards. He didn't even need his handy remote. Looking at boy in the cell he knew that today was the day. The boy was ready. Today his real plans could begin.

“Wake up, little Jedi. We have so much to do,” he said casually. Obi-Wan sat up from his position on the floor, silently regarding his captor. Xanatos deactivated the ray shield and gestured for the boy to come forward. He rose to his feet slowly, his body stiff from being in the same position for so long. Without a word or sound he approached the ex-Jedi,

his gaze set on some distant point reaching off into nowhere. With no prompting or painful enticements, Obi-Wan allowed himself to be led down the hallway moving, for once, by his own power and on his own volition. In silence the pair entered the large oval dueling room they had used twice before. Once again Xanatos placed a collar around his own neck and handed the boy his lightsaber. Obi-Wan took the offering, holding it limply in one hand his brow furrowed as he gazed upon it as if he didn't know what exactly it was he was holding. Perhaps he didn't.

It didn't matter really.

Nothing did. Not anymore.

Xanatos ignited his blade and raised it in salute, but Obi-Wan made no move to either ignite his saber or return the ritual sparing salutation. He simply stood there, staring at nothing.

"Prepare yourself, little Jedi," Xanatos sneered. Obi-Wan blinked. Xanatos stepped closer to him, his blade still lit. "I said prepare yourself!" he yelled as he viciously backhanded the youth. The strike caused the boy to stagger backwards several steps, his cheek a red flame of pain, but he kept his feet and his silence.

"Too pathetic to even fight back?" Xanatos smirked as he grabbed the boy's saber arm by the wrist. "You are a perpetual disappointment," he crooned oily in Obi-Wan's ear, then he gave the captured arm a sharp, hard angled twist ripping the teen's shoulder deliberately from its socket eliciting a gasp from the child, but nothing more. Unsatisfied Xanatos turned the arm again, this time at the wrist. He rotated it further and further until he heard the satisfying snap of bone under his vice-like grip. Again, the boy gritted his teeth, a hard grimace on his face, but no sound escaped. Xanatos released the boy's arm suddenly causing him to lose his balance and fall gracelessly to the floor. The ex-Jedi stared down at the teen and for several moments neither moved nor spoke until finally Xanatos placed his saber back on his hip and picked up Obi-Wan's from where it tumbled from his grasp. He placed it on his hip as well then crossed his arms across his chest. He casually reached into a pouch on his belt and removed a small silver syringe.

"I don't think I like this silent padawan. Let's see if I can help you find your voice again..."

* * * * *

"Stars above! Obi-Wan! Obi-Wan, say something!"

Obi-Wan didn't say anything. He didn't do anything. He simply lay there on his cell floor feeling and yet somehow not feeling the numerous abuses Xanatos had once again inflicted on his weary body. When he heard the familiar voice asking him to speak he

simply ignored it. Even when Adaen's slightly blurry face filled his vision, Obi-Wan simply couldn't muster something within himself to respond. He learned that he preferred the silence he held both from within and without.

Adaen continued to mutter curses under his breath as he appraised the body before him. He looked down on Obi-Wan's face and saw the blank, defeated expression in those blue-gray eyes and made a decision. He rose from the cell and disappeared out the door for several minutes before returning with a clean tunic, leggings, and an old cloak. As quickly and as carefully as he could he dressed the young Jedi in the borrowed clothes; the only acknowledgement given a hiss or two of pain from the physical manipulation.

"Come on, Obi. You have to help me. I can't carry you out," Adaen pleaded as he tried to pull his friend's dead weight to his feet. Thankfully at least this request was answered, not verbally, but with Obi-Wan's assistance in standing and awkwardly moving on his own.

"I'm getting you out of here... I'm just sorry that I waited so long..." Adaen whispered as he looked into the eyes of his friend. The despondency he saw in those crystalline orbs frightened him, but also served to strengthen his resolve. Carefully, the Rattataki led them out of the building, pausing at times to avoid a guard or security measure. They finally exited on the roof of what appeared to be a small building within Coruscant's industrial complex on the middle levels. There was a non-descript air taxi waiting. Adaen pushed Obi-Wan into the front passenger seat before climbing into the pilot's seat and taking off from the rooftop platform at breakneck speed.

In the far-off distance ahead of them, one could just make out the spires of the Jedi Temple.

Chapter 16: Once Spoken

Day 114

As a Jedi, a negotiator, a mediator, and a diplomat, Qui-Gon Jinn understood the power of words. He understood their ability to stir the imagination, awaken the heart, and engage the mind. Still the master was quite unprepared for the molten fury, the indelible rage the boy's narration incited within him.

Starved. Habitually abused. Sadistically disfigured. Tortured.

Manipulated.

The boy had been manipulated quite masterfully by his abductor. No... not just his abductor. As much as Qui-Gon sought to distance himself from that fact, that... pain, he could not, he would not let himself forget... This was done by Xanatos. This was done by his former apprentice. This was done by a boy, now a man, he had once loved, still loved, still mourned somewhere deep in the recesses of his battered heart. And it was because of this withered and diseased love he once had for that boy, now a cancerous rot that festered inside him, that his former apprentice sought to destroy his present one.

His present apprentice. His padawan. His Obi-Wan.

From the very beginning, Qui-Gon Jinn knew that Obi-Wan was everything, everything that Xanatos was not. He had known it, but chose to deny it out of fear. His fear had created a deep wound in his charge, a wide crack at the very bedrock of the boy's self-worth and it was that wound, that crack that Xanatos had exploited with stunning alacrity.

The master had remained quiet during Obi-Wan's recitation of his first few weeks of captivity; the food, the talks, the oh-so-subtle yet oh-so-devastating insinuations. He had struggled against the vicious bile that rose in his throat as Obi-Wan described how Xanatos had scarred him with the whip and with the blade, but the master had ultimately maintained his unreadable expression and composure. However, the old master was forced to his feet when his padawan detailed the conclusion of their first duel. Qui-Gon had masked the sudden movement with the act of getting them both more tea, but it wasn't a need for refills that had compelled his hasty motion. What had forced him from his seat was the unmistakable knowledge that if he didn't move right that second he would not have been able to conceal from his padawan the rage bubbling up in his chest threatening to overwhelm all his years of training and discipline. So, the master had retreated into the small kitchenette to set about the lesser task of pouring tea and the much greater task of regaining his center and releasing his anger into the Force. At best he was only partially successful, but he was at least able to calm himself enough to return to the common room. He handed the fresh mug to his apprentice who took it dutifully, but held it absently in his hands. It was only then that Qui-Gon noted his padawan's trance like state; glazed blue-

gray eyes gazing far off into nowhere, features slack and empty. The master realized, with a shudder, that the stare was eerily similar to the boy's earlier catatonia in the medical ward. As Qui-Gon regarded him further he also noted that none of Obi-Wan's previous narration had included any reference to his own emotions or feelings at the time. The recitation was flat, intonated, clinical. The old master had taken his seat quietly wondering if, perhaps, for the first recounting, such emotional disassociation was useful maybe even necessary. He decided to let the boy continue his tale in this manner, but even the delicately woven fabric of that forced emotional distance began to fray as Obi-Wan spoke of his second duel with Xanatos.

"Four weeks," Obi-Wan said as he put down his now cold mug of tea. Qui-Gon's already sat on the low table having been emptied of its contents long ago. At first the master waited patiently for his apprentice to elaborate, but when it became clear that nothing more was forthcoming, Qui-Gon decided a gentle prompt was needed.

"Four weeks for what, Padawan?" he asked. For a moment he saw some unknown emotion flash across the teen's face, but it was gone before he could quite place it.

"Four weeks to prepare myself, to get my strength back," he yelled suddenly as he slammed down his fists in frustration on either side of his thighs. Obi-Wan jumped to his feet and quickly began pacing around the room creating a tight circuit around the couch, arm chair, and low table.

"He gave me four weeks, Master. Four weeks of food, water, exercise, and no torture! Four weeks!" he screamed, his arms waving in the air as much in exasperation as in emphasis. "And still I... I..."

"You what, Padawan?" the master asked mildly. For the briefest of moments the boy raised his eyes to meet those of his master's before swiftly darting back to the floor. He clasped his fists tightly to his sides and fell back into his seat on the far end of the couch. He sat stiffly now, his head bowed tightly to his chest, his shoulders slumped heavily inward as if he were physically bearing the burden he carried in his heart and mind.

"Four weeks and I still failed," he finished softly.

"Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon began, but the apprentice wouldn't have it.

"I did everything I could, everything I knew how to do, but in the end... He toyed with me," he spoke bitterly. "He knew I wasn't a threat to him even with a lightsaber in my hand... I wasn't enough... and he knew it..." Obi-Wan finished, his voice trailing away as anger gave way to self-deprecation and despair. Qui-Gon got to his feet, crossed the short space to where his apprentice sat forlornly and knelt in front of the boy.

"Obi-Wan," he spoke gently. "Obi-Wan, look at me."

Slowly, the teen raised his eyes to meet his master's. What Qui-Gon saw in those blue-gray orbs nearly broke his heart. Instantly, the old Jedi found himself forcibly tamping down a resurgence of the rage he felt earlier. Anger would not serve him here. His apprentice needed his compassion, his strength, his serenity, his reassurances, his unquestioning belief in the brilliant child of light that was his padawan.

He took Obi-Wan's small hands inside his larger, calloused ones.

"Obi-Wan, I need you to listen to me. You did nothing wrong in any of this. You did not fail. You did not fall short. You did not disappoint me, indeed, I have found your strength and courage amazing. You are an excellent student, obedient, attentive, and a quick study, but you have only been an apprentice for a few short months. Xanatos was nearly a knight when he..." here the master paused astounded that, even now, so many years later the word 'betrayed' still caught in his throat. "When he turned," he finished. "It was not possible for you to have defeated him in combat. It is no failing on your part only a difference of age and experience. I want you to know how very proud I am of you, Padawan."

There. He'd said it. Now he only hoped that the boy would believe it. Perhaps today would be the day; the day they would both look back on and see when the belief in his place as a Jedi took seed even if it were yet another season before it would bloom into true self-confidence.

Perhaps this would be that moment.

"Please... don't..."

Perhaps not.

"Don't what, Padawan?"

"Don't call me that," Obi-Wan whispered, his eyes falling to the floor. For a moment the master was taken aback. He quickly reviewed his words looking for what the boy had objected to only to reach one inevitable and heart wrenching conclusion.

"Don't call you what?" the master asked already knowing the answer. Still, it tore at something inside him to hear the boy say it aloud.

"Padawan," he barely more than mouthed. Qui-Gon released the boy's hands and grabbed his shoulders. He felt a desperate need to try to shake sense into the child, but instead he settled for using his most masterly voice.

"Obi-Wan."

Reluctantly, the teen responded to the unvoiced command to look up. Qui-Gon held both the boy's gaze and his shoulders steady, but tenderly.

"Obi-Wan Kenobi, you are my padawan and you will be my padawan until your knighting. Do you understand?" he asked as he searched the teen's face for understanding. Suddenly, those limpid blue-gray orbs began to shine with unshed tears.

"What is it?"

"If... if you knew what I did... you wouldn't say that," the teen answered and with his response whatever little control he had been exerting to keep the tears at bay evaporated. The boy wept freely yet in-between great gasping sobs he tried to give the reasons why his master should shun him.

"I-I burned him! I burned Adaen! H-He was nice to me... he was my f-friend and I hurt him! I burned him with my saber just like Xanatos burned me!"

Qui-Gon let the boy cry and yell. He allowed him to thrash and twist wildly in half-hearted attempts to flee, but the master never once let him go from his gaze or his grip. The master simply waited out the turbulent storm of emotions and when the force of the boy's grief and shame were spent and his desperate cries are reduced to shuddering sobs, the master finally spoke.

"Did you enjoy it?"

"Wh-what?" the boy stammered. Qui-Gon kept his face and voice neutral as he stared at his apprentice.

"Did you enjoy it? Did you enjoy burning your friend?"

"No! Of course not!"

"Then why did you do it?"

"I-I..."

"If you didn't enjoy it you must've had a reason to do it. What was your reason, Obi-Wan?"

"Xanatos would have killed him if I didn't."

"I see. So you did it to save his life then?"

"Yes, but..." Obi-Wan tried to counter, but his master continued on pointedly ignoring the budding disapprobation of his charge.

"Then it sounds to me that you were forced into a hard decision and you chose the path that was best for another despite the cost to yourself. That is the decision of a Jedi and precisely what I would expect from my padawan."

"I... I..." the boy tried to speak, but words eluded him as he attempted to digest what had been said. Qui-Gon finally released his shoulders. He patted the boy's knee as he rose to his feet.

"That's enough for now I think," he said as he glanced at the wall chrono. "It's early yet. You should try to get some sleep."

"I'm not sleepy," the younger Jedi countered. Qui-Gon allowed a single skeptical eyebrow to raise at the boy's statement. Through the bond he could feel the waves of fatigue radiating off the teen's mind. He was about to force the issue when he caught Obi-Wan's furtive glance at to his room and the spike of apprehension that accompanied it.

"Very well," the master said. "Why don't you just rest here a moment."

Obi-Wan appeared as if he were about to protest, but then his master pushed a subtle Force suggestion through the bond and, instantly, the boy's eyelids began to droop heavily.

"Not... fair..." he managed around a large yawn. The master smiled as he lifted his padawan's legs on to the couch and arranged the boy into a more comfortable sleep position before covering him with a light blanket.

"Master's prerogative," he retorted allowing his affection and amusement to permeate the bond. Qui-Gon felt a surge of affection rush back at him even as he heard the last grumbles of his apprentice before sleep finally claimed him. He spared a moment to watch his apprentice in slumber. Vresh was right. They did look younger when they slept; younger and far more vulnerable.

Qui-Gon sighed. There would be a time when he would have to release his guilt to the Force, but not now. Right now he had earned that guilt and whatever pain it caused him to hold onto it is his to bear—alone and in private. For now there were things to do and duties to attend. He headed to the fresher and, after a somewhat immoderately long shower, donned a fresh set of robes. He returned to the common room to find his padawan still sleeping peacefully on the couch. Satisfied, Qui-Gon settled down on his meditation cushion and allowed himself to fall lightly into the Force. This morning he would not enter a deep trance like his usual morning meditations. He instead kept part of his awareness on their bond, monitoring the dreams of his apprentice. The last thing the boy needed right now was another nightmare.

Qui-Gon took a deep breath and as he exhaled he allowed some of the anxiety and tension he had been carrying since he first rushed from his bedroom to be released into the Force.

By the time the master emerged from his meditation several hours had passed and it was nearly time for firstmeal. Qui-Gon was just rising from his mat when he felt a presence approaching. He quickly crossed to the outer door, palming it open before the would be visitor could sound the chime and rouse his sleeping apprentice.

The door slid open revealing the short, compact frame of a young Mon Calamari female. Her large, bulbous eyes stared up at him in surprise for a moment before she remembered herself and schooled her expression into a mask of neutrality.

"Master Jinn?"

"Yes, Initiate Eerin?"

"I was hoping... That is... I heard that Obi was released from the Healer's Ward. I was hoping that maybe..."

"I'm sorry," the master replied hoping his soft tone would lessen the harshness of his words. "Obi-Wan is not ready for visitors just yet."

"Oh," she responded clearly disappointed. "Do you think," she began, but the older Jedi was forced to turn away from her when he heard a soft whimper from behind him.

"Excuse me," he said as he moved to his padawan's side. Beneath the blanket, the boy made several sudden jerky movements, his expression was tightly wound in a grimace of pain. Qui-Gon gently placed two fingers on the child's forehead and used their bond to dissipate the nightmare and return the boy to peaceful slumber. In just a few seconds, Obi-Wan's entire body relaxed and his expression was once again framed in calm serenity. The master lingered a moment more before returning to the young initiate still standing just outside the door. Her dark eyes were still fixed on her friend's supine form when the master returned to the threshold.

"He's not okay, is he?" she asked softly. Despite his years of training, the elder Jedi was unable to keep a deep sigh from escaping his lips.

"No," he replied breathily, "but he will be."

The young Mon Cal nodded.

"Will you tell him that his friends are here for him whenever he is ready and... will you tell him that... we miss him?" she finished quietly. The master rested a heavy hand on her slender shoulder.

"I will tell him. He will need you when he is ready," he said in his deep reassuring and rumbling baritone. The girl gave him a rueful smile.

"He has us. Thank you, Master Jinn," she answered with a polite bow then she disappeared down the hallway. Qui-Gon closed the door and turned back inside to find his apprentice looking at him, his eyes still heavy with slumber.

"Thank you, Master," he said before closing his eyes again and drifting back to his dreamless rest.

* * * * *

Qui-Gon let his apprentice sleep a while longer before he was forced to rouse the boy for his appointment with the healers. For the next few tens the apprentice would be required to attend various assessments and rehabilitation appointments none of which made for a happy padawan, a fact that was all too clear to the master by the boy's body language. Still, the master had expected a much more vocal protest from the teen, but instead Obi-Wan was sullen and silent as they drew near the dreaded ward. Healer Songe met the master/apprentice pair at the main doors and ushered them both inside. Qui-Gon noted that his apprentice was a bit winded from the short walk. The Master Healer had noticed it too, but both senior Jedi chose to let the observation pass unvoiced as it was equally obvious that the boy was determinately trying to hide that fact.

After Songe completed Obi-Wan's check-up, he was turned over to the care of the padawan healers for his rehab for his shoulder, wrist, and muscles tremors. It wasn't until after a bit of verbal sparring and a very "masterly" glare from Ar Songe to both Jedi that Qui-Gon was shooed away with instructions to return in three hours.

With a bit of time to himself and no pressing need to worry about his padawan's health and safety, Qui-Gon began to feel the remnants of his earlier anger start to rise again in chest. Before he realized it, his jaw was tight with tension and his hands were reflexively and repeatedly curling into fists though this was hidden in the voluminous sleeves of his robes. Soon his every muscle twitched and ached with restlessness.

Without further conscious thought, Qui-Gon headed to the training salles. He entered the room and immediately shed his cloak, robes, and outer tunic. He quickly moved through the necessary stretches and, once completed, sent a challenging glance to a nearby knight who accepted.

The bout was over quickly. Too quickly for Qui-Gon's tastes, for his body and mind still thrummed with barely suppressed indignant rage. He challenged another. And another. A knight. A senior padawan. A master. All too swiftly each Jedi fell beneath the frenetic onslaught of the tall master's green blade. It was after the fifth bout that Qui-Gon realized no one in the salle would meet his gaze for fear of being pulled into a duel with an obviously furious master swordsman. The tall Jedi nearly groaned in frustration, then a voice called out from behind him.

"Well someone woke up on the wrong side of the Bantha this morning or do you just enjoy picking on knights and senior padawans?"

"Are you here to talk or spar?" Qui-Gon growled roughly. Vresh was far from intimidated and raised only a single cultured eyebrow at the question, a smirk flitting across his thin lips.

"We can spar first," he responded his unspoken condition plainly heard. Qui-Gon nodded and fell into a ready stance. Both lightsabers ignited and they began.

* * * * *

The small office was painted with the warm yet soft colors of an Alderaanian sunrise. The seating, an armchair and a large, long couch, was sumptuous without appearing garish in contrast to the room's rather ascetic remaining decor. Bright and exotic plant life filled the small corners and alcoves of the room bringing with it a lush and sweet tang that hung lightly in the air deeply cradled in the Living Force. The lights in the space were soft and inviting, bordering on intimate, dimmer than most places elsewhere in the Temple save for the private mediation cells or suites. All in all, the room was perfectly designed to put its guests at ease.

It was not working today, however.

Not on one Obi-Wan Kenobi.

Master Soul Healer Cesca Ja'Prinn observed his new patient quietly; a remarkable accomplishment to most non-Force users as the healer had no eyes with which to observe. As a Miraluka, Master Ja'Prinn was born without eyes, though his biology still retained vestigial sockets where humanoid eyeballs would normally have rested. This "lack" of normal vision among the Miraluka was easily offset, however, by their unparalleled Force vision. So it was through the Force that Ja'Prinn examined the young Jedi before him.

"Have a seat, Padawan," Ja'Prinn requested kindly, his voice soft and smooth like water gliding over polished stone, its tone naturally soothing without trying.

"Yes, Master," Obi-Wan answered politely as he took a seat on the edge of the large couch. Ja'Prinn could see the apprehension radiating off the boy, but there was also something else, a tendril of the Force worriedly extending outward, searching...

"Are you expecting someone?" the healer asked mildly.

"I... I was wondering if my master would be joining us."

"Ah. No, Master Jinn will not be sitting in with us today. I've asked him to give us this time alone."

A brilliant flare of deep purple fear sparked into the Force around the adolescent's frame.

"Why?" the boy asked clearly suspicious.

"Why what?" the healer replied innocently.

"Why do you want us to be alone?"

"Are you afraid to be alone with me?"

"You're a Jedi. I should have no reason to fear you."

"So you are afraid."

"I didn't say that."

"No, you said you shouldn't have a reason to be afraid, which implies that you, in fact, are."

A burst of magenta erupted like a solar flare as the boy's vexation grew.

"I... You're twisting my words."

"Is that what you think my purpose is?"

"No."

"What do you think is my purpose then?"

"You don't know?"

"I'm asking what you think."

The tendril of magenta was now full-blown crimson as the boy nearly barked his response.

"I think you're here to get in my head, make me say things I don't want to, talk about things I'd rather forget, try to tell me that everything's okay when it's not, and you need me to trust you before you can do it!"

"And do you trust me?"

"No."

Ja'Prinn smiled warmly and got up from behind his desk. He walked slowly to the armchair near the couch and took a seat.

"Good. That was honesty and honesty is a good place to begin," the healer said kindly. With an internal sigh of relief he watched as the dark crimson swirled about the boy began to morph and melt into watery orange in nervous tension. "Let's see... it's almost midday,

perhaps I could order something from the refectory and you could eat before we begin. If I know anything about padawans is that you're nearly always hungry. Are you hungry, Padawan?"

* * * * *

The two masters had been battling for over an hour and both were showing signs of fatigue, but neither were showing any signs of yielding. Finally, Vresh overextended himself in his lunge stumbling helplessly into Qui-Gon's space only to be rewarded with a vicious back fist that sent him sprawling to the floor, a trickle of blood appearing at the corner of his mouth as the dark-haired master placed the tip of his saber at his friend's neck.

"Feel better?" Vresh said as he wiped at his mouth casually. Qui-Gon gave him a wry grin and disengaged his lightsaber. He held out a hand to help his friend up. Vresh took it and the two masters headed to the side benches where Vresh threw the other master a towel before they both took their seats.

"Now, you want to tell me what's going on?"

"Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon started his voice and expression devoid of emotion. "We started talking about... about what happened to him... what Xanatos did to him."

Vresh paused to look at his friend. He remembered the fierceness, the absolute rage that gripped the man when he first entered into the duel with him.

"That bad?"

"Worse. What Xanatos did to his body pales in comparison to what he has done to the his mind," Qui-Gon paused as he looked at his hands with a detached air. "V, if I see him, I think I might..."

"When we find him, I will be there to do it so you don't have to, my friend," Vresh answered for him as he put a reassuring hand on the master's shoulder. Qui-Gon finally looked at his friend and gave him a weak, but genuine smile. Then suddenly, Vresh watched as the smile morphed swiftly into a frown as Qui-Gon's eyes stared off into the distance, but he could tell that the master's focus was inward not outward.

"What is it?"

"Something's wrong," Qui-Gon replied immediately on his feet. "Something's wrong with Obi-Wan."

Chapter 17: In Nightmare's Wake

Day 115

Not again.

Those were the only two words present in the mind of the thirteen year old apprentice currently tearing down the usually sedate halls of the Jedi Temple. He would not endure that again. He could not endure that again, so Obi-Wan ran. He ran from the Healer's Ward. He ran to nothing, only from something and since he hastened to nowhere he didn't know when to stop. So he didn't. He just ran; consumed by the absolute desire to escape what deep down even he knew was patently inescapable.

His chest hurt. His muscles ached and throbbed and screamed in protest. He could barely breathe, but he must not stop running. Soon the choice was taken away from him. Massive tremors seized Obi-Wan's legs stopping him in mid-stride sending him tumbling towards the cold floor in a graceless, sprawling mass, but the hard impact of the ground never came. It took the teen a moment to realize that he had been caught by a Force cushion. As he was gently lowered to the floor, Obi-Wan grabbed painfully at his spasming legs, but still managed to cast his gaze about to find the person who intercepted his near fall. Finally, his eyes lighted upon the gimlet orbs of the Grand Master of the Jedi Order.

Obi-Wan could not decide if he wanted most to beg the master for help or run away in fear, but his mental argument was rendered moot by the violent shaking still holding him hostage on the floor. His mind felt as seized as his legs and Obi-Wan finally gave up on trying to think. He gave up on trying to escape. He just gave up and gave himself over to the inevitability of his recapture. Even as the slow resignation took hold of him he could feel that he was, in fact, caught as strong arms and large hands gathered him up and held him tightly. Obi-Wan wanted to scream and fight and struggle and run, but he did none of those things. He couldn't, so instead he closed his eyes tight, shielded heavily, and buried himself deep down inside his own mind to distance himself from the pain in his legs and the pain he knew was still to come. Yet from behind those closed eyes his mind sent out a small and desperate plea into the Force.

/Master.../

* * * * *

Blind panic. That was what the master felt through the bond with his padawan as he raced down the halls away from the training salles. Qui-Gon wasn't sure exactly where he was rushing to, only to whom. Focusing on Obi-Wan's Force signature, the master was led unerringly to his padawan's location. Even as the master rounded another corner and bounded up the stairs, taking several at a time under his long strides, Vresh was right on

his heels. The tall white-haired master had said nothing since leaving the practice rooms content to offer whatever aid he could when the time came. He knew there was no need for words, only his continued presence by the other master's side.

Qui-Gon turned another corner. He recognized that he was nearing the grand halls that lead to many of the Temple's famous gardens. Suddenly, his gaze narrowed and he saw him. Obi-Wan was curled into a tight ball on the floor at the feet of Master Yoda, but the tiny master said nothing, did nothing, only stood slightly near the boy. Qui-Gon flashed the smaller Jedi a quick glare indicating his disapproval at his inaction before he reached his padawan's side. He pulled Obi-Wan to him, encasing the boy in his arms and cradling his twitching frame to his chest. The boy's eyes were squeezed tightly shut in both pain and panic and then the master heard it... almost a whisper in his mind.

/Master.../

/Padawan! It's alright. I'm here. You're alright./

In his arms, Qui-Gon could see his padawan relax slightly and in his mind he could feel a mild edging off of his overwhelming panic, but some degree of fear still gripped the child. The dark haired master glanced over to the ancient Jedi before him.

"What happened here? Why didn't you help him?" the younger master snapped, the anger in his tone treading dangerously close to outright disrespect. The elder Jedi made no response to the breach, only to the questions asked.

"What has upset him so, I know not. Help him I did. No more from me would he have accepted. Help only from his master will he trust," Yoda answered, his ears lowering minutely, his voice tinged with sadness. Immediately, Qui-Gon regreted his earlier tone with the revered master.

"Forgive me, Master. I should know better than to doubt you," Qui-Gon replied, his voice deeply calm and respectful. Yoda rested both his clawed hands atop his gimer stick with a heavy sigh.

"Yes, but doubts you both have about yourselves, about each other, grave doubts," the ancient master intoned, but he was interrupted by the hurried approach of a tall, slim Miraluka male in blue healer's robes and a red and gold eye curtain.

"Master Ja'Prinn, lost someone have you?"

"Yes, Master Yoda," Ja'Prinn answered with small tilt of his head. He clasped his hands in front of him as he directed his attention to the master and padawan facing away from him still on the floor.

"Master Jinn, is," he began, but Qui-Gon's deep baritone cut him off.

"I leave him in your care and then I find him like this. What happened?" he barked, a thrill of danger rolling in the undercurrents of his tone despite his best efforts to contrary. The Miralukan stepped forward to circle around Qui-Gon and address the master directly in blatant disregard of the flickers of orange, crimson, and purple swirls dancing around the pair. Instead, it was Vresh's barring arm that successfully cautions him to remain where he was.

"We were in the middle of a session. Everything was proceeding as would be expected then he suddenly fled the room."

"He would not have fled unless you gave him good cause," Qui-Gon growled not looking back at the healer standing behind him, instead keeping his eyes on his apprentice. Under the master's one-handed massages, the boy's leg tremors began to die down, but Obi-Wan's mind was still unsettled and his presence was still deeply focused inward. His master doubted the child was even aware of the scene that had formed around him. With his other hand, the master rubbed soothing circles on the teen's back even as he heard the two Jedi master's standing behind him shift slightly.

"We talked, that is all. We had not even begun to explore any aspect of his captivity, only his expectations for our sessions. I suggested that he order something for midday meal before we continued and,"

"You ordered food? For him or both of you?"

"For him. I didn't want his hunger to distract from,"

"Karking stoopa! Fierfek! Schutta! Wermo!" Qui-Gon grumbled in a hurried tumble of expletives as he stood, his padawan still cradled in his arms.

"What is it, Qui?" Vresh asked mildly, breaking his previous silence, but still loosely holding Ja'Prinn in place. Even from his position behind Qui-Gon, Vresh could see the sharp drop of the master's shoulders and he knew that the tilt of his head meant he had yet to take his eyes off the still shaking youth.

"Xanatos would give him food on the condition he would talk to him, answer his questions. It was another way he tortured and manipulated him," Qui-Gon answered gruffly. Vresh grimaced, but said nothing. He could only imagine what the boy would have felt to have a scene from his ordeal recreated not with his captor, but with a Jedi—a healer at that. Vresh was no empath or soul healer, but he did understand trust and the white-haired master knew that this misstep will prove costly in that regard.

Master Ja'Prinn stiffened slightly at the new information.

"I was unaware of that. If I had known I would have, of course, proceeded differently," the healer intoned, his chin jutted out in indignation. At this, Qui-Gon spun around, the fire in his eyes denoting his barely contained rage.

"If I had been allowed to come to the session this would not have happened!" he snapped. Ja'Prinn took a step forward unwilling to be intimidated by the sparks of black and crimson nearly engulfing the dark-haired master. Vresh grabbed him by the shoulder, but the healer violently shrugged him off.

"Given the nature of the trauma, proper protocol dictated,"

"I don't give a damn about what proper protocol dictates. My only concern is the well-being of my padawan, something I will no longer leave to the decisions of others."

The shoulders of both masters squared, their jaws set tight in preparation for a battle of wills, but before the tension in the Force could reach a breaking point the thunderous clack of a gimer stick striking the cold, marble flooring pulled all three masters' attention to the tiny hitherto ignored Jedi at their side.

"Argue on this, you will not. What is best for the padawan only will we do," the old master stated plainly, his tone clearly brooking no discussion. "Trusts only his master the boy does, so to his master's care we shall leave him," Yoda said. When Ja'Prinn opened his mouth to object, the grand master raised a single ear as he turned a stern gaze in the healer's direction. Though the Miralukan could not see the ancient master's expression, the near lightening crackle in the master's Force aura was something he could see and he knew that it was an unmistakable warning that what Yoda had said was not up for debate or contradiction. Once the healer was suitably upbraided, Yoda turned his heavy admonishing gaze to Qui-Gon who instantly removed the smug smirk that had appeared on his face at the healer's reprimand.

"See to his care as his master you alone will do, for now," Yoda stated, his emphasis on the last two words very clear. Qui-Gon wisely decided not to push the issue as he was eager to get Obi-Wan back to their quarters. The diminutive master, sensing his pleasure at the healer's reprimand, struck out at an unprotected shin drawing a silent wince from Qui-Gon and a poorly hidden chuckle from Vresh.

"Go now you will. Much rest and meditation both master and padawan need."

"Yes, Master," Qui-Gon said with a quick, but respectful bow. He managed to give both a short nod to Vresh and a useless glare at Ja'Prinn before departing for his apartment at a speed as close to a run as Jedi serenity would allow. Yoda turned to the remaining pair of masters.

"Master Ja'Prinn."

"Yes, Master Yoda?" the healer answered, his voice and demeanor once again quiet and serene.

"Much help will Obi-Wan require to recover; much help from you and his master. Learn to work together, you must or fail the boy you will," the grand master warned

gravely. The master healer bowed deeply in acknowledgement and understanding before taking his leave and returning to the healing halls. Soon only Vresh remained, the smaller Jedi regarding him with a mildly amused expression.

“And what sage advice or warning do you have for me, Master Yoda?”

“Encroaching on Master Uvain’s territory, you are,” he smiled. Vresh crossed his arms over his chest and gave the smaller Jedi a wry grin.

“Handling Qui-Gon is a multi-master job,” Vresh replied. To this Yoda nodded.

“Yes, and need you both he will. Many trials are still to come before either can begin to heal,” Yoda said pausing as he closed his eyes and reached out into the Force. “Yes, difficult trials... and soon.”

* * * * *

Day 121

“This isn’t working, Master.”

“It’s working just fine, Padawan.”

“You can’t be comfortable.”

“Believe me, I have endured worse places to rest than this.”

“Still...”

“Padawan?”

“Yes, Master?”

“Go to sleep.”

“Yes, Master,” Obi-Wan answered sighing softly in exasperation at his overly stubborn master before rolling over in his bed to find a more comfortable position. Once found, the boy was asleep in mere moments. For his master, however, sleep did not come so easily.

Qui-Gon adjusted his position on the floor. His padawan was correct in that he was far from comfortable on the hard, unforgiving floor, but what he said was also true; he had

slept on worse. Though that fact did little to ease the sore muscles and stiff joints the master inevitably endured upon waking. Not to mention his body's ever-increasing fatigue.

For most of the past week, Qui-Gon had slept on the small patch of floor beside his padawan's narrow bed. After the first night of being violently awakened by the boy's shrill, blood curdling screams not once, but three times throughout the night, both Jedi were more the worse for wear in the morning. From then on Qui-Gon had elected to remain at his padawan's side at night resting only in a light trance, ready to catch the terrors that besieged the boy's mind as he slept. As a result of the change in sleeping arrangements, Obi-Wan was finally able to get some rest and Qui-Gon was learning that operating on a string of sleepless nights was much easier in his youth. Still, since the team was Temple bound, and not on a mission requiring an alertness for constant danger, the master found his personal exhaustion a more than equitable trade to give his padawan some small measure of peace.

Qui-Gon opened his eyes as he felt a mounting wave of anxious tension in the Force. Instinctively he reached out across the bond, but found his padawan sleeping well and dreamlessly. The master sat up and extended his search fully outward and was surprised to find the anxiety was emanating from several dozen minds within the Temple. Instantly, he was on his feet and in the common room intending to comm. Mace or Yoda to find out what was going on. So when he felt the presence of two Jedi just outside the outer door to his quarters, Qui-Gon knew something very bad had or was happening.

The tall master quickly crossed to the door and palmed it open. On the other side of the threshold stood Mace Windu and a young knight who seemed vaguely familiar to Qui-Gon, however, he had no time to ponder the uncertain memory as Mace's grim expression seemed to confirm his suspicions regarding the severity of the current crisis.

"What has happened?" Qui-Gon asked deciding any pleasantries would be an unwelcomed waste of time. Mace must have felt the same way as he also launched straight in with his answer.

"Remember the new measures we put in place shortly after...", Mace replied pausing for a moment obviously disquieted about what he must say and further disquieted by the fact the former had caused his disquiet in the first place. Mace shook his head, his frown deepening as he continued.

"The measures we put into effect after Obi-Wan's abduction?"

"Of course," Qui-Gon said with a curt nod.

"There's been an incursion," the Korun master intoned. For a moment Qui-Gon's felt darkness tug at the edge of his vision as a dread chill crept up his spine bringing with it the potentiality of his worst fears coming true. After a moment and a rather noticeable swallow, Qui-Gon was able to find his voice again.

"Xanatos?"

"We don't know... yet, but I've ordered a Temple lockdown while Master Lo-Cha and his teams investigate the disturbance," Mace responded. He turned to the knight at his side. "In the meantime, Knight Jorno Rasiilli will stay here with you and Obi-Wan in your quarters."

Qui-Gon spared a moment to take in the young Weequay before bringing his gaze back to Mace with a glare.

"I am perfectly capable of protecting myself and my padawan," he spoke gruffly then he turned back to the younger Jedi. "No offense to you, Knight Rasiilli."

The tan skinned knight smiled broadly, his dark, slightly recessed eyes shinning with some private amusement.

"None taken, Master Jinn," he answered, his deep voice grumbly like a velvet avalanche, thunderous yet warm. Mace looked his friend squarely in the eyes.

"You assume Knight Rasiilli's purpose is to keep others out of your quarters," the Councilor replied dryly, a small, furtive smirk breaking through his frown. Qui-Gon relented and ushered the younger Jedi inside, but not before subjecting Mace's retreating form to an intense scowl. It seemed that his sternest expressions of late were being wasted on those who lacked the ability to see them. Qui-Gon noted with a mental sigh. He turned back into his quarters closing the door behind him and found the Weequay knight standing uncomfortably in the center of the common room. Qui-Gon offered him a half smile as he gestured to the couch.

"Please, Knight Rasiilli, make yourself at home."

"It's Jorno and thank you, Master Jinn," the knight answered warmly as he took a seat on the well worn couch. The tall master cocked his head.

"Then it's Qui-Gon and you're quite welcome," he replied as he turned to go into the tiny kitchen. "Would you like some tea?"

"Umm... no thank you, Mas-... Qui-Gon. I know it's almost heretical for a Jedi to say so, but I never seemed to develop a taste for the stuff."

"More's the pity then. Would you care for something else?" the master called from the kitchen.

"I'm fine, thank you," Jorno answered and after a few moments, the master returned from the kitchen and sat down in the armchair across from him with a steaming cup in his hand. Qui-Gon gave a thoughtful glance at the knight before taking a sip of his tea.

"You look familiar. Do I know your master?"

"I was the last padawan of Master Maak," the knight answered. Qui-Gon nearly spat out his tea.

"Dio Maak? Tahl's Dio Maak?"

"The very same," Jorno replied with another broad grin. "Tahl is my padawan big sister of sorts."

"There are worse to have," Qui-Gon said with a laugh. "No wonder you seemed familiar. I must have seen you at,"

"Master Maak's memorial service," Jorno responded his expression suddenly somber. Qui-Gon's prior mirth disappeared just as quickly.

"I am sorry for your loss," he offered, but the knight just waved the condolence politely away.

"There is no death remember. Besides Master Dio was a good master. I prefer to reflect on that rather than the end," he said. Qui-Gon nodded approvingly.

"So, you've been a knight for how long now?"

"About seven years."

"And no padawan to show for it? Tsk. Tsk," the master admonished though the humor in his eyes takes all the sting from the rebuke. Still the knight had the grace to blush or at least gave the Weequay approximation of one.

"I attend all the tournaments and exhibitions. I even volunteer in the crèche when I'm between missions, but..."

"But what?"

"None of the initiates... I don't... The Force just tells me not yet. So, I'm waiting," he finally said. Again Qui-Gon nodded, a slow smile breaking across his features.

"That is wise, Jorno. When the right student comes along you will know it," he replied then he paused a moment in thought before continuing. "Just don't be too blind to see it when the Force points him or her out to you."

"Speaking from personal experience, are we?" Jorno asked with a wink. Qui-Gon studied the knight for a moment before sighing and returning to his tea.

"Your 'big sister' talks too much."

"Yes, and mostly about you," Jorno replied, his smile only growing wider. The two Jedi sat in companionable silence for a few moments before the question tugging at Qui-Gon's thoughts could be put aside no longer. He sat down his now empty mug and turned his attention fully to young man before him.

"Do you know what is going on?" the master asked his expression serious. Jorno sighed and shook his head, regret etching his already wrinkled features.

"Not really. I was called to the security station along with a couple dozen other knights it seemed. Master Lo-Cha was just about to start dividing us into teams and divvying up tasks when Master Windu tapped me on the shoulder and told me to follow him. He didn't say much on the walk down here, only that we might have an intruder and that I was stay here in these quarters with you and your padawan," he stated then paused with a slight grin. "Actually, I was given rather specific orders not to let you leave the room to find the intruder yourself and that I was to stop you... let's see, what were his exact words... "even if you have to hide his robes and boots from him," I believe were Master Windu's exact orders."

Qui-Gon crossed his arms and sat back in his large armchair in a huff. Jorno tilted his head as he assessed the older Jedi.

"Hmm, though from what Tahl has said I doubt the lack of appropriate attire would hinder you much once you decided you were going to do something."

"Well," Qui-Gon answered dryly, "a story of me running semi-nude down the grand hall would likely do little to worsen my reputation. I remember once as a padawan I..." he stopped then immediately jumped to his feet just as the door to his padawan's room flew open. A disheveled Obi-Wan stepped into the common room, his eyes wide with fear and tension marking his every move.

"Master, I know what you said... I know that last time I was wrong, that it was just a dream, but this time I know I felt something," Obi-Wan said then he looked at the unknown knight on their couch and his master's expression. "I'm right. He's... He's here, isn't he?"

Qui-Gon considered lying, but quickly abandoned the idea. He had never lied to his padawan before and he wasn't about to do him that disservice now.

"We don't know, but... yes, we think he might be trying to get back into the Temple," the master spoke as he crossed over to his padawan. He knelt before his apprentice, placed his hands on his shoulders and looked him straight in the eye. "But I promise you, Xanatos will not harm you again."

Obi-Wan opened his mouth to say something, but the sound of the door chime stopped him. Jorno was immediately on his feet and approaching the door, his hand resting on his saber, but Qui-Gon shook his head.

"It's Mace," he said then he palmed the door open with a touch of the Force. The Councilor stepped inside the apartment and immediately Qui-Gon could feel his padawan tense under his fingertips. He stood up and pulled Obi-Wan close into his side a move designed to both keep the boy in the room as much as it was to offer the boy reassurance of his safety. Mace noted the new body language of both master and padawan and kept his distance from the pair.

"Well?" Qui-Gon asked.

"We didn't catch anyone, but we are certain it was him," Mace reported grimly. Obi-Wan pressed himself deeper into his master's side. Qui-Gon also tightened his grip on the boy.

"How do you know?" he asked.

"We found this," Mace answered as he reached into his cloak and pulled out something all too familiar to two of the Jedi in the room. Neither master nor padawan could speak, both just stared at the object in the Councilor's hand.

It was Obi-Wan's lightsaber.

Chapter 18: Equal and Opposite Reactions

Day 121

Obi-Wan made no move to reclaim his lightsaber, only stared at it blankly through almost febrile eyes. A subtle nod from Qui-Gon and Mace tossed the weapon to the long-haired master who caught it adeptly. He glanced down to his apprentice who reluctantly returned his gaze.

/Padawan?/

/No, Master. I don't want it./

The boy's adamance was a burst of clear energy over the bond. His master suppressed his mental sigh.

/Obi-Wan, your saber is your life. You know that. If it's the tremors.../

/It's not the tremors, Master./

Qui-Gon's brow wrinkled in confusion and concern. Obi-Wan bit his lower lip and turned his gaze away from the worried blue eyes of his master.

/What is it then?/

/The last time I used it I... I won't use it again. Ever./

Qui-Gon studied his apprentice for several quiet moments before speaking through the bond again.

/Then I shall keep it for you until you are ready./

The master clipped the smaller hilt to his belt beside his own. He glanced up to find both Mace and Jorno patiently waiting for the two to complete their mental conversation. Qui-Gon thought he saw a hint of dismay flicker across Mace's features over the placement of the saber on his belt, but the expression was gone as quickly as it came.

"What now?" Qui-Gon asked.

"I've called the Council into session. Master Lo-Cha is going to give his report," Mace answered plainly. Qui-Gon nodded.

"That is one Council meeting I would very much like to attend."

"Of course, but..." Mace hesitated as he glanced down at Obi-Wan's still very pale figure. Qui-Gon turned and knelt before his apprentice. He opened his mouth to speak, then thought better of it. The last thing he wanted to do was further distress the boy by possibly embarrassing him in front of other Jedi.

/Padawan./

Obi-Wan picked his gaze off the floor and turned to his master.

/Yes, Master?/

/I-I... need to attend this Council meeting, Obi-Wan, but... I do not want you to come with me just yet./

The glazed look finally left the teen's features and a quizzical expression promptly took its place.

/Wait, why? You don't want me with you?/

Qui-Gon immediately seized the boy and pulled him into a tight embrace as he felt the crush of panic and hurt surge across the bond. He held his apprentice in a fierce hug not caring one whit if the public display of affection would embarrass the lad or not.

/Of course I want you with me, Padawan. Your place is by my side and I would always have you there if I could, but... Tell me, Padawan, how do you feel when you look at Master Windu?/

Obi-Wan turned his head on Qui-Gon's shoulder never breaking from his master's embrace. He glanced over to the Korun Council member. Mace remained perfectly still under the youngster's intense scrutiny, his Jedi mask of neutrality never wavering. Suddenly, Obi-Wan's entire body tensed as he tightened his hold on his master and turned his face back into Qui-Gon's neck; burying himself in the other Jedi like a distraught crècheing.

/Tell me what you feel, Padawan./

/Like... like I want to run. Like I *need* to run. Like I know he's going to hurt me somehow... No, not hurt... betray... he will betray me, Master. I can't explain it, but I can't *not* feel it./

/I know, Padawan. I know. That is why I don't want you to come with me. If one Council member makes you so uncomfortable.../

/Then all twelve might make me crawl out of my own skin and go stark raving mad?/

A touch of amusement flittered across the bond.

/Something like that./

Qui-Gon smiled briefly, but all too soon his expression was very somber. He pulled back from Obi-Wan far enough that he could look the boy in the eye.

/I don't want to leave you alone, though. Would you be comfortable with Master Tahl? The two of you can wait for me just outside the Council chambers. Can you do that, Obi-Wan? You must be honest with me. You must tell me if you cannot./

/Yes, Master. I can do it. I can wait with Master Tahl./

Qui-Gon looked deep into the large blue-gray eyes in front of him. What he found there was exactly what was transmitting lightly over their bond, fear laced with determination. The master nodded, gave his apprentice's shoulders one more tight squeeze of reassurance then stood up and turned to both Mace and Jorno.

"I will meet you in the Council chambers shortly," he said to Mace who nodded then he turned to the knight who had to this point remained silent. "Jorno, I'd like you to remain here in our quarters until we return, unless you have other duties that need your attention."

Jorno opened his mouth, but the Councilor beat him to it.

"If he did he doesn't now," Mace answered with a pointed look to the knight. Jorno gave Qui-Gon a small bow of his head.

"It seems my schedule is rather clear at the moment, Master Jinn. I am at your disposal."

"Good," the long-haired master stated. "And now we must wake up your big sister."

"On that, Master Jinn," Jorno said with a broad smile, "you are on your own. Even brave knights such as I dare not wake a sleeping draigon..."

* * * * *

"It's your move."

"Oh. Sorry," Obi-Wan mumbled as he returned his attention to the holochess board between him and Master Tahl. While he studied the board, consternation wrinkling his brow, Tahl studied him. The boy looked a bit better than he did a few days ago. The dark circles under his eyes were gone, so at least he was getting some rest, but the haunted look within those blue-gray orbs remained.

Tahl had not been surprised in the least when Qui-Gon comm.'d her. Though she had hoped the anxious tension she felt in the Force was unrelated to her friend and his padawan, something in the Force whispered to her that that was simply not the case. So before Qui-Gon had finished his request, Tahl was putting on her boots and was nearly out the door. She met the pair just outside the Council chambers and if Obi-Wan's rested face relieved some of her worry, Qui-Gon's haggard visage had the distinct opposite effect. The fact that he was attending a Council meeting at this hour, after what she felt in the Force, and after the number of new guards, sentries, and checkpoints she had passed by or through just to reach the chamber... Everything about the situation made Tahl's stomach twinge uncomfortably.

"Obi-Wan?"

"Hmm," he answered distractedly. His eyes were still on the board, but Tahl would bet her lightsaber that his thoughts were somewhere else entirely.

"A decided for your thoughts?" she asked. The teen sighed and rested his chin in his hand.

"I can't protect my sarvip."

"What?" Tahl replied unable to keep the surprise and confusion out of her voice.

"No matter what I do, I can't protect the sarvip," he repeated pointing to the board. "Whether it's in one move or a hundred, it's inevitable..." he said, his voice trailing off and suddenly Tahl realized he was not discussing the game at all.

"You know," she began gently as she stared down at the little holo-creatures quietly fidgeting on the playing board. "That's exactly how I feel about my horranth. I mean, most players don't give him a second thought because he is so small, but," she said as he looked up at her for the first time since they sat down. "If the player is wise enough to recognize the potential of the piece and knows exactly how to use it... well, a horranth can be as powerful as a gundark."

"But you still lose pieces."

"True, but a good player will protect those he or she can whatever the cost to him or herself. You know that don't you, Obi-Wan?"

"Yes, Master Tahl," he replied with a resigned sigh. Tahl leaned back away from the board, half reclining on the wall behind the long bench where they were sitting.

"You want to tell me what's going on because it seems I was sleeping through most of it," Tahl said with a small smile. It wasn't exactly a lie, she had been asleep until she felt that surge in the Force. She had waited several long moments after that trying to pinpoint the disturbance and debating whether to comm. someone. Qui-Gon had beat her to it, but only

to ask her to stay with Obi-Wan as he attended a Council meeting. He had told her nothing about whatever it was that was going on and now her curiosity and patience had reached their limits.

"Xanatos came back," Obi-Wan intoned, his gaze still directed at the chess board, but not really looking at it. Tahl's jaw clenched. That would explain the increased security she thought to herself as she watched the teen thumb the game off leaving the playing surface as empty as his stare.

"Did you,"

"No, I never saw him. I'm not sure anyone did, but I... I felt him through the Force and... Master Windu found where he left my lightsaber. That's what they're meeting about," he said as he cast a glance to the closed double doors behind him. Suddenly, a nudge of concern was felt over the bond.

/Padawan?/

/I'm fine, Master. I was just... thinking./

/Hmm. If the Council is any indication, Padawan, thinking is very overrated./

The master let his amusement carry over the bond and was rewarded by Obi-Wan's own mental giggle. The sound warmed his worried heart.

/I do not giggle, Master./

/Would it matter if I said it were a very manly giggle?/

/Shouldn't you be paying attention to Council or something?/

/I suppose I should since they won't stop talking./ A pause. /What is it?/

/It's... nothing./

/Padawan./

Obi-Wan released an exasperated sigh an echo of which his master could feel brush lightly against his mind.

/Spill, Padawan./

/I'm just... hungry, Master./

/Will wonders never cease./

/Master!/

The master was silent for a moment considering several things before deciding on what he said next.

/Have Tahl take you to the refectory. It is a bit early for the firstmeal rush so it should not be overly crowded./

/But.../

/If there is a problem I am only a thought away./

/I guess so.../

/And Obi-Wan?/

/Yes, Master?/

/Save something for me. If this lasts much longer I liable to start gnawing on Master Yoda's gimer stick./

/He'll whack you with it before you ever get close to it, Master./

/Then let's hope this wraps up quickly./

/Yes, Master. We'll meet you in the refectory./

/A thought away, Padawan. That's all./

A rush of love and warmth flooded across the bond and was promptly returned.

/Thank you, Master./

* * * * *

"I take it everything is well with your padawan?" Master Mundi asked politely as Qui-Gon concluded his mental conversation with Obi-Wan. The dark-haired master turned his focus back to the circle of Councilors, his previous small smile replaced by a disapproving scowl.

"As well as can be expected in light of our recent failures."

"We did not fail. He did not reach the boy," Master Piell retorted, his accent making his words sound even harsher. Qui-Gon tucked his hands into the sleeves of his cloak, his fists and jaw tightening in growing consternation.

"He never should have made it into the Temple in the first place!" he yelled. Before the two masters' frustration could escalate further, Master Bilaba's soothing, smoky voice sang through the chamber.

"A feat he has accomplished at least twice now," she said then she directed her soft gaze to the Iktotchi Master of Security standing to the left of Qui-Gon. Master Lo-Cha shook his head, the scowl on his usually serene face clearly reflecting his vexation.

"And I am still unable to determine how he is doing it," the master all but grumbled. "He just... appears and disappears in the Temple like an anthelar."

Qui-Gon snorted and looked at the Security Master.

"Xanatos is no malignant spirit, Master Lo-Cha," he growled then he directed his attention again to the Council members before him. "But he is dangerous."

"Perhaps if we knew more about his motives, his ultimate intent? Has your padawan told you what transpired during his captivity?" Master Poof asked kindly, his head gently swaying like a living pendulum.

"He has shared much, but not all," Qui-Gon started, but he was forced to pause and reign in his increasingly errant emotions. "There are still... things... he is not yet ready to face. What is clear," he continued his protectiveness giving him clarity, "is that Xanatos tortured his body and manipulated his mind."

"To break him or simply to punish you?" Master Tiin inquired. Qui-Gon shook his head, a few strands of his silvering hair escaping for the leather tieback.

"Both I'd imagine, but there are other things, subtle... reactions he has ingrained into Obi-Wan for some unknown purpose."

"It would help to speak with him, Master Jinn," Master Mundi intoned.

"Impossible," the master responded. "One of Obi-Wan's strongest reactions seems to be regarding Council members."

"All the more reason you should bring the boy before us," Master Koon replied, his deep baritone distorted by his anti-ox breather.

"I will not permit it."

"We could order you," Master Piell gruffed. Qui-Gon visibly straightened his posture effortlessly sliding into a ready stance, his weight evenly distributed between his widely planted feet.

"You could, but it would make little difference. I am his master. The decision is mine."

"Are you again questioning the wisdom of the Council?" Piell retorted. "That is a lesson we thought you had finally learned."

"I have learned that there is wisdom beyond my own," Qui-Gon conceded. "But I will always do what is necessary to protect my padawan."

Before Master Piell could respond Master Windu held up his hand to silence whatever retort the short master was planning.

"Enough," the Korun Councilor barked, his voice carrying easily over the chamber. "Master Jinn is correct, the decision is his and besides, I have seen his padawan's... response to Council members first hand as has Master Yoda. We will not risk inflicting further emotional harm on the boy without good cause," he said flatly taking a moment to meet the eyes of every Councilor. Mace then turned to Qui-Gon. "You said 'reactions,' Qui-Gon. You've observed more?"

"Yes. Obi-Wan will only eat if others around him are eating as well as Xanatos used food to manipulate his mind and his thinking. Also," the master paused as he forced himself to take a deep, centering breath knowing that the Jedi before him would find what was about to say as disturbing as he did.

"He has sworn to never again touch a lightsaber."

A low murmur of conversation followed the pronouncement as notes of deep worry and incredulity peppered the Force around them. Then Yoda, who had opted to remain quiet the entire session thus far, finally spoke.

"Know you his reason, do you?"

"Yes, Master. You all know of the saber burn Xanatos placed on his chest?" the master asked. Qui-Gon knew all of the Council members had already read Obi-Wan's medical report, but still waited for the individual members' nods before pressing forward.

"There was another boy there, someone who Obi-Wan befriended and for that friendship Xanatos threatened to kill the boy unless Obi-Wan inflicted the same saber burn to the boy as Xanatos had inflicted on him. He did."

Aside from Depa's gasp, the Council chambers fell into stunned silence. Yoda's ears drooped noticeably lower.

"See this, I did not though fear it I did," the ancient master spoke sadly. "Have a plan to help him, do you?"

"Yes," Qui-Gon answered slowly, "but it mostly relies on time and talking, but to work there can be no question as to his safety. He has already been taken from inside the Temple and now his kidnapper has somehow entered our home again and eluded us again. If we cannot protect him,"

"He may never trust us again," Depa finished somberly.

"Or worse, he may never trust again," Qui-Gon added. Mace nodded and leaned back in his seat, interlacing his fingers.

"We must find the source of these breaches, but you, Qui-Gon, you see to your padawan. I will inform you what we decide here," Mace said. Qui-Gon heard and was grateful for the dismissal, but he was far more pleased by Mace's offer to update him personally; a subtle nod to their long friendship despite the animosity of their Council sessions. Qui-Gon made a short bow to the Council.

"Masters," he said and with an almost imperceptible nod from Yoda he departed the chambers and headed to the Temple's main refectory.

* * * * *

"Obi-Wan, may I ask you something?" Tahl inquired softly as she reached for several pieces of toast. Obi-Wan shrugged as he grabbed a muja fruit giving it a squeeze to test its ripeness.

"I guess, Master Tahl," he said as he placed the sweet fruit on his tray before grabbing a second fruit as well.

"When was the last time your master slept?" she asked and the apprentice stopped and looked at her in surprise for several moments before collecting himself and continuing down the line.

"Is something wrong?"

"No," Obi-Wan replied quickly hoping to dispel the surge of worry he saw flash across Tahl's features. "I just wasn't expecting... lately people only worry about me."

"And you worry about him. Did you think you were the only one?" Tahl asked with a raised eyebrow. Obi-Wan blushed lightly, but said nothing.

"Well, you're not, Padawan, so you're going to have to learn to share worrying for your master with me. Besides, I'm better at it than you. I've been doing it longer."

"Longer, sure, Master Tahl, but I doubt you're better than me," Obi-Wan retorted with an impish grin that Tahl hadn't seen in quite a while.

"Hmm, perhaps," she temporized with a frown as if she were considering the boy's potential to worry, then she smiled. "Now that that's settled, you still haven't answered my question," the honey skinned master said as she picked up her tray and headed to an empty table. Obi-Wan followed closely behind her, his eyes and his Force sense constantly scanning the mostly empty room. He was in a room with only Jedi yet he felt more vulnerable now than when he was alone in his room. Making a conscious effort to tamp down his discomfort lest he alarm his master, Obi-Wan took a deep breath as he sat down across from Tahl at their table.

"He's been sleeping on the floor in my room for the past few days. To stop the nightmares," he added when he noted Tahl's confusion. "I... I have so many a night... I don't think he gets any sleep at all. I did try to make him go to his own bed though, but he refused."

"Like the stubborn old gundark he is," she replied teasing another smile out of the teen. "Well, go ahead and eat up. You said you were hungry," she added as she proceeded to slather her bare toast with a creamy Alderaanian spread. From there the two Jedi ate in companionable silence sometimes breaking the quiet with sardonic observations about the other Jedi drifting in and out of the room. About halfway through the meal, Tahl noticed that the boy's eyes kept drifting to a particular table of padawans and initiates who, in turn, were trying desperately not to appear to be stealing glances at him.

"You know, if you want to eat firstmeal with your friends it's okay with me," Tahl offered absently between sips of her tea. Obi-Wan turned to her clearly considering it for a moment, but eventually shook his head.

"I wouldn't be good company," he answered finally.

"I don't know about that. I find your company quite enjoyable," Tahl countered with a smile, but the boy's expression remained sullen.

"Yeah, but you don't ask me questions. You already know what happened to me," he replied softly.

"Not really," Tahl began. Obi-Wan gave her a questioning look. She reached across the table and took one of his hands in both of hers. "I mean I have seen your scars and I know that you have nightmares and other... stress reactions, but no, I don't much beyond that."

"Master Qui-Gon and I started talking about it almost a tenday ago... I just assumed he would have told you..."

"Your master would never betray your confidences, Obi-Wan. And even if he did have to tell someone something you said to him in private, he would only do so if it were in your best interest and he would tell you so," Tahl answered bluntly, but not unkindly. Obi-Wan nodded, but still shrugged off her assurances.

"Well, even if no one knows the... details, everyone knows I'm crazy now because of what happened."

"Obi-Wan," Tahl said her voice far more serious than normal. "You are not crazy. Sarcastic, stubborn, and soon to be too damn handsome for your own good, but not crazy. No one here thinks that so you better not be thinking it either," she finished with a piercing glare. Obi-Wan relented nodding sheepishly before turning away with slightly flushed cheeks.

"You think I'm going to be handsome?" he asked meekly. Tahl gave him a wide grin.

"Are you kidding? With that hair and those eyes and that cleft chin, the other padawans will be swooning around you."

"Okay, now you're making fun of me."

"Am not, but," Tahl said as she gave his hand one last squeeze before letting go, "we can revisit this in a few years when I can say I told you so. For now, go visit with your friends. I will be right here if you need me," she said. Obi-Wan glanced over his shoulder at the table of young Jedi then back at Tahl; his mouth in a thin line, a determined look framed his features. He gave her a curt nod, took a deep breath, and slowly walked his tray to the table of familiar faces.

"Um... Hi. Can I... join you?" Obi-Wan asked timidly as he stood beside the table filled with the wide-eyed stares of his friends and crèchemates. It was Garen who recovered first.

"Obi-Wan Kenobi, you better sit your ass down here with us or I will personally kick your ass myself."

"Garen!" Bant exclaimed, but her shock at his course language diminished when she saw Obi-Wan's smile at the threat.

"Well, since you put it that way," Obi-Wan said as he slid into an empty seat beside Reeft who was already scrutinizing his tray.

"Hey, Obi, are you going to eat that?" the Dressellian asked pointing to his untouched second muja fruit. Obi-Wan handed the treat to his friend, shaking his head in amusement.

"Some things never change," he said. Garen smiled for a moment, but then his face grew more serious as he glanced down at Obi-Wan's hands and notices the 'x' shaped scar on each.

"Obi, we've been really worried about you. I mean...," he said pausing to look at Bant who nodded. "I mean, you were missing for so long and then when you came back, you wouldn't see us. You wouldn't see anybody."

"I know," Obi-Wan answered hanging his head down so low his chin was resting on his chest. "I didn't... mean to, I just... I didn't want to talk about it."

"And now?" Bant asked gently.

"I still don't want to talk about it," he answered softly. Garen frowned for a moment.

"Fine, we won't talk about it then, but tell us that you're okay, man. Are you? Are you okay?"

"I'm... working on it," Obi-Wan answered after several seconds of thought. Garen, Reeft, and Bant all exchanged glances before all three turn back to him, smiling.

"Good enough for us," Bant said. Obi-Wan returned their smiles with a genuine smile of his own and soon the four were talking and laughing as they had always done and for the moment, Obi-Wan felt safe in the familiar and easy comfort of his friends. It was a feeling he knew would not last, but he didn't care. It had been so long since he had felt anything approaching happiness that he would take whatever joy he could for however long he could have it. For now he would do as his master had told him on more than one occasion.

He would live in the moment.

* * * * *

"This seat taken?"

"Hmm?" Tahl answered distractedly as she looked up from her empty mug of tea to the roguish grin of her crèchemate.

"Well that's a serious expression," Vresh said as he took a chair, turned and straddled it placing his covered food container on the table between them. Tahl shook off her pensive gaze and welcomed her friend with a warm smile.

"Fancy seeing you here. Thought you weren't a firstmeal person," she asked with a single raised eyebrow.

"Could say the same about you," he replied evenly then he ran a weary hand through his short crop of white hair. "Got a sick padawan who must have her nutritional needs met. Thus, the trip," he answered tapping the food container with one finger.

"Is she alright?" Tahl asked concerned, but Vresh waved her worry away.

"Devoran flu. Nasty little souvenir from our last mission. You wouldn't believe the stain a wad of fur covered mucous will leave on a tunic," he said wrinkling his nose in disgust at the very memory. "So, you know why I'm here," he continued. "What's your excuse?"

"I'm here with company," Tahl replied with a slight tilt of her head to a table behind him. Vresh looked over his shoulder, his eyes settling on a table of young Jedi. It took but a moment for his gaze to fall on one particular auburn haired padawan. He studied the teen for several seconds. The boy was eating, talking, and... laughing. It was a very pleasant sight that eased something inside the master he hadn't known was tight. He turned back to Tahl.

"I had no idea he was doing this well. It's good to see," he said smiling then his smile faded as he noticed a particular absence. "But where's Qui-Gon?"

"With the Council," Tahl answered, her pensive look returning. "Did you feel it last night?"

Vresh nodded not pretending to misunderstand her meaning.

"It was Xanatos. Somehow he made it back inside the Temple. He didn't make any contact with Obi-Wan," she added quickly when Vresh threw a worried glance over his shoulder. "But he did leave another gift before he made his escape."

"What this time?" Vresh asked not really wanting to know. The master had long since come to hate Xanatos's idea of gift giving.

"Obi-Wan's lightsaber," Tahl answered. Vresh carded both hands through his spiky locks this time muttering a series of choice Huttese curses under his breath. Just as he was nearing the end of his expansive vocabulary a familiar presence joined them at the table.

"That was an impressive display of fluency," Qui-Gon offered dryly as he took a seat in the empty chair beside Tahl. "May I ask what," he started, but his voice failed him as his gaze lighted on his padawan.

"Nice, isn't it?" she said poking the dark-haired master in his ribs. Qui-Gon nodded his head still quite taken with the scene before him. Not trusting his eyes, the master hastily checked the bond which only confirmed what he knew he was seeing.

"He's... happy..." he stammered. "Force Tahl, you're a miracle worker!"

"Trust me, it has less to do with me and more to do with them," she replied with a pointed glance at the youths. Qui-Gon consciously pulled himself from his stare of disbelief.

"Still, I am grateful," he said taking a moment to take in his closest friends. Vresh leaned forward over the back of his chair, his focus squarely on Qui-Gon.

"Two things. First, what did the Council say?"

"Nothing useful," Qui-Gon answered.

"No surprise there," Tahl muttered.

"They still have no idea how Xanatos is getting into the Temple and, therefore, no ideas on how to stop him."

"And your plan?" Vresh asked knowing full well Qui-Gon was not going to leave Obi-Wan's safety in the hands of the Council or Temple Security.

"I'm still working on it," the master grumbled. Vresh considered his answer for a moment before nodding and rising to his feet, his container in hand.

"Tell me what you need when you know it. Lantis and I are Temple bound for a while as she recovers from this bug of hers," he said. "Speaking of which, I should get back before I have a sick, starving, and mutinous padawan in my quarters."

"Wait," Qui-Gon called out as Vresh turned to leave. "You said there were two things."

"Oh, yes," the white-haired master said. "The second thing is, Qui-Gon?"

"Yes?"

"You should know you look like shit."

"Noted, Vresh."

"No, really. You look like shit. Fresh grade A scraggily ass womprat shit."

"Vresh."

"Slimy disease-ridden Hutt shit."

"Vresh!"

"Get some rest, Qui, I mean it," he said his tone suddenly serious. When Qui-Gon finally, and reluctantly nodded, Vresh gave a small bow and took his leave. Tahl leaned casually onto Qui-Gon's shoulder with a subtle sigh.

"He's right, you know," she said. He didn't answer immediately reaching instead for the lone muffin resting on her tray.

"I know," he said finally. "But my sleep was a sacrifice worth making."

"For now, yes, but you won't be doing him any favors if you run yourself into the ground."

"I will remain mindful," he answered giving her shoulders a reassuring squeeze. "I just wish that there was," he began, but his thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the loud clatter of a tray hitting the floor. Both masters, and the handful of other Jedi in the room, traced the sound to a lone padawan standing stock still in the middle of the floor. Qui-Gon was in the process of standing when the boy bolted out of the refectory leaving the dropped tray and its mess on the floor. In the space of a heartbeat, the master was right behind him catching up with the teen not far outside the refectory doors.

"Padawan?" he started, but the master was once again interrupted by another loud clatter. Both master and padawan looked to the doors to see a Mon Cal initiate come to a running halt in front of them. Before either could ask a single question there was another clatter, then another followed by the hasty arrival of the two remaining young Jedi Obi-Wan had dined with. Seconds later, Tahl came to join the small gaggle outside the refectory doors.

"What... what did you do?" Obi-Wan finally managed to ask, his hands tucked into his sleeves. Garen looked at him and shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly.

"Figured if we all dropped our trays no one would be looking at you, they would be looking at us," he said. For a moment, Obi-Wan was speechless while the two masters used their years of training to hold back pleased smiles.

"You didn't have to do that," he said finally. Reeft stepped forward, his dark eyes full of compassion.

"Of course we did. You're our friend, Obi."

"And don't you forget it," added Bant. Obi-Wan still hid his tremulous hands within the sleeves of his cloak, but a small smile spread across his face.

"I won't."

Chapter 19: Trespass

Day 121

Meditation was supposed to be a relaxing endeavor. It was supposed to be an opportunity to reclaim one's center, to release emotions and passions, to find inner peace and serenity, and to seek out guidance by listening to the will of the Force. A Jedi's meditation was to be a thing of comfort and clarity. It was not supposed to be an utterly frustrating waste of time, thought, and energy.

The frown on Qui-Gon Jinn's face deepened even as his meditative state did not. The master had chosen to use the time his apprentice was with the rehabilitation healers to commune with the Force both to release his building anxieties as well as to seek guidance on how best to help his padawan to heal. His decision to keep Obi-Wan away from the Soul Healers had not changed. He knew that, for right now, his padawan's best care would be administered under his hands, but that knowledge did little to provide the master with an understanding of just what that "care" should be. So far, and to Qui-Gon's great frustration, the Force had chosen to remain silent on the issue. Worse still, the master could not shake the feeling that something was... off. That he was missing or overlooking something important, but he had no idea what that might be.

"He's here. He's in the Temple. I felt him."

Qui-Gon let his mind take him back to that moment, back to Obi-Wan's first nightmare. The boy had seemed so certain, so sure of what he felt, but it was just a nightmare, wasn't it?

"...I know I felt something... I'm right. He's... He's here, isn't he?"

Qui-Gon's eyes flew open as revelation shocked him out of his light trance. Thought Qui-Gon knew from experience that Xanatos was adept at hiding his presence in the Force, he also realized that Obi-Wan had sensed him that night. The boy had sensed Xanatos's presence when no one else had; not the sentries, not Mace or Yoda, not even himself, the man's former master. And if Obi-Wan could somehow sense what they could not... perhaps the first was no nightmare at all.

Shaking his head, the tall master rose to his feet. Something was definitely not right here. He glanced at the chrono on the wall of the common room. Obi-Wan still had an hour remaining in his rehab session with the healers. An hour would be just enough time for what he must do. Qui-Gon grabbed his cloak and headed hurriedly out of the door.

* * * * *

"Come, sit, expected you are," Yoda said as he gestured the tall master inside his quarters. As ever, the Grand Master's rooms were infused with the currents of the Living Force and, despite the tepid temperature and pervasive humidity, Qui-Gon immediately felt his rapidly fraying nerves begin to soothe in the embrace. He took a seat on the cushion near Mace who was also seated on the floor. The Korun master was already here when he arrived and, from the look of him, had been there for quite awhile; perhaps since the Council meeting ended.

"Very troubled you are. Something new you have discovered, hmm?" the small master asked as he offered both younger masters steaming cups of tea. Qui-Gon took the offering with a nod.

"Yes, but I don't yet know what it means," he started. Both Mace and Yoda said nothing as they patiently waited for their fellow Jedi to gather his thoughts. After a moment, Qui-Gon chose his approach.

"Did either of you sense Xanatos was in the Temple last night?" he asked finally. Mace and Yoda glanced briefly at one another before turning back to Qui-Gon, Mace shook his head.

"No. We only felt a vague disturbance. It honestly would not have even been investigated were it not for the new alarm sensors being triggered. Why do you ask?" Mace inquired, his eyes narrowing. "Did you sense him?"

"No. I only became aware when the anxiety of the Temple increased. It was that tension that woke me. Then I felt the same disturbance as you, but it was nothing definite, nothing I could hold on to."

"But sense him your padawan did, yes?"

"Yes. He knew Xanatos was here even before Mace verified it," he answered. Mace's brow furrowed as he mulled over Qui-Gon's response.

"I don't see how that's possible," he muttered. Yoda's gaze hovered over Qui-Gon a few quiet seconds; his gimlet eyes scrutinizing the long-haired master.

"More there is?"

"I... I'm not sure," Qui-Gon began uncharacteristically hesitant.

"Certain of much we are not. Tell us, you will. Understand more we may," Yoda intoned as he finished the last of his tea.

"Obi-Wan's first night out of the Healer's Ward... that night he suffered a nightmare. I awoke to find him in our common room, terrified. He told me he sensed Xanatos in the Temple. I reached out with my own senses, but felt nothing. I asked him then if he still felt

him and after a moment he said no," Qui-Gon paused then released a deep sigh. "I told him it was just a nightmare, but now... now I'm not so sure."

"Is it possible that Kenobi has some sort of lingering connection with Xanatos? Perhaps one he isn't even aware of?" Mace asked turning to Yoda with a ponderous expression. The diminutive master closed his eyes, his ears twitching slightly as he sank into the currents of the Unifying Force. After many silent moments, the ancient master opened his eyes, his gaze sad and full of foreboding.

"Possible it is that bonded to the boy Xanatos has."

"Impossible," Qui-Gon huffed as he got to his feet. "You cannot bond with someone against their will or knowledge and Obi-Wan would have never permitted it."

"Such bonds there have been though many years it has been since such was seen," Yoda responded. Mace's eyes widened with comprehension and disbelief.

"You're speaking of Dar'Makai, the dark bond," the Councilor said, his expression still one of deep incredulity. Yoda's ears dropped noticeably as he nodded his head.

"Speak of that bond, I do," the Grand Master answered. Qui-Gon shook his head as he looked down upon the smaller master.

"Dar'Makai is a myth."

"A myth think you," Yoda answered with a huff of his own. "So much faith in prophecy no room for myth, have you?"

Qui-Gon's mouth opened, but no sounds came forth as he was temporarily put at a loss for words knowing that the tiny master had landed a powerful blow against his reticence. Mace took advantage of his silence and pushed forward.

"If Xanatos has made use of Dar'Makai where did he learn it and, more importantly, what do we do about it?"

"Ahead of ourselves we are. Determine there is a bond first we must do," Yoda answered leaning heavily on his gimer stick.

"How?" Qui-Gon asked finally regaining his ability to speak. Yoda looked up at the tall master, his lids sitting low on his eyes, but even that did little to hide the sadness living within them. It was then that Qui-Gon realized what the master thought was necessary.

"NEVER."

* * * * *

In the end “never” turned out to be “soon” as the plan went into effect immediately after Qui-Gon went to collect Obi-Wan from the healers. It was only after a very long, very loud discussion that the master had finally acquiesced to the will of the two Councilors. It was, admittedly, his contribution to the discussion that had been loud, but the very idea of asking him to permit his padawan to be mind probed after everything else the boy had suffered had done nothing short of sending Qui-Gon into a rage. The master wanted no one else to gain access to the boy’s head. He had been tampered with and manipulated enough and now the thought that his padawan had been forced into a bond against his will... It was only the abject horror of that possibility that had allowed Qui-Gon to even entertain the idea of a probe.

Even when the master had let himself be convinced of the necessity of the procedure, the manner in which it was to be conducted turned out to be a whole other argument, more heated than the last.

“This will not be done before the Council.”

“Having the Council present is both for his benefit as well as ours, Qui-Gon.”

“He is terrified of the Council, Mace, or do you not remember him cowering, panicked in a corner dripping blood from the IV he ripped from his wrist in his haste to escape from you? Have you forgotten that because I assure you I have not!”

“Of course I remember... but this is... delicate work.”

“Delicate work or not I will not willfully allow my padawan to be traumatized further. Find. Another. Way.”

“The Council we do not need. Conduct the probe alone, I will.”

“Master,”

“Careful I will be. Worry to much, you do. Accept this will you, Qui-Gon?”

“Just you, me, and Obi-Wan? That... is acceptable.”

And so it was decided that the probe would take place in Jinn’s quarters with only Yoda present, but still the probe would not take a place for another few days. The other two masters had tried to argue the need for haste, but Qui-Gon was adamant in his stance that moving too quickly would do far more harm than good. Considering that only hours ago Xanatos had made his way back into the Temple the last thing the master wanted to do was add to his padawan’s current stress, especially after such a positive breakthrough at

firstmeal. No, he would allow his apprentice a day or two to regain his footing and sense of security before laying this new and potentially devastating revelation at his feet.

Qui-Gon stepped through the doors to the main lobby leading into the Healing Ward and barely managed to stand fully inside before he was nearly tackled by his eager apprentice.

“Master!”

“Padawan,” Qui-Gon replied as he held the boy close to him. He reached across the bond, but he encountered no fear, no panic only a genuine sense of relief and a degree of excitement. He looked down at Obi-Wan’s face trying to match what he felt over the bond with what he saw in the boy’s eyes.

“You have some news you would like to share with me?”

“I get to escape!” he answered giddily then his smile shrank slightly. “Well, not so much escape as the healers have finally agreed to let me go. No more rehab!”

“Ah, well that is good news,” the master said giving a smile of his own. “Perhaps we should celebrate this occasion?”

“Well,” Obi-Wan began as he pulled away from his master’s embrace and became once again fascinated with his boots. “I sort of hoped to spend some time with Bant, Garen, and Reeft at the lake, but if you’d rather I stay with you,” he quickly added, but Qui-Gon raised his hand forestalling the boy’s attempt at appeasement.

“Enjoy your time with your friends, Padawan. It may be sometime before all four of you are in the Temple at the same time again since two of you are already padawans,” the tall master said. When Obi-Wan’s looked up at him with uncertainty flashing off those blue-gray orbs, Qui-Gon sighed audibly.

“Obi-Wan.”

“Yes, Master?”

“Go,” he ordered with a smile. Obi-Wan’s brilliant grin slowly returned to his face.

“Yes, Master. Thank you, Master,” he yelled as he ran out of the ward and to his friends. Qui-Gon shook his head, still smiling and quietly thanking the Force for giving his apprentice such wonderful friends and agemates.

* * * * *

"Wait, so you're really free of them? Like free free or like you-can-stop-coming-to-rehab-but-we-still-don't-want-you-to-do-anything-fun free?"

"The first one," Obi-Wan said throwing an amused look to Garen. All three of his friends suddenly let out wild hoots of joy followed by untamed laughter. Soon the four young Jedi were sprawled half-hazardly across the lush grass flanking the large Temple lake. The quartet laid in breathy silence for several minutes, content to stare up into the artificial sky and to enjoy each other's quiet company.

"It's good to have you back, Obi," Bant said softly.

"It's not over though," he answered just as softly. His three companions each rolled into sitting positions, their collective expressions exceedingly somber.

"What do you mean?" Reeft asked nervously. Obi-Wan brought himself up, sitting cross-legged as he absently pulled at individual blades of grass.

"You've noticed things have been different today?" he asked. When he received three quiet nods he continued, his focus back on the green blade between his fingers. "He came back."

"For... For you?" the Dressellian ventured hesitantly. His wrinkled worried expression turned to wrinkled horror when Obi-Wan nodded his head.

"That would explain the increased security," Garen replied grimly as he gestured with a tilt of his head toward the Temple Guard standing silent and ominous near the Temple wall several meters away.

"What does he want with you?" Bant asked her dark eyes growing wide.

"I don't know," Obi-Wan said with a short shake of his head. "But that isn't what scares me."

"What does scare you?" Garen asked leaning forward. Obi-Wan finally looked up at his small circle of friends, his voice barely above a whisper.

"That if I did know what he wanted I would probably give it to him."

* * * * *

"That was fast," Vresh said as he stepped into the familiar common room at Qui-Gon's invitation.

"Lantis?"

"With Allie. You remember Allie, don't you?" Vresh answered taking a seat on the large couch. Tahl, who was already seated on the couch, passed him a fresh mug of strong, dark tea. Qui-Gon sat in his arm chair to the left of the pair.

"Your first padawan? Like I could forget. For years Allie and Jena were inseparable," Qui-Gon said with a chuckle of nostalgia and a wistful look in his eyes. "I didn't know she was in Temple."

"Here for a tenday between missions. Thought she check up on her old master," Vresh laughed, but as he looked around his expression immediately sobered. "Obi-Wan?"

"Spending some much-needed time with his friends," Qui-Gon answered. Tahl turned to Vresh.

"Friends and a Temple Guard," she added dryly.

"I will not leave him unprotected."

"You really think Xanatos will try again?" Vresh asked setting down his mug on the low table. Qui-Gon responded by sighing heavily, the circles under his eyes seeming to darken dramatically.

"He's already tried twice in less than a tenday. I would be surprised if he did not try again."

"Twice?" both Tahl and Vresh exclaimed simultaneously. Qui-Gon leaned forward in his chair, his elbows resting on his knees, his fingers raking over his face in exhaustion.

"His first night out of the ward Obi-Wan told me he thought Xanatos was in the Temple. I told him it was just a nightmare. I have come to believe I was wrong."

"Why? What changed?" Tahl inquired mildly as she pulled one of his hands away from his face and covered it with her own. It was a simple gesture of comfort and the master welcomed it.

"It seems that Obi-Wan can sense his presence even if we cannot."

"How?" Vresh asked.

"We don't know for certain, but Yoda suspects... Dar'Markai."

Silence descended, its presence as heavy and dark as the words that preceded it. Stars were born, burned, and died in thick silence such that enveloped them now, cradled to their grave in the infinite vacuum of space. Such was the quiet that enveloped the three masters.

"What do we... How do we...?" Vresh tried, but the necessary words escaped him. Qui-Gon gave him a wry grin.

"I was struck similarly inarticulate when Yoda suggested it to me," he said. Tahl squeezed the hand she still held in her own.

"What's the plan?"

"In a day or two, Yoda and I will perform a mind probe on Obi-Wan to determine if such a bond truly exists."

"And if it does?" Vresh asked. Qui-Gon gave the white-haired master a level gaze.

"We destroy it," he answered, his voice as cold and deadly as a winter on Hoth. Another silence fell, but this time it was Tahl's honeyed voice that broke the quiet.

"Does Obi-Wan know?" she inquired softly. Qui-Gon turned to her, his expression immediately softening under the weight of an ever-present sadness.

"No. I see no reason to frighten him until we know for certain. Until then, we must," he began, but the master was interrupted by the room's wall comm. He rose from his seat and crossed over to the small desk housed beneath the unit. He activated the panel and gasped nearly inaudibly. Nearly. Both masters were on their feet and by his side the moment they heard the sharp intake of air. All three now stared at the small monitor, the figure on the screen smiling serenely back at them.

"Hello, Master..."

Chapter 20: Of Spirits and Specters

Day 121

"Hello, Master..."

"Xanatos," Qui-Gon answered with a thunderous growl. "I have no desire for you to call me by that title."

"But you are my master. You taught me so much."

"I never taught you to be cruel or to torture children," Qui-Gon snapped, but Xanatos remained unperturbed in the face of the master's obvious ire.

"Ah, but you did, Master and it was a lesson I learned very, very, well."

"What do you want?" Qui-Gon ground out, reigning in his temper only because the object of his rage is physically out of his reach. The three masters watched the display as Xanatos seemed to ponder the question for several seconds before answering with a question of his own.

"I could answer that, but I think the more important question is what is it that you want, Master," the dark Jedi said, his cultured, lilting voice grating on Vresh's nerves.

"Stop with the kriffing games and double speak, Xanatos, you will find no appreciative audience here."

Xanatos's head snapped around to meet Vresh's gaze, his eyes flashing with unmitigated fury.

"Silence your dog, Qui-Gon, or I will silence him for you!" the younger man hissed. Vresh stepped in closer to the monitor.

"You're welcome to try you arrogant little Sith shit!" the white-haired master taunted. Qui-Gon stretched an arm in front of Vresh's chest in an obvious "back down" gesture. Vresh responded with an audible 'huff,' but did indeed relent, stepping to a position slightly behind and to the left of Qui-Gon. On the screen, Xanatos nodded in approval and began to smooth imaginary wrinkles on his crisp, black tunic as he reverted to his typical calm and smug demeanor. Qui-Gon reached down within himself to find some calm of his own. In the corner of his eye, he noticed Tahl's slight movements, but before he could give it any further thought, Xanatos cleared his throat in a blatant bid for attention.

"Now, if you can keep your pets properly muzzled," Xanatos said pausing to glare at Vresh who met his gaze with a fire of his own. "I can return to the purpose of this call."

"Which is?"

"To extend an invitation. I would like to see you again, Master and I'm certain you are anxious to see me."

"When and where?" Qui-Gon inquired in a rumbling baritone.

"When? Now. As for where... I'd imagine Master Tahl is finished tracing the transmission by now," he answered with a sly grin. Qui-Gon turned to Tahl who nodded then he turned back to the monitor.

"I'm on my way," he said and Xanatos gave a slight bow.

"See you soon, my Master," he replied abruptly ending the transmission. Qui-Gon placed both hands on the desk and leaned forward, his head hanging down and his eyes closed. He found himself taking several deep breaths before he trusted himself to speak.

"How far?"

"Not very," Tahl answered. "Less that half an hour by air-car if we ignore traffic regulations."

Qui-Gon nodded and stood up straight, but he had yet to face his friends and fellow Jedi.

"I'm going," he said as he turned to move towards the main door of his quarters, but Vresh crossed in front of him placing a halting hand on his chest.

"Not alone you're not," Vresh stated. The restraining hand he placed was soft, but his voice was pure durasteel. Tahl stepped closer to the two masters and placed her hand on Qui-Gon's shoulder.

"He's right. In addition to this being an obvious trap, there's no reason for you to face him alone," she added.

"I know," Qui-Gon replied with a sigh. He finally met the eyes of his friends, lingering a bit on Tahl's stripped eyes. "Vresh will accompany me. You will stay here."

"The hell I will, Qui-Gon Jinn! If you think for one second I'm going to just sit here and," Tahl yelled, but her tirade was cut short by a single finger placed gently upon her lips.

"I need you here to protect Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said with a rueful smile. "This is likely a trap as you say and I do not want him left unprotected while I am away. That could be exactly what Xanatos wants. I am trusting you to keep him safe."

The expression on Tahl's face noticeably softened as the impact of Qui-Gon's words, Qui-Gon's trust, resonated among the long time agemates.

"Alright," she replied, "but you two better keep each other safe and I'm telling Mace... after you leave the building."

"Better to beg forgiveness and all that," Vresh said as he gestured to the door. Qui-Gon grabbed his cloak and tossed Vresh his own.

"Let's go."

* * * * *

"They did what?!" the Korun Councilor yelled. Tahl watched with semi-amusement as Mace paced the short distance of his office. It was not often that this particular Jedi lost his cool and the few times he had, Tahl noted wryly, the cause was usually tied to Qui-Gon, Vresh, or the pair. This time was no different. Mace paused in the middle of his third lap. He hung his head and took a deep slow and even breath. With a heavy sigh he sank into the chair behind his desk in boneless exasperation.

"You should not have let them go without telling the Council."

"I'm telling you."

"Yes, conveniently after they have already gone," he answered dryly. Tahl shrugged innocently.

"It was a long walk from Jinn's quarters."

"I don't suppose you will tell me where they went so I can at least send them some support teams?"

Tahl shook her head, the amusement from earlier vanishing from her eyes.

"No, besides, the Jedi we need are better used here. Qui-Gon tasked me with protecting Obi-Wan in his absence in case this meeting is just a lure to expose the boy. I'm headed to him as soon as you're done being shocked and stubborn," she replied. Mace's characteristic scowl deepened.

"I've assigned a Temple Guard to him and we have several extra security measures in place."

"But we still don't know how he keeps getting inside."

"I know," the Councilor mumbled.

"No one blames you, Mace. Not even Qui."

"Doesn't matter. It's happening on my watch, Tahl. I blame myself," he said then he leaned forward on his desk interlacing his fingers. "What do you have in mind?"

* * * * *

Qui-Gon was pushing the Temple's air-car as fast as he dared go, which was still far too fast for Vresh's tastes. The other master's pallor was almost as pale as his hair as Qui-Gon sent the car into a steep dive, cutting through several lanes of busy Coruscant traffic. Even with Jedi traffic overrides and expert piloting, if not for Qui-Gon's judicious use of the Force, Vresh was certain the two masters would have been the main combustible in a fantastic mid-air explosion. As it was, the only things threatening to explode at the moment were the contents of Vresh's stomach as Qui-Gon banked another hard left. Vresh closed his eyes and actively tamped down another wave of nausea. If Qui-Gon noticed the slightly greenish tinge to his friend's normally golden skin he didn't mention it. Instead he held the steering controls in a white-knuckle death grip as he deftly maneuvered through a dozen lanes of traffic earning the two Jedi scores of screamed invectives in a multitude of languages; most of which he recognized, a few he didn't. Qui-Gon glanced down at his console then he looked around, surveying the immediate area.

"There!" he yelled pointing towards a squat, non-descript building to the left and below them several levels. He directed the air-car to the building roof top via another steep dive that almost ended his friend's battle against nausea. He parked the vehicle and jumped out of his seat in one smooth motion. Vresh followed behind a moment later though with noticeably less grace as he finally forced his stomach to settle and set his mind to the task at hand. Qui-Gon spared him a glance and noticed for the first time his friend's compromised complexion.

"Are you alright?" he asked. Vresh nodded.

"Yes, but the next time I drive," he answered dryly. To this Qui-Gon only lifted an eyebrow before turning to the door ahead of them leading down into the building. He laid his hand across the smooth durasteel and closed his eyes reaching out with his senses and the Force. He opened his eyes and looked over his shoulder at Vresh who looked better than he did only seconds ago.

"I don't sense any immediate danger, but I don't sense anyone inside either," he said. Vresh rested his hand casually on the hilt of his lightsaber.

"Well, we did say this was going to be a trap. We're here, might as well spring it," Vresh responded. Qui-Gon turned back to the door. He easily overrode the simple locking

mechanism with a touch of Force and they stepped into the semi-dark interior of the building. The access door led the pair down a narrow stairway. The way was dark, but not too dark to see as some of the glow lights were still functional. Slowly, the Jedi made their way down, their every sense on high alert. The two moved quietly down the many empty corridors of the small structure. Most of the rooms they encountered were empty or, conversely, filled to overflowing with random bits of broken furniture or pieces of equipment. They turned left down one hall to explore a room that dead ended the passage. Qui-Gon stepped inside first, his eyes sweeping over the spartan scene. There was a chair, a desk, and... a cell.

"Force, this is where he kept him," Vresh whispered. "He was less than an hour away from the Temple the entire time."

Qui-Gon didn't answer. He stepped inside the tiny cell kneeling down on the floor, his hand gently touching the dingy, flat mattress near the wall. When he pulled his hand back, Vresh could see a slight tremble to its features.

"He was so close," Qui-Gon murmured. Vresh put a hand on his friend's shoulder, but said nothing. Qui-Gon rose to his feet and they left the room and continued their search of the facility. Several twists and turns away, the two Jedi entered a large room. The Force around them swirled and surged violently against their shields. They moved throughout the space noting the lack of furniture or equipment. In fact, the room only boasted one chair and a pair of restraints hanging from the ceiling and another complimentary set bolted to the floor. Vresh's breath hitched in his throat at the sudden realization.

"You feel it too, don't you?" Qui-Gon asked his voice strangely distant despite their proximity.

"Yes."

"He tortured him in this room... I can still hear..." he started, but was unable to finish as Force echoes of his padawan's screams and pleas stormed unimpeded through his mind. Vresh grabbed him by the arm and pulled him bodily from the room.

"That's enough, Qui. Let's keep moving," he said and after a moment to collect himself, Qui-Gon nodded and they resumed their search. Finally, they entered an oval shaped room with a polished floor and high ceilings, but it was not the décor that caught the Jedi's attention. It was the young man standing at the door opposite, lightsaber in hand, but not yet lit.

"So good to see you again, Master. It's been too long," Xanatos smirked. Qui-Gon, still reeling from the torture room's psychic residue, growled primally in response.

"Tell me why I shouldn't run you through with my lightsaber right now?"

"Because that doesn't seem very Jedi," Xanatos answered innocently. Though intended as a taunt, the words smacked against Qui-Gon's anger dissipating it with its truth. He closed his eyes and took a calming breath. When opened them again, he was more focused and resolved to get the answers he had come for and perhaps the justice he desired as well.

"Why? Why did you take him? He was no threat to you. The conflict was between us."

"You brought him in to our 'conflict' as you call it, Master, not me."

"What do you mean?" Qui-Gon asked stepping forward slightly, but not impinging on the great distance between the master and former padawan. Vresh hovered silently to his left, his Force signature fairly rippling with unexpressed irritation.

"You were the one who betrayed me, remember? You were the one who forced me down a path I never wanted... a path without my father or the Jedi. That was your doing. You cost me my future it was only fair that I took away your own," Xanatos hissed.

"It wasn't my future you endangered, Xanatos. It was a thirteen year old boy's," Qui-Gon countered surprisingly calm.

"Your padawans are your future, Qui-Gon. We are your thrice damned legacy," the fallen apprentice retorted and Qui-Gon could feel some of his control slipping as the young man's words tore through his heart and soul far too easily.

"So that was your plan? To break the boy down with pain and fear so thoroughly that he can no longer pick up a lightsaber?"

"Can he not?" Xanatos said pausing. That was something he did not know and he mulled over it for a few seconds before responding further. "Interesting... But yes, my intent was to ensure that he would never become a Jedi, but you see, here is where it gets really interesting, Master mine. Little Obi-Wan can still become a man, sane, healthy, recovered... all you have to do is let him. But I know you. That is something you will never do and so, ultimately, it won't be my hand that truly breaks the boy. It will be yours."

Qui-Gon's control broke completely as the shock of Xanatos's words cause him to stagger where he stands, his knees almost giving out on him. Vresh stepped closer to him, adding his strength to Qui-Gon's even as he attempted to distract their opponent to give his friend time to recover.

"Who taught you the Dar'Makai?"

"No one gave you permission to speak, dog! Next time there will be consequences!" Xanatos yelled. Hearing his former pupil lose some of his control helped to restore a bit of his own balance. Qui-Gon patted Vresh on the shoulder, letting him know that he was okay then he turned his attention back to his former student.

"He asks a good question. You certainly didn't learn it from me," he stated. Xanatos smiled at him in a way that made the hairs stand up on the back of his neck.

"I said that you are my master. I never said you were my only master," he answered, but Qui-Gon was far from satisfied.

"Why? Why bond with him? If it is like you said that I will be the one...," he faltered unable to voice the fear Xanatos had successfully planted within him, "why do this?"

"Insurance," he answered simply.

"I don't..." Qui-Gon responded, shaking his head. Xanatos's grin only became wider and more disquieting.

"Understand? You will, only when you do it will be too late. The great Qui-Gon Jinn Jedi failure to the last," he replied with a smirk seeing in his former master's eyes that he had indeed hit a nerve. Vresh whispered in his ear.

"Don't listen to him, Qui."

"Penalty!" Xanatos barked. Before either master could say anything a ray shield sprang to life dividing the space between them in half, blocking off any expectation the Jedi might have had about following him out of the complex or apprehending him. Without another word, Xanatos grinned wickedly at Vresh before sauntering causally out of the room. Just as the door slid closed behind, Qui-Gon gasped and fell heavily to his knees. Vresh grabbed him by the shoulders, but his friend's eyes were wide, unfocused, and unseeing, his expression one of utter panic.

"What? What is it, Qui?"

"Oh Gods..." Qui-Gon whispered. "I can't feel him... I can't feel Obi-Wan..."

Chapter 21: Minding the Gap

Day 121

Tahl took in a deep breath and allowed her senses to immerse her fully within the moment. The various fragrances of the vibrant and verdant life around her wafted gently through the air carried on subtle, but pleasant breezes that tickled her skin and lightly lifted the occasional errant wisps of hair that framed her face. There was a delicate sweetness in the air that danced across her lips and tongue with each soft stir of the qualla tree blossoms behind her, but the most pleasing gift to her senses laid several meters before her. The sight of four smiling young faces, the peals of laughter in high pitched adolescent tones, the cradling currents of the Force binding the four together in joy, those were all wondrous to behold and Tahl reveled in the serenity of the moment.

It was peaceful.

It was normal.

And naturally, it was short lived.

Tahl was pulled from her quiet enjoyment as her comm. beeped insistently. She activated the small device hoping the tiny tendril of fear that spiked in her mind was unwarranted.

“Uvain.”

“Tahl? Oh, thank the Force!”

“Vresh? What’s going on? Are you okay?” she asked standing up and moving further away from the group of Jedi youths.

“That’s what I was going to ask you,” Vresh’s voice answered over her comm. His voice was even, but Tahl knew him well enough to hear the undercurrent of worry in his strong tenor.

“Is Obi-Wan...”

“Obi-Wan is fine. What’s going on, Vresh?”

“Are you certain?” he continued, ignoring her question entirely. “Be certain, Tahl.”

“I’m certain,” she replied slightly annoyed at the continuing lack of information. “I’m looking at him right now. He’s sitting and talking with his friends. Now, tell me what the hell is going on? What did,” she stopped and the pause caused the tension in Vresh’s voice to become nearly palpable.

“What? What’s happening? Tahl!”

“Hush. Give me a sec,” she answered and she promptly put her friend on mute as Master Windu and Master Rhara hastily approached her. Mace’s scowl was at its finest.

“What happened?” he asked skipping all attempts at pretext or pleasantries. Both masters were anxiously surveying the scene, scrutinizing the group of four carrying on obliviously some meters away. Tahl placed her hands on her hips.

“Why does everyone keep asking me that? Nothing’s happened here,” she said then she glanced at Clee Rhara and back to Mace. “Why don’t you tell me what’s supposed to be happening.”

Mace turned to Clee who nodded and relaxed. Slightly. He then turned his attention back to Tahl.

“For a moment, Clee lost all bond contact with her padawan, Muln,” he replied gesturing subtly with his chin toward the group of friends. Out of the four, only one other was a padawan like Obi-Wan and that was Garen Muln. The others, Reeft and Bant Eerin, were still initiates though Tahl suspected that wouldn’t be true for either of them much longer.

“And now?” Tahl asked the fiery haired master.

“It’s back to normal. I don’t even think he noticed,” Clee answered. Tahl thumbed the mute on her comm.

“...don’t answer me right now, I swear I will reach through this comm. and,”

“Qui-Gon, shut up. I’ve taken you off mute,” she said then she paused to make certain he was listening. “Now tell me, did you lose contact with Obi-Wan?”

“Yes. Is he alright?”

“He’s fine,” Tahl answered quickly. “And now? Can you sense him now?” Tahl felt the Force stir silently around her. She gave a quick shake of her head and the Force settled once again. More security had arrived.

“No. I still feel nothing. It’s almost like... Tahl, tell me you have him, that he’s okay, that he’s,”

“Qui, would you like to speak with him?” Tahl inquired knowing he could hear the smile and gentle teasing in her voice.

"I..." a long pause followed before Qui-Gon spoke again. "No, if he is... I won't alarm him," he said finally. Mace stepped forward so he could be plainly heard over the small device.

"Qui-Gon, do you have him?"

Another long pause.

"No," was the clipped response that followed then there was a brief rustling as the communication unit changed hands.

"Mace?"

"Vresh," the Councilor responded. "I want you two back at the Temple as soon as possible. There are... things we need to discuss."

"Alright," Vresh agreed cautiously, "but first you should send a team or two here. We found where Xanatos was keeping him."

"I'll dispatch two teams immediately. May the Force be with you."

"And with you, my friend."

* * * * *

"I'm hungry."

"You're always hungry, Reeft," Bant sighed amusingly as she lay on her back and stared at the artificial sky above. All four friends had adopted similar poses choosing simply to lie down, relax, and enjoy one another's company, but one of the four had become disturbed despite the languid peace of the afternoon. It did not go unnoticed.

"Garen?" the Dressellian called, his wrinkled visage furrowing even more in his frown. "Is something wrong?"

The dark-haired human was sitting up, his gaze directed to a small corner of the placid lake front.

"Huh?" he answered distractedly. "I... uh... What is my master doing here with Master Windu and Master Uvain?" he spoke to no one in particular. Obi-Wan rocketed to his feet. Instinctively, he reached across the bond and was greeted with a cold and familiar void. Bant was on her feet in the next instant as she watched her friend go very pale.

"Obi?" her soft, worried tone captured the attention of the remaining pair. Garen, who was closest to him, could see the fine tremors that began to rock his friend's frame. He reached out a steadying arm and clasped Obi-Wan by his bicep. Reflexively, Garen called out to his master though the bond they shared. He then returned his attention to the tremulous form of his best friend.

"Obi-Wan, what's wrong?"

The only answer the padawan gave was the panicked laden mantra repeated in barely whispered breaths of "not again not again not again not again."

* * * * *

"None of this makes any sense," Mace grumbled, his frustration leaking uncharacteristically into his voice. "How is Xanatos affecting the training bonds and why Padawan Muln? How does he fit into all,"

/Master! Something's wrong with Obi-Wan!/"

"Something's happened," Clee Rhara interrupted as she pushed past the two masters and made a hurried beeline for the three youths who now stood huddled around the fourth; their fear and concern fairly rippling through the Force. Despite Clee's head start, Tahl was the first to reach the group. She immediately fell to one knee, grabbed Obi-Wan by his shoulders, and spun him around to face her. All she saw was abject terror in those saucer wide, blue-gray eyes.

"Obi-Wan, what is it? What's wrong?" Tahl asked then she hesitated and unconsciously tightened her grip. "Obi-Wan, do you sense him? Is Xanatos here?"

"No," he answered shaking his head, but the motion was jerky and automaton like.

"Then what is it, young one?"

"I can't feel him. I can't feel my master. It's happening again," he whispered and Tahl could feel his body shudder under her hands.

"No, Obi-Wan. It's not happening again. You're here with us and you're safe," she replied. Tahl paused for a moment, a smile creeping across her face. "Would it ease your mind if you could speak with him?" she asked and, if it were possible, the boy's eyes grew even wider, but this time they shined with hope and not fear. He nodded quickly. Tahl pulled out her comm. and punched in the familiar sequence.

"Jinn," came an immediate baritone response and just as speedily Tahl could feel a bit of the tension in the frame under her remaining hand ease ever so slightly.

"Qui, it's Tahl. You have someone who would like to speak with you," she stated then she passed the comm. to Obi-Wan who took it so gently the motion was bordering on reverential.

"Master?"

"Padawan?"

"Are you alright?" / "Are you alright?" both asked simultaneously. It took all of Tahl's years of training for her to stifle the chuckle that surged from inside her chest. The master recovered first.

"I'm fine, Padawan. Is everything alright with you?"

"Master," Obi-Wan started meeting with some minor success at calming his voice. "I can't feel anything through the bond. It feels like before..." The battle for calm was lost as a sudden tightness claimed his throat cutting off the fearful words before he had chance to speak them.

"Padawan, close your eyes."

"Master?"

"Close your eyes, Obi-Wan," his master repeated gently. The apprentice obeyed and closed his eyes, his hands now holding the small communication device in a white knuckled death grip.

"Reach out, Obi-Wan. Can you feel the Force around you?"

"I..." he began as he stretched forward with a tentative tendril of his mind to touch the Force around him secretly afraid that he would not find the great majesty his had lived in all his life, but instead find the void that haunted him during his time with Xanatos. Still, he obeyed his master, he reached out and touched... the warm currents that had cradled him from his earliest memories... and yet something was... wrong.

"Yes, Master, I can feel the Force, but..."

"But what, Padawan?"

"But... things are," Obi-Wan paused, his youthful brow creasing beyond his years as he searched for the right words. "Things are missing."

"Missing?" Qui-Gon repeated. "Missing how?"

"Dear Force, he's right!" Clee exclaimed. "How did we not notice that?"

"Not notice what? What's happening," Qui-Gon barked out over the comm., the tiny speaker doing nothing to mask his exasperation and concern. This time Tahl answered him.

"We can't sense anything beyond this room, Qui-Gon. None of us can."

"If there is some sort of Force shield in place... it is very subtle. I sense nothing out of the ordinary..."

"Other than the fact that we can't sense what we should," Clee amended. Mace nodded.

"Though it would explain the bond interruption of both padawans," Mace offered, speaking his mind, but clearly still deep in thought.

"Vresh and I will arrive at the Temple shortly."

"We are at the lake, Qui," Tahl spoke into the comm. though she left the device in Obi-Wan's hands.

"Padawan?"

"Yes, Master," he responded, his eyes glued to the technology held tightly between his fingers.

"It's not the same. Remember that."

"Yes, Master."

* * * * *

The flight back to the Temple was a hurried one, but not nearly as frantic as the trip out, a distinction for which Vresh's stomach was immensely grateful. The trip was also an exceedingly quiet one, excluding Obi-Wan's call, for which Qui-Gon was immensely grateful. Far too many unnamed, unsettled emotions dominated the master's mind allocating only a precious few resources towards safely steering the two Jedi home.

When he finally returned the air-car to the vehicle bay, Qui-Gon's dismount was only marginally slower than his debarking at Xanatos's den. Only when the pair entered the Temple proper did the dark-haired master slow his pace to something more resembling Jedi serenity. The two masters conducted themselves down the long and winding halls unhurriedly, but with long and ardent strides that fairly broadcasted their attention to a singular purpose leaving them assiduously unmolested as they traveled towards their destination. Still, Qui-Gon felt something was off as they passed near several of the more

populated areas of the Temple. He was still trying to pin down the “off-ness,” when Vresh grabbed his arm pulling him abruptly to a halt.

“I wasn’t sure before, but I’m sure now,” Vresh started, answering the question Qui-Gon had no chance to voice. “There are... holes in the Force here. Gaps. A lot of them. What in the Seven Sith Hells did that prissy little bantha shit do?” he asked looking to his friend for answers he was quite certain the man didn’t have.

“I don’t know... This,” Qui-Gon gestured vaguely. “None of this is like him... He does not seem like the same man I encountered on Bandomeer.”

“Recognizing what Xanatos is and is not has never been one of your strong suits, Qui,” Vresh retorted. Qui-Gon shook his head.

“I already underestimated his need for vengeance and the depth of his cruelty,” Qui-Gon sighed. “Now it seems I have underestimated his abilities as well.”

“Stop it,” Vresh snapped. He gripped the arm under his fingertips so hard he knew he would leave bruises. To his credit, Qui-Gon did not respond to the pain, instead he glanced at his friend in confusion.

“Stop what?”

“Stop blaming yourself for what’s happening. This is Xanatos doing what he does best.”

“And that is?” Qui-Gon asked warily. Vresh let go of his arm and tapped a solitary finger against Qui-Gon’s temple.

“Getting in here and mucking about until you lose yourself to his madness,” Vresh answered as he stepped in closer to his friend, his voice lowering significantly as he continued. “We lost you to that quagmire of guilt for eight years, Qui-Gon, and I’ll give up my lightsaber before I watch that happen again. So, you make a choice and you make it right now. Either you live for Obi-Wan here in this moment or you live for Xanatos and continue to mourn the man you thought he was. What will it be?”

He was right, damn him. Vresh was right and Qui-Gon knew it as he stared into the hard, silvery eyes of one of his best friends. How much of himself had he already given over the years to the memory of a padawan he no longer had, whom he never had really? Vresh had named it exactly. He still mourned and in that mourning he also held stubbornly to the guilt of his failure. Almost a decade later and the pale skinned, blue eyed man he once thought of as a son still commanded him, still had power over him, but now it had to stop. Qui-Gon knew in his heart that he could no longer afford the indulgence of his self-imposed penance.

He had Obi-Wan now and Obi-Wan deserved better than half a master.

With only a breath, Qui-Gon felt the subtle shift within himself as he finally followed his own oft repeated mantra. He chose to live in that moment and in that moment Xanatos was no more than a monster; a dangerous animal that must be put down. Nothing more or less. The master was surprised when that thought was not accompanied by the usual sharp, sudden stab of pain. He only felt a twinge of regret, but even that feeling was surrounded by an overwhelming sense of calm resolve.

Vresh easily noted the change in his friend's Force aura. He allowed himself a smile as he stepped back from his friend while still regarding him thoughtfully.

"I'm glad you made the right decision because if you hadn't, I would have had no choice but to take your lightsaber and stab you squarely in the balls."

Qui-Gon's face remained carefully neutral save for a single quirked eyebrow.

"And may I ask why my lightsaber and why my balls?" he asked his manner surprisingly dignified despite the subject matter. Vresh gave an expression of feigned incredulity.

"If you think I would allow my lightsaber to come anywhere near your testicles you are quite mistaken, my friend, and as for why stab you in the nuts to begin with?" Vresh replied with a shrug. "It seemed to be the sufficiently ill-mannered choice."

"Ill-mannered indeed," Qui-Gon responded dryly. "Shall we proceed to my padawan or do you have more threats of a rather intimate nature to cast my way?"

"Lead on, oh supremely uncastrated one," Vresh answered with a sweeping bow. Qui-Gon rolled his eyes as he turned to resume their trek to the Temple's lake room.

When the two masters entered the area, Vresh immediately noted that the two initiates, the Mon Cal female and the Dressellian male, were gone and in their place there were four new Jedi, in addition to the three masters already present. Vresh felt a slight prickling at his Force sense. He leaned his head nearer to Qui-Gon's.

"Shadows," he whispered conspiratorially, but Qui-Gon wasn't listening. His entire attention was focused on the bright flame of his padawan's presence that sparked to life the moment he crossed the threshold to the scenic area.

At the same moment, Obi-Wan looked to see his master's approach and what Jedi decorum frowns on physically, the master and apprentice engage in mentally as the two minds met each other in a crushing embrace.

Qui-Gon and Vresh approached the group of Jedi. Clee and her padawan, Garen Muln, Mace, Lo-Cha, Tahl, and Obi-Wan all stood in a semi-circle waiting patiently for the newcomers to join them. Obi-Wan crossed over to his master who pulled the boy to him,

turning the teen's back to his chest and placing his hands on his shoulders in a clearly protective stance.

"Your bond?" Mace asked.

"Back to normal," he answered, but before he could continue Vresh took a small step forward.

"But there's more," he started waiting for acknowledgement from Mace before proceeding. Mace gave him a nod and Vresh began to recount his earlier observations. "As we moved through the Temple just now, Qui-Gon and I encountered other... gaps in the Force."

"More shielded areas?" Mace inquired. Vresh nodded.

"That's my thought. The gaps seem to be in the most populated areas as well."

"That would make sense," Lo-Cha began as he absently tapped the tip of his left cranial horn in thought. "If Xanatos doesn't actually know where to locate Kenobi within the Temple then placing Force shields at specific popular locations would greatly increase his odds of catching the boy within one of the zones. Depending on the number of locations, such a plan could prove reliable though not fool-proof."

"Not to mention that the lack of Force awareness outside of the given zone would be more difficult to notice in high traffic areas," Clee added.

"Have we confirmed the shield theory?" Qui-Gon asked. Lo-Cha turned to greet an approaching young Cathar knight.

"I think that Knight Vor may have your answer, Master Jinn," Lo-Cha said as he gestured to the knight in question. "You've found something, Taylen?"

"Yes, Master Lo-Cha," the Jedi purred as she handed the master a small rectangular device. "This is a Force shield generator though I've never seen one quite like it. It's omnidirectional and Force camouflaged. This is a piece of highly sophisticated equipment," the knight said.

"That means it's not cheap. Only a few people could make it and even fewer could afford to buy it," Garen interjected then suddenly flushed when the eyes of six masters and one knight all fell on him. "Sorry," he mumbled. Tahl smiled.

"Don't apologize, Padawan. That is a very astute and likely very correct observation," she said and instantly the dark-haired boy was beaming though he was trying very hard not to show it.

“Master Rhara’s cub is right. Oh I bet Acks’na can’t wait to get his hands on this baby; all six of them. I’m sure he’ll get us some answers regarding the manufacturer,” Taylen said as Lo-Cha passed the small, flat device to Mace who turned it over several times in his hands before returning it to Lo-Cha.

“Give to Master Ortan before you let Bin take it apart. Her skills in psychometry may yield some information of its own,” Mace stated. Lo-Cha nodded and placed the unit back in Taylen’s furry hand.

“I’ll see to it, Master Windu,” she replied then she bowed respectfully to the group. “Master Lo-Cha, Masters,” she said in parting then she turned and left to see to her task.

“Did you note which areas of the Temple had the gaps you experienced?”

“Out of the areas we passed, the lower salles, the main refectory, and the junior padawan lounges,” Vresh answered. Lo-Cha tapped something into the small datareader he produced from his belt.

“I’ll add all but the private salles and masters’ retreats. That leaves the archives, Healer’s Ward, main meditation gardens, the pools, and the master/padawan residence,” Lo-Cha listed as he gestured to a nearby knight and handed him the newly issued orders. Only Qui-Gon noticed the sudden tension in Obi-Wan or heard the small, sharp intake of breath the boy gave at the Security Master’s list of locations.

/Padawan?/

/Sorry, Master. I just don’t like the idea of him being in our rooms... again./

Qui-Gon gave the slender shoulders under his hands a reassuring squeeze.

/I know, Padawan. I dislike the notion as well, but forewarned is forearmed./

/Yes, Master./

“Qui-Gon,” Mace called as he waited for the tall master’s attention. “I do not believe it wise to wait any longer.”

Qui-Gon sighed heavily.

“I know,” he said. “We will do it now, I just need a few moments to... prepare,” he answered and Mace nodded knowingly, his expression a mixture of pertinacity and sorrow. Qui-Gon glanced down at his apprentice.

“Come, Padawan. We have much to discuss.”

Chapter 22: Violations

Day 121

When the master and padawan returned to their quarters, Qui-Gon wasted no time sitting the teen down on the couch and placing a hot cup of tea in his hands. This had not been a conversation the master had looked forward to, but on the heels of discovering just how deep Xanatos's infiltration into the Temple went he knew Mace was right and this, however unpleasant and unwanted it would be, could no longer be delayed. So, the master sat across from his apprentice, opened the bond wider to send continuous waves of calm reassurance and love as he prepared to deliver what he was certain would be a horrendous blow to the child's already dangerously delicate sense of safety.

Qui-Gon recounted to his apprentice the boy's first "nightmare" and then his uncanny ability to sense Xanatos's presence when the other masters could not. He delivered all of this in soothing tones, carefully leading the boy up to where Yoda had made his blood chilling speculation.

He told the boy of the suspected Dar'Makai.

Once the dreaded words were spoken, Qui-Gon had expected the boy to experience any number of intense reactions; rage, panic, fear, confusion, hell's even hysteria, but what the master was not prepared for was silence. Now, the silence had stretched for several minutes and the master was uncertain if he should disturb the delicate quiet. Obi-Wan said nothing. Instead, the boy simply sat there staring not quite at the floor, his breathing so soft it was barely noticeable. Qui-Gon forced himself to resist the urge to shift uneasily in his chair. Gently, delicately, the master stretched himself out across the bond trying to feel a hint of what his padawan was experiencing, but again he found himself locked out by, what he now notices were, shields too impossibly thick and complex for his padawan's current level of skill. The revelation and the implications that followed sent a chilling tremor through the master's heart.

Finally, the master could sit patiently no longer. He moved before his apprentice, kneeling closely to the boy as he took two smaller hands into his.

"Padawan?" he asked tenderly. Obi-Wan blinked owlishly once, then twice as if he was suddenly emerging from a long daze or trance. Qui-Gon gave him a chance to focus as he worriedly awaited those familiar blue-gray eyes to rise and meet his own, but the boy's gaze remained doggedly fixed to a low space in front of him.

"Master Yoda thinks that he... that Xanatos formed a bond with... me," he spoke, his voice flat and even, less a quality of Jedi serenity as emotional sterility. It was a quality that frightened his master.

"He does," the master answered still trying to read something in the boy's reaction or lack thereof as it was.

"Do you?" Obi-Wan asked, again his voice cold, lifeless. The master heaved a quiet mental sigh. He would not lie to his apprentice even as this was a truth he wished he could hide from them both.

"I do," he answered and Obi-Wan gave a short nod. Qui-Gon frowned, his concern increasing steadily. "Padawan, look at me please," he ordered albeit gently. Slowly, the boy raised his gaze to meet that of his master's. Qui-Gon quickly suppressed the gasp that sought to escape his lips as he beheld the hollow eyes of his padawan. No. Not hollow. It was worse than hollow. What the master saw before him was empty and lifeless. His was looking into dead eyes.

"Padawan," the master began. He took a moment and swallowed thickly. "Tell me what you're feeling."

"Feeling?"

"Yes. What are you feeling right now?" Qui-Gon repeated. Obi-Wan stared at him with those big, dead eyes.

"Nothing," was the one word response. Qui-Gon rocked back on his heels, his mouth agape as he realized the statement was more truth than hyperbole. What he felt in Obi-Wan was akin to the "lack" he had sensed in the child back on Bandomeer when Obi-Wan had been suffering from their incomplete bond. He had been known as the "Ghost" then because, while his body seemed alive, his soul seemed all but lost.

Before the master could marshal his senses to make a reply, the door to their quarters slid open revealing the diminutive figure of the Grand Master of their Order.

"Ready you are?" the ancient master asked as he slowly hobbled into the room leaning heavily on his gimer stick. Obi-Wan looked from his master to the Grand Master and back again.

"He's here to take me away," he stated as coldly as ever. Qui-Gon surged forward and grabbed his apprentice by his shoulders.

"Never. I would never let that happen."

"But if I'm dark,"

"You are not dark, Obi-Wan. Whether Xanatos has bonded with you or not, it does not change who you are."

"Then what? What happens now?" he asked. Yoda stepped forward placing his small, gnarled claws atop his stick as he regarded the young Jedi appraisingly.

"Now answers we shall find."

"How?" the boy asked. His master hesitated only for a heartbeat before answering the simple inquiry.

"By performing a mind probe," he replied. He awaited a reaction, but again the master was greeted with only surreal disinterest.

"I see," Obi-Wan responded. He then turned to Yoda who was standing quietly to his left. "You then?" he asked. If the ancient master took offense to the boy's failure to address him by his title, he made no show of it. Instead, he nodded slightly in both answer and acknowledgement.

"Into your mind your master and I will go. Discover the bond if one there is."

"And if there is?"

"We will destroy it," Qui-Gon answered. Yoda spared the younger master a disapproving glance before returning his gimlet gaze to the Jedi youth.

"Find it first we must, then decide what action to take we shall," the ancient master intoned. He waited patiently until he got acknowledging nods from both apprentice and master.

"I will enter your mind first, Padawan, then I will bring in Master Yoda to join me. Remember, we are only looking for the presence of the bond, nothing more, but you will have to lower all but your innermost shields for us to do so."

"I understand, Master," came the response. Still cold. Still even. Still dead. Qui-Gon spared a fleeting glance at the elder Jedi, but quickly brought his attention back to his padawan.

"Close your eyes, Obi-Wan. I want you to relax and breathe deeply. Be at ease, Padawan. Be at ease in the knowledge that you are safe in this space," the master instructed gently, his calming voice all the more effective with the subtle Force suggestion embedded deeply within the spoken words. Obedience and compulsion rendered the apprentice unable to resist his master's orders. As Obi-Wan's eyelids lowered so did most of his mental shields. Qui-Gon closed his own eyes and slowly extended himself across their bond. Bringing Yoda's serene presence behind him, the master stretched further across the bond than he had ever before until the two masters found themselves brushing against thoughts that were not their own.

It was an odd sensation for the younger master to be enmeshed so far into a consciousness not his own. All around them was a tepid emptiness; a darkness born not of malcontent, but the simple absence of matter to fill it. In fact, all that surrounded them were echoes, damp sand left by a receding tide. Then the master understood. Obi-Wan had pulled the great ocean of his thoughts and emotions behind supremely dense inner shields. Qui-Gon's mental presence shuddered at the thought of falling into one's own psyche so deeply, but then again, hadn't he done the same before when no one was inside his mind to notice.

"Different this is," Yoda spoke to him, apparently aware of the master's thoughts. "Hiding from pain you were. Hiding something from us your padawan is."

"His shields are stronger than they should be," Qui-Gon replied not wanting to discuss what private feelings his padawan was deliberately concealing from them.

"Mmm. Yes," Yoda answered, his voice more gravelly than usual. "Energy they are being fed. Find the source and find the bond we will," the wizened master intoned. Qui-Gon focused on the Force, seeking out the various tiny tendrils that intertwined all the energies of a being with both the Force and the greater galaxy of existence.

"There," he said pointing towards a particular strand of energy. The strand was not the same bright and vibrant color of his padawan's life force and aura like the others were. This strand was muted in shadowy red and black, almost invisible against the empty dark of Obi-Wan's unshielded mind. The two masters traveled along the thread allowing it to lead them through the emptiness until they found what they were after. Before them sat the familiar outline of a Force bond, but beyond that bare definition there was little else to be recognized in comparison with the more familiar Force bonds of the Jedi. Where the bond Qui-Gon shared with his apprentice was a bright band of energy shimmering and singing in its intensity, this bond was a dark, shriveled thing where energy dripped down like spilled ink and the bond itself pulsed erratically like the heartbeat of a dying man. The sight nearly made Qui-Gon physically ill. Yoda's ears drooped considerably.

"Wrong I hoped I was. Know how to do this your former padawan should not. A practitioner of the dark arts he has found."

"When I spoke to him he mentioned having another master," Qui-Gon replied still staring at the dark weeping bond in disgust. "You think he found..." The master stopped unable to form the word that had truly not been spoken outside of history lessons and terror tales in almost a thousand years.

"A Sith, yes," Yoda supplied apparently feeling no compunction about saying the word though the tone of the grand master's voice was laden with a sense of quiet foreboding that left Qui-Gon's soul in state of intense disquiet. A sense of outrage quickly rose to overtake the disquiet. The younger master stepped forward towards the shadow bond that was forced on his apprentice. He reached out to touch it, to grasp it with his bare

hands, and rip it out from the roots, but a gimer stick placed before his shins stopped him before he could act.

“Touch it you should not.”

“I mean to do more than touch it, Master,” Qui-Gon snapped, but Yoda’s stick and stare both stayed firm.

“Remove it now, we cannot,” Yoda spoke sadly. Qui-Gon spun around to face the tiny master, his face a contorted mask of shock, horror, and rage.

“I will not leave this... abomination here inside his head! It should not be! No one should have to endure a bonding against his will! Xanatos violated my padawan in the worst possible way. I cannot, I will not leave this thing here!”

“Leave it you must or much worse will the boy suffer. Your anger, worth it is your padawan’s future as a Jedi?” Yoda asked clearly irritated as he brought his stick down before him with a loud clack. Some small part of Qui-Gon’s brain wondered how such an action was capable of making sound in the nothingness of their present location and given their own insubstantive nature, but that line of inquiry was quickly dismissed as he latched on to the implication laced in Yoda’s words.

“What do you mean his future as a Jedi?” he asked, his curiosity warring with righteous fury with no clear victor yet emerging. Yoda sighed wearily shaking his head.

“Impatient you are and failed to see you have. Anchored the bond is. Remove it easily we may not,” the old master replied as he gestured to the Dar’Makai bond with his stick. Qui-Gon took another look at the infernal link. At first it appeared no different than before; the same muted and shadowy colors, the same dripping inky blackness, the same throbbing... Wait. Qui-Gon looked closer. The bond wasn’t dripping, as he first suspected, it was... moving... slinking. Shadowy, razor thin tentacles were reaching down from the bond and wrapping dark ribbons around the bright Force threads running near it. The master traced the most luminous set of strings with his eyes. Those threads, he discovered, connected to a bright star like pulse that could be seen even behind Obi-Wan’s inner shields. Qui-Gon gasped as the realization of what he saw hit his understanding.

“Is that...?”

“Obi-Wan’s Force presence, yes.”

“The bond has... attached itself to him... If I had... Dear Gods....” he whispered as he fell back several steps moving as if he could physically distance himself from the knowledge of the horror he almost inflicted.

"Leave it for now we must, but leave it forever We. Will. Not," the smaller master stated, his words so uncharacteristically vehement Qui-Gon felt hard-pressed to doubt his certainty.

Slowly the two masters left just as they came, crossing back over the training bond and returning to the familiarity of their own consciousnesses. When Qui-Gon opened his eyes his apprentice was still sitting before him, his eyes closed. His master took one of his hands, squeezing it gently.

"Obi-Wan, open your eyes now," he ordered softly. Slowly, as if waking from a deep slumber, heavy lids began to rise revealing the same dead blue-gray orbs that seemed determine to break the master's heart.

"Did you find it?" he asked. Qui-Gon turned to Yoda who nodded solemnly at the boy.

"Find it we did," the grand master answered. Obi-Wan waited to hear more, but when it was clear that nothing further was coming he turned his empty gaze back on his master.

"And?"

Qui-Gon took a deep breath and sent waves of love and reassurance over the bond even as he spoke the words that he knew would inspire feelings of anything but.

"We had to leave it for now, but I promise you, Padawan we will,"

"Save your promises!" Obi-Wan hissed as he leapt to his feet and in an instant, the master realized he had gotten his wish. The boy was at last allowing himself to feel something, but as Qui-Gon's mental shields were battered by the rushing waves of furious anger radiating off the boy like a star going supernova, the master was unable to decide which state was better.

"Padawan," Qui-Gon started as he rotated in his kneeling position to face an apprentice already at the door. Obi-Wan spun around glaring at both masters, his hands curled into fists at his sides.

"Leave me alone! Just leave me alone both of you!" he yelled and in the next heartbeat he was gone, the door sliding closed quietly behind him.

"Go to him," Yoda said. "Decide this moment will his recovery, his future. Everything on this hinges. Go," he repeated and Qui-Gon wasted no more time as he jumped to his feet and raced after his padawan.

Running in the halls of the Temple was not anathema, per se, to the Jedi who resided there. Though it was generally frowned upon as it reflected little of the appropriate Jedi serenity one was expected to exude, such behavior was not wholly unheard of. Chasing someone through the halls of the Temple, however, was a different matter entirely.

Masters, knights, padawans, initiates, and even some support staff watched the two Jedi race by far too agog to step in and involve themselves in the flash drama that sped by them.

During the pursuit, Qui-Gon was careful to not actually catch up with his apprentice permitting a small distance of a few meters between them; close enough to reach the boy quickly, far enough to keep the boy from feeling trapped.

Obi-Wan, of course, noticed none of this, his mind all but consumed with the single command of: RUN! So, run he did, through the halls, down the stairs, past the lifts, around corners pushing, panting, forcing his body to comply with his demands. Then suddenly, Obi-Wan was forced to skid to a stop. His frenzied dash had unwittingly led him to one of the Temple's many hanger bays and the path before him was cut short by a long drop to Coruscant's lower levels. He turned around searching for other paths, other avenues of escape, but there was only one way out and his master already stood there blocking his way. Obi-Wan felt his entire world begin to press and close upon him with each step his master took towards him. He backed up, knowing he had nowhere to go, but unable to stop the reflexive retreat until his booted heels scraped against the edge of the platform.

"Obi-Wan," the master called out, pulling on all of his years of training and discipline to keep his voice calm and even, but his apprentice was having none of it.

"Stay away from me!" he yelled and immediately Qui-Gon halted his advance.

"Padawan, please, let me help you," he entreated. The expression the master saw cross Obi-Wan's face could only be described as incredulous rage.

"Help me? Help me! I HATE you!" he shrieked. "I hate the Jedi! I hate this place and I hate YOU!"

Qui-Gon resisted the urge to flinch at the unabashed intensity and raw fury that was echoed in the Force at the boy's words. The roiling heat of the Force quivered around them could not be dismissed or denied. There was anger here. Fury. Rage. The bands woven around Qui-Gon's heart tightened painfully under the excruciating knowledge that Obi-Wan meant every word he said.

The master, however, could not allow himself to focus on his own pain. Yoda told him that this moment would be the deciding instance, the shatterpoint of his padawan's recovery. He could not, must not fail the boy now.

"Why, Obi-Wan? Why do you hate the Jedi?"

You must have been a truly awful initiate, little Jedi, for the Jedi High Council to have gone to such lengths to get rid of you...

"Why? The Jedi... The Jedi threw me away like I was nothing, like I didn't matter! Oh, he's nearly thirteen, he has visions, he's too weird, too weak, too different and no one wants

him anyway. We can just throw him away, send him to Bandomeer. No one will miss him... no one wants him... no one..." he paused in his rant as sobs began to overwhelm his voice, but Obi-Wan ruthlessly pushed down his despair drawing strength from the burning rage inside him. "But that wasn't enough... No! You had to give me to him! The Jedi," he snarled his lips curling in disgust as if the very word was the foulest of insults. "The Jedi gave me to Xanatos knowing what he would do to me!"

"We did not give you to Xanatos. He took you from us," the master interrupted, his own anger beginning to bleed through his calm veneer.

They abandoned you, little Jedi. They left you... to me...

"Liar!" Obi-Wan yelled. "No one just walks into the Jedi Temple and takes anything! Yoda, the Council, even you... you let him take me!"

"Losing you tore me apart. I spent every day looking for you!"

"But you didn't find me!" Obi-Wan hissed in reply. "Where were you, Master? Where were you when he was doing this to me?" he yelled as he snatched his tunic overhead, flinging it uncaringly over the side of the platform where a gust of wind caught it and carried it away. Obi-Wan stood there, his marked and marred bare chest heaving as he stared daggers at his master.

...we will create something beautiful, something unique. It will be a work of art worthy of presenting to our shared master and you, my little Jedi, will be the canvas...

"Look. At. Me! Look at me and tell me where were you when he was starving me, beating me, torturing me, CARVING ME? Where were you? Where was the Jedi?" he screamed. Qui-Gon wanted to answer, needed to answer, but any response seemed empty and hollow, all explanations rendered meaningless in the face of the boy's horror.

"And then when someone does care enough about me to get me out of that hell and bring me here, you let Xanatos in again! And again! And again!" he screamed and now he was crying; his wealth of rage extinguishing as his anguish washed in like a tide. "And now... now when he's put this thing inside me," he cried pointing to his head, "You... you just leave it there! You won't get it out of me! What did I ever do to make the Jedi hate me so much? I would have left if they had just asked me to... I would have gone away... They didn't have to do this! Why did they do this? Why?"

Then it happened. Such a small thing compared to the great drama playing out about them. A tremor ran through the thigh of his left leg causing his knee to buckle. His balance shifted and Obi-Wan realized he was falling. There was no fear in him only a sort of grim amusement at this last great betrayal of fate and the Force.

Obi-Wan felt the wind rush up to greet him. He closed his eyes and embraced the path that now sped him towards oblivion.

Chapter 23: Keeping Score

Day 121

"And now... now when he's put this thing inside me," he cried pointing to his head, "You... you just leave it there! You won't get it out of me! What did I ever do to make the Jedi hate me so much? I would have left if they had just asked me to... I would have gone away... They didn't have to do this! Why did they do this? Why?"

Then Qui-Gon saw it and, for a moment, his heart seized in his chest. A tremor ran through the boy's left thigh causing his knee to buckle and his body to collapse and fall backwards...

...backwards off the platform...

...Obi-Wan was falling off the platform...

That sudden realization shocked the master's heart back into rhythm as effectively as any defibrillation device ever could. The Force was quiescent around Obi-Wan and the master knew it was because the boy was not interested in trying to save himself. He was content to let himself fall to what he knew was certain death. His master, however, shared no such sentiment. With the immense power born of desperation and the fine control wrought from a lifetime of training, Qui-Gon quickly surrounded the teen's small body in a blanket of Force first stopping him then lifting him back onto the platform. Once again, the boy was safe on solid ground and, in an instant, the master had him safe within the circle of his arms. Qui-Gon knelt fiercely clutching the teen to his body, his thoughts awash with what could have been, with what almost was. So, distracted were his thoughts and so strong his relief that it was several minutes before he noticed the boy was shivering in his embrace; his bare skin raised into pimpled flesh. Qui-Gon removed his cloak and settled it around the boy's chilled frame in one smooth motion. He leaned back slightly, just enough to see the boy's face. Blue-gray eyes rose to meet his deep blues. These were not the dead eyes of before. No, there was feeling in these shimmering orbs, but what was reflected was not the rage from moments ago either. Instead, those eyes only held a desperate weariness and a bottomless despair that stole away the master's breath; the memory of when last the boy looked upon him with those eyes flashed in his mind. He had not seen those eyes since Bandomeer. He had hoped to never see them again.

"Padawan?" he whispered.

"I'm tired, Master," Obi-Wan responded. Without hesitation or even conscious thought, Qui-Gon scooped the boy up in his arms, wrapping him tightly in his cloak, and silently sped them both back to their quarters. Once they returned, the master whisked his apprentice off to his room placing him on the narrow bed, his lean form still tucked neatly within master's oversized cloak. It was only as the master laid the boy down did he note

that the boy was already fast asleep. He took a moment to trace his padawan's brow lightly with a single, calloused finger. Again, the master found himself startled at the youth and vulnerability revealed in his padawan's sleeping visage. Qui-Gon felt a stab of pain as his mind traveled back to those moments on the platform. There was so much hurt, so much pain, so much anger hiding inside the boy only waiting for one last push, one moment of weakness to come rushing out in a torrent of wild emotion. A torrent that nearly cost the boy his life.

Qui-Gon shuddered as he pulled away from the bed, his back pressing against the wall as he slid down bonelessly to the floor. He pulled his long legs into his body, bending at the knee, his feet planted widely apart, his outstretched arms resting over his knees. He hung his head low between his shoulders. He just sat there, unmoving, his body mocking a stillness his mind could not achieve. The master knew he was far too off-centered to meditate, his thoughts and feelings too much of a frenzied jumble to sort and release, so he didn't try. He simply allowed himself to feel, to let his mind and emotions freely run their course without study, without judgment, without control. The practice was decidedly not very Jedi, but nothing in Qui-Gon's experience had prepared him for the profound anger and anguish wrestling within his chest; a depth of pain he had maybe only felt once before with another padawan...

Qui-Gon was startled out of his own head by the warm body pressing in against his side. The master lifted his arm and wrapped it around the youth's shoulders, pulling the still cloaked, still snuggling form even closer.

"You would be more comfortable in your bed," he said though he had no real desire to see the boy move as he found himself enjoying the physical comfort as much, if not more, as the boy.

"No, I wouldn't," Obi-Wan answered softly, but clearly. Qui-Gon said nothing, he merely nodded and the two settled into an almost cloistered silence for several long minutes. Surprisingly, it was his padawan who broke the uneasy quiet.

"I don't hate you, Master."

"Padawan..."

"No," Obi-Wan interrupted twisting his body within his master's embrace so he could look the man in his face. "I want you to know that I don't hate you. I am ... angry with you, Master, but... I don't hate you. I could never hate you," he finished and Qui-Gon could clearly hear what was not said.

"And the Jedi? Do you hate the Jedi, Padawan?" the master asked. Obi-Wan ducked his head tucking it into the nook between his master's chest and shoulder.

"I don't know," he answered finally and they both realized that it was the truth. "I want to trust them... the Jedi... the... Council, but when I think about them I have all these

different... feelings screaming inside of me," he paused then sighed. "I don't know what I'm supposed to feel anymore. I'm... I'm sorry."

Qui-Gon reached with his free hand and tucked a large finger under the dipped, cleft chin nudging it upwards until the boy was looking at him.

"No, Obi-Wan. Never apologize for your feelings whatever they may be. They are yours and you have a right to feel them."

"But I thought we weren't supposed to feel these things as Jedi."

"We are Jedi, Obi-Wan, but we are also human, which means we can and must allow ourselves to feel a great many things, but because we are Jedi we must never allow our emotions to rule us or otherwise govern our actions. That power we give only to those we serve, the Republic, the Council, and the Force itself."

The boy was quiet for several minutes mulling over his master's words or so Qui-Gon assumed, but when his apprentice spoke again he knew his assumption was wrong.

"Do you trust the Council, Master?"

"Yes, Padawan. I do. I may not always agree with them," the master added wryly, "but I do trust them."

Obi-Wan turned again to look at him his wide, guileless eyes asking the same question that fell from his lips.

"Why?"

Qui-Gon gave the question serious thought before he answered and even then his words were measured and careful.

"I trust the Council because I believe that they, at their cores, are servants of the Force and beings of light. I believe that we all want the same ends of justice and peace and I believe that their experience and deep connection with the Force has made them some of the wisest and most powerful among us."

"Some of the wisest and most powerful among us," Obi-Wan repeated emotionlessly.

"Yes, I believe it to be so."

"And yet Xanatos was able to elude them all," the apprentice intoned. It was not a question, but his master answered it anyway.

"Yes, he did," he stated. Obi-Wan held his master's gaze in a soft, yet no less demanding stare.

“How?”

“I... I don’t know,” the master said quietly. Obi-Wan dropped his gaze, his voice equally low when he spoke.

“That’s why I can’t trust them.”

* * * * *

Day 143

“Aw man, my master would leave me to go on a mission alone just when Master Taffa decides we need to write a paper on the cultural significance of blah blah blah on the economically repressive blah blah mid-rim blah,” Garen moaned loudly.

“I definitely think that should be the title you use on your paper,” Obi-Wan replied with a smirk that quickly got him caught in a headlock.

“Oh, I’m sure I can come up with something better since my best friend is going to help me out, right?” Garen asked. Obi-Wan wriggled out of his friend’s grip with a laugh and a tug on his tunic to straighten it. Neither of the two young Jedi acknowledged the silent figure following behind them.

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll help you, Hutt for brains,” Obi-Wan smiled. “But not today. I have an open hand spar with my master.”

Garen noted that the spar is “open hand,” but he resisted the urge to comment. The past few weeks had been good, really good and Garen liked having his best friend back. The other things... well, he was a Jedi, he could be patient.

“Well, tomorrow’s no good for me. I have a tutoring session with Knight Celarr on Galactic History,” he replied with a sigh. “What about the day after? Reeft will still be at the xeno-biology symposium, but you, me, and Bant could go grab some lunch then hunker down in the archives.”

“Sounds good,” Obi-Wan replied as he waved his friend a quick goodbye before trotting off towards the Temple salles. The silent figure continued to follow behind him at a discreet distance and Obi-Wan continued to pointedly ignore his quiet companion. Obi-Wan palmed open the doors to one of the smaller training rooms to find Master Vresh, his padawan, Lantis, and his master already waiting inside. He stepped into the space and crossed directly over to the mat to begin his warm-up as his personal Temple Guard

assumed his silent vigil at a post near the door. Lantis joined him on the mat and started her own light stretching while their two masters conversed quietly at the edge of the floor.

"Padawan?" Vresh called out and immediately Lantis pulled herself out of a rather sinuous stretch to face her master.

"Yes, Master?"

"You and Obi-Wan should go through the third open handed kata a few times together," he said. Lantis nodded at her master and Obi-Wan caught his master's gaze and gave him a slight nod as well. The two padawans then quickly fell into defensive stances, but neither moved as Vresh's silky tenor rang out again.

"Oh, and Padawan?"

"Yes, Master?"

"Please try to remember no claws this time," he admonished lightly and Obi-Wan could swear he heard the felinoid hiss her displeasure at the restriction. He shot his own master a slightly worried glance, but Qui-Gon offered him only an amused grin. He turned back to his opponent just in time to see her pounce.

* * * * *

"Things seem... better," Vresh commented as he pulled his cloak about his rangy frame and sat down on the narrow bench near the edge of the large practice mat. Qui-Gon joined him with a poorly disguised sigh.

"Yes, and for that I am grateful," he replied. Vresh turned to his friend.

"But..."

"But every stride seems only to draw attention to the things still lost to him."

"Draws whose attention? His or yours?" Vresh asked. Now it was Qui-Gon who turned.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Obi-Wan doesn't seem to be focused on what he's lost to me. He seems quite happy to enjoy what he has managed to gain back these past tendays and he has gained a lot."

"You think I'm holding him back," Qui-Gon inquired slightly aghast at the notion.

"No, I think that you worry about him too much. As you should, I might add. Master's prerogative and all that," the short haired master said with an airy wave. The two masters sat quietly watching their padawans grapple and tackle each other with the fervor and abandon of the very young. Vresh stole a sideways glance at his longtime friend. He noted the man's intense stare, the unadulterated and severe scrutiny levied on his apprentice. The dark-haired master looked haggard, but only around his eyes and only noticeable to those that knew him best. Vresh wondered if there had been a single day since the boy was first taken that the master had given himself a moment to relax, to simply breathe and just be.

Vresh doubted it.

He turned his gaze back to the sparring mat just in time to see Obi-Wan throw his padawan neatly into the air. She landed a second later lighting on the balls of her feet before rolling over one shoulder and springing back up again. Vresh smiled. The boy had come so far though the path had been far from easy for him. Vresh knew that Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon met with a soul healer daily. That same soul healer, in fact. Admittedly, his first impression of Master Ja'Prinn was not an endearing one and Vresh was certain that Qui-Gon loathed the man, but even so, past feelings were set aside quickly as the necessity of Ja'Prinn's assistance became evident. Apparently, the sessions were helping, but Vresh also knew that Obi-Wan still suffered from nightmares and tremors. Then, of course, there was the lightsaber avoidance, the Dar'Makai bond, and the ever-present Temple Guard; a constant reminder that until Xanatos was caught and the bond broken none of this was over.

Vresh sighed silently. Maybe Qui-Gon was right and every gain shined a spotlight on the lingering losses, but then again, Obi-Wan was progressing, he was being social, he was even happy on occasion. Surely, that had to count for something? Didn't it?

As if sensing his friend's thoughts, Qui-Gon turned to Vresh with a small smile.

"I am happy for him, Vresh," he said before returning his gaze back to the teenage combatants. "He has been so strong through... everything. I am so very proud of him," he spoke pausing for several seconds of silence then he turned to his friend with an unmistakably mischievous half-smile.

"Score?"

"You're up by three."

"Four," Qui-Gon corrected. Vresh shook his head and wagged an elegant finger reprovingly at his friend.

"Three. Homicidal rages induced by renegade, ex-padawans don't count," he answered. Qui-Gon raised a single eyebrow in mock protest. Vresh waved off the expression. "It's in the by-laws I assure you."

"They were codified?" Qui-Gon asked, a slightly bemused expression playing across his leonine features. Vresh stood up and began removing his tabard, robes, and outer tunic.

"Night of Tahl's knighting. She suggested a formalization of the by-laws after you shamelessly failed to provide me with proper wingman service."

"As I recall," Qui-Gon began as he too shed his outer garments, "the alleged failure was simply a result of you losing your female's attention to a superior male specimen."

"Oh, so we're back to measuring lightsabers again, eh?" Vresh taunted as he stepped onto a neighboring practice mat and drew his weapon. Qui-Gon took his hilt in hand.

"Let's make my fourth victory official, shall we."

* * * * *

Both padawans were stunned into inaction at the sight of their masters engaged in a no-holds-barred saber duel. Both Jedi were master swordsmen, easily capable of besting even some members of the Council. Obi-Wan plopped down heavily on the mat staring at his master in unrepentant awe. He was only vaguely aware when Lantis folded herself next to him, her own mouth slightly agape. The teens' eyes followed the dangerous dance, the performers all grace and power and... speed. The masters were Force enhanced blurs of motion as their dance reached a crescendo and then with a wrist flick and a Force push... the music stopped and the dance ended. Qui-Gon looked at the man holding a lightsaber to his chest in mild surprise.

"That was a Makashi disarmament," he said. Vresh grinned widely as he deactivated his blade and placed it back on his hip.

"Was it?" the short haired master replied as he crossed to the bench, took a seat, and wiped his face with a towel. Qui-Gon followed him off the mat, but stopped just shy of the bench. He stood in front of his friend, his arms crossed over his chest.

"You never studied Form II," Qui-Gon pressed. Vresh shot him his most innocent expression.

"Have I not?"

"That look has not fooled anyone since the crèche, V."

"I beg to differ. That look worked quite well on the Ranixians of Ventox III."

"Master, the Ranixians tried to kill us," Lantis interjected as she took a seat by her master's side. Vresh greeted her with a tap on her nose.

"True, but that had nothing to do with the effectiveness of the look," he answered grinning broadly. Obi-Wan looked up at his master as the tall man called his saber to his side and replaced it on his belt.

"Master, you were... amazing."

Qui-Gon looked down to find his apprentice staring at him wide eyed as if he were suddenly transformed into one of those young holo-vid celebrities.

"Thank you, Padawan," the master answered, then he hesitated wondering if his next statement was the mistake he felt it might be. "Perhaps there is something particular you saw me or Vresh do that you would like me to teach you?" he asked and immediately he knew the question was, in fact, a mistake. Just as he feared, Obi-Wan's wide-eyed wonder disappeared and a flash of some unknown emotion crossed his face before vanishing behind a carefully constructed calm and even façade.

"No, I... No, Master, I only wished to express my appreciation of your and Master Vresh's skill," the boy intoned. Vresh, who had been following the entire little exchange, gave Qui-Gon a knowing glance before turning to his padawan.

"Come Lani, let's go get cleaned up before things start to grow on us," he joked. His padawan gave him a toothy grin before jumping to her feet and grabbing her bag. Vresh picked up his own bag and clothing. The two Jedi offered the remaining pair a slight nod of parting then they took their leave disappearing into the shower rooms. Qui-Gon took a seat on the bench and gestured for Obi-Wan to join him.

"Padawan, may we talk for a moment?" he asked as Obi-Wan sat down next to his master. He sat sideways on the bench pulling his legs up so that they were crossed in front of him.

"Yes, Master?"

"Padawan, I am... concerned about your training," Qui-Gon began very carefully. Obi-Wan bit subtly at his lower lip, but he managed to hold his master's gaze despite his desire to look away and run from the conversation he knew was coming.

"I'm catching up with my classes as best I can, Master," he started, but he stopped when his master placed a warm hand on his knee.

"I am not concerned with your academics, Obi-Wan. I think you know that," the master said bluntly, but not unkindly. Obi-Wan sighed.

"Yes, Master. I know."

"Then you also know what I am concerned about."

"Yes, Master."

"Tell me."

"You're worried about me because I... I won't use my lightsaber," he said. His master nodded then turned his gaze away to stare at something on the far wall or maybe he was looking at nothing at all, Obi-Wan wasn't sure.

"I wonder, Padawan, if I have been remiss in not forcing you to confront this fear."

"I have no fear of using my lightsaber, Master," Obi-Wan answered. His master brought his gaze back to him.

"Then what is it?"

"I told you what I did the last time I... used my saber. I will not use it again."

"Then don't," Qui-Gon replied. "You can build another."

Obi-Wan shook his head, a frown gracing his youthful features.

"It wouldn't change anything. It's not the saber that's the problem it's the wielder," he answered not knowing he was going to say those words before they tumbled out of his mouth. Now, it was Qui-Gon's turn to frown.

"Obi-Wan, there is nothing wrong with you."

"There must be. I did to Adaen the same thing Xanatos did to me."

"It was not the same, Padawan, and until you realize that... I don't know where that leaves your training," the master finished. Qui-Gon could almost see the shadow of understanding subsume the boy's features.

"You mean... you're saying I can't be a knight if I don't use my lightsaber, aren't you?"

Qui-Gon remained silent for several moments before speaking.

"Padawan, do you remember the Crystal Code I recited to you when you were ready to build your lightsaber?"

"Yes, Master."

"Recite it for me."

"The crystal is the heart of the blade. The heart is the crystal of the Jedi. The Jedi is the crystal of the Force. The Force is the blade of the heart. All are intertwined: the crystal, the blade, the Jedi. We are one," Obi-Wan intoned to his master's satisfaction.

"Our lightsabers are more than just weapons, Padawan. A Jedi's lightsaber is his life. It is an extension of our own bodies and our connection to the Force. To be a Jedi is to carry a lightsaber," Qui-Gon replied. He paused, hesitating to ask the question he must. In his mind, he could hear Xanatos's words come crashing down upon him.

Little Obi-Wan can still become a man, sane, healthy, recovered... all you have to do is let him. But I know you. That is something you will never do...

Is this what Xanatos meant? That maybe Obi-Wan's recovery lay down a path that would take him away from the Jedi? Away from his master? Could he let him go down that path? Qui-Gon closed his eyes for a moment trying to slow his racing heart and quell his growing panic. He took a deep breath and opened his eyes. He looked squarely into the eyes of his padawan.

"Obi-Wan, do you still want to be a Jedi?"

* * * * *

Day 145

"Hey, you think anyone has ever died in here? You know, from boredom, and maybe now their spirits walk the aisles lamenting the time they spent here?"

"You know, if you put half as much thought into your paper as you just did for wandering Force apparitions you would be half done by now," Bant giggled, but Garen just glared at her.

"I'm just saying, Bant, this could be a real concern. I mean, I swear I can feel my life force diminishing with each chapter on...," Garen's voice trailed off as he stared at his friend sitting silently across from him at their table. "Obi-Wan?" he called. When he got no response, he started waving his hand in front of his friend's glazed eyes. "Coruscant to Kenobi. Kenobi come in, please."

"Huh? What?" Obi-Wan replied with a start. "What did I miss?"

Bant reached out with her smaller webbed hand and covered his larger pale one. She blinked those large dark eyes at him, her concern obvious in those bulbous orbs.

"We should ask you that," she said carefully. "Where were you just now?"

"Where was I?" Obi-Wan repeated rather confusedly.

"You kinda just zoned out on us for a moment, Obi," Garen supplied. Obi-Wan blinked a couple of times and then leaned back in his seat a bit.

"Oh."

"So, are you going to tell us what's wrong?" Bant asked squeezing his hand under hers. Obi-Wan looked at her and offered a slight shrug.

"There's nothing... wrong... I just thought I felt..." he began, but then his voice wandered off as both of his friends watched his focus turn inward once more. Garen and Bant exchanged worried glances.

"Maybe we should call Master Qui-Gon," Bant said softly. That snapped Obi-Wan's attention back to his friends so fast the two almost jumped.

"No, that's not necessary, really. I just..." he said then he glanced over his shoulder at his ever-present Temple bodyguard. When he brought his gaze back over to his friends, his expression was unmistakably mischievous.

"Hey," Garen ventured suspiciously. "I know that look. What are you thinking?"

"I need a big favor from you guys. A huge favor."

"Of course, Obi-Wan," Bant answered, but he shook his head dismissing her reflexive response.

"No Bant, I want you two to think before you agree to help me. This might... This might get you in some trouble."

"And you?" Garen asked.

"It will definitely get me in trouble," Obi-Wan smiled weakly. "But it's something I have to do and it will be easier with your help," he finished, looking at his two friends with a glimmer of hope in his eyes.

"Alright, what is it you want us to do?" Garen asked.

"I need you to distract my bodyguard," he answered and immediately he could feel Bant pull her hand away from his, a small gasp escaping her mouth.

"Obi..."

"It's important, Bant. I wouldn't ask otherwise. I need to check out something, but I can't do that with him following me everywhere."

"He's a Jedi, Obi-Wan. Even if we managed to distract him long enough for you to slip away it will only buy you a few minutes at best."

"I know, but a few minutes is really all I need," he said. Obi-Wan looked to his friends, his blue-gray eyes silently pleading. Again, Bant and Garen exchanged quiet glances almost as if they were holding a telepathic conversation. They both turned to him, Garen smiling.

"You're going to owe us BIG time."

* * * * *

What they did and how they did it, Obi-Wan didn't know, but he would forever be grateful for their efforts. Somehow, and he was really going to have to ask them how later, Garen and Bant succeeded in distracting his assigned Temple Guard long enough for Obi-Wan to slip silently away from the scene and rush out of one of the lesser used exits of the Archives. He knew Garen was right and that he would only have a scant few minutes to do this, but he had to do this.

When he was sitting with his friends, ostensibly doing research for their assigned papers, Obi-Wan had felt... something tingling at the very edge of his Force perception. It was almost like he was sensing someone familiar, but what he felt could match no sensation he had in his memory and whenever he felt he was on the verge of recognizing the sensation it would vanish. That's when Obi-Wan realized that he had to let go of trying to grasp the niggling in his mind and instead allow it to simply linger. Once he did that he discovered there was a slight pull to the feeling. Something or someone was calling to him through the Force.

The thought frightened him then and it still frightened him now even as he raced along secluded corridors following the path the Force laid out for him. In mere moments, Obi-Wan found himself in a rarely used section of the Temple that housed much of the machinery that kept the mini-city of Jedi running efficiently. He slowed his frantic pace and began walking down the long hall, the constant thrum of energy rumbling through the floor, into his boots and into his bones. He was almost at the end of the corridor when the sensation suddenly peaked, his every nerve tingling, but there was no sense of danger only... what exactly?

A sound from Obi-Wan's left captured his attention. He turned to gaze upon a slightly opened door. His hand drifted to his side and, for the briefest of moments, he lamented not having his saber, but then the reasons he didn't carry a lightsaber came rushing back and that regret was quickly dashed in light of bigger, more oppressive regrets. Obi-Wan pushed the door fully open. The small space within was filled with pieces of equipment, half-

formed and derelict devices of unknown purposes. A maintenance closet he reasoned. He was just about to turn away and go back the way he came when a blur of motion caught his attention. He spun quickly to his right, reaching out and capturing the arm of the someone he had been tracking. The moment his hand touched the other there was a flash of recognition that shot through his body like lightening. Two pairs of eyes met in the semi-darkness of the closet.

“Adaen?”

Chapter 24: Causality's Casualties

Day 145

"Adaen?"

"Obi-Wan! Thank the stars!" the young Rattataki exclaimed as he pulled the bewildered Jedi into a fierce one arm hug. "When I left you here, I didn't know if you would... I hoped that... I'm just glad you're alright!"

"Adaen?" Obi-Wan repeated his brain still struggling to catch up with the flow of events. "How did you..." he asked as his friend pulled back with a grin.

"Escape? Get here? Find you?" he laughed. Obi-Wan found himself chuckling as well.

"Yes, all of the above."

"It's a very long story, but one I am happy to tell you, my friend," Adaen answered. Suddenly, the smile on Obi-Wan's face faltered.

"Adaen, I..." he started, but he was interrupted by the approach of other Jedi. There were at least three of them coming. Obi-Wan could not yet tell who the others were, but one of the Jedi he recognized immediately, though too, the persistent knock at his shields that was increasing in both intensity and urgency was a pretty strong indicator of the identity of one of the approaching Jedi. Obi-Wan relaxed his shielding a bit and unmuted his end of the bond. The response was immediate.

/Padawan!/

/Yes, Master. I'm here./

/Are you alright?/

Obi-Wan could feel the great waves of his master's concern wash over their bond and instantly he was seized by guilt.

/Master, I'm fine. I know I should not have left my guard or.../

/We will discuss it later./

Now the concern was mixed with threads of tightly controlled irritation and disapproval. Obi-Wan cringed mentally and physically. He sent his sense of guilt and his apology back over the bond.

/Yes, Master./

Just as the mental conversation drew to a close, Obi-Wan looked to his friend to find him staring wide-eyed at him. He frowned.

“What?”

“You... you went all blank for a moment,” Adaen fumbled out as he searched for the right words. “Like you were here, but... not,” he finished. Obi-Wan gave his friend an amused grin.

“Sorry, I was talking to my master.”

“But, Obi-Wan, there is no one else here,” Adaen whispered, but stopped as he could now hear the footfalls of several beings drawing near. The teen grabbed Obi-Wan’s arm and tugged him away from the sound. “Come on, let’s go!”

“Go?” Obi-Wan said as he planted his feet to keep himself from being dragged along. “Adaen, it’s alright. We’re safe here. You’re safe here, I promise,” he said just as his master, his assigned Temple Guard, and Master Windu came to a stop not far from the pair of boys. Adaen quickly ducked somewhat behind his friend, his hold on Obi-Wan’s arm tightening to just shy of a death grip.

“Care to introduce us to your friend, Padawan?” his master asked kindly, clearly discerning the stranger’s unease. Obi-Wan nodded and gently prodded his shy friend into a position at his side.

“Master Qui-Gon, Master Windu,” Obi-Wan started. He doesn’t bother with introducing the Temple Guard as knights serving in that capacity were to remain silent and anonymous. “This is Adaenkinith Ryl. Adaen, this is Master Mace Windu and my Master, Qui-Gon Jinn.”

“Adaen,” Qui-Gon repeated daze-like as the significance of the name, the boy in front of him registered. The impact was not lost on Mace either as he and the other High Council members had read all of the reports from Obi-Wan’s sessions with the Soul Healer and those submitted by Qui-Gon himself as Obi-Wan had still not come to stand before the Council in person. So it was that both masters knew exactly who Adaenkinith Ryl was, but that knowledge only brought bigger questions to the forefront of the masters’ minds.

“Report,” Mace ordered to seemingly no one, at least no one that Obi-Wan could see. Just as he began to wonder if the Councilor was speaking to him, he heard a voice behind him. Adaen jumped and only Obi-Wan’s training kept him from doing the same. The teens spun around and found themselves face to face with a female Jedi Knight who seemed to have appeared from thin air. There was a slight stir of recognition as Obi-Wan stared at the mysterious Cathar and he realized she was one of Master Lo-Cha’s Security Knights.

"Knight Vor," Qui-Gon greeted seemingly nonplussed by the knight's sudden appearance. The Cathar took a deep bow.

"Master Windu, Master Jinn," she began. "The young padawan here had his friends create a diversion to distract his guard." Here the knight paused and gave Obi-Wan a wink and a sharp tooth grin. "Your friends are rather... creative," she smiled then she reverted to her neutral Jedi mask as she addressed the two masters once more.

"The padawan then ran straight here and into this maintenance closet where the Rattataki was hiding. The boy is alone, unarmed, and injured," she finished. Obi-Wan's attention snapped to his friend.

"Injured?" he repeated as he scrutinized his friend. Adaen was dressed in simple, faded clothing like before, but instead of worn overalls he was wearing a simple cream-colored tunic and matching trousers. Both appeared to have seen better days as both pieces were threadbare and fraying at the hems, but Obi-Wan could detect no injury. As if sensing his question, Vor continued.

"He's favoring his left side and keeping his left wrist immobile. Also, there are traces of blood on the back of his tunic," she stated. Qui-Gon moved quickly to kneel behind the teen. Adaen's grip on Obi-Wan finally crossed into death grip territory as the boy's fingers dug into his forearm with bruising strength.

"It's my master, remember? You can trust him," Obi-Wan soothed. When Adaen relaxed slightly Qui-Gon carefully lifted the back of the child's shirt and released a breath. He gently lowered the boy's tunic and nodded at Mace. Mace glanced at the knight.

"Knight Vor, thank you. You may return to your duties," he said. Vor nodded and stepped away from the small gathering. Mace then directed his gaze to Qui-Gon.

"Qui-Gon, would you see our guest to the Healing Ward? I will join you shortly," he said. Qui-Gon nodded, understanding completely that he was to keep the boy in the ward until the Council could be informed of his arrival and a course of action was determined. Mace gave a curt nod to the Temple Guard, an understanding that he was to continue his assignment, then the Councilor left. Qui-Gon rose to his feet and looked at the two teens.

"Shall we?" he asked. Obi-Wan turned to Adaen. His friend still looked afraid, much like a mynock in speeder lights in fact, but he also appeared determined to trust Obi-Wan just as Obi-Wan had trusted him. Something inside the padawan violently balked at the idea of Adaen's freely given trust, after all, look what Obi-Wan had done to him when last he had that trust.

/You saved his life, Padawan. You only did what you had to. He knows that and that is why he trusts you./

/Yes, Master./

The three, plus the guard walking discreetly behind them, made their way to the Healing Halls in silence. Qui-Gon led the way while Adaen hovered as close to Obi-Wan as he could without actually touching him. Once they entered the halls they were shown to an examination room to wait for a healer. The guard remained outside. Adaen sat on the medical couch with Obi-Wan standing nearby. Qui-Gon stood further back, his arms tucked into the sleeves of his cloak. After only a few minutes, the exam room door slid open and the familiar pale green skin, dark tattoos, and orange eyes that was Obi-Wan's primary healer walked into the room.

"And to what do I owe the honor this time, Padawan Kenobi?" Ar Songe said with a small bow to both padawan and master. Qui-Gon stepped forward, speaking before Obi-Wan could answer.

"This is Adaenkinith Ryl and he is a guest of the Order. He is in need of some medical assistance," Qui-Gon replied, his deep baritone warm and soothing, but despite the pleasantness of his words, Ar immediately understood the coded message within Qui-Gon's simple phrasings. He stepped to the teenager sitting shyly on the medical couch.

"Adaenkinith... that's quite a mouthful. I don't suppose you could take pity on an old man and give him something shorter to call you, hmm?" Ar asked as he gave the teenager's eyes, ears, nose, and mouth a quick once over.

"Adaen," the boy answered softly. "You can call me Adaen."

"Adaen? Yes, that is much easier on the tongue," Ar smiled. "Well Adaen, my name is Ar Songe. It is my pleasure to meet you."

"Umm... yes, it is a pleasure to meet you too," the boy stammered. He stole a quick glance from Obi-Wan. Ar, noticing the exchange, turned to the padawan, but said nothing knowing that Obi-Wan did not need words to understand the subtle request from the healer. Obi-Wan turned to his friend.

"Adaen, take off your tunic so Master Songe can see," he said. With obvious reluctance the Rattataki complied and for the first time Obi-Wan saw the full extent of his friend's injuries. Adaen's torso was covered with bruises with a particularly large and nasty one on his left side. With the tunic removed Obi-Wan could also see the swelling and discoloration of Adaen's left wrist. He was no healer, but even to Obi-Wan's untrained eyes the wrist was likely broken. He didn't see the long gashes, some of which were still bleeding, blazoned in red across the white skin of his friend's back. Obi-Wan only noted his friend's injuries in passing as his eyes were transfixed to the large circular scar on his chest. A scar identical to his own in every way except one: the one on Adaen's chest was the result of his handy work.

/Padawan?/

/I'm fine, Master./

It was a lie and they both knew it, but thankfully his master let it pass for now. Qui-Gon turned his attention back to the teen on the table.

"Adaen, how did you get these injuries?" the master asked, his tone casual and unassuming. Ar continued his assessment of the boy, but of course he too was listening carefully to the boy's reply.

"I... misbehaved," he answered softly.

"Misbehaved?" Qui-Gon repeated. Without thought, Obi-Wan reached out and took Adaen's uninjured hand in his. The gesture had the desired effect and bolstered the boy's confidence and resolve.

"He's been... angrier ever since..." he began, but soon his voice trailed away. Obi-Wan lowered his head.

"Since I escaped," he whispered. Adaen nodded.

"Most of the time I can keep him happy, but when he gets like this..." Adaen paused lowering his chin to his chest. "I can't do anything right, so he punishes me."

"And this time?" Qui-Gon prompted gently.

"I missed a spot while shining his boots."

The whole room was quiet for several heartbeats before Ar stepped from behind Adaen. He picked up a datareader and started inputting his notes as he spoke to the small group.

"Well, my dear Adaen, I believe you have a date with a bacta tank," he said then he turned to Qui-Gon. "That is if he can be spared your company for a few hours?" the healer asked. The hidden question was not lost on the master. Qui-Gon nodded serenely at the master healer.

"Whatever you think is best, Master Songe," he intoned.

"Master?"

"Yes, Padawan?" Qui-Gon replied as he turned his attention to his apprentice. Obi-Wan looked nervously at his friend before returning his gaze to his master.

"Master, I'd like to stay with Adaen if that's alright."

"Your friend will be in bacta for several hours. There won't be much that you can do for him," Qui-Gon answered reasonably, however, his apprentice was not to be dissuaded.

"I can be there, Master," Obi-Wan replied. Against his better judgment, Qui-Gon relented and agreed to let the boy stay, his consent communicated with a nod and a small smile.

"I will make the arrangements," Ar said then he gestured to the door. "Master Jinn?"

Qui-Gon gave a curt nod and left the small exam room, Ar Songe following closely behind. Once in the hallway, the two masters stopped and allowed the door to close behind them.

"His injuries?"

"Very real," Ar answered his brow wrinkling in thought. "And yet..."

"I know. I felt it too."

* * * * *

"Are you certain?"

"There is no doubt. The boy is lying," Qui-Gon answered Mace and the Council chamber plunged into contemplative silence. The tall master waited patiently as he stood in the middle of the chamber, his arms tucked neatly into the sleeves of his cloak.

"His wounds, were they self-inflicted?" Saesee Tiin asked. Qui-Gon shook his head.

"Master Songe does not believe so. Someone did abuse the boy, but his explanation of how he obtained the injuries rings false in the Force."

"And we are certain that it is the same child that was also held by Xanatos during your padawan's abduction?" Ki-Adi-Mundi inquired as he leaned forward, his long, pale fingers steepled before him.

"Obi-Wan definitely recognizes him as the same person who befriended him during his captivity."

"If Xanatos didn't hurt the child then who did and why would the boy lie?" Adi Gallia pondered aloud. Plo Koon shook his head.

"Xanatos may still have been the one to hurt the boy. All we know is that the reason the child gave for his injuries is false. It would be precipitous to exclude the possibility that Xanatos was the one that harmed the boy."

"Perhaps it was done on purpose," Even Piell interjected. "Xanatos and the boy could be in collusion. He could have abused the boy then deliberately sent him to us."

"To what end?" Depa Bilaba asked quite reasonably, but Mace interjected before any could answer her question.

"Any answer given at this point would be pure speculation, an indulgence we can ill afford," the Councilor stated and slowly murmurs from his fellow Councilors died down as heads began to nod in agreement. Mace turned his focus back to Qui-Gon.

"I take it the dip in the bacta tank wasn't necessary," he asked. The tall master answered with a half-smile.

"The bacta treatment was necessary for the boy's wounds, however, Master Songe may have extended the duration of his treatment in the interest of... safety," the master finished. Adi leaned forward in her seat.

"Is it wise to leave your apprentice with the child?"

"You think the boy can harm someone while submerged in bacta?" T'un asked. Adi regarded the other master coolly.

"Of course not, but as many of us have pointed out we do not know anything about this boy except that he was injured and he has been dishonest with us. I am merely concerned that given the history between the two leaving Obi-Wan alone with the boy may be placing him in unnecessary danger."

"I promise you, Adi, that is a concern of mine as well," Qui-Gon replied. "However, I don't sense any danger coming from Adaen at this time." Qui-Gon paused for a moment debating whether he should say what came to his mind. After a moment's thought, he decided to speak. "Also, I think we must be very careful in how we deal with Obi-Wan's relationship with Adaen. Whatever our concerns may be Obi-Wan trusts the boy, a trust that he is not extending to very many Jedi at the moment. If we ever want to gain that trust back we must proceed carefully."

"Correct his master is," Yoda spoke finally after remaining quiet during the Council session up to that point. "Observe the boy we will, but treat him with suspicion we will not."

"There is one more thing, Masters," Qui-Gon began. Once he had the attention of all the Councilors he continued. "The boy is Force sensitive."

"Your padawan never mentioned that in his recountings," Even retorted. Qui-Gon frowned slightly, the small thinning of his lips the only outward sign of his displeasure at the Lannik Councilor's insinuation that his padawan was attempting to deceive them.

"Obi-Wan doesn't know," the master answered evenly. Mace now had a frown of his own.

"Considering the closeness of the two boys I do not see how such a thing would have gone unnoticed."

"You forget that for the vast majority of Obi-Wan's captivity he was wearing a Force collar. That would have prevented him from noticing Adaen's own sensitivity. Also, since finding the boy here, he has been attempting to shield his Force connection. He is doing a rather good job of it too, enough to show he has been trained to do so and enough to fool my apprentice, but not enough to fool me or Master Songe," Qui-Gon answered.

"So, what do we do now?" Depa said.

"The only thing we can do," Mace replied, "We let things play out until we know more."

"Even if that means putting Obi-Wan in danger?" she asked incredulously. This time it was the Grand Master who responded, his ears drooping sadly as he did so.

"In danger the padawan already is. Be patient we must until know more we do. No other choice do we have."

* * * * *

It was a quiet journey from the Healing Halls to the Jinn/Kenobi quarters. Neither the master nor the two boys said anything until they reached the private sanctum of the Jedi's apartment. Once inside the teens quickly disappeared into Obi-Wan's room, the door closing softly behind them leaving the tall master alone with his thoughts in the common room.

Qui-Gon shrugged off his cloak and hung it by the main door. He walked to the rear of the room and knelt on his meditation mat overlooking the balcony. He gently rolled each of his shoulders in turn, releasing the tension across his neck and back. The master then closed his eyes and let his mind settle into a light meditation. He allowed his mind and thoughts to wonder, permitting his concerns to filter unimpeded to the surface exposing his worries and problems to the Force; seeking answers, but giving them leave to reveal themselves in their own time. He thought of Xanatos, of the Dark'Makai, of Obi-Wan and his escape, of Adaen and his return. Each piece turned itself round in his mind's eye. The master examined each element like a puzzle piece as he tried to determine its place in the greater scheme, but the picture eluded him and he was left with far more questions than answers and even the serenity of meditation could not completely dispel his general discomfiture.

The master began to surface from his meditative state and as he did so he could sense the presence of his padawan standing nearby waiting to be acknowledged. Qui-Gon opened his eyes and turned to his apprentice.

“Padawan.”

“Master,” the boy replied and the master noticed a sort of nervousness about the boy. Obi-Wan was uncomfortable and was nearly fidgeting in place under his master’s scrutiny. It was then Qui-Gon realized the source of the boy’s apprehension.

“Padawan, we must talk,” he said as he rose gracefully to his feet. He gestured to their small meal table and Obi-Wan obediently took a seat. Qui-Gon took a position across from him and placed his hands on the smooth surface, his fingers interlaced.

“Adaen?”

“He’s taking a shower,” Obi-Wan replied and Qui-Gon nodded then followed the nod with a deep breath.

“Padawan, what you did today was very foolish. You acted without regard for those who care for you.”

“I knew you would worry, Master, but it was only for a few minutes. I didn’t think,”

“No,” Qui-Gon interrupted, “I don’t believe you thought at all.” The master shook his head and regarded his apprentice with a frank expression on his leonine features. “Obi-Wan, deception is not a promising trait in a padawan and yet you convinced your friends to lie to a fellow Jedi on your behalf. Did you stop to consider that this... stunt might hinder Initiate Eerin’s chances of being chosen as a padawan learner? Or what of Padawan Muln? Master Rhara will have to address his behavior as well. Tell me, Padawan, did you give any thought to the consequences your friends would have to face or merely your own?” he asked. Obi-Wan’s eyes fell to his lap as he stared at his own wringing fingers.

“I knew that they might get in some trouble, but,”

“Might, Padawan?” Qui-Gon interrupted again.

“I... I knew,” the boy answered softly. The master wanted to stop here, to stand up, cross the small distance between them, and embrace the boy, but such action would ultimately serve neither of them. Obi-Wan must come to understand the consequences of his poor judgment and it was Qui-Gon’s duty as his master to see that the lesson was learnt.

“There is also the issue of your Temple escort. I am certain the Council will be forced to reprimand him as well,” the master stated. Obi-Wan’s eyes shot up to meet his master’s.

“But it wasn’t his fault!”

"Obi-Wan, he allowed himself to be distracted from his duty. Such a lapse could have easily led to a dire result. Yet, you found all of this acceptable as you did not deter in your course of action."

"I... no... I didn't... I mean... I didn't know that it would cause so much trouble," Obi-Wan mumbled. Again, Qui-Gon had the urge to let the boy off the hook, but he knew he could not. The master sighed as he studied the sullen face of his apprentice.

"Didn't you know, Padawan? Has anything I've said actually surprised you?" he pressed. Obi-Wan's gaze fell back to his lap. When he answered his voice was soft, its edges lined in guilt and defeat.

"No, Master."

"I will be honest, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon continued though the boy would no longer meet his eyes. "This... incident concerns me greatly. I have never known you to act so recklessly and with such careless disregard for others."

"I'm sorry, Master."

"I am but the first of those you must apologize to, Padawan, and I dare say this is not the last time we will discuss this, but that will come later after you have completed many meditations on your actions."

"Yes, Master," was the quiet response. Qui-Gon took a moment and leaned back in his chair. He studied his padawan carefully and allowed several minutes to pass before speaking again. When he did, the castigatory tone of the past conversation was gone and in its place there was only warmth and masterly concern.

"Padawan?"

"Yes, Master," Obi-Wan replied. When he received no further response, he was forced to raise his gaze and meet the deep blue of his master's eyes.

"How did you know where to find Adaen?"

"I didn't," the boy answered. "I just had a feeling. I first felt it in the Archives."

"Describe the feeling for me," his master commanded gently. Obi-Wan closed his eyes as he tried to recapture the sensation he experienced earlier.

"It was like... the Force was pulling me in a certain direction... like something was... calling for me," he said as he opened his eyes. "But every time I tried to focus on it, it would disappear. So, I stopped trying and just let it guide me. It led me to Adaen," he finished and Qui-Gon could not stop the swell of pride that filled his chest at his padawan's insight into

following the Force, but now was not the time for such praise. Obi-Wan swallowed thickly, hesitating slightly before speaking.

“Master?”

“Yes, Padawan?”

“The... Council is going to let him stay with us, won’t they? They won’t send him back?” Send us back? Qui-Gon heard the unspoken question and reached over the table to put a hand on the boy’s shoulder.

“No one will be returning to Xanatos,” the master stated evenly, his eyes locked onto and searching his apprentice’s eyes as he waited to be certain he was understood.

“Master, I’m sorry... I didn’t mean for... I’m sorry,” Obi-Wan said as he cast his gaze down.

“I know, Padawan I know, but you frightened a lot of people today; people who care about you.”

“I’m sorry,” was the whispered reply. Qui-Gon reached over and placed a finger under the boy’s cleft chin. He raised the boy’s head so the two could look each other in the eye.

“I accept your apology,” the master said warmly. Obi-Wan managed a weak smile.

“Thank you, Master,” he replied. Qui-Gon returned his smile then gave a brief nod as he stood up from the table.

“Now,” the master began as he headed to the main door. “I’m going to the refectory to retrieve something suitable for latemeal. I will be back shortly.”

“Yes, Master,” Obi-Wan said with a short bow of his head. He watched his master leave then he went to his room. Obi-Wan entered the small space just as Adaen stepped out of the refresher. The look on his friend’s face told him that Adaen suspected the nature of the conversation he had with his master though it would have been impossible that he could have heard any of it here in his room.

“Are you in trouble?”

“Yes, but it’s alright,” Obi-Wan relied casually in an attempt to assuage his friend’s fears, but Adaen’s worry was not displaced so easily.

“You’re in trouble with your master because I’m here.”

“No, it’s not because of you. It’s because of what I did.”

"You mean because you looked for me," Adaen retorted. Obi-Wan sighed and sat down heavily on his bed.

"Well, sort of but,"

"I never should have brought you back here!" Adaen suddenly exploded. "I should have taken you to one of the Memorial Hospitals, but I was afraid... that he would find you there," he said miserably as he sank onto the bed beside Obi-Wan. The padawan wrapped an arm around his friend's shoulders.

"No, Adaen, I'm glad you brought me back here."

"Why?" Adaen snapped at him, a look of incredulity plastered brazenly across his features. "These people don't trust you or me! They are only interested in what they want, not us. These are the same people that abandoned you, Obi-Wan. Don't tell me that you trust them now!"

"I don't trust them!" Obi-Wan yelled back. He stopped and took a deep breath, calming himself before continuing. "I mean... I don't trust all of them, but I do trust Master Qui-Gon. He won't betray me. I know it. He cares for me. I'm his padawan," he answered. Adaen gave him a rueful glance.

"So was Xanatos once."

Chapter 25: Bad Feelings

Day 149

"Any change?"

"None."

"And where is the boy now?"

"Watching a holo-vid with Obi-Wan in our quarters," Qui-Gon answered as he accepted a cup of red tea from Vresh. Mace took an offered mug as well as the interlude briefly put a pause to his questioning. Vresh handed a cup to Tahl before taking the last one for himself and setting the now empty tray aside. The tall, short haired master took a seat on the arm of his couch while Tahl and Qui-Gon sat on the couch proper. Mace sat in the armchair to the left of them, his brow deeply furrowed, his expression the same as the one he wore for the most frustrating of Council sessions. Qui-Gon took a sip from his tea then lowered his cup shaking his head.

"I've spoken with the boy several times over the past few days and nearly everything out of his mouth is a lie."

"But you don't feel any danger or malice coming from him?" Tahl asked. Qui-Gon turned to her with a wry grin.

"Oh, I sense plenty of malice," he told her, but then he looked to Vresh and Mace and quickly answered the question not yet spoken on both their tongues. "All of Adaen's malice seems to be directed at me. It is quite obvious that he hates me."

"Do you know why?" Vresh inquired as he drained his cup and sat it on the low table in front of them. Qui-Gon sat his still full cup down and frowned.

"No. He acts as if he is somehow trying to protect Obi-Wan from me, but I get no sense of that from him."

"He's still shielding," Mace spoke his tone indicating more statement than question.

"Well enough to keep his thoughts hidden, but his stronger feelings often escape. Whoever is or was training him doesn't seem to have advanced him past level seven shielding."

"Lantis is still at level six," Vresh offered.

"Before the Dar'Makai, Obi-Wan was at level six as well though now... his shielding rivals that of many masters."

"Do you think Xanatos was training him?"

"I've... inquired into their relationship, but he either evades my questions or denies the implications outright."

"Perhaps you should have Obi-Wan ask him," Vresh mused aloud. Qui-Gon shot him an indignant look.

"And would you ask the same of Lantis if the situation were reversed?" he snapped. Vresh had the good grace to look slightly abashed.

"No," he answered slowly, "I don't suppose I would, but... that doesn't mean I would be right not to do so."

Mace nodded his head in agreement with his agemate's words, but before he could speak Qui-Gon shook his head, a thunderous expression on his face.

"You would have me ask him to betray one of the only people he trusts. Adaen is his friend. Hells, Mace, the boy saved his life!" Qui-Gon yelled as he clenched his fingers into fists. Tahl covered one fist with her hand and waited for him to meet her eyes. When he did she could see more than the anger that was apparent in his tense frame, she could also see the fear hiding within those midnight blue depths. Tahl easily recognized that her friend was absolutely terrified of pushing his padawan too far too fast. She knew he dared do nothing to risk losing the boy again.

"Qui," she began gently. "You're not going to lose him again. No one in this room is going to allow that, but... as long as we don't know how Adaen fits into all of this Obi-Wan is in danger."

"I could live with Lantis hating me if it meant I could keep her safe," Vresh added somberly. Qui-Gon closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. He need not question the veracity of his friend's words because he would endure the same. Every master would happily endure nearly any burden to keep those in their care safe from harm. After a few calming breaths, the long-haired master was able to regain his center. When he opened his eyes he looked to the small group of friends.

"I will speak to him," he intoned. Tahl patted his hand then turned to Mace.

"And I will see what I can find on him," she added with a smile that could only be described as wickedly mischievous. Vresh frowned deeply as he concluded his internal debate.

"Lantis tested very high on the empathic register. If she were to spend time in Adaen's company there is a possibility that she could gleam something more from him," he said. Qui-Gon immediately sent him a worried glance. The dark-haired master opened his mouth to speak, but before he could utter a word of protest Vresh raised a single hand to silence him.

"I know your score as well Qui, but it's clear he won't speak to you. He might speak to her and Lantis has been in far more dangerous situations in the field, but of course I will talk to her beforehand and she will have the whole Temple to back her up if necessary. Besides," the white-haired master continued with a shrug, "I'd rather have her watching Obi-Wan's back and he hers than trust Obi-Wan's safety to a boy who may be Xanatos's apprentice."

"So, it's settled then," Mace stated as he clapped his hands together the gesture signaling the end of their informal meeting. He stood up and gave a solemn nod to the small assemblage. "I've got a meeting with Valorum and the Sentate Sub-Committee on Interstellar Cross-Cultural Contamination."

"You're meeting with the triple C? Stars, Mace, who did you piss off to get that assignment?" Tahl said with a laugh as she stood and joined the bald Councilor at the door.

"The Force apparently," he answered dryly. Tahl hooked her arm under his elbow.

"Well, I need to see a friend of mine in the city, so I'll escort you as far as the Senate, but then you are on your own," she smiled. Mace shook his head in mock disappointment.

"What has the Order come to when Jedi desert their own," the Korun master answered his usual scowl still present, but the humor in his chestnut eyes belied his sour tone. The two masters then took their leave the lilting tones of Tahl's laughter carrying them out. The remaining two masters sat in less than companionable silence before Vresh awkwardly cleared his throat in a clumsy attempt to break the heavy quiet.

"Well... Lani will be out of class soon... I should go meet her," the white-haired master said as he stood. Qui-Gon immediately joined him.

"Vresh,"

"You can't talk me out of this, Qui."

"I wasn't going to," the dark-haired master answered wryly. "I was going to thank you for doing this."

"Oh," Vresh stumbled nervously, "then... uh... you're welcome of course," he mumbled as he headed to the door. Qui-Gon grabbed his arm and pulled him around to face him.

"What's wrong?" Qui-Gon asked, but his friend just shook his head and offered him a weak and wholly unconvincing smile.

"Only this whole situation," he laughed lightly, but no humor reached his eyes. Qui-Gon scrutinized his friend and the more he looked into those silver colored eyes the more he was convinced that something was amiss with his longtime companion.

"Vresh, tell me what's wrong."

"It's nothing."

"Tell me or I will forbid Obi-Wan from spending any time with your padawan," Qui-Gon growled. Vresh's eyes widened briefly in shock before his more neutral expression once again settled onto his golden features.

"You can't do that."

"I most certainly can and I will," Qui-Gon replied as he drew himself to his full height, but the motion failed to bring its usual intimidation as both masters were roughly the same height. "Vresh, what is going on?"

Vresh closed his eyes, a look of grim resignation framing his face. He stood silently for a moment and Qui-Gon could sense that he was gathering the Force around him and within him. It was a sensation that the dark-haired master was very familiar with having spent so much time as a youngling in the presence of Master Yoda. Vresh was attempting to access the future. Prescience had never been one of Qui-Gon's strong suits and, as a result, he found that he put little stock into twinges of precognizance and Force visions, but he was aware that Vresh, and Obi-Wan, had this particular gift, both subject to powerful visions since their days in the crèche and Vresh had learned to trust the hazy hints the Force chose to show him. Vresh opened his eyes.

"It's nothing specific, Qui. Believe me, I wish it were...," he said with a heavy sigh. "I only know that if Lantis helps Obi-Wan something bad will happen, but if she doesn't... something far, far worse will happen," he finished his whole body suddenly tense with frustration. Qui-Gon placed a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"Are you certain?" he asked quietly. Vresh nodded and gave a wry smile.

"The Force is being rather... insistent on this one, Qui," he answered then he forced himself into a state of calm. "Come, Lantis will be out soon."

Qui-Gon nodded, but said nothing and the two masters left the apartment and headed to the classroom section of the Temple in weighty silence. It didn't take long before the two reached the main classroom halls where dozens of recently released padawans and a few initiates softly milled about the corridor. After a moment, a ball of fur made its way through the crowd and settled before her master.

"Afternoon, padawan," Vresh smiled down at his apprentice. Lantis beamed up at him in return.

"Master," she replied then paused, "did I forget something? Were we supposed to meet, Master?"

"No, Lantis Something has... come up and I need to ask something of you," Vresh answered calmly, but something about his tone still caught his padawan's attention and her small furry brow wrinkled in concern. She looked briefly to Master Jinn, but his expression was inscrutable and revealed nothing to her. She turned back to her master and gave him a quick nod.

"Of course, Master. What do you want to ask?" she said. Vresh looked around a moment then placed a hand on her shoulder, gently steering her towards a window seat in a more secluded section of the corridor away from the concentration of classrooms and padawans. The master and padawan pair sat on the small bench tucked within the alcove while Qui-Gon stood silently nearby blocking the two from the scrutiny of strangers and eavesdroppers.

"Padawan," Vresh began then he took a deep breath and looked deeply at his apprentice. He began again. "Lantis, you are aware that Master Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan are hosting a guest in their quarters?"

"Yes, Master. There's a boy staying with them," she answered as she glanced again to Qui-Gon, but again his face revealed nothing. "Why do you ask? Is something wrong?"

"Yes... and no," Vresh replied smiling weakly at his apprentice which only served to confuse her more. "The... boy that is staying with Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan is called Adaen and he was... with Obi-Wan while he was kidnapped," he added. The master waited as he watched his padawan slowly absorb this information and he could almost see the questions appear in her thoughts before she spoke them.

"He was with Obi-Wan? Then... he is the one who saved him, right?" she asked hesitantly, unsure of the connections she was making. Her master nodded, but his answer too was hesitant.

"Yes, Obi-Wan believes that Adaen helped him escape from Xanatos," Vresh replied and two tawny-orange ears immediately perked up.

"But you don't?" she asked this time looking directly at Master Jinn.

"We are unsure," the dark-haired master answered. Lantis turned her gaze to the floor, her tongue darting meekly out of the corner of her short muzzle as she puzzled out the pieces presented her.

"If you're unsure that Adaen helped Obi-Wan escape then... you think it's possible that he was helping Xanatos instead, but... if Obi-Wan still believes that Adaen helped him that means that... you haven't talked to him and if you haven't talked to him, but you're talking to me... you're worried about him," she finished then she turned to face her master. "Am I right?"

"Very," her master answered with a warm smile and a rush of pride sweeping over their bond that made the apprentice's whiskers twitch in the equivalent of an embarrassed blush. Vresh let his smile linger a moment longer, but all too soon the smile was gone and a worried frown took its place. The expression was mirrored on his padawan.

"You want me to spy on Adaen," Lantis stated more than asked. Vresh shook his head slightly.

"Not spy," he answered, "just spend time with him and Obi-Wan. You have a gift that we do not, a gift that may help us find the truth."

Now it was Lantis's turn to shake her head.

"How can anything I can do be better than what you can do, Master? I mean, I'm just a padawan!" she replied in patent denial. Vresh stopped her shaking head with a finger placed under her slightly pointed chin.

"The Force grants us many gifts, padawan, and you have the gift of empathy. Master Qui-Gon is strong in the Living Force and I...," he paused, "I am stronger in the Unifying Force. More than that," he said as he looked directly into his apprentice's eyes. "You are far more than just a padawan. Do not forget that."

Lantis nodded at her master, but her expression told him that she was still far from convinced. Vresh removed the finger from her chin and placed his hand on her shoulder giving her a gentle squeeze.

"Something more troubles you," he stated gently.

"Obi-Wan," she answered softly. "If we are wrong and he finds out what... what I'm doing..."

Finally moving from his sentry position, Qui-Gon knelt before the young felinoid. He waited until the youth's eyes were upon him before speaking.

"If we are wrong and Adaen is no threat then we," he said the emphasis clear in his voice as he glanced quickly at Vresh, "will apologize to Obi-Wan. You would have done nothing wrong Lantis," he spoke then Qui-Gon's expression softened. "As your very wise master pointed out to me earlier, I would rather have an angry padawan than an injured one."

At that the young girl looked up to her master.

"Padawan," Vresh began, "I will not order you to do this."

"Then I volunteer," the apprentice answered, but Vresh shook his head disapprovingly.

"Do not do this because you fear disappointing me," he stated bluntly, but not unkindly. "If our doubts prove to be warranted, you and Obi-Wan could be in great danger," he said. Lantis drew herself up, her back straight and her chin slightly raised.

"I am a Jedi, Master," was her reply and Vresh was incapable of stopping the smile that tugged at his lips.

"You are indeed, Padawan. You are indeed."

* * * * *

"Remember, if something should happen, if you sense something wrong or feel a disturbance in the Force... anything, you let me or Qui-Gon know immediately. If you can't find us or there is an emergency you and Obi-Wan get away immediately then you find Mace or Tahl or Yoda or any master or knight. Do not try to do anything yourself. This is a reconnaissance mission, Padawan. Remember that."

"Yes, Master," Lantis repeated for the third time. This time her exasperation leaked over the bond and Vresh let out a soft, self-deprecating chuckle.

"I'm mothering you, aren't I?"

"A little, Master, but I'm pretty sure it's in the Code somewhere that masters have to mother their padawans a little," she smiled shyly at him. Qui-Gon raised one eyebrow.

"Well, I can see that your sense of humor shall be passed on to the next generation of Jedi. Whether that is for better or for worse is yet unclear."

"For better," Lantis answered definitively as she stared down the tall master. Vresh knelt down next to his apprentice and the mood quickly grew serious once more.

"Padawan," he began and obediently Lantis turned her attention to her master. "There is one more thing you should know." Vresh glanced up at Qui-Gon who nodded then he turned to his apprentice once more. "Adaen is force sensitive."

"How strong?" Lantis asked her brow wrinkling at this new information. "Is he just aware of the Force or can he use it?"

"We don't know, but there is... reason to believe that he has had some training. He has been attempting to hide his Force sensitivity. We masters are not fooled, but..."

"But I wouldn't know. That means that Obi-Wan doesn't know either, right?"

"Correct. I am telling you this because I do not want you to underestimate Adean. He hasn't... done anything that is threatening or harmful, but he has been less than truthful with us since his unexpected and unexplained arrival. Be mindful and be careful, young one."

"I will, Master. I promise," she answered. Vresh nodded and gave her shoulders a quick squeeze before rising to his feet. He looked at Qui-Gon and the trio continued their journey down the corridor to the Jinn/Kenobi apartment. Once they reached the door, Qui-Gon palmed it open and they stepped inside to find the two teenagers sitting on the couch watching a holo-vid. Obi-Wan paused the vid and jumped to his feet.

"Master," he greeted then he gave a small bow to their guests. "Master Vresh," he welcomed then he smiled at his fellow padawan. "Hey, Lantis."

"Hey Obi," she answered back. Qui-Gon stepped a little forward commanding his padawan's attention wordlessly. Adaen remained silent still sitting on the couch, a discreetly annoyed look on his face.

"Padawan," Qui-Gon began. "Master Vresh is being called away for a short mission. In his absence, his padawan will be staying with us."

"What!" Adaen exclaimed jumping to his feet now. Qui-Gon turned a cocked head to the Rattataki teen.

"Is there a problem, Adaen?" the master asked calmly. Quickly, the boy relaxed his tense frame, attempting to mimic the master's cool composure.

"I was just wondering how that would work out, Master Jinn sir. There are only two bedrooms. Perhaps it would be better if she stayed elsewhere."

"Nonsense," Qui-Gon replied, dismissing the concern with an elegant wave of his hand. Obi-Wan touched Adaen lightly on his arm drawing his attention.

"It's alright, Adaen. We have plenty of room," he said then he turned to Lantis. "You can sleep in my room. Adaen, you can sleep on the couch and I will stay with my master. If that's alright with you, Master?"

"Indeed, that sounds like a sound arrangement," Qui-Gon answered then he looked at Adaen. "Unless you have some other concern that is?"

The teen swallowed back the bitter retort sitting on the edge of his tongue and managed to mumble out a “that’s fine with me.” Vresh gestured for his padawan to come near.

“Now, you be good, Lantis. I expect you to mind Master Qui-Gon as you would mind me. I should not be gone long and if you need me,” he said as he looked deeply into her eyes, “you know how to reach me.”

“Yes, Master,” she replied as she drew the tall master into a hug. “May the Force be with you, Master.”

“And with you, Padawan,” he responded. When the short embrace ended, the white-haired master nodded curtly at the teens then at Qui-Gon who gave a knowing nod in return then the master took his leave. Obi-Wan crossed over to his fellow padawan and placed an arm around her shoulders.

“Don’t worry, Lantis. I’m sure Master Vresh will be fine and be back real soon.”

“Thanks, Obi,” she replied softly thankful that her nervousness for the situation read only as her concern for her master. Obi-Wan gently led her to the couch where he sat her down by his side much to Adaen’s obvious displeasure; obvious to all except Obi-Wan.

“Here you can watch this with us. We just started it. It’s about a boy who finds a magic weapon that turns him into a king...”

* * * * *

Obi-Wan pulled himself out of another failed attempt at meditation. He hadn’t had much success lately and he didn’t know why. Worse he hadn’t told his master that he was having a problem and he didn’t know his reason for that either, but his worry must have been evident on his face as his master graced him with a quizzical look as he stepped out of the refresher clad in his sleep pants.

“Padawan, is something bothering you?”

“I’m worried about Lantis,” he answered. It wasn’t exactly a lie. He was worried about his friend. Lantis seemed more subdued throughout the evening than he had ever seen her. Usually, the felinoid was a bouncing ball of energy, but tonight... she was... quiet. Too quiet for Obi-Wan’s tastes. The change did concern him though he attributed it to her master’s absence and his solo mission. So, Obi-Wan was speaking the truth when he answered his master that it was Lantis who concerned him. It was not important that he mentioned that he also couldn’t meditate or that he had had a constant bad feeling for several days now. No, his master didn’t need to know that. After all, it was just a feeling. If it became more than the apprentice would say something. Now just wasn’t the time.

"Oh?" his master answered as he pulled back the bed clothes and motioned for Obi-Wan to get in. Obi-Wan lifted his corner of the sheets on the side opposite his master and slid into the large bed. He felt the bed tilt slightly as Qui-Gon climbed in as well.

"Well, she was so quiet at late meal and after....," he said his voice trailing off with a shrug of his shoulders. "It's probably nothing. She's probably just missing her master. I know... I would be if you went on a mission without me," he finished his voice falling to a whisper. Still sitting up in bed, Qui-Gon reached out and patted his padawan's hand gently.

"As I would miss you and as I am sure Vresh misses his padawan and her him. Perhaps then you can use this time to get to know Lantis a little better, distract her from her anxieties," the master suggested. Obi-Wan nodded.

"Yeah, Adaen and I can keep her busy. I'm sure we can find lots to do."

"Yes, you and Adaen," Qui-Gon repeated, but something in his voice must have been slightly off because Obi-Wan looked up at him questioningly.

"You don't like him, do you?"

Qui-Gon didn't pretend not to know to whom the boy was referring.

"I do not dislike him."

"That's not really the same."

"Perhaps not, but I really don't know him, Padawan," he said then he paused for a heartbeat or two. "And neither do you."

"Perhaps not," Obi-Wan responded mirroring Qui-Gon's words and tone, "but I know he cares about me, that he helped me, that he saved me when... when I needed saving," he said with a sigh. "I just wish you two got along better," he finished then he laid down rolling onto his side, his back to Qui-Gon.

"Goodnight, Master."

"Goodnight, Padawan," the master answered, but he did not sleep. Sleep that night was a long time coming as he pondered over his padawan's words.

...he saved me when... when I needed saving...

At that moment, Qui-Gon hoped more than anything that he was wrong about his suspicions, but deep down inside he knew that he was not.

* * * * *

Day 156

"How is she?" Vresh asked the moment Qui-Gon stepped into his quarters as he had asked every day for over a week. Were Qui-Gon not acutely aware of his friend's genuine concern over the welfare of his padawan and the possible danger she was in, he might have laughed, but he was aware and the danger was real so the would-be humor never materialized. Instead, the dark-haired master took a seat on the other master's couch and graciously received the proffered cup of tea while once again attempting to alleviate at least some of his friend's fears.

"She is well," Qui-Gon answered calmly and instantly a little of the tension pent up in Vresh was released into the Force. True, that because of their training bond if something had befallen his apprentice Vresh would likely know without having to consult with Qui-Gon, but something about hearing the words from the man who was currently living with his padawan and seeing her on a daily basis just eased something within him that his rational mind could not.

Qui-Gon took a sip from his cup before speaking again. When he did it was with the same calm voice he used earlier, but Vresh noticed that his eyes reveal a deeper worry that utterly belied his tone.

"There have been a few... incidents, though,"

"Incidents? What kind of incidents?" Vresh interrupted. Qui-Gon held his hand up in a yielding gesture that encouraged the white-haired master to take a moment to calm himself. As he did, Qui-Gon continued with his explanation.

"Nothing dangerous. Nothing obvious, just a few coincidences... a strange occurrence here or there all of which could mean nothing at all."

"But if you believed that you would not be mentioning them to me now," Vresh responded more centered now than when he began the conversation. He took a seat across from his fellow master.

"True," Qui-Gon answered ruefully. Vresh leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, his fingers interlaced before him.

"Tell me what's happened."

"Like I said it's nothing serious, but there have been datareaders that have gone missing or assignments that have been erased. The occasional missing item, a brush, a data chit, a nail file... All Lantis's, of course," Qui-Gon paused knowing he was about to cross into something a little less innocent. "However, there was one incident that truly concerns me."

"Yes?"

"Yesterday, when the boys had gone to the refectory to fetch the late meal I ordered for us, Lantis told me that she caught Adaen trying to access restricted files on the terminal in the common room the previous night when she happened to be up to get some water. She asked him what he was doing and he told her to mind her own business... that curiosity had been known to kill felinoids. Later that night, after everyone had retired I felt a slight warning in the Force. I checked on Obi-Wan who was sleeping peacefully then I made my way quietly into the common room to check on Adaen. When I looked to the couch, I found that he was not there. I then moved to Lantis's room. That's where I found him, standing in the doorway to her room watching her sleep."

"He...", Vresh began then he stopped as he visibly shunted his anger into the Force. "What was he doing? What did you do?"

"I pulled him from the doorway and demanded that he tell me what he was doing. He said he was just going in to use the fresher."

"And?"

"It was a lie."

"Was she..."

"She never woke during the exchange and I could find nothing dangerous or incriminating save his presence. I waited for him to use the refresher then sent him back to bed with a very heavy sleep suggestion to ensure that he would be out for the night," Qui-Gon finished. Vresh leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes. He let out several deep breaths before he trusted himself to speak. When he did he leaned forward again, his eyes open, his serenity returned though his grasp on it was tenuous at best.

"What I sensed... Whatever is to happen will happen soon. I can feel," he started stopping suddenly as his eyes widened and he jumped to his feet. Qui-Gon felt it an instant later. Panic. Fear. Confusion. Pain. He felt all of these things from his padawan, but the last one, the pain was not his own, it was not Obi-Wan who was hurt, it was another.

"Lantis," Vresh scarcely whispered as he grabbed his cloak and raced out of his apartment his fellow master quick on his heels.

Chapter 26: Falling from High Places

Day 154

It was not a sound or movement that awakened her. It was a feeling, a rather powerful feeling that battered against her sensitive and poorly shielded empathic receptors. Lantis squeezed her eyes shut as her small furry fingers press against her temples. It took several deep breaths before she had reinforced her meager empathic shields (so similar to and yet so different from her normal shields) enough that she could think clearly. She opened her eyes and trained her focus to the emotions that roused her from sleep. Someone nearby is quite happy, but it was not a joyous or ebullient sort of giddiness. No, this was far more... self-centered and conceited. This person was smug.

The young felinoid slid silently out of bed and padded softly to her door. There Lantis paused a moment to reach out with the Force to scan the room beyond. Her extended senses only confirmed her suspicions. With only a blush of trepidation she opened the door, wrapped the Force tightly around her and stepped into the common room. She stalked slowly and silently through the room like a creeping fog determined not to alert the room's other occupant. Her efforts were rewarded when she found she was able to approach the young man at the room's terminal without his being aware. She pulled up behind him now only a meter away. At this distance, she could just begin to make out what was on the screen. Her eyes widen and a gasp escaped her short muzzle before she could stifle it. Immediately the screen went dark and Adaen jumped out of his seat his expression darker than a night on Dagobah.

"What do you think you're doing? Were you spying on me?" he snapped. Lantis wanted to snap herself at his tone, but instead she took a half second to calm herself as her master would want her to.

"Were you engaged in some activity where I would need to spy on you?" she asked serenely. Her demeanor only served to infuriate the other teen more, but Lantis didn't know how else to proceed so she continued relying on her instincts and her thoughts of what her master would do. "What were you doing, Adaen?"

"I was minding my business," he replied angrily, his fist clenched at his sides. "I suggest you do the same. Curiosity has been known to kill felinoids, you know," he finished with a smirk. Lantis's thin lips curled into a snarl reflexively.

"Are you threatening me?"

"Now would I do something like that?" Adaen asked smugly, his previous ire replaced by casual malevolence. "I have nothing to fear from you."

"Perhaps not, but I could wake Master Jinn and I'm sure he could conjure sufficient reason for you to fear him," Lantis spat back. Adaen shrugged.

"Wake him I don't care. I saved Obi-Wan, remember," he said stepping closer to the felinoid. He stopped just inches away from her face. "No Jedi would dare touch me now," he whispered and then suddenly Lantis felt a pressure on her neck. Her throat constricted violently cutting off her supply of air. She looked at Adaen with wide eyes, but he only continued to smirk at her; his eyes gleaming at her struggles. Then as quickly as it had closed her throat was open again and Lantis found herself gasping and gulping for air. Adaen stepped back as he watched the padawan fight to return to normal breathing. Finally, Lantis was able to regain control of her respiration and she looked at the boy before her through narrowed eyes.

"You're wrong," she rasped. "My Master, Master Jinn, the other masters... they will stop you. I will stop you."

"Yes, you've done a marvelous job of it so far," he replied coolly. "Don't get in my way again, little felinoid or I will put you down," he added then he turned and reclaimed his normal position on the couch as if preparing for bed. Lantis stood there silently for several minutes, one hand still clasping her neck. Finally, she too returned to her bed, closing and locking the door behind her. The young Jedi sat heavily on her bed as she tried to shift through her jumble of thoughts. That had not gone as she had planned and the boy had used the Force against her. He had nearly killed her! On the other hand she had seen what he was doing and though it didn't make any sense now with a little research... Lantis shook her head. Tonight was too close. If her master knew what just happened, well he would probably kill her himself. Lantis instinctively reached out for the bond she shared with her master, but managed to stop herself before she accessed it. If she talked to her master now he would come to her and the ruse would be blown. No, she would wait and speak to Master Jinn first... after she did a little research of her own. With a plan now solidly in hand, Lantis laid back on her pillow and closed her eyes, but sleep didn't come easily as her thoughts traveled back to Adaen's attack and what she felt from him...

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Day 155

"Master Jinn?"

"Yes, Lantis?" Qui-Gon answered without opening his eyes. When he heard no further response he surfaced completely from his light meditation and opened his eyes to find his best friend's padawan standing nervously before him. He tilted his head to the side and

gave the girl a warm smile. The gesture caused her to ease slightly, but the master could plainly feel the tension rolling off the young Jedi in waves through the Force.

"Something troubles you," the master offered and the young felinoid nodded.

"Umm...", she started, hesitatingly. "Where... where are Obi-Wan and Adaen?"

"They've gone to the refectory to fetch latemeal for us," Qui-Gon answered then he frowned. "Does this have to do with them? Did something happen?" he asked surprised he was able to keep most of his worry out of his voice. When the padawan nodded, Qui-Gon rose to his feet and brought her over to the couch. They sat side by side, but the master turned slightly so he could better face the youth beside him.

"Tell me," he ordered gently and Lantis could already sense a wisp of worry from the master despite his advanced shielding. It was then she realized she could not tell him the truth, at least not all of it. She took a deep breath.

"Last night, I woke up and came into the common room... I, um... wanted some water," she lied. Qui-Gon could sense her dissemblance, but chose not to speak on it now as he could also sense real distress coming off the girl. He remained quiet, waiting patiently for the padawan to continue.

"I saw Adaen at the terminal," she said pointing to the room's rear console. "I tried to sneak up on him to get a look at what he was viewing."

"Did he sense you?" the master interrupted.

"Yes, and he was not too happy to find me there," Lantis answered, her gaze dropping to examine her hands.

"What did he do, Padawan? Did he hurt you?" Qui-Gon asked and again Lantis could not bring herself to speak the truth.

"No, Master Jinn, but... he did threaten me. He said that curiosity has been known to... kill felinoids and that he wasn't afraid of me. I told him I could wake you and that I bet he was afraid of you," she said smiling ruefully, but then her somber expression returned. "But he said he wasn't afraid of you or any Jedi."

"Did he say why?" Qui-Gon asked. Lantis finally looked the dark-haired master in his eyes.

"He said he's the one that saved Obi-Wan. No Jedi would dare touch him now."

* * * * *

Day 156

"This was a great idea Obi. I was getting so tired of just studying and doing katas," Lantis said as she indulged in a long and languorous stretch. Obi-Wan grinned at his friend and fellow padawan.

"Yeah, I love working out in here. When I do my aerials it feels like... like I'm flying," he answered. Lantis responded with a knowing nod. Adaen, who was sitting nearby on a bench, snorted. It did not go unnoticed.

"Oh, come on Adaen," Obi-Wan pleaded as he finished his warm up. "Join us. You don't have to do anything fancy and we won't let you fall."

"What about you?" the Rattatki teen asked sweetly. "What if you fall?"

Obi-Wan laughed and smiled at his friend.

"Well, I don't fall... often," he grinned, "and Lantis, well she never falls."

Lantis answered his statement with a toothy grin and then bounded up the nearest set of bars. Obi-Wan immediately followed her leaving Adaen alone with their things.

"We'll just see about that then, won't we..."

* * * * *

Knowing that something like this would happen did little to ease the knotted tension growing inside Vresh's chest that threatened to strangle his heart and end his life mid-sprint as he barreled down the wide corridors of the Temple in a very un-Jedi like manner. In his quarters the master felt a sudden spike of surprise, fear, and then pain across his bond with his padawan, but now... now the bond was quiet; the warm spark that was his padawan now only a muffled, muted presence in his mind. Even as he raced through the halls he reached out for his apprentice. He reached out, but was answered with silence. Not a void, but an eerie quiet that somehow was even more disquieting than a total lack ever could have been. The master's anxiety ramped up several notches and his graceful gait became a Force enhanced dash into the Temple's main gymnasium. Qui-Gon was on his heels as the two masters entered into the large room quickly surveying the scene around them. Several padawans and knights stood nearby, but most were like statues, unmoving, faces frozen in various degrees of shock. Only the small gathering near the center of the room seemed capable of movement. Vresh made his way to that cluster, a small gasp escaping his thin lips as he took in the small and twisted body before him. Beside a Twi'lek knight he didn't recognize laid his apprentice. She was still save for the shallow rise and fall

of her chest marking some degree of respiration, but for all the comfort that observation gave him the awkward angle of her right leg and the slowly increasing pool of blood ringing around her head pouring from a deep laceration caused unbound panic to race again through his heart.

"Call for a healer..." the stricken master ordered as he carefully cradled his apprentice's head in his lap mindless of the blood now leaking on to his tunics. Qui-Gon nodded at his own padawan who stood nearby, his face pale and drawn in barely suppressed panic. Beside him stands Adaen, his expression was unreadable yet Qui-Gon found it unnerving just the same. The long-haired master turned his gaze to the Twi'lek knight who shifted uncomfortably beside his friend.

"I have. They should be here any moment," he answered quietly. Vresh nodded his gaze still fixed upon the slack face between his large hands. Qui-Gon watched as the master closed his eyes and dumped healing energy into the padawan heedless of the toll sustaining such levels would have on his own body and life force. He placed a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"Easy," he whispered and he could sense that Vresh had heard him, but the master did not pull back from the energy he was still pouring desperately into the small frame below him. Qui-Gon was about to admonish his friend again when Lantis began to stir ever so slightly. Vresh opened his eyes and gazed lovingly if not worriedly at his padawan who eyes were merely slits behind half closed lids.

"Mmm...aster..."

"Sssh, it's alright, Padawan," Vresh cooed. Peripherally he could hear the doors to the gym slide open and the soft patter of booted feet cross hurriedly to their location, but that awareness was little more than background noise to the singular focus his padawan held for him.

"Nnnooo..." the felinoid whispered, "Mmmasster... please..."

"Easy child," Master Songe said as he knelt beside the young Jedi. He placed a hand on Lantis's head and closed his eyes inventorying her injuries through the Force even as he spoke to the group around him. "What happened here?"

"She was on the tertiary bars when she... fell," the Twi'lek answered as Songe opened his eyes wide in alarm. Whether the knight's words or the healer's findings were the cause was unknown to Vresh, but the concern that flared in the Force around them was both intense and unmistakable.

"Hover sled, now," the master healer barked over his shoulder and two other healers, senior padawans, brought the requested equipment over. Songe looked to Vresh.

“Master Tivi, we must get her to the ward immediately. You must let go,” Songe said firmly, but not unkindly. Vresh nodded, but did not release his apprentice who was still starring at him through mostly closed lids.

“Master Tivi,” the master healer repeated. When he did not get a response Qui-Gon squeezed the shoulder still under his hand.

“V,” he pleaded softly. “She needs to go.”

“Yes,” he whispered in reply as he finally allowed the trio of healers to lift the child from his arms and place her on the floating stretcher nearby. Songe checked a few things before he gave the instruction to begin moving her, but before any of the party took a single step Lantis's voice called out again.

“Mmmaster!” she yelled albeit weakly. Vresh was instantly by her side, her small paw held tightly between his own.

“It's alright, Lani, I'm here.”

“Nooo,” she insisted, “I know... I know...”

“Quiet now, Padawan,” Vresh answered as he gave a nod to Songe and the group began to move out of the gym and to the ward, but still Lantis demanded to be heard.

“Master... please... hhh-hear me...”

“What, Lani? What is it?”

“... I.... know...”

“You know? What do you know?” Vresh asked, but his questions went unanswered as Lantis slipped away into unconsciousness taking the precious knowledge with her.

Chapter 27: On Purpose

Day 156

Small. So small. That's how she looked to him as she laid there unmoving, unresponsive, and so very, very small. He was still holding her hand as the healers worked quickly and efficiently to divest the padawan of her clothing and affixed leads and sensors to her body after shaving away the fur to reveal the needed small patches of skin. She was going to hate that when she woke. The thought made the master smile a bit. She would wake. She must wake.

"Master Tivi?" Master Songe said. Vresh looked up to find himself staring at the intense eyes of the Mirialan healer.

"Yes," the white-haired master answered softly.

"I need you to let go of her hand now. She has to go into surgery and no," the master healer said raising a stalling hand, "you may not come in. You can stare at her in the bacta tank and you can stare at her in her bed, but you cannot be there to stare at her in my surgical room. Are we clear?" the healer finished. Vresh reluctantly gave a curt nod of his head then turned his gaze back to his apprentice.

"How long?"

"A few hours at least," Songe replied. He waited a moment, but when the other master made no further move he was compelled to speak again. "Tivi, we must go. Now," he commanded forcefully, but his tone though authoritative was not without compassion. Vresh pulled the hand he held to his chest and leaned over. He lightly kissed the furred forehead of his padawan.

"I will be here when you wake, little one. I promise," he whispered then he stepped back, releasing her hand. Immediately a swarm of healers surrounded the small body and she was whisked away from him without another word. Vresh remained in the now empty room existing as silently and as unmoving as the young girl that dominated his thoughts.

* * * * *

"Padawan, are you alright?"

"I'm... I'm not hurt, Master."

“And you?” Qui-Gon asked turning his attention to the Rattataki youth. Adaen looked to the long-haired master with an expression Qui-Gon could not define, but still left him feeling ill at ease.

“Oh, I’m fine, Master Jinn,” Adaen responded. The master regarded the teen for a moment longer before bringing his attention back to his padawan. Obi-Wan looked up at his tall master, his eyes filled with both fear and shock. Qui-Gon rested a large hand on the boy’s slender shoulder and gave him a reassuring squeeze before turning his gaze to the knight at his left. The Twi’lek hadn’t spoken since giving his description of the accident to the healers. Instead the yellow skinned Jedi found himself staring at the pool of blood still on the gym floor, seemingly oblivious to all around him.

“Knight...?” Qui-Gon began. When he doesn’t get a response he repeated his inquiry. “Knight?”

The Twi’lek’s gaze shot up to meet the master’s.

“Apologies, Master Jinn. I guess I’m still a bit... distracted by today’s events,” he answered. Qui-Gon nodded.

“Understandably. Forgive me, but I don’t believe I know your name.”

“Ah,” the Twi’lek said with a small and crooked smile just barely flashing his sharp teeth. “Ani Dasa.”

“A pleasure, Knight Dasa,” the master replied with a slight bow. “Tell me, did you see everything?” he asked and the master noted the slight frown that instantly creased the young knight’s features.

“I saw enough,” Dasa responded carefully. Qui-Gon quirked a single eyebrow at the reply.

“We need to report what we witnessed to the Council,” he began then he turned to his padawan and his friend. “All of us.”

* * * * *

“I’m sorry, Master Jinn, but the Council is in session at the moment.”

“I am aware of that, but this is a matter of some urgency I fear,” Qui-Gon answered serenely. “Please, I’m sure if you just alert Master Windu to our presence we will be admitted.”

The padawan behind the desk looked to the master with a dubious expression marring his slick Mon Calamari features, but he acquiesced. The Mon Cal sent a private message to the aforementioned Councilor and was rewarded with a surprisingly quick response. The youth's large bulbous eyes blinked once, then twice before looking back up to see Master Jinn still politely serene expression.

"Yes... um the Council will see you, Master Jinn."

"Thank you, Padawan," the master said with a short nod of his head before crossing to the large double doors and entering the main chamber Knight Dasa, Obi-Wan, and Adaen following close behind. The group of four walked into the room coming to a halt in the middle of the open floor. Dasa took a position to Qui-Gon's left allowing Obi-Wan to take his customary spot slightly behind his master and to his right. Adaen sidled up beside Obi-Wan. Both boys fairly vibrated with discomfort, but it was Obi-Wan's Force aura that was fluctuating wildly. Qui-Gon turned his head to his apprentice.

/Padawan?/

/M-mmaste?/

/Can you do this?/

/I.../

Obi-Wan's thought speech terminated as he began to tremble with the strain of trying to maintain control over the rising panic within him. Qui-Gon placed a hand on his shoulder.

/Go. Sit in the antechamber and await me there. Do not leave./

/Y-yes, M-mmaste./

Sketching a quick bow, Obi-Wan managed to exit the chambers without incident, Adaen following silently. Once the doors shut behind them, Qui-Gon turned his attention back to the twelve Jedi before him.

"I apologize for the intrusion," he started with a low bow, "but recent events have made the breach of protocol necessary."

"I assume you are referring to Padawan Mir's recent injury?" Master Mundi asked mildly. Qui-Gon nodded and Mundi frowned. "Then perhaps Master Tivi should be present as well?"

"He is with his padawan at the moment."

"From the healer's report, the child will be in surgery for some time still. He should be summoned," Mundi pressed. The Cerean Councilor glanced briefly at Yoda, who nodded, before punching a few commands into the console set in the armrest of his seat. After a few seconds a voice that was both familiar and unfamiliar was heard in the quiet chamber.

"Tivi."

"Master Tivi, this is Master Mundi. The Council requires your presence," the Jedi Councilor stated placidly. A long silence followed before an exasperated sigh was heard.

"Now?"

"Yes, Master Tivi."

"My padawan,"

"Is being attended to and this will only take a moment," Mundi retorted. Another long silence.

"Very well," Vresh replied and then terminated the link. Those within the chamber waited in quiet and well-practiced patience until the white-haired master arrived and took a spot beside Qui-Gon. He bowed before the honored assembly.

"Masters," Vresh said, but Qui-Gon could hear the natural soothing tones of his tenor were gone replaced with the cold weariness of his worry. Mace looked to his friend and agemate with sympathy clearly showing in his dark eyes.

"How fares your padawan?"

"She," Vresh began, but he was forced to stop at the harsh crack within his voice. He cleared his throat and started again. "She is in surgery. They expect it... it will be a long surgery," the white-haired master said swallowing thickly. Mace nodded and then turned his gaze to Qui-Gon.

"What do you bring before this Council, Master Jinn?"

"I think today's... incident is connected to Obi-Wan's abduction," he responded as a collective murmur traveled throughout the chamber. When the whispers died down it was Master Bilaba's warm and smoky voice that resonated through the room.

"I thought Padawan Mir's accident was just that... an accident," she stated melodically. Knight Dasa stepped forward slightly.

"Masters, I was present in the gym and I can assure you what I saw was no accident," the Twi'lek knight said. Vresh's gaze shot up, but it was Mace's baritone that was heard.

"Explain," the Councilor ordered and the knight politely bowed his head before launching into his story.

"The Padawan, Mir, and the two others..." Dasa paused with a glance to Qui-Gon.

"Obi-Wan and Adaen," the master supplied and the knight continued.

"The three entered the gymnasium and the two padawans began some light stretching. I had just finished my own workout and was resting on one of the benches on the adjacent wall. I saw Mir and Obi-Wan take to the bars," Dasa paused with a slight smile. "The girl was fearless and as graceful as you'd expect from someone of her species. She climbed to the tertiary bars and was performing a series of complicated aerials, mostly from the second set of the Falling Leaves kata, when it happened."

"When she fell?" Master Koon asked, his voice lightly mechanized by his anti-ox breather. Dasa shook his head.

"No, Master. Mir did not fall. She was pushed. Someone used the Force to knock her off of the bar."

A collective gasp set off a new series of murmurs, but this time Mace did not wait for the side conversations to die down naturally.

"Are you certain of this?" the Korun Councilor inquired.

"Absolutely. I felt it as well as saw it. Someone trapped her with the Force and pushed her from the bar holding her in such a way that she was prevented from saving herself from the impact."

"Serious allegation this is," Master Yoda interjected breaking his previous silence. "Know who did this you do?" the Grand Master asked. Dasa hesitated, subtly shifting his weight from his left foot to his right and back again.

"That... I am less certain about, but... I believe it was from the Rattataki boy. Adaen," the knight finished and before the Council could react Qui-Gon stepped forward.

"There's more," he said and when he knew he had everyone's attention he continued. "Two days ago, Padawan Mir, while staying in my quarters happened upon Adaen researching restricted files. When she asked him about it, he threatened her. The following night, I found him hovering in her doorway watching her while she slept. I believe that what happened today was him making good on his threat," Qui-Gon finished and as he did he could feel the shift in the Force currents moving about the room. Beside him, Vresh's hands were clenched into fists by his side and his mouth was compressed into a tight, thin line.

"Why was Padawan Mir staying in your quarters?" Master Gallia asked, her expression one of polite confusion.

"It was decided that her abilities as an empath might shed some light on Adaen's motivations or loyalties," Qui-Gon answered carefully, but he knew he was not going to get off the hook that easily. A deep furrow appeared on Master Tiin's crown.

"Then despite your and the Council's suspicions about the boy, you chose to place this padawan directly into danger," he said. It was not a question. The Iktotchi Councilor drew his stern gaze to Vresh. "As a master, I find that choice of action... odd."

"Are you implying something... Master?" Vresh grated out, his temper barely being held in check.

"What I think Master Tiin means is," Master Bilaba began, her mellifluous voice doing much to ease the tension in the Force, "we would like to know your reasoning behind such a decision," she finished. Vresh closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He then counted from ten. Slowly. In Huttese.

"I meditated on it for quite some time and the Force made it clear that Lantis was to help in this way. I did not make the decision easily or lightly."

"It doesn't matter," Mace interrupted. "I was aware of the decision and I authorized it. If there is blame to be placed, place it on me. There is no need to speak of this any further with Master Tivi," the Councilor stated in a voice that clearly brokered no further discussion even amongst his fellow Council members.

"What files was the boy viewing?" Master Piell asked, his harsh accent cutting through the short silence of the room like a vibroblade.

"Lantis was unable to tell me at that time as the boys were returning from the refectory. Since then we did not have an occasion to discuss it."

"The question is what do we do now?" Mace added. "If the child is dangerous we cannot allow him to harm anyone else and he is already far too close to Obi-Wan," he said. Qui-Gon sighed.

"I agree, but we must also consider that Adaen doesn't yet know we suspect him. If we separate him from Obi-Wan we lose that advantage."

"And likely Obi-Wan's trust," Master Gallia offered.

"I believe that as well," Qui-Gon answered. Master Koon steepled his long, clawed fingers before him.

"Master Jinn, do you believe the boy would harm your padawan?"

"I," Qui-Gon started, but then paused as he considered his thoughts and words carefully. "I believe that Adaen is under the direction of Xanatos whom we know has no compunction about harming Obi-Wan, but... I do not think Obi-Wan is the target or at least not the main one. If he were, Adaen could have hurt him at any time these past weeks... No, I think there is something else at play here and whatever it is it is tied to those files."

* * * * *

"What do you think they are talking about in there?" Adaen asked as he completed his circuit one way and was turning to pace in the other direction. Obi-Wan sat stock still on the bench, only his eyes moving as he followed his friend's figure back and forth.

"They're just reporting about the accident," he answered in a small voice. Adaen suddenly stopped his pacing.

"But... isn't that strange? That they would have to tell it to the Council in person? I mean it was just an accident, right?" he said. Obi-Wan looked at his friend with a troubled and quizzical expression.

"Of course. What else could it have been?"

* * * * *

"So we are agreed then?" Mace asked as he looked about the room. His fellow Councilors each gave a short nod before he turned his focus to the Jedi in front of him.

"And you, Master Jinn? Do you agree with this course of action?"

"I do," Qui-Gon intoned. Mace nodded. He conferred silently with Yoda for a moment before turning to his fellow Jedi and offering his benediction.

"May the Force be with you," he said and all three bowed. The trio headed to door, Dasa pulling ahead as Vresh grabbed Qui-Gon's arm and pulled him close.

"I can't believe you of all people would allow this!" he hissed in Qui-Gon's ear.

"Do you think I want this? That I like it?" he whispered back, but Vresh was in no mood to debate or quibble as his eyes flashed with barely tempered rage.

"If that... thing takes one step, one breath out of line I will kill him myself," the furious master ground out through clenched teeth.

"Vresh," Qui-Gon began carefully regarding his friend, "you once told me when I said something similar about Xanatos that you would hope that you had friends good enough to stop you from making a terrible mistake. Let me be that friend now. Go to the healer's ward. Be with Lantis and leave Adaen to others."

"If he looks to harm Lani or Obi-Wan or anyone I will kill him, Qui-Gon. And no one, not even you will stop me," he snapped as he released Qui-Gon's arm and stormed away from the Council chambers. The Council, who had watched the entire scene play out, said nothing. Yoda slowly made his way to Qui-Gon's side, his ancient gnarled hands resting atop his gimer stick.

"Sincere he is."

"Yes, Master."

"Dangerous his anger and fear are. Dangerous for the boy and for himself."

"He will not fall, Master. I will not allow it."

Chapter 28: Master Planning

Day 156

"Are you certain?"

"Yes. We must proceed as planned. Everything depends on you though."

"I understand, but the risks..."

"Are necessary. How long do you need?"

"An hour maybe two."

"Good."

* * * * *

"I don't understand. Why can't we see her?"

"Padawan..."

"Master, she's my friend and she..." Obi-Wan paused for a moment as he forced words around the lump in his throat. "She almost... died. I have to see her to know... to know that she's okay," the teen finished weakly. Qui-Gon's expression softened as he knelt in front of his apprentice.

"I know, Obi-Wan, I know, but there is more going on here than you realize," the master said as he took a deep breath. It was now or never, he knew. He must tell Obi-Wan the truth though he also knew his padawan would be as loathe to hear it as he was to say it. "Obi-Wan, what happened to Lantis... her master believes it was no accident."

Qui-Gon studied his apprentice as Obi-Wan's brow knitted in confusion. The boy stood silent for several moments as he considered his master's words, but no understanding came.

"I don't... understand... I mean... she fell. It was an accident. Wasn't?"

"Vresh does not think so," the master answered. "He thinks that someone made her fall. That someone used the Force to do it."

"But how could he possibly know that?" Adaen asked speaking for the first time. Qui-Gon regarded the teen carefully before answering.

"Lantis discovered something before she went to the gym with you... something important. Her master believes that someone intentionally harmed her to keep her from sharing that information."

"So he doesn't know what she knows then?" Adaen asked a little too quickly for the master's comfort, however, Qui-Gon easily schooled his expression to show only his sorrow for the situation.

"No, unfortunately," he answered. The master then turned his gaze back to his apprentice as a fresh wave of anxiety crested over their bond. "What is it, Padawan?"

"Do you think...," Obi-Wan stammered. "Do you think it was Xanatos? Is he here? Is he back in the Temple? Does he want..." the boy continued now babbling in his growing panic. Qui-Gon pulled the boy to him and embraced him tightly.

/Sssh. Hush now, Padawan. Right now we don't know what has happened./

/But... if it's him.../

/He will not harm you again. You have my word on it. I will not allow it./

The master held his padawan tightly for several more seconds before pushing him away slightly so that he might look into the boy's eyes. There was still fear there, but the overwhelming panic had receded.

"Like I said, we don't know anything for certain, but I will not take any chances with your safety," he paused with a glance to Adaen. "Either of you. I want you two to remain in our quarters until further notice. You are not to go anywhere without me. Is that clear?"

"What about... you know... our bodyguard. Surely we are safe with other Jedi?" Adaen asked smoothly. The master's eyes narrowed minutely, but otherwise his expression was unchanged.

"I have chosen to see to your safety myself. You needn't worry about it. I will let no harm come to you, Adaen," Qui-Gon responded. While the Rattataki seemed mollified, Obi-Wan's furrowed brow denoted anything but, still the boy chose to remain silent. His master checked the bond, but once again, he found Obi-Wan shielded against him. He opened his mouth to say something more, but was interrupted by a beep from the comm. station. He rose from his kneeling position and moved to the panel in the rear of their common room leaving the two youths seated nearby on the couch.

"Jinn."

“Master Jinn,” Master Songe’s voice called over the speaker. “Master Tivi has asked that I inform you that his padawan is awake and wishes to speak with you. I’d prefer she rest now, but both master and padawan insist that the matter is urgent.”

“I understand and I am on my way,” Qui-Gon answered as he terminated the call. He crossed back over to stand in front of his charges. He placed his hands into the sleeves of his cloak and drew upon his full height emphasizing his already intimidating masterly presence. “You two will remain here until I return. You are not to leave these quarters for any reason nor should you allow anyone to enter. If you have need of me, Obi-Wan you should call on me immediately. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Master,” Obi-Wan answered obediently. Qui-Gon then glanced to Adaen who finally gave a rather reluctant “yes.” Assured that his orders had been understood, Qui-Gon reached forward and placed a soothing hand on Obi-Wan’s shoulder.

“Be at ease, Padawan. All we be over soon,” he spoke gently.

“Yes, Master.”

* * * * *

“What do you think she knows?”

“I don’t know, but whatever it is it can’t be good if someone tried to hurt her for it,” Obi-Wan replied distractedly as he studied the playing board. He tapped in a command and watched his sarvip advance a few spaces. Adaen suddenly turned off the holo-chess imager and walked over to the common room’s main console.

“Hey!” Obi-Wan exclaimed, but his friend paid him no mind as he settled himself before the computer screen and typed in a series of commands. Obi-Wan moved to stand behind him as he watched his friend slid a data spike into the console’s main port. “Adaen...” he began shakily. “What are you doing?”

“Getting answers,” the boy replied as he typed in more commands. Suddenly the Jedi main database appeared. Obi-Wan’s eyes grew wide and his mouth hung slightly agape.

“How did you get that? You shouldn’t be able to do that,” he stammered as he watched Adaen begin to sort through the Temple’s various sub-systems. “Adaen, those are restricted files for the Council’s eyes only. You have to stop,” he demanded. The Rattataki youth turned to his friend.

“Come on, Obi-Wan. You heard your master. We can’t trust anyone to tell us what’s going on here. That includes the Council.”

"He didn't say that."

"Didn't he?" Adaen asked seriously. "He didn't even trust your own bodyguard, Obi. He doesn't trust the other Jedi any more than you do. And why should you? Remember they're the ones who let Xanatos take you in the first place. They're probably working with him and have been the whole time," he finished as he turned back to the screen. "This is the only way we can know for certain."

"But..." Obi-Wan began uncertainly. He watched as Adaen pulled up various planet files and mineral resource lists. He shook his head in confusion. "What do mineral rights have to do with anything? No... No, this is wrong. Stop it, Adaen. Stop it now."

"Will you just calm down and trust me?" Adaen snapped as he continued his search and began to download. Obi-Wan took a deep breath then placed his hand on the other boy's shoulder pulling him away from the console.

"No, I can't let you do this. It isn't right," he stated calmly. Adaen's pale eyes flashed with anger.

"I saved your life remember!" he shouted. Obi-Wan flinched at the unexpected ire.

"I know, but this is wrong."

"Fine," Adaen hissed and suddenly Obi-Wan was flung across the room. He slammed against the far wall hitting his head in the process. He fell to the floor in a dazed heap, but it was only a matter of seconds before his mind cleared and he looked up to see his friend advancing on him.

"Adaen? How..."

"What? You think only Jedi can use your precious Force?" the boy spat. He raised his arm and Obi-Wan was again lifted off of the floor. Adaen curled his fingers and Obi-Wan could feel his throat begin to close cutting off his flow of oxygen.

/Master!/"

"Don't worry, little Jedi," Adaen crooned in a voice that sounded very much like another voice that still haunted Obi-Wan's dreams. "This will all be over soon."

* * * * *

Qui-Gon opened his eyes with a heavy sigh; his attempts to meditate still thwarted by his own chaotic emotions despite the tranquility of the gardens. He could feel the tickle in

his Force sense hinting at some vague foreboding, but he could not define it. The master was just about to try again when a sharp cry roared between his ears.

/Master!/

/Padawan!/

In an instant, the master was on his feet, but before he could take any further action a familiar aura entered into his awareness. Qui-Gon spun around to find a shadowed figure standing in the main archway. A cruel smile graced his scared features.

"It's good to see you again, Master."

"Xanatos," Qui-Gon growled. "What have you done with Obi-Wan?" he asked as he watched the lithe form of his former apprentice slink further into the garden.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about him. My apprentice is keeping him company I'm sure."

"The boy."

"The boy," Xanatos repeated.

"Your overconfidence has cost you once again, Xanatos. The Council already knows about Adaen," the master responded, but the younger man only laughs lightly.

"Do you really think I expected a child to be able to fool a Temple full of Jedi Masters?" he answered still chuckling haughtily. "Even you can't think me that naïve, Master."

"Then why?" Qui-Gon retorted inching closer to the dark Jedi. "What purpose does he serve?"

"A distraction, of course."

"So what is it that you are really after?"

"Two things actually. The first, of course, is acquiring a new apprentice and Obi-Wan and I have already bonded so well together," he smirked. Qui-Gon's eyes flashed with rage as his hand flitted over his lightsaber.

"I'll die before I let you take him again," he snapped. To that, Xanatos reached for and ignited his own blade.

"That's the second thing I'm after."

Chapter 29: Shatterpoints

Day 156

"There is no point to this, Xanatos. We know how Adaen got into the Temple. We know about the catacombs. You're not getting out this time," Qui-Gon stated calmly, but Xanatos simply grinned at the unimpressive revelation.

"It certainly took you long enough," the younger man laughed and suddenly the master realized he had made a tactical error. Xanatos always had another way out, a backdoor, a plan B, but before he could speak Obi-Wan's cry rang out in his mind.

/Master!/

/Padawan! Are you alright?/

/Adaen, he's.../

The master's heart stopped for a moment as the voice in his mind went quiet. He could feel the boy's concentration and fear, but he could also feel his determination. He knew that there was only one way to reach his padawan. Qui-Gon lifted his saber and took an Ataru defensive stance, his saber's bright green glow a stark contrast to the hideous crimson humming before his former apprentice.

"This ends today, Xanatos."

"No, Master. This is only the beginning," the dark Jedi smiled and in an instant the former master and apprentice fall into a deadly dance. Green and crimson bars of light arced and struck, blocked and parried, moved and countered faster than the eye could see. Xanatos had always been good with a saber, but Qui-Gon knew he was no master. The Jedi moved with speed and grace matching the scarred man easily, first in defense then pushing the offensive. The master glided through the battle, falling completely into the Force as he pushed the younger man back. Just a few moments more and the battle would be over...

Then pain.

* * * * *

Obi-Wan could feel his body's desperate need for air intensify as his chest constricted painfully and dark spots began to dance at the edges of his vision. His fingers continued their blind search, clawing pointlessly at his throat as Adaen's Force clutch only tightened

further. Obi-Wan formed begging words with his mouth, but no sound escaped making his features seem grotesque and fish-like. Adaen stepped forward, a cruel smirk on his thin lips.

"I bet you think your master is coming to save you, don't you?" the boy sneered as he drew close to the padawan. His lips grazed the Jedi's ear, his warm breath tickling the tiny hairs there. "He's not, you know. Master Xanatos has seen to that."

Obi-Wan's eyes went wide at the boy's words and something broke inside him. He would not leave his master to fight Xanatos alone. The padawan closed his eyes. Adaen was strong in the Force, but Obi-Wan was stronger. He pulled the Force around him letting it coalesce between his coiled fingers then with a sudden jerk he snapped his hands forward. The Force surge pushed the Rattataki youth sending him flying across the room. Obi-Wan, released from the child's fierce Force choke, fell to the ground his lungs struggling for breath. He knew he hadn't much time so he forced himself to his feet even as he tried to regulate his labored breathing.

/Master!/

/Padawan! Are you alright?/

/Adaen, he's.../

Obi-Wan's thoughts were interrupted as the Force slammed into his mind with a warning. Without hesitation, the apprentice ducked, narrowly missing a chair hurled at his head. It crashed into the wall behind him, splintering into several pieces. Before Obi-Wan could even react he heard a feral roar and suddenly Adaen was upon him. He fell back to the floor with a hard thud, the landing knocking the air out of him. His former friend pinned him there, fists swinging wildly as blow after blow connected with his face despite Obi-Wan's disoriented attempts to block.

/Padawan!/

He could hear his master yell, but he was too concerned with survival to answer as a fist connected solidly with his left eye.

"You think you're so special!" Adaen screamed as he continued to rain down blows. "Nobody wants you! Not the Jedi! Not your master! Not even Xanatos! He just used you to hurt Jinn!"

"No!" Obi-Wan screamed. His voice sounded unfamiliar, wild and primal in its intensity. Again he used the Force to dislodge the bigger boy, but he was only free for a moment before the boy was on his feet and charging at him in a furious rage. Blindly, Obi-Wan groped around him, his fingers curling around a splintered leg of the chair.

"You're nothing! You're..." Adaen hissed, but his voice was cut off, his eyes opened wide as he stared down at Obi-Wan. Both boys looked between them at the bloody hand holding the sharp piece of wood that was embedded deeply within the older boy's chest. Adaen's eyes raised and Obi-Wan felt compelled to meet them.

"You're... nothing..." the boy whispered with a gurgle as a trickle of blood began to drip out of the corner of his mouth. Obi-Wan held his gaze as he watched the other boy's eyes dim as the life drained out of him. Another heartbeat, two, then no more. The older boy's body slumped, further impaling himself and falling heavily upon the padawan.

* * * * *

/Padawan!/

Qui-Gon's lunge faltered as pain and desperation crashed over the bond with his apprentice. He staggered a moment at the intensity before drawing back from the battle and taking a defensive stance once more. Xanatos smiled.

"It seems my Adaen is making an impression," he sneered. "I hope he remembers not to kill him. After all, I think his turning would hurt you so much more."

Qui-Gon could feel the rage course through him at those words. The Force around him shifted and a well of molten fury built in his chest begging to be released.

"Never!" the master howled as he launched into a flurry of wild blows each of which was handily deflected by the younger man. Their sabers crossed and soon the two men were staring at each other, their faces lit eerily by the glow of red and green.

/Master!/

Obi-Wan called into his mind, but Qui-Gon did not hear him as he was too wrapped up within his own fury, his own rage.

"Your anger has unbalanced you, Master," the younger man spat as he pushed the older man away. "Where as my anger only makes me stronger!" he yelled as he started a brutal attack of his own. Qui-Gon was momentarily stunned by the sudden onslaught. His grasp on the Force weakened in his rage. He continued to lose ground as Xanatos pounded away at him with furious strikes. Still fighting, Qui-Gon took a breath and found his center, releasing the dark emotions as best he could. With a powerful shove, the master used the Force to push the dark Jedi away from him, but Xanatos recovered quickly rising gracefully from his crouch. Instead of engaging though, the younger man looked to small monitor on his wrist then he turned to his former master.

"Time's up."

* * * * *

For a moment, Obi-Wan could not move. He could not think, then he remembered his master and was instantly pulled out of his paralysis.

/Master!/

Obi-Wan's call went unanswered, but he could feel his master's fear for him, his determination, his rage as he continued in his own battle. Obi-Wan quickly extricated himself from the limp body of the boy he once called friend, but he couldn't think about that now. It was too much. Instead he focused solely on his master. He climbed awkwardly to his feet and moved to the door. He palmed it open, but before he could step out into the hall a thunderous explosion rocked through the Temple. Then another. And another. And another. The successive blasts shook the walls and tilted the floor sending Obi-Wan stumbling into corridor. A flash of warning and Obi-Wan jumped to the right scarcely in time to miss a chunk of duracrete as the ceiling began to collapse. He landed clear of the rubble, but his right ankle rolled painfully and he fell briefly to his knees. The explosions had stopped, but the rumbling continued. Obi-Wan pulled himself to his feet and sped down the hall as quickly as his hobbling gait would allow.

The Temple was in chaos. Jedi of all ages, ranks, and species raced to and fro. Most were trying to organize rescues and searches. Others were attending to the wounded before attempting to move them to safety. A few younglings and padawans staggered around dazedly in search of their masters before some random master or knight took them quickly by the hand sending comfort and peace through the small touch. No one noticed the grim and determine looking padawan lurching behind the pair of cloaked figures racing down the corridors heedless of the surrounding maelstrom of frenzied energy.

* * * * *

The floor and walls shook violently as successive explosions rocked through the Temple. Only through judicious use of the Force was Qui-Gon able to keep his balance. Across the garden he could see his former apprentice dash out the far archway and instantly the master was in pursuit. The older Jedi tore through the Temple halls. All around him was in disarray. Wounded Jedi, wondering younglings, and falling debris were everywhere. Some Jedi even glanced up, their eyes following the two figures racing past them, but Qui-Gon took no notice of them. His eyes only saw the dark figure running ahead of him. He saw no others, not even the smaller limping figure traveling determinedly in his wake.

* * * * *

Xanatos sprinted out into the open space of the Temple's eastern landing platform, his eyes casting wildly about as if searching for something or someone. He came to a slow stop near the center of the space, his mouth slightly open and a deep furrow forming on his brow.

"No..." he said aloud, but speaking only to himself. "No, where is..."

"Your master has betrayed you, Xanatos," Qui-Gon answered as he entered the bay, his saber once again igniting. "No one is coming for you."

Xanatos spun around at his words, a feral snarl on his lips. Qui-Gon could feel the heat of the younger man's unchecked fury smashing against his mental shields even as his saber clashed with his own. The unbridled fury of his attacks pounded away at the master's defenses, but Qui-Gon did not falter. Instead the master held out, patiently waiting for the opening he needed to end things once and for all. Then suddenly a flash of movement caught his eye. He knew that Xanatos saw it too as a wide grin spread across the man's face.

"Master!"

"Obi-Wan, no!"

* * * * *

Obi-Wan followed his master through the Temple halls as quickly as he could, but his injured ankle protested his pursuit loudly by shooting blinding bolts of agony through his frame at every step yet still he persisted. He lost sight of his master's retreating form, but he was undeterred as he relied on the training bond to guide to him. It did so, unerringly, and soon the apprentice found himself on the eastern landing platform. As he approached, his eyes fall immediately onto the two figures locked in furious combat. The padawan inched closer his gaze never leaving the two duelists. His master was holding his own, but Xanatos was attacking with an intensity that frightened the young Jedi. A wave of panic rose in his chest overwhelming his conscious thought.

"Master!" he cried out and immediately he realized his error. The dark Jedi pushed away from his master and leapt towards him. Instinctively, Obi-Wan's hand drifted to his hip for his saber, but of course it was not there. He looked up in terror at the bar of crimson death hurtling towards him.

"Obi-Wan, no!"

* * * * *

To Qui-Gon's eyes everything was happening in slow motion. He watched in horror as Xanatos leapt towards his unarmed apprentice. With a speed he would have thought himself incapable of achieving, the master leapt between the two, clasp ing his padawan to his chest and shielding him from Xanatos's saber with his own body.

"No!" Obi-Wan screamed.

Qui-Gon felt the instant the blade contacted his body as a searing and unimaginable pain ripped across his back, burning both cloth and skin in a vicious slash. Agony gripped him. His saber fell from his hand and he collapsed forward bringing his padawan down with him.

* * * * *

Obi-Wan fell to the ground hard, his master's heavy and unresponsive body partially covering his leg and injured ankle. Xanatos was smiling manically now, his visage a twisted, evil mockery of genuine mirth. Obi-Wan frantically casted his gaze about looking for something, anything to defend himself with. His master's saber was gone from his hand rolling to where Obi-Wan knew not. Xanatos walked closer to the pair of Jedi. He savagely kicked the fallen master. Qui-Gon made no response, but Obi-Wan still wrapped his arms around his master's body protectively. His fingers brush against something cool. Xanatos knelt before him, his crimson blade humming by his side, but not raised to strike the killing blow just yet.

"Do you see now, little Jedi? Do you see how worthless you are? You let your master die. Who will want you now?" the dark Jedi crooned. "Come with me and perhaps you can prove to be worthwhile yet."

Obi-Wan looked down at the unmoving form of his master then to the scarred man kneeling before him. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. When he opened them, Xanatos could see the resolution the boy had made within himself. The dark Jedi smiled widely.

"You've made the right choice, little Jedi."

"I know," Obi-Wan said softly. There was a sudden flash of the boy's wrist then Xanatos felt something hard pushing into his chest. He looked down to find the boy clutching a lightsaber, his thumb resting on the activation button. His eyes moved from the unlit saber to the boy's eyes.

"You don't have the nerve," he said. Obi-Wan made no response, his grip on his saber's hilt tightening a fraction.

“Predictably, you fail your master once again,” the older man sneered then suddenly he was yanked away by an unseen hand. It took several moments for Obi-Wan to understand what was happening as he watched several Jedi descend on his attacker. He was still looking at the scene dazedly when Mace crouched in front of him. A quick shake of his shoulders got his attention and he realized he was still clutching his saber before him.

“Obi-Wan? Obi-Wan are you alright? Are you injured?” the Councilor asked. The padawan didn’t respond save for his lightsaber dropping from his trembling hand. He turned away from the Council member and clutched at the still body beside him.

“Master!” he wailed as his vision blurred and tears streamed hotly down his cheeks. Deep in his anguish he did not feel the light touch of fingertips at his temple. He only knew his world had fallen into darkness.

Chapter 30: Mortal Coils

Day 157

The blade was falling, its arc marked by a blur of crimson, its destination inevitable. Obi-Wan stared mutely at his own end coming by the saber that had trapped him, tormented him, marked him. He waited only for that eternal moment. There was no escape for him this time, yet even as he thought those last thoughts a voice rang out through the open air.

“Obi-Wan, no!”

Horror, prolific, and unimaginable.

A body blocked the path of the deadly blade’s arc. A body protected him, sacrificed itself, its skin, its blood, its pain. There was a hiss. The smell of ozone and burnt flesh. Obi-Wan’s stomach turned as the pungent odor assailed his nostrils. The body slumped forward towards him falling limply, letting gravity have its will, but not before he saw them. Two blue eyes stared at him accusingly then eyelids fluttered shut never to be opened again.

“Master...” he whimpered, but he was not heard for no voice could reach the dead.

“Do you see now, little Jedi? Do you see how worthless you are? You let your master die. Who will want you now?”

“I’m sorry, Master. I’m so sorry... please... please don’t go... don’t leave me... Master! Master!”

“Master!” Obi-Wan yelled his body rocketing off the soft pillows of his bed. Instantly he felt a small hand upon his chest lightly pushing him back down, his own body too tired, too weak and wrung out to resist even this slight touch. A low keening wail escaped his lips.

“Master...”

“Easy, young one,” a familiar voice cooed. “Safe you are. Rest now you must.”

Obi-Wan turned his head to the soothing tones and found a pair of gimlet eyes staring at him.

“My fault...” he muttered. “My master is dead and it’s my fault,” he whispered his insides turning cold and his short limbs trembling. A wave of comfort and calm pushed into him from a warm spot under the hand on his chest.

"Your fault nothing is. Calm you must be," Yoda ordered serenely, his touch and presence still working to soothe the young Jedi, but Obi-Wan was not soothed. He was not calm. How could he be? His master...

"But... my master..."

"Dead Qui-Gon is not. Saved him you did."

"But..."

"Sssh," Yoda interrupted. "Explained things will be, but now rest you should. Yes, sleep, young one. All will be well again," the ancient master spoke warmly. Obi-Wan wanted to trust the wizened master, but his heart still ached with questions and uncertainties. He felt the push of the master's Force suggestion and he was unable to fight it. All too soon he was drifting back into the darkness of sleep, but this time, thankfully, he didn't dream.

* * * * *

"Shall we wait for Master Yoda?" Master Mundi asked quietly, his cultured tones ringing in the large Council chambers. Master Gallia shook her head, her headdress swaying rhythmically from the gesture.

"No," she answered her expression somber, her usually melodic voice tinted with sorrow. "He intends to stay with the boy until his master wakes."

"Yes, we should move forward," Master Windu intoned as he rested his elbows on his knees, his hands interlaced under his chin. "Knight Vor, your report?"

The young Cathar knight bowed low before the Council members, the slight twitch in her right ear the only sign of her minor nerves.

"We were able to secure and permanently seal the old catacomb entrance that Xanatos and the Rattataki child were using to ingress and egress. Those passages will no longer be an exploitable risk to the Temple," she reported curtly. Master Koon interlaced his long claw like fingers and leaned back in his seat.

"And what have you determined from the explosives? Why were we unable to detect them?"

"Master Lo-Cha is still analyzing the components with his team, but we know that they were concealed with the same Force shield generator technology Xanatos used before. Master Acks'na is currently working on a way to detect and nullify the equipment."

"How many casualties?" inquired Master Gallia, her voice soft in quiet reverence. The knight sighed audibly.

"Five Jedi were killed in the blasts. Three knights and a master and padawan. Eight more were injured, but none are currently critical," the Cathar answered and for several moments the chamber fell into silence out of respect and sorrow for their fallen sisters and brothers. It was Master Windu who finally broke the somber moment.

"Thank you, Taylen. You are dismissed," he spoke in his typical rumbling baritone. The knight bowed deeply and quietly took her leave. The two remaining Jedi stood mutely before the Council waiting to be recognized. Windu turned to one of them. "Master Uvain, what is your report?"

Tahl bowed low before the honored assembly. Vresh stood beside her in continued silence as he had not yet been called upon to speak, but there was an unnatural stillness about him that troubled her. Tahl was concerned, but she knew that her questions must wait.

"The Temple's files were not compromised, Masters. We were able to isolate and redirect the attempted download without being detected," she answered. Master Piell leaned forward in his seat, his short legs hanging in the air.

"How were you able to protect the system so quickly? I understand that the splice the child used was quiet sophisticated."

"We would not have been able to catch it so quickly were it not for the information Master Tivi's padawan provided me," she responded. Vresh glanced at her briefly, his eyes wide in question, but Master Windu spoke first.

"Explain."

"Shortly after speaking with Master Jinn, Lantis came to me with her concerns as well. She described what she witnessed when she found Adaen seated at the terminal in Jinn's quarters. She did not understand exactly what he was doing, but based on her description I was able to track his movements through the system and from them was able to create and install a series of safeguards against the intrusion."

"And the download?" Master Tiin questioned.

"Prevented, however," Tahl paused as her expression tightened ever so slightly. "The download pertaining to the mineral resources and rights of registered planets was not the source of the intrusion. That breach was a distraction."

"And the real target?" Master Billaba inquired in her typical warm and mellifluous tones.

"The actual attack was from a virus hidden within the programming of the data spike used to splice the system. This virus was designed to retrieve very specific information, upload it to another terminal, and then create permanent backdoors for future use. Thankfully, we were able to prevent that from happening," Tahl answered succinctly.

"Were you able to trace the destination of the attempted upload?" Billaba continued. Tahl sighed.

"No, unfortunately. We only know that it was to be a short-range transmission meaning that the recipient terminal would be somewhere on Coruscant."

"And what was the data in question?" Master Windu added following his former padawan's line of questioning. At this, Tahl's mask of serenity slipped slightly revealing her severe disquiet with the answer.

"Someone was trying to get the names and locations of our former initiates... initiates who left the Order or joined one of our corps," she responded. Master Poof's head began to sway jerkily, a clear sign of his puzzlement and agitation.

"To what end?" the Councilor wondered aloud.

"I can only think of one reason," Tahl stated pausing for a moment. "Recruitment."

Master Windu sighed and leaned back in his seat, his brow deeply furrowed.

"We can not afford to allow ourselves to fall into idle speculation," he began and Tahl shot him an incredulous look. The Councilor raised his hands palms out in a placating gesture. "But we will take this as the serious threat that it is and respond accordingly while we continue to investigate," he finished and Tahl's glare receded a bit. The Korun Councilor then turned his gaze to the so far silent master to Tahl's right.

"Master Tivi?"

"Yes, Master Windu," the tall master answered calmly. His voice was flat, his expression empty, his mind tightly shielded revealing nothing.

"We owe a debt of gratitude to your padawan for her quick thinking and selfless acts. She is to be commended for her actions and you as well for your teachings."

"Her actions are her own," the white-haired master said with a rueful smile. "I cannot take responsibility for crafting her compassion or her heart. It is simply who she is."

"How is she?" Mace asked gently. Vresh took in a deep, centering breath.

"She...", he began, but then was forced to stop, swallowing thickly before continuing. "The surgery went well and she has been removed from the bacta. She has yet to wake, but

the healers are hopeful," he answered. Mace nodded, his brown eyes reflecting only deep concern and compassion for his friend.

"We are glad that our ruse did not bring her into further harm. We know of your deep... concern with the plan," Mace stated carefully. Vresh didn't answer merely nodded in recognition of the Councilor's statement. Mace regarded the Jedi in front of him for several quiet seconds before speaking again.

"We thank you for your service. May the Force be with you," he said by way of benediction and the two Jedi bowed and took their leave of the Council chambers. Once they were alone in the quiet halls, Vresh began a slow, but steady pace towards the Healer's Halls. Tahl moved to walk beside him. They walk silently for several minutes, but soon Tahl was unable to remain mute under the weight of her concern.

"Vresh, how are you doing?" she asked softly. She watched as he took a deep breath, his shoulders slumping slightly at the exhale.

"Ask me when she wakes," he answered and then he said no more.

* * * * *

Day 159

"Back you are. Good to see you it is. Worry me like that you should not for too old I am," the ancient master said smiling warmly down at his grand padawan's haggard visage. Only recently released from the bacta tank, Qui-Gon was pale and weak, his eyes sunken and bruised, the skin on his newly healed back still tender and pink.

"Master?" the long-haired master called out feebly.

"Hmm?"

"Where... where is Obi-Wan?"

"Resting he is. Resting you should be," Yoda answered his ears drooping slightly.

"I must see him. I need to know he is okay," Qui-Gon persisted, his eyes showing a strength his voice currently could not.

"Healed his injuries have been. Heal your injuries still must. Patience you must have, young one."

"No, Master. I need to see him... please," the younger master pleaded. The tiny master sighed softly, closing his eyes for a moment before answering.

"Need each other you do. Arrange it I will," the master said and at his words something in Qui-Gon's heart eased slightly. His eyes drifted close as some of the tenseness left his beleaguered body.

"Thank you, Master."

* * * * *

Obi-Wan Kenobi was cradled in darkness, but there was more than just a lack of vision within the creeping black. There was a numbness both within and without and it called to him, held him in a sad mimicry of comfort for at least here there was no pain. The ache in his heart was bearable here in this dead space. Dead. His master was dead. The anguish inside him stirred once more as his mind moved undesirably towards awareness. He was waking, but Obi-Wan did not want to wake. Waking meant facing reality, a reality where he was alone... so utterly alone.

"Open your eyes, Padawan."

That voice. He knew that voice, but he also knew that it couldn't be. That voice was silenced because of him, gone from him, lost forever.

"Be at peace, Padawan. I am here."

Obi-Wan tried to tamp down the spring of hope welling in him, but he could not. His lids fluttered stiffly, his mind hoped to delay what would surely be his reintroduction into a life he could no longer bear. His eyes opened and slowly his vision was filled with the soft blue eyes he thought never to gaze upon again.

"Master?" he scarcely more than muttered. Qui-Gon smiled softly and Obi-Wan could see the warmth shining in those blue orbs. "I'm dreaming," he whispered.

"No, Obi-Wan. You're not dreaming. I am here and I am well."

"Master!" the boy cried and immediately the master pulled the child to his chest, the boy's head held against his heart. Qui-Gon held his padawan tightly his chin resting on top of the boy's short crop of hair.

"I thought... I thought he... killed you," Obi-Wan stuttered into the soft folds of his master's plain medical tunic. "My fault... all my fault..."

"Sssh. Hush, Padawan. None of that now," the master gently ordered as he rubbed soothing circles on the boy's back. Something about that tone, that embrace broke the tenuous hold Obi-Wan had on his emotions and all the fear and despair within him poured out in gushing sobs. His master whispered soothing nonsense as he rocked him, holding him fast against the storm of feeling until finally, as all storms do, it passed leaving only red-lined and puffy eyes in its wake. Qui-Gon moved to allow the child to rest again upon his pillows, but Obi-Wan seized him in a vice-like grip sending a jolt of pain through the newly healed flesh of his back.

"No... don't go... please, don't leave me..." he whispered desperately and the master's heart nearly broke at the anguish he heard there.

"It is alright, Padawan. I'm not going anywhere I promise," the master said as he gave his apprentice a reassuring squeeze before attempting to lay him back against quickly propped up pillows. This time Obi-Wan let go, but his reluctance to do so was nearly tangible. Settled once more, Obi-Wan's eyes fell again upon his master. The man was too thin and too pale. There were dark circles under his eyes and his hair hung about in scraggly wisps from a haphazard braid.

"Master, you are alright? Truly?" the boy asked. The stark sincerity of his question brought a surprised smile to the master's lips.

"Truly, Obi-Wan. My injury is nearly healed, but in truth I am much better now that I can be here with you."

"I was so scared," the apprentice answered and Qui-Gon's eyes close for a moment as he forced himself back to his center.

"I was too," he said finally and Obi-Wan's heart warmed at the soft admission. Through the bond he could feel his master's deep worry for him, but also he could feel his joy. Obi-Wan allowed himself to bask in that feeling even as he sent waves of his own love through the bond to his master. After several moments, Qui-Gon took his padawan's hand in his, smiling softly.

"There is someone who would like to see you if you feel up to it?"

"Yes, Master," came the swift reply. Obi-Wan could not care less who wanted to see him or what he or she might want of him. He had his master back and that was enough for him. Qui-Gon turned his head to the door of the small room, but did not rise. It was only a moment later before the door quietly slid open and the tall, lithe form of Master Tivi stepped through the portal. The white-haired master walked to edge of the bed taking in the two Jedi before him.

"I'm glad to see you up," he said then he glanced directly at his agemate. "Both of you."

“Not nearly as glad as I,” Qui-Gon replied still smiling, then his expression turned significantly more somber. “How is Lantis?”

“No change,” Vresh answered quietly. Obi-Wan’s brow wrinkled as he looked from Vresh to his master.

“I thought you said that she woke up? That she was okay?”

Qui-Gon turned his attention back to his padawan and sighed inwardly.

“No, Obi-Wan. Lantis has yet to awaken though many of her wounds have been tended. I apologize for deceiving you, but it was necessary at the time. I’m sorry,” his master finished. Obi-Wan dropped his gaze to his blanket as his mind struggled to accept this new information. Deception. His deception. His master had... lied to him. Lied. To him. It seemed inconceivable, yet he knew it to be true. His master said it was necessary... and Lantis... Lantis was not okay. She never was... A necessary lie... a lie to...

Obi-Wan gasped as the shock of his realization hit him.

“You knew?” he asked as he once again looked to his master for answers. Qui-Gon did not pretend to misunderstand. The Jedi master nodded looking, in that moment, much older than before.

“Suspected at least. We did not want to place you in jeopardy, but I feared if I told you,”

“I would not have believed you,” Obi-Wan finished for him and again the master nodded. Obi-Wan gave a jerky nod of his own before turning his slow gaze to the master standing silently at the foot of his bed. He lowered his chin to his chest in the best penitent posture he could manage from his nearly supine position.

“Master Tivi, please forgive me for the wrongs I have caused to both you and your apprentice. Adaen is...,” he paused swallowing noticeably, “Adaen was here because of me. What he did was,”

“Not your fault,” Vresh interrupted, his voice far harsher than the master intended. He pinched the bridge of his thin nose and closed his eyes briefly. “It is not your fault, Obi-Wan. No one blames you.”

“But Lantis,”

“Was hurt by him,” Vresh snapped, his eyes flashing open in unchecked anger. “Not you. Him,” he finished hotly causing Obi-Wan to flinch away involuntarily. Qui-Gon gently squeezed the hand held in his. Vresh sighed and struggled silently for a moment to reign in his emotions.

"Forgive me, Padawan. I still... have much to meditate on, but know this no one blames you, not your master, not me, not Lantis. No one and I don't want you to blame yourself either. That's the last thing Lantis would... Lantis would want. So, just... don't, okay?" the master said and Obi-Wan could see the simple plea in his silver eyes.

"I won't, Master Vresh. I promise," he replied meekly. Vresh nodded slowly a bit of relief easing his tense frame. Qui-Gon regarded his friend for a moment.

"V?"

"I'm alright, Qui. I just need..." he started, but the master was unable to finish. The words he sought eluded him. He shook his head in frustration. "Sorry, I need to meditate for a while I think. I will see you later?" he asked uncharacteristically timid. Qui-Gon nodded. Vresh gave a slight bow to both master and padawan and then left the room closing the door behind him. Obi-Wan turned to his master a question in his eyes. Qui-Gon pulled the boy back into his embrace.

"All will be well in time, Obi-Wan. All will be well in time."

Fin.