Deadeye

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/5621677.

Deadeye
by Emram_Aondel

Summary

Just before leaving for Bandomeer, Obi-wan was chosen by Master Praethorn, never having even met Master Qui-Gon Jinn. Nine years later, they are hunting down a dangerous fugitive on Tatooine, when Obi-wan literally runs into a Zabrak with black tattoos. For years, Obi-wan has experienced visions and nightmares in which his Master is killed by the Zabrak. With his visions coming to light, Obi-wan will finally meet Qui-Gon Jinn and the two will become an important team in the fight against the Sith.
"You were right. He's heading to his ally's home on Mimban." Master Praethorn's voice chirped over the com. "Just confirmed from security feeds at the space port that he actually got on board."

"It was the most likely choice. Good thing he doesn't know we are aware of his associate."

"Agreed. We might not have been so lucky in narrowing our choices if he hadn't been so sloppy in his desperation. You must have put the fear of the ScoreKeeper in him."

Obi-Wan knew his master was fishing for more details of the encounter he had with the Trandoshan in the Mos Espa bar. But Obi-Wan did not oblige. He was too ashamed and frightened by his actions. There was no need to provide further evidence of his incompetence to his Master. He knew he would have to discuss it at some point, but he was not ready.

When no comment was forthcoming, his Master continued, "The poor kid that booked his flight was found in a supply closet a few moments ago. Iessel slashed his neck. Bled out pretty quickly."

Obi-Wan ignored his Master's comment. He did not need to think about the further devastation being wrought by the Trandoshan. It would only serve to push him further into his guilt. He paused in his search of the room in which Iessel had been hiding for the past two days. While they needed no more information to determine his next destination, additional evidence of his crimes might be recovered from the items he had left behind.

The Trandoshan had left in a hurry and his pads, weapons, and other personal items were still scattered throughout the one room apartment. Despite his escape from Obi-Wan in Mos Espa, Obi-Wan could still sense Iessel's desperation within the four walls. He knew the two Jedi were closing in on him quickly and to be taken prisoner was a fate worse than death for him. He was used to being the hunter, not the hunted.

"How long ago did he leave?" Obi-Wan asked.

"It's only been two hours since he boarded the ship," Praethorn advised. "It'd be best if we follow quickly. I don't want to give him time to prepare any surprises for us. He knows we'll be following."

"Agreed." Obi-Wan responded, already grabbing one of the nearby bags and throwing anything that looked important inside of it. "I can be back to the Deadeye in fifteen minutes. You'll have her ready?"

"You know I will." Praethorn answered. "Remember to remain calm, Padawan. Do not let your emotions lead you. Let the Force be your guide."

"You have prepared me well, Master. I will do my best."

"You always do, young one. I'll see you in a few moments."

Obi-Wan could hear the pride in his Master's voice and he knew the tough, old man was smiling the smile that seemed reserved just for him. One that would have been given from a father to a son. He just wasn't sure if he was as deserving as before.

Obi-Wan had no idea where he would be if not for his Master. He had been packed and prepared to leave the Temple for Bandomeer. A life of farming in the AgriCorps appeared to be his future. But the older Jedi had arrived at his room as he debated whether to say goodbye to his friends or not. He
introduced himself and asked Obi-Wan to join him for noon day meal.

He had witnessed Obi-Wan's duel with Bruck Chun and thought Obi-Wan had a lot of drive and determination. But, he had not considered taking him as a padawan at the time. It had been too long since he had done so and he was getting on in age and had not planned on training another. He had had to leave immediately after the tournament on a short, but time-sensitive mission. Upon his return, he was shocked to find that Obi-Wan had not been chosen.

After speaking with Master Yoda about Obi-Wan's plight, he had decided to make the offer to become the young man's Master. He explained to Obi-Wan that he was no longer in his prime, but he was still out there fighting the good fight. "You may have to do most of the heavy lifting, kid. But I will teach you how to let go of your anger. I'll make you a fugitive's worst nightmare, a tactical weapon, and one hell of a detective. With your strength in the force, you may be one of the most valuable Jedi of your time."

"Master," Obi-Wan had responded desperately, "I just appreciate the chance to become a Jedi Knight at all."

Master Praethorn specialized in catching the most violent and dangerous fugitives wanted by the Republic and he would go anywhere to find them. He was also called upon for dignitary protection details. He had taught Obi-Wan everything he knew over the past nine years. But his Master was older now and finding it tougher and tougher to do the job that came so easily to Obi-Wan.

They had discussed Obi-Wan's status just a month ago, Master Praethorn eluding to the fact that their time together would soon be ending and Obi-Wan would be facing his trials.

Obi-wan found it hard to believe that it had only been a month since that conversation. One month. And now he was not so certain he was prepared to undergo the trials. So much had happened in such a short time span. So many things to give him reasons to doubt his abilities and his judgment.

Barrick Iessel had happened.

Obi-Wan threw the last of the personal effects into the bag angrily and took a moment to pause. He breathed deeply, letting his fear, his anger, and his guilt settle upon him. He released the emotions with each exhale, determined to be perfectly calm when the time came to take Iessel into custody. He would need to meditate even more on the journey to Mimban. Though nearly healed from his physical injuries, the emotional trauma of his most recent mission was still overwhelming at times. His master had helped a great deal, insisting on meditating with Obi-Wan to help him face the more dangerous thoughts and feelings stemming from the incident. He wasn't alright, but he was getting there. At least he was still functioning. And his Master judged him healthy enough to continue in their attempts to take Iessel into custody.

After another few deep breaths, he scanned the room once more using the Force to guide his observations. This was not their usual efficiency, but time could not be spared to search further. Near certain that he was leaving nothing important behind, he exited the room and started back for the ship.

The wind had not completely abated since the sandstorm last night and he was pelted with the tiny grains as he opened the door, He angled his face away and squinted his eyes.

Sand, sand, and more sand! He hated sand planets and Tatooine was definitely being scratched off his list of places to visit in the future. It was horribly hot and there was not a crevice in his body that was sand free.
After being caught in the beginning of the storm last night, Obi-Wan was convinced that sand could be added to the list of things that would tempt one to the darkside.

He was still squinting as he rounded the corner of the building and bumped against a robed figure going the opposite way.

"Excuse me," Obi-Wan said politely.

A growl caused Obi-Wan to look up into the hood. He only caught a glance as the man pushed past him rudely, nearly knocking him down in the process.

The face he saw there made him freeze in his tracks. It made his stomach sink and his knees turn weak. It was the same image that had haunted his visions, his nightmares for the past six years. A face a thousand times more dreaded than Barrick Iessel's. The face of the monster who would kill his Master.

A Zabrak with black tattoos.
Chapter 2

Maul was immediately disgusted by the drunk Toydarian lounging in his rolling chair. After asking if he had had any inquiries for spare parts for a Nubian vessel, possibly hyperdrive components, the pathetic life form began blubbering on about being cheated in a recent bet. It was difficult to understand the slurred words, and spittle flew from its mouth with every syllable.

"Have you seen this man?" Maul growled, displaying the video of the hologram of Qui-Gon Jinn using his lightsaber to deflect blaster fire on Naboo.

The flying monstrosity sat up. "Eh. That's him! I knew he cheated, mmm....should have followed my instincts...was a Jedi. I will report this to the Hutts. They will-"

"You will do no such thing," Maul warned, grabbing the creature by its throat, picking him up by the neck and shoving him against the wall. Maul reveled in the fear coming from the small blue being.

The Toydarian looked at Maul with wide, worried eyes, his body trembling beneath his hands. Maul loosened his hold around the creature's neck and sat him back down in the chair upon which he had previously been seated.

"I have a quarrel with this Jedi. Tell me what you know and I will retrieve what he has taken from you as well."

"Eh." The creature was still tense, but seemed to be in a much more collaborative mood upon hearing his last words. "And I believe you could do it, eh." He sat a bit straighter, some of his fear dissipating. Maul could see him mentally struggling to escape the drunken stupor in which he put himself.

The junk dealer began to relay the entire story once more, but Maul interrupted roaring. "Where are they now? Where is their ship?" He loomed over the Toydarian getting up close and baring his sharpened teeth.

The shopkeeper flinched back once more, clenching his eyes shut and preparing for a blow to the head. Or perhaps a bite.

"I followed them to the end of town," He answered quickly and in a much higher pitch than before. "I cursed the one that swindled me, the Jedi, the whole way. When they left the city, they headed southwest, so I would suspect...out in the Western Dune Sea. But I do not know for certain."

"How long ago?" Maul asked, backing away again.

"Not even an hour ago."

Maul turned to go and the Toydarian shot back up out of his chair to follow unsteadily.

"I want his ship. Eh? And the boy. Anakin Skywalker. He was my slave and I want him back as well!"

Maul drew his lightsaber, spinning quickly and dispatching the Toydarian. He watched as the severed head bounced, and then rolled to a stop on the stone floor. He smiled in satisfaction, glad to have shut the creature up finally.

Tapping his armband, he redirected his probe droids to the Western Dune Sea. He quickly replaced
his saber on his hip and pulled up the hood of his robe before heading back to his hoverbike.

He was about a block away from where he parked, when a human rounded the corner of a building and slammed into him.

"Excuse me." The being offered kindly.

Maul growled automatically disgusted at the courtesy, the deference, being shown. He pushed past the human, but not before noticing the lightsaber on his hip. He rounded the corner from which the Jedi came and used the force to leap quickly onto the roof of the building.

The Jedi was but a boy. Late teens, maybe. A padawan judging by the fear rolling off of him in waves. No emotional control at all. Maul watched carefully from above as the young man peaked back around the corner, apparently checking to see if he had continued on.

This could be too much fun to pass up. Should he follow the young one to find Amidala or take the information of her whereabouts from him...forcibly? There must be a reason for him to have come back to the city. Or had he been delayed from joining his master when Qui-Gon Jinn had left earlier?

The padawan's master would not leave Tatooine without him. A weakness of the Jedi. And the young man's disappearance might actually give Maul more time to find the queen.

The human continued walking in the direction he had been going, albeit more cautiously. Maul watched for a moment, before deciding to surprise him a block ahead. He knew just the place to jump out and take him. Racing over the rooftops he jumped down and waited for the boy to get close enough.
Chapter 3

The sudden, but familiar chill of the Zabrak's presence slipped into Obi-Wan's bones and he shuddered. It was like falling into an ice-cold lake in pitch darkness. Only this time, it was no dream.

He somehow managed to round the corner and press his back to the wall for support, but couldn't consciously remember doing it. The bag he had been holding rested by his feet and his hand rested on his lightsaber at his hip.

"Breathe." He reminded himself quietly, as he battled to restore his normal state of calm. It was a pointless exercise this time around. He needed to move. To get away quickly. But he was paralyzed with fear. Images from his visions assaulted his more practical thinking.

Obi-Wan made a quick peek around the corner and could no longer see the Zabrak.

"Kriff!" He cursed to himself, wiping sweat from his brow with a shaking hand. He needed to get to his master, ignore having seen the Zabrak, and get off that planet as fast as possible. He forced himself to pick up the bag and throw it on his shoulder.

He scanned the area briefly and started walking toward the spaceport.

But after only a few steps, he hesitated. What if leaving immediately became the cause of the confrontation to begin with?

His com chirped, nearly causing him to jump out of his skin. He fumbled to retrieve the device from his belt, his fine motor skills having abandoned him with the surge of adrenaline his body had released.

"Padawan, are you there? What is your status?"

Obi-Wan hesitated in answering. Should he tell his Master he had seen the Zabrak. Or should he keep quiet and continue on to the spaceport? He hesitated too long in deciding.

"Obi-Wan?! Answer me. I can sense something is terribly wrong."

Obi-Wan raised the com still not sure of what he would say when he took notice of the speeder parked behind him, while scanning the area. The oh-so-familiar speeder the Zabrak had operated in countless visions.

"Standby." He responded, buying time to decide what to do. He could disguise the fear in his voice and he had learned early on in his apprenticeship how to regulate his body's reaction to all sorts of emotions. But right now, all that training seemed for naught. His close bond with his master would not allow the fear to go undetected and if he shielded, his master would only worry further.

He fished out a tracking chip from his belt and quickly scanned the area. He could still sense the cold, but it seemed to be moving away from him. He was running to the speeder and placing the tracking chip where it would not be visible, before he realized what he was doing. Then he took off for the spaceport, jogging down the street this time. The faster they escaped Tatooine, the better.

"Kriff!" Why had he even done that! He'd wasted precious seconds in which they could be getting out of there.

If they just left now, they could be in space within the hour, his visions thwarted. They could just
continue on after lessel. It may be the only chance to escape the fate he had foreseen for years. The opportunity was too good to pass up.

"I'm on my way, Master. Temporary set back."

Obi-Wan was sick of visions and sick of living in fear of this moment. Fear of not making the correct choices. He'd always known there was no escaping it, and now it was upon him.

The first couple times he had experienced them, Obi-Wan dismissed the visions as incredibly intense nightmares. Master Praethorn had been away on missions, and he had not been there to witness his padawan's distress.

But his master had been woken by each of the following nightmares over the course of the next several months, and he had recognized them for what they were, visions. Seeing the fear and anxiety the visions caused his padawan, and the effect they had on Obi-Wan's daily health and his ability to meditate, Praethorn had insisted he share the visions with him. Obi-wan refused, even when Praethorn threatened punishment that he ultimately did not follow through with. For some reason, the visions of his Master's death were the only things Obi-Wan had difficulty discussing with the man. So, after having his bluff called, Master Praethorn sicked Master Yoda on him.

Master Yoda had taught Obi-Wan everything he knew about visions and every theory proposed by the various Jedi Masters throughout the ages. It frustrated him to no end that no one had a solid answer to give. Why would the Force send him visions if not to warn him and offer him a chance to change the outcome?

"Meditate on the visions and they will pass."

That's what all of the masters he had consulted would tell him. But the visions didn't pass. If anything, they had increased in intensity and frequency over the years. This past month, during his recovery, he had two visions while still awake.

Small things would change with each vision, but his master's death at the Zabrak's hands was a certainty. It always had been. The Zabrak was always there in the vision, but how Obi-Wan would first encounter him would change. Master Praethorn always died, but the manner of his death, usually by lightsaber, would occasionally change. Obi-Wan clung to the hope that there was a chance, no matter how small, that he might be able to do something that would make a difference. Only, how could he know which choice might lead to his master's survival? A question that had never been more important than right now.

He'd made it to the end of the block when he realized the cold was getting stronger. He felt he was being watched. He slowed his jog to a walk and the Force warned him to keep his vision ahead.

Despite his fear that he would not be able to focus when the time came, a sense of calm overcame Obi-Wan. The certainty of what was about to happen settled on him. He accepted that his Master might not survive the day, but he was determined the Zabrak would not escape either.

"Obi-Wan?" His master's voice came across his com as the Zabrak stepped out from behind another building thirty feet ahead of him. Angry yellow eyes focussed intently on Obi-Wan as the Zabrak took up a position that would block his path. It simply stood there, smiling with malice, waiting to see what Obi-Wan would do.

He turned around and ran the other way without hesitation. He knew from his visions he was no match for the Zabrak. Obi-Wan, though modest, was very skilled with a lightsaber. His master had insisted on hours of practice daily and in every possible environment they came across. But in his
visions, the Zabrak had demonstrated feats of speed, strength, and control that Obi-Wan could only
dream of performing. So making a tactical withdrawal did not shame him in the least.

In fact, the further away he could get from the spaceport and his master, the better.

The Zabrak followed, seemingly excited to make a chase of it, but he didn't appear to be in a rush.
More like a cat getting ready to toy with a mouse.

Obi-Wan picked up his pace, drawing and igniting his lightsaber with the intention of slashing the
hoverbike as he raced by it. But he had been distracted by his master's calling his name again and
had not registered the incoming blaster fire until the first shot grazed his upper right arm.

Except for the first bolt, Obi-Wan was able to deflect the fire, but in so doing, he had to move away
from the hoverbike, which had very likely been the Zabrak's intent.

The last bolt he managed to deflect back toward the Zabrak, knocking the blaster from his hands.

With a roar of anger, he ran toward Obi-Wan activating his own lightsaber at both ends, just like in
the visions. Obi-Wan wasted no time, sprinting away once more.

So much for toying with him!

The Zabrak could have easily killed him just then with the blaster, but Obi-Wan sensed that he was
being redirected and not actually targeted. The Zabrak likely wanted to take him alive, but that might
not be the case anymore.

He used a burst of the force to enhance his speed in order to put some distance between them, while
scanning the path in front of him. A Rodian was parked in a speeder outside a resupply station, the
passenger shouting to some people in the store. Obi-Wan opened the door, "You will lend me your
speeder." He suggested strongly with the force. "And you," he told the passenger, "will get out
quickly."

"Of course," The Rodian smiled, "I will lend you my speeder."

Obi-Wan grabbed the Rodian and helped him move faster, while tossing the bag into the opposite
seat just as the passenger jumped over the side, not bothering with the door. He took off quickly, the
Zabrak much closer than he would have liked.

He held his breath as he steered the speeder through a small alley. He made a sharp turn upon
exiting, scraping the length of the speeder against the corner of a building. But he caught sight of the
hoverbike gaining on him as he turned.

"Obi-Wan. What is your location? And what the kriff is going on? I am heading toward you now."

"Master, NO!" Obi-Wan yelled into his com. "You need to leave now! Take the ship and go after
Iessel. I'll have to explain later. I'll catch up to you on the next transport out."

"Not likely, son." He argued. "I know you are injured. Start talking!"

Another warning in the Force told him to swerve left and he barely missed running into a Twi'lek
and her young child.

"Sithspit!" He cursed, banking hard to go down another street.

"He's here, isn't he?" His Master's voice was calm, so drastically different from what Obi-Wan was feeling right now after hearing that his master was coming.

"The Zabrak." A statement of certainty, no longer a question from his master.

Dread filled him once again and he briefly wished he had requested Master Yoda to keep his visions confidential and not allowed them to be shared with his master. He found, even now, he could not confirm the Zabrak's presence to his master, "Please. Just go." He begged him.

The Zabrak was gaining on him too quickly. The speeder he'd borrowed was a piece of Banta poo.

"My place is by your side, Padawan. I will not leave you. You know this." His Master's voice was strong and proud. Then more gently, he added. "You've always known this."

Obi-Wan judged their location and reported it quickly to his Master, while continuing to make random turns every so often.

The Zabrak would be upon him long before his Master's arrival. He was going to have to make a tactical decision and soon. A pole was extended out across the roadway ahead. Obi-wan performed a quick calculation in his head.

Cutting off the power to the speeder to allow it to coast to a stop, he stood up and jumped for the pole hoping it was secured soundly enough to bear his weight. Using his momentum from the leap, he grasped the bar with one hand and swung himself over the pole, while drawing and activating his lightsaber with the injured arm.

As he flipped over the pole, the Zabrak could not react quickly enough and was forced to continue under it. Obi-wan managed to strike a glancing blow to his shoulder.

Using, the force to cushion his drop to the ground, he stood quickly and began running again. This time looking for a location in which it would be difficult to use lightsabers and somewhere with a lot of good hiding spots. Unfortunately, they had come closer to the edges of the city and the buildings and homes were actually more sparse.

Too much space. A lightsaber battle it would be then. Obi-wan turned to face the Zabrak as he calmly parked the speeder and dismounted the bike, coming to stand before him.

"Nowhere to run anymore, Little Jedi," It teased.

Obi-Wan took a few deep breaths to center himself, not allowing the Zabrak's words to affect him. With a few deep breaths he prepared himself for his toughest battle yet. He released the last of his fears and anxiety to the force, and he became more focused than he ever had before.

The Zabrak did not wait long. His anger seemed to have notched up after having been struck by Obi-wan. He was no longer playing around. He came at Obi-Wan full force and their sabers clashed.

Obi-Wan stayed in a defensive mode, knowing from his countless visions that he would only tire more quickly if he attacked this opponent. He'd never gained ground offensively when fighting him solo in the visions.

He could tell it was frustrating the Zabrak to no end. He was doing well keeping him at bay and had
not allowed a single opening for the Zabrak to reach him. Obi-Wan's sense of time, was not what it should be, but he figured a good two minutes had passed. And he was holding his own. He just had to keep going until his master got there.

The Zabrak was not going to have any more of it though. With very little warning, Obi-Wan sensed a set of rather large rocks coming toward him. He barely had time to use the force to stop the threat. The distraction allowed the Zabrak a chance to move in closer and Obi-wan was barely able to block a strike aimed at his chest. But even as Obi-Wan's saber brushed the Zabrak's saber aside, the tip of the Zabrak's lightsaber slid across his chest, leaving a large, but hopefully superficial, burn in its wake.

There was no time to stop and check as the Zabrak was all over him again. They battled back and forth in the roadway. Obi-Wan did not know how much longer he could hold up. But just as the thought occurred, a shadow fell over the two and they both looked to the sky.

Obi-Wan's relief was bitterseet.

The Deadeye hovered in the sky above them, it's gun turret swinging around and his master taking aim at the Zabrak.
Ok, I'm not the best at battle scenes, so this may be a little weak, but hopefully it's still entertaining! Hope you enjoy!

Obi-Wan continued to battle the Zabrak as his Master set the ship down. He knew he needed to get away from the line of fire so his Master could shoot. But the Zabrak wasn't making it easy.

He finally found an opening in which he was able to use the force to push the Zabrak back from him. In those few seconds, his master fired, but the Zabrak was ready. He deflected the multitude of shots straight toward Obi-Wan who barely had time to deflect them a second time. The Zabrak sent the last few shots back toward the ship striking the base of the turret rendering it inoperable.

"Kriff!" he cursed again, knowing his Master would exit the ship now and join the battle. The Zabrak was already coming for Obi-Wan again. But Obi-Wan decided to go on the offensive this time. With his master coming to watch his back, he could at least afford to take more chances now.

The Zabrak, on the other hand was being more cautious. His attention was now divided between Obi-Wan and watching the ship so as to assess the most recent threat. Upon seeing Master Praethorn heading toward them, the Zabrak became even more aggravated.

"How many Jedi does it take to smuggle a queen off-world!" He taunted as his master joined Obi-Wan's side.

Obi-Wan was once again surprised by the Zabrak's speaking to him. He had never heard the Zabrak so much as mutter a curse in the visions. But he had no clue what he was talking about and he sensed his master's curiosity pique as well.

"Who are you and why are you here?" His Master queried as all three of them circled around one another carefully.

The Zabrak considered the question as he studied the Deadeye with more interest. "There is no one else on board your vessel."

"Who were you hoping to find?" Obi- wan ventured a question of his own.

The creature sneered at him and then spoke once more, "You have distracted me long enough. This ends now."

He lunged for Obi-Wan with an overhead strike and the battle began again. With his master's joining the fight, the Zabrak was finding it harder to go on the offensive. Obi-Wan and his master had spent nine years together honing their ability to read one another and anticipate what each would do, how they would react. Their dedication was paying off and after several minutes, the Zabrak was scrambling to keep their strikes from connecting.

Obiwan could tell he was attempting to angle around to the hoverbike. He sent his Master a mental warning and Praethorn cut off the path.
Instead, they pushed the Zabrak backwards. "Who are you and who is your master?" Praethorn questioned, even as he swung his lightsaber, clashing it against the creature's red blades.

Obi-wan was shocked. He knew his Master was inferring that this was a Sith. But the Sith had been extinct for a millennium.

The Zabrak did not respond further. He seemed to need all his concentration to keep up with the duo. They continued to push him toward what Obi-Wan could only make out as a warehouse. Lots of crates and supply drums were stacked up against the walls.

Despite the appearance of the Zabrak's faltering, he did not sense any concern from him. After another minute, Obi-Wan was fairly certain the Zabrak had a plan and was luring them into something. He wanted the battle to move toward the warehouse.

"Master," He shared the feeling with his master. But even as he did, a stronger warning in the force told him to steer away from the building. In that brief second of enlightenment, the Zabrak had moved quickly and managed to elbow his master in the face, drawing back for a killing blow.

Obi-wan used the force and pushed the Zabrak backwards quickly, before he could hurt Praethorn. The Zabrak rolled out of the push, springing up and running on top of various drums and crates to get to the roof.

Obi-wan started to follow, but his Master yelled at him. "No, Obi-Wan, run! He has my blaster and those vats are-"

The Zabrak had reached the roof, stopped, looked at Obi-wan and smiled. He then raised the blaster toward the drums and fired while jumping off the other side to safety.

His master must have used the force to speed toward him and push them both back from the building. Obi-Wan wasn't really certain what happened next. He felt a massive wall of heat as a heavy weight slammed him down and then nothing for several seconds.

As his eyes fluttered open, he saw small pools of fire littering the ground all around him. His ears were ringing and a horrible burning sensation in his leg had him reacting before consciousness had fully returned. He tried to reach his leg but he was held down by something. Trapped.

The desperation to stop the burning made him use all his strength to push the weight from atop him. He thought he was screaming, but could barely hear his own voice.

He reached for his leg and hissed, drawing back his hand as flames licked at his fingers. He rolled his leg into the sand beside him smothering the flames even as he scanned the area for his master.

It was then he realized his master must have shielded him from the explosion. Obi-Wan had pushed his master off of him in his haste to reach his burning leg. Obi-wan's vision was swimming. But his master was on his stomach, not moving, flames on his legs and upper back.

He crawled quickly over and, even on all fours, he lost his balance twice and fell back to the ground. His equilibrium was off and the disorientation was nauseating, but he pushed forward until he reached his side.

"Master!" Obi-Wan could not hear his own voice, but hoped he was speaking as he rolled his master over and smothered the flames in the sand. Rolling him back to ensure the fires were out, Obi-Wan saw the shrapnel that littered Praethorn's back. One particularly large piece appeared to have gone through his spinal cord just above his shoulder blades.
"No, no, no." Obi-Wan cried. "Not like this. Please, Master. Please." The smoke from the fires was getting thicker and Obi-Wan was having trouble breathing. He needed to get Master Praethorn back to the ship.

He stood and realized immediately that he couldn't carry him. His grasp of the force was tenuous, either from his head injury or from his shaken emotional state. He wasn't even sure if he could walk straight. Flying the ship to his master was not an option because of the fires. He'd have to get the anti-grav sled from the cargo hold and bring it back.

"I'll be right back, Master." He sent a feeling of reassurance toward his master before scanning around and finding their lightsabers and starting for the ship. A hundred yards had never seemed so far before. He had to rest twice along the way. Once due to dizziness, the second due to coughing, as the wind blew the smoke from the explosion toward him. As he straightened the second time, he looked toward the ship and saw the Zabrak. He had gone past his hoverbike and was walking toward the Deadeye.

The Deadeye was no doubt locked and in defensive mode, but that didn't mean the Zabrak wouldn't try to damage her to prevent their pursuit of him.

Obi-Wan quickly ignited both sabers in his hands and tried again to draw on the force, again with little effect. He started walking toward the Zabrak attempting to look intimidating and praying he did not fall flat on his face.

It must have worked as the Zabrak turned back, mounted his hoverbike and sped away.

Obi-Wan thanked the stars, his bluff had paid off. He knew that he could not afford a lapse in attention like that again. He took a moment to visually scan the outer hull of the Deadeye, fearing the Zabrak may have planted an explosive or tampered with the ship in some manner. He didn't see anything, but the fact that he was seeing double at times did very little to make him confident in his assessment. He hoped the Zabrak had been scared off before he could do anything.

When he got to the ramp, he deactivated the lightsabers, quickly hooked them on his belt, and lowered the ramp. At the top of the ramp, he hit the power button on the anti-grav sled. Then, he raced to the bridge, stumbling into a couple of the walls a few times, and activated the tracker on the Zabrak's bike. It was already a mile away and traveling quickly out toward the Western Dune Sea. He transferred alerts to his wrist control, relaxing slightly. If the bike headed back their way, the alert would sound.

He then went as quickly as he could to the med bay and opened the medication cabinet. He grabbed one of the syringes for head injuries, accidentally knocking several loose onto the counter in his rush. He removed the cap and dosed himself on the neck. Then he grabbed one of the big time painkillers and shoved it in his thigh. It was an automatic delivery and he could breathe easier almost immediately. The feel of his lower leg blistering and swelling had been almost unbearable, but it was just an annoyance now. But the lack of pain didn't stop his terror at the thought of looking at it. He grabbed one of the emergency med bags and two rebreathers before heading back for the ramp and the sled.

He made his way a bit more steadily this time and managed a slow, limping jog. The medicine was already helping with the disorientation.

A few daring souls had come out of the surrounding buildings and were watching everything. Obi-Wan sensed no threat in them and continued toward his Master.

The ringing in his ears was still present as he crouched down next to his master. He couldn't hear
Praethorn’s breathing, but he could see the agonal gasps and felt despair settle in. His master's pulse was almost undetectable.

Obi-wan bent and lifted his Master onto the sled, placing him once again into a recovery position. He pushed the sled back to the ship and after entering hit the button to raise the ramp. He activated the ship's shields from his wrist controls and then fell to the ground next to his master.

He attempted to reach for him in the force and was finally able to connect with a bit more stability. Even while scanning his injuries, Obi-wan felt his Master's life leaving him, returning to be one with the force.

He sat down next to the sled. His leg was too painful to kneel. He simply sat resting a hand on his Master's arm, feeling that it was important to be with him until the end. He knew Praethorn would never know he was there, but he would not leave his side. Not until it was over.

"I love you, Master. I will continue to make you proud." He cried, barely hearing his voice even now. His Master's breathing stilled and seconds after, his heart stopped.

Obi-Wan cried, clenching his master's hand in his own. Then he screamed. He screamed his frustration and his anger and his grief. He sat there and sobbed for several minutes before finally needing to lay down due to weakness.

After several more minutes of allowing himself to grieve, he tried to pull himself together by doing exercises that are taught to young ones in the creche. When he was thinking straight again, he knew he needed to get up and move or he could go into shock.

The alert on his wrist beeped bringing him back to awareness of the outside world. He raised a shaking hand above his face to check. The hoverbike had turned back momentarily.

The Zabrak.

He was after another Jedi. One trying to smuggle a queen offworld. While it made no sense to Obi-Wan, he wasn't going to leave a fellow Jedi alone against a Sith.

He rolled onto his stomach and gasped as a new pain in his side erupted. He pulled the knee of his good leg beneath him and breathed in and out, carefully releasing the pain to the force.

Probing the area carefully, his hand came away with blood. Quite a bit of blood. In fact his lower shirt and pants leg were soaked in blood.

"What the kriffing hell!!" He shouted, grimacing. "Can anything else go wrong?"

He used a nearby wall to stand before lifting up his shirt to see a small piece of metal sticking out of his side, just above his hip.

"Oh, that's not good." He breathed out quickly. How could he not have felt that before?

He limped back to the med bay and after scanning the injury, he was relieved to see it was only about an inch deep, but it was jagged and removing it would hurt like a son of a Hutt.

Obi-Wan could pull the metal out and cauterize the wound or pull it out and pour Quick-Clot into the wound. Cauterizing it would be more successful in stopping the bleeding, but he wasn't sure he could do it right now and stay conscious.

He opened another cabinet, leaving more red smears over the white cabinets, and grabbed the Quick-
Clot packet. His use of the force was steadier now so he decided to forgo the forceps and just pull it out with the force. Bracing himself, he winced as he pulled the shrapnel from his side, letting it hit the far wall and fall. He fumbled to tear open the packet of Quick-Clot and poured the grainy powder into the wound. He covered it quickly with a bacta patch and wrapped a bandage snugly around his waist to keep the patch on securely.

Once done, he turned for the bridge. He placed an emergency contact call to the Council even as he piloted the ship up and away from the scene, heading for the Western Dune Sea and the tracking signal's location.

"Padawan Kenobi." Mace's face filled the view screen.

The response was a lot faster that what he had been planning on and the sudden onscreen appearance of the council members startled him, especially as he had turned the volume to maximum so as to be able to hear them.

"Master Windu," Obi-Wan bowed his head slowly. "I regret to inform you that my master and I encountered the Zabrak from my visions. My master is dead and I believe the Zabrak is hunting another Jedi on Tatooine, one he referred to as possibly smuggling a queen off-world. Do you know who that is and are you able to send a warning to him?"

"Calm down, Padawan," urged Mace. "Your master contacted us several moments ago and sent reports that we are still trying to figure out. And you look like you're ready to fall out of your seat. You say Master Praethorn is dead?"

"Yes, Master Windu. Killed by the Zabrak."

"Are you injured?"

"I will be fine. And that is not important right now. I am currently tracking the Zabrak's movements and he is headed to the Western Dune Sea. For what destination, I haven't a clue. But the Jedi he is after could be in extreme danger. I need you to notify him or her of-"

"We have no Jedi assigned to missions on Tatooine right now, Padawan. And we were unaware of your mission to the planet until moments ago."

Obi-Wan was at a loss as to their not knowing his and his master's location. And he had been so certain there was another Jedi. "I see." He responded, feeling lost for the first time in the conversation.

"Obi-wan" Master Plo Koon interrupted this time. "You are obviously injured. I would like to know to what extent and whether you require assistance."

Obi-wan chose to ignore the question. "My...my master believed the Zabrak to be a Sith. I will need reinforcements if I am to-"

"The Sith died out a thousand years ago," Mace said.

"Even so, Master Windu. This Zabrak is of the darkside and he must be stopped."

"You are too close to this." Mace said, shaking his head in disapproval. "You are injured and you are upset over your master's death."

Obi-Wan grew frustrated. They were doubting his motives and he did not have time for this. The other Jedi being hunted did not have time. He bit his tongue and prayed he could make it through this
conversation without cursing.

"I would think that by now, the Council would recognize that I am fully capable of acting without my emotions influencing my decisions. I have had years to prepare for this moment. Years of experiencing visions of Master Praethorn dying at the hands of this Zabrak. I have been prepared to accept his fate for quite some time. I am not acting out of revenge or fear. This Zabrak must be stopped, if for no other reason, than to determine who his master is."

Obi-Wan fought through a wave of dizziness and did not catch Mace's next words. He hoped they did not pick up on his weakness.

Yoda rose from his floating chair, hopping down to move closer to the transmitter.

"Believe you I do, Padawan. Doubt your judgment, I do not. But face this Sith by yourself, you are forbidden from doing. Track him you may. Engage him, you will not. A master and padawan team, a day away from you there is. Reassigned immediately, they will be."

"Something tells me that's not enough time, Master Yoda." Obi-Wan warned.

"Suspect I do, the Zabrak's targets are Master Qui-Gon Jinn and the Queen of Naboo. Missing they went, days ago."

"I am only moments away from-" Obi-Wan was interrupted by an alarm. "Standby. A Nubian vessel is launching two miles to the west and the Zabrak's tracker is only a mile away from me. His hands were flying over the controls now and his sensors showed what appeared to be a lightsaber battle going on near the tracker.

He split the screen for the Council to see what he was seeing.

"Masters? Are you seeing this?"

The ship continued to fly in the opposite direction of the Deadeye, before jumping to hyperspace from within the atmosphere. Obiwan began to feel the familiar cold signaling the Zabrak's proximity.

"Qui-Gon, it is." Yoda confirmed. "Struggling, he is."

"The other ship has gone to hyperspace." Obi-Wan informed them, even as he began landing the Deadeye.

"Help him you must." Yoda agreed. Obi-Wan activated the sequence to put the Deadeye on defense mode after his exit, just as he touched down a safe distance away.

"Leave this channel open, Obi-Wan." Mace added. Obi-Wan nodded, carefully stood from his seat, and quickly made his way off the bridge.

He thanked the stars his legs had not failed him as the Council watched his exit. He knew he was in no shape to fight again. The very idea of even walking out there seemed near impossible to consider. So he raided the medical cabinet once more, this time, grabbing a syringe of adrenaline. He injected it on the way to the ramp then tossed the small medical device aside carelessly.

As the ramp lowered, he took several deep breaths and mentally prepared once more to fight the Zabrak. He would not allow another Jedi to fall to the Sith.
Qui-Gon was finally headed back to the ship with Anakin in tow. Padme, who Qui-Gon already realized was the queen, had returned to the ship with Captain Panaka to install the new hyperdrive components. The installation should be near finished and their return to Coruscant was almost ensured.

The boy had been an unexpected find, and a key element in their being able to escape this sand-covered hell. Three sand storms in their short stay here! Granted, only one of them was serious, but Qui-Gon had never been more ready to get back to Coruscant. Of course, that didn't mean much, as he avoided being in the Temple as much as he could. It had been over a decade since he'd had a padawan and Master Yoda still harassed him incessantly, reminding him that it was his job to pass on his knowledge to the younger generation. A Temple visit wasn't complete until the guilt trip had been taken.

That brought him around to thinking of Anakin again. He was uncertain if the Council would allow him to be trained. If ever there was a boy that might change his mind, it would be this one. But Anakin was too old and Qui-Gon knew he would be facing a lot of issues. Issues he had failed to deal with before. He would not risk another child's future with his faults.

He had yet to determine the boys midi-chlorian count, but he estimated it to be even higher than Master Yoda's. Even if he did not train as a Jedi, he would have to be taught some sort of awareness and control.

That would not be his decision though, nor his problem. As likeable as the boy was, he would not be his responsibility once he presented him to the Council. If the boy were not to be trained, there were Jedi working in the Creche that would assist him in choosing a path to follow.

Qui-Gon was lost in his thoughts when the boy stopped suddenly in front of him.

"It's only about five more minutes, Anakin. Can you make it without a break?" Qui-Gon stopped beside him.

It was then Qui-Gon realized that the boy had not stopped because he was tired. Something was wrong. He turned to face the direction from which they had come. Qui-Gon glanced back and saw nothing there.

"What is it?" Qui-Gon spoke gently.

"Something bad is coming. Can't you feel it?" Qui-Gon saw the boy trembling, and placed a hand upon his shoulder, just as he began to sense it as well. Whatever it was gave Qui-Gon an ominous sense of doom. It was evil and it meant to stop them.

Qui-Gon knelt down and grabbed Anakin's upper arms tightly, looking him in the eyes. "You must
run, Anakin. Don't stop and don't turn back. No matter what you see or hear or feel. Do you understand?"

The boy shook his head up and down, his eyes wide with fear.

"Tell Captain Panaka to take off immediately. He is not to wait for me. I will meet up with you again on Coruscant."

The boy's fear increased, but he nodded his head again. Qui-Gon stood quickly, turned the boy around and gave him a push. "Go, run!"

Anakin turned back quickly and hugged Qui-Gon's legs, "Please don't die." He spoke quickly before turning and running.

"I will see you on Coruscant." Qui-Gon shouted in reassurance.

He quickly turned back to assess the threat. He climbed to the top of the dune they had just descended. Using the force, he scanned the area while attempting to focus on where the disturbance was. It took him only a short time to spot a figure on a speeder. Or maybe a hoverbike heading directly toward them. There was no doubt in his mind that this person was coming for the ship. They were the only ones out here for miles.

The cold feeling increased as the figure drew closer. It felt like the void of space, something that would suck the life out of everything. Qui-Gon found himself shivering, much as the boy had earlier.

He adjusted his location, using the force to show him where the creature would be cresting the dune. It would only be seconds now.

He patiently lay in wait on his back on the blind side of the peak. He sensed the transport cresting the dune and swung his lightsaber with perfect timing, cutting off the front of the craft in one fell swoop.

He watched as the figure on the bike, jumped from the seat and landed with a ton more grace and ease than Qui-Gon had expected. He quickly raised his lightsaber and waited to see what the figure would do next.

It turned slowly and assessed the Jedi. Qui-Gon assessed it as well. A Zabrak, very fit, very strong, and practically fuming with anger.

"You will regret that!" It spat, while pulling a lightsaber from its waist and activating both ends.

"I disagree." Qui-Gon stated, trying to sound calm and confident, despite his shock at the sight of the twirling red blades in front of him.

Truth be told, he was quite worried about the imminent battle. He was almost certain he was facing a Sith, a creature thought to be long extinct, but known for its strength and the power it derived from the Darkside.

The Zabrak charged toward Qui-Gon. Qui-Gon charged as well, meeting it halfway. Their sabers clashed only briefly as Qui-Gon had to meet the reverse blade as the creature whirled around. Within the first few seconds, Qui-Gon recognized that the Zabrak was a skilled and dangerous opponent. It would be possible to defeat him, but it would not be easy.

Back and forth they dueled in a fierce fight for survival. After another minute of fighting, Qui-Gon was fairly certain the Zabrak would not catch up to Anakin, even if he were free to pursue him. Qui-Gon's sole concern now was to win. But the Zabrak did not appear to be tiring or weakening,
whereas Qui-Gon's muscles were burning with exhaustion. He would not be able to outlast the Zabrak as he might with others. He would have to attack and try to end things as quickly as possible, before his strength abandoned him.

The relief he felt as Captain Panaka launched and the ship went to hyperspace was short lived. The Zabrak became enraged and Qui-Gon could sense that the creature had tapped into even more power with his anger.

Qui-Gon braced for the onslaught. It was all he could do to avoid or block strike after strike from the Sith.

Another ship flew over then. Qui-Gon could not chance being distracted from his opponent and was unable to look at it. If the Zabrak had reinforcements coming, his defeat would be inevitable.

Qui-Gon didn't think the Zabrak could become more powerful, but after it stole a glance at the arriving ship, it roared and came at him harder. Qui-Gon was at a loss. The Zabrak was moving so quickly, he could barely anticipate each new threat. The red saber struck one of his shoulders with a glancing burn before the other just missed his lower leg. His muscles ached with a burning he had seldom felt and he had no clue of his surroundings.

The Zabrak was pushing him backward and Qui-Gon did not see the drop off he was approaching until the Zabrak pushed him over. He tumbled down a steep incline and lost his lightsaber in the process. He attempted to cushion his fall with the force, but it had come upon him so quickly, he wasn't very successful. He felt each impact as he rolled and crashed to the bottom. He had not yet regained his bearings as he looked uphill to find the Zabrak leaping off the edge, only one blade lit now and raised over his head, ready to slash Qui-Gon in two.

"Get up now!" A figure shouted at him, as it ran awkwardly past Qui-Gon and toward the Sith. A light blue lightsaber was already swinging toward the rising Zabrak, who barely managed to deflect the blow in time.

"Hurry, Master Jinn. We need to end this quickly." The young knight yelled.

Qui-Gon searched quickly for his lightsaber and used the force to pull it back into his hands even as he stood to rejoin the fight.

With renewed hope, Qui-Gon ran to the other Jedi's aid and extended a mental connection, even as he swung his blade toward the Zabrak. The other Jedi's mind crashed into his and Qui-Gon knew at once that the young man would not last long. His injuries and exhaustion were evident. But the man's will power, his sense of determination to win this fight was solid. As were his fighting skills.

As they continued, he was amazed how easy their minds connected. It was slightly distracting, being able to see and send another's intentions and concerns at the same time as his own. He had never experienced anything like it and he had fought alongside many Jedi. Though surprised by the connection, he quickly adapted to it and their cooperation and teamwork were paying off. They had scored a few smaller hits on the Zabrak and Qui-Gon's confidence grew as he saw the Sith struggling to keep up. He knew their opening was coming, he could feel it. He projected his next intention to move behind the Zabrak, sweeping at its lower legs. The Zabrak had no choice but to defend against Qui-Gon's strike and during that split second, the other Jedi, swung straight through the Sith, severing the creature from its legs at the waist.
The Zabrak's lightsaber deactivated and was dropped into the sand. The other Jedi force pulled the weapon and flung it behind himself. Qui-Gon maneuvered around to the other Jedi, but he wasn't certain if he was aware of him anymore. The Jedi was glaring at the Zabrak, his chest heaving from his exertions, his lightsaber still at the ready position. The Zabrak's shocked expression began to fade with its consciousness. It toppled forward and the young man, stumbled backward in surprise to avoid it's touch.

Qui-Gon sensed the other Jedi's weakness slam into him then, and shock looked to be settling upon him as well. Before he could collapse, Qui-Gon grabbed his arm and flung it over his shoulder. He grimaced as a pins and needles sensation traveled from his arms and shoulder through the rest of him. Stars knew what nerve damage he'd done to his old body during that fall!

The other man physically shuddered, "I'm alright." He spoke unusually loud. "I just need a minute."

"Would you prefer to lay down?" Qui-Gon asked, but he received no response.

"Ok. Maybe I need more than a minute. Maybe a few days." The young man smiled gently, looking his way and meeting his gaze.

Qui-Gon was stunned by the sea green eyes, but his concern for the man would not allow him to be distracted.

"How are you even conscious right now?" Qui-Gon asked as he scanned the other Jedi to determine how injured he was. The leg was bad. And the Jedi's left side was bleeding.

"I'm sorry." The young man spoke again. "I can barely hear anything right now. S'like your underwater." He winced as Qui-Gon began to lower him to the ground. "Need to see your lips."

Qui-Gon looked directly at him, once he was prone. "I wondered how you are still conscious?" He stated and spoke louder.

"Drugs." The Jedi groaned. "Good drugs. But I think I'm about to pay for it." He winced as Qui-Gon lifted his shirt and saw the bandages covered in blood.

"You're bleeding, heavily." Qui-Gon explained as he scanned the wound with the force.

"Now you see...why I wanted to finish him...quickly." He explained, obviously having trouble with his breathing. Qui-Gon scanned his lungs and ribs and, while there were fractures, they shouldn't be making him breathless.

"What drugs have you taken?" Qui-Gon asked, growing more concerned.

"Antishock, Comaren...and adrenaline just before...just before coming out here."

"Stars!" Qui-Gon exclaimed. "Okay, we've got to stop the bleeding. You're losing too much, too quickly, probably because of the rise in your heart rate. Concentrate and do your best to lower it."

He was paying close attention as Qui-gon formed his words, reminding him to speak louder, "Feels like...m'heart's gonna come out of my chest...hard to breathe."

"Both side effects of the adrenaline." Qui-Gon nodded, while tearing open the bandage on Obi-Wan's side and trying to judge whether he could carry the the Jedi back to the ship or if he had to cauterize the wound there.

The young man grunted as Qui-Gon pulled off the bacta patch. "Shrapnel." He said. "Got it out,
but...couldn't cauterize...without passing out...didn't know I'd be fighting again so soon."

"So you used Quick-Clot." Qui-Gon finished for him, observing the granules. "Is that the Deadeye?"
Qui-Gon asked.

"Yes. She will open for you."

"How did you manage to end up with her? Isn't that normally Master Praethorn's ship?"

A wall of grief slammed against his mind and Qui-Gon quickly raised his shields having forgotten they were so connected. The young man had shut his eyes tightly. "Sorry for that." he murmured bring his emotions under control rather quickly.

It only took a second to put two and two together. Qui-Gon spoke up loudly. "I thought you to be a knight. But you are Master Praethorn's padawan, Obi-Wan Kenobi."

"Yes." He whispered, sadly. Obi-wan blinked his eyes back open and attempted to focus on him.

Qui-Gon pressed a hand to the young man's shoulder and offered what comfort he could.

Tears fell down the man's cheeks and into the sand. Qui-Gon hated to tell him what he needed to do next. Obi-Wan surprised him by speaking first. "You are going to cauterize it. There is not enough....time to get back."

Qui-Gon nodded. "There is a small piece of metal that you missed. No bigger than the tip of a finger, but it has shifted around and knicked an important vein. I will need to pull it out with the force and then cauterize the wound."

Obi-Wan nodded his understanding, but halted Qui-Gon as he moved to draw his lightsaber. "I will pass out."

"I will not think less of you." Qui-Gon reassured.

Obi-Wan let out a small hump and Qui-Gon sensed it as a laugh of amusement. "That's not why I..." He took a deep breath. "You must take the Zabrak back to the ship with you. I will wait here for your return. But you must keep him alive."

Qui-Gon had not given the Zabrak a second thought since they struck it down. He had assumed it was dead. Confirming its heart beat through the force proved the young man was right.

Qui-Gon shook his head though, disagreeing. "You will be first-"

"NO!" Obi-Wan shouted, startling Qui-Gon. "He is more important."

"I disagree-"

"I will not die while waiting for you to fly back with the ship. He could."

Qui-Gon was stunned by the argument and the young man's selflessness.

"You misunderstand." He shook his head, "It is not in kindness that I do this." He whispered, fiercely. "I am fairly certain that Zabrak...is a Sith. And there are...always two." Qui-Gon listened in shock, but agreed, "A master and an apprentice."

"The Council...will need answers...He may...be made to...cooperate." Obi-Wan explained. His hand
found its way to Qui-Gon's forearm and squeezed. "Please."

Qui-Gon scanned him again with the force. He was beginning to weaken considerably, the wound needed to be cauterized.

They met one another's eyes again and Qui-Gon could sense how important it was to Obi-Wan.

"Get his Li'saber and bike too...when you come back." His words were slurring, but he spoke as if Qui-Gon had already agreed with him. Which Qui-Gon was surprised to find he did.

"Very well." Qui-Gon agreed. "I will do it. But we have no more time to waste talking." He ripped part of the sleeve off of his robe. "Bite down on this." He instructed.

Obi-Wan did so, tensing for the pain. Qui-Gon held his body down with the force and pulled the small piece of rusted metal from his side. He activated his saber and gently placed it just deep enough into the wound to reach the knicked vein.

The young Jedi groaned through the cloth in his mouth and his body fought against the force holding him down. Shockingly Qui-Gon was barely able to deactivate his saber before he fell to his knees grabbing his side at the echo of horrendous heat burning him there.

He checked Obi-Wan, who had indeed passed out. Qui-Gon did not like to think ill of the dead, but Praethorn should have done more to teach his padawan not to project so strongly. Qui-Gon wondered what would have happened had he not had his shields in place.

Perhaps Obi-Wan was an empath. Extremely rare, but possible he supposed. It would certainly explain why they had worked so well together and how the padawan had seemed to follow his line of thinking.

After removing the cloth from Obi-Wan's mouth and rolling him onto his side, Qui-Gon pushed himself up and moved to check the Zabrak. Obi-Wan had been correct. The Sith was alive. But he would not be much longer, unless he received treatment for the shock.

Qui-Gon grabbed the beast's hands and twisted, in effect piggy backing him to the ship. While Qui-Gon did not like it's teeth so near his neck, he knew that it would not be waking. In fact, it's life was waning even now.

Qui-Gon's already abused muscles screamed as he climbed the last rise before reaching the ship. But he made it without fail. He used his palm and voice confirmation to open the ship and a ramp descended.

He climbed it steadily and paused briefly upon seeing Illeus Praethorn's body on a grav sled in the cargo hold. A pool of blood was near the sled and bloody footprints had been tracked through the ship.

A sense of horror and panic hit Qui-Gon, knowing that a lot of that blood was Padawan Kenobi's. He needed to hurry. He continued past the Jedi looking for the med bay, which was also in disarray.

Qui-Gon had no clue where to begin. He needed to get an IV in the creature and bring him back from the shock. He activated the med systems on the table and was completely surprised as the computer began performing scans and giving him orders he jumped to obey. It was an amazing piece of technology. He did what was required to stabilize the Zabrak, but knew that without surgery in the next few days, there was little chance for it to survive.

Qui-Gon did not spare time to clean up, as Obi-Wan was waiting for him and, truth be told, he was
still worried. The wounds when he left the young Jedi, would not kill him, but with the self-medicating and pushing himself so far, Qui-Gon worried that the man had very little in the way of reserves. He wasn't willing to leave him out there a second longer than was necessary.

He was very shocked to find the Jedi Council on the viewscreen as he entered the cockpit.

"Qui-Gon! Thank the stars! Where is Obi-Wan Kenobi."

Qui-Gon startled as his ears were assaulted by the volume of Mace's voice.

"Masters," Qui-Gon bowed his head quickly, "Obi-Wan is injured. I need to fly the ship to his location."

"And the Zabrak?" Mace asked quickly, before Qui-Gon could toggle the volume controls back to normal. After finding them he moved on to study the flight controls. He was not known for his piloting skills and an unfamiliar ship was always a challenge.

"He is severely injured and currently in the med bay. I am not certain if he will live."

Mace began to ask another question, but Qui-Gon raised a hand, "Give me a moment, please, Mace," Qui-Gon began to figure the controls and managed to lift off.

"Master Jinn, Padawan Kenobi was not doing well when he came to your aid. Are his injuries serious?" Master Plo Koon voiced.

"They are, but he will survive. Am I to understand then that he was reporting to you as he arrived?"

"Know everything, we do not." Yoda answered. "Much information at once we received. Only some of it, from Padawan Kenobi."

Qui-Gon was directly over the padawan's position, when a comm light illuminated and a voice came through the speakers, "Do me a favor and don't land on me, Master Jinn."

Qui-Gon was surprised to hear the young man's voice on the intercom. "Have a little faith, Padawan Kenobi. I will get you home in one piece."

"Preferably...not a flattened piece," came the response.

Qui-Gon smiled. He did not expect the young man to regain consciousness, nor to be so snarky. He was definitely a fighter. The Council seemed relieved as well.

Qui-Gon set down ten yards away to be on the safe side.

"Masters, please excuse me."

"Go." Mace ordered.

Qui-Gon raced down to the ramp, pausing for a brief second upon seeing Master Praethorn's body. He ran and grabbed a sheet from the med bay and covered the grav sled.

Then he hit the ramp open and saw Obi-Wan waiting at precisely the right spot, so as not to be struck by the descending ramp. He looked ready to collapse once again and so Qui-Gon ran to him and offered him a shoulder. The man leaned heavily upon him and they made their way onto the ship.

"The Zabrak?"
"Alive. For now. That is quite an amazing med bay."

"I agree." Obi-Wan winced and pushed a hand against his temple, groaning, "I need to speak with the Council. Are they still...?" He asked.

"They are. But you should-"

"I need to report to them." Obi-wan resisted Qui-Gon's gentle pull toward the cabin area.

"You need to lay down." Qui-Gon protested, knowing every step was causing him pain. The only thing keeping him standing now was a firm grasp on the force. The minute that slipped, the young man would be out.

"I agree." Yet he attempted to move toward the bridge again, "I can rest in the co-pilots seat." He smiled.

"No. I mean in a bed, where we can elevate the leg and tend to you properly." He argued.

"Five minutes. Master Jinn." He pled, "I need to...inform them of my mission...and some new developments."

Qui-Gon did not look happy, though he let Obi-Wan steer them to the bridge.

"And then I need to return to Mos Espa."

"You need to ...for what purpose?" Qui-Gon asked. "You realize you won't be conscious that long. You've already pushed yourself well past your limits."

"I will do what I must!" But after this firm declaration, his leg finally gave and he stumbled. Qui-Gon had been ready for it though and supported him with the force. "In my haste to go after the Zabrak, I left a bag of evidence in a speeder I... borrowed."

"Borrowed?" Qui-Gon raised his eyebrows.

Obi-Wan gave him another small, devious smile as Qui-Gon lowered him into the co-pilot's seat.

"Qui-Gon, he should clearly be lying down. What are you-" Mace began, but he was interrupted by the padawan.

"Master Windu, I need to report a few things before I...rest."

"He insisted." Qui-Gon explained, shrugging his shoulders, and standing behind the chair.

"Barrick Iessel is headed to Mimban. He has a friend there that-"

"Your master informed of us Iessel's destination and of the dangers, Obi-Wan. We already have a team headed there now to intercept him."

"Mimban is not far off course. No one knows Iessel like I do. If they hold off on the capture and wait for my arrival, I could better advise them how to-"

"No, padawan." Mace shook his head "Not happening."

"They will likely underestimate him." Obi-wan warned. " He will be armed with force suppressors and he is incredibly intelligent and dangerous. He will be expecting Jedi pursuit. I know his tactics, his weaknesses-"
Qui-Gon's hand on Obi-Wan's shoulder warned him to stop. He did and waited.

Master Yoda moved his floating chair forward and then hopped down and walked closer meeting Obi-Wan's eyes.

"Have you on board, the only living Sith seen by Jedi in over one thousand years.." Yoda spoke.
"More important, that bring him here with all due haste, you do."

Obi-Wan sighed. A horrible feeling settled within him. "The team you are sending has all of my reports?"

"They do." Yoda answered.

"You will make sure they read them?" Obi-Wan begged, his voice cracking slightly with emotion.

"I will." Yoda promised.

"There is more I have found...not in my reports. Iessel may have been involved in more than we expect. Blackmailing, intimidating senators, world leaders. I...to effect the vote to create an army."

Qui-Gon could sense the young man's strength finally waning. He was struggling to concentrate. He shook his head and gave up, looking at Qui-Gon.

"I can't..." Obi-Wan's fingers gripped the arm rests on the seat. "You have to get the bag in Mos Espa. I won't...I cannot leave without it. Sith or no Sith."

Qui-Gon was lost in the intensity of Obi-Wan's eyes. But a vision of two Rodians and a speeder crossed his mind, the Rodians getting out as quickly as they could. He blinked in shock and he looked back to Obi-Wan whose eyes were now closed.

"Just follow the smoke to the warehouse." Obi-Wan said, near whispering now, not bothering to open his eyes. "The speeder will be around there somewhere." And Qui-Gon saw on his mind's eye the direction and location that Obi-Wan had apparently sent the speeder to coast to a stop before he...leapt upward?

Qui-Gon shook his head to clear it and realized Mace was speaking to him.

"Are you alright Qui-Gon?" Mace paused.

Qui-Gon looked in confusion from Mace to the young man and back to Mace.

"I think so." He answered, a bit stunned, and thoroughly feeling his exhaustion.

"Were you clear on your orders?"

Had they just given him orders? "No. Forgive me. I was...distracted."

"Recover the bag and get those two back here as soon as possible." Mace said again.

"Yes. Of course." Qui-Gon agreed, still somewhat confused by what had just happened.

"Force supressors, they have on board. If need them, you do. Obi-Wan can access them." Yoda advised.

While Qui-Gon wondered why they would have such things aboard, he held his tongue.
"Understood. I will contact you with a brief report after I recover the bag and before we jump to hyperspace."
"Very well." Mace agreed.

"Cautious you will be. Know not you do, whether there is another Sith nearby."

"I will be careful, Master." He promised.

Mace nodded and ended the connection.

Qui-Gon looked down at the young Jedi passed out in the co-pilot's seat. Even now, he found it difficult to see him as a padawan. Qui-Gon used the force to assist him in carrying Obi-Wan to the sleeping quarters. It would be several days before they made it home. He expected the young man to sleep through most of it. He hooked an IV up to Obi-Wan to help with the dehydration and then winced as he glanced at the burns on his lower leg. That was going to take some time to clean. He did what he could quickly, using a liberal amount of bacta. But he knew he needed to go retrieve the bag before too much time passed. He would do more for Obi-Wan after its retrieval.

He tried to leave the small cabin two separate times and found it impossible. He turned back both times and checked Obi-Wan again, breathing, heart rate, temperature. The young man even appeared to be in a healing trance.

"Stars!" Qui-Gon attempted to leave a third time and still felt a need to stay with him. He gritted his teeth and forced himself to walk out.

He had some evidence to retrieve.
After having made sure Obi-Wan and the Zabrak were safe and well, Qui-Gon had to move Master Praethorn’s body in order to free up the anti-grav sled. There was a small guest cabin in the rear of the ship near the engines. It was half the size of the one in which Obi-Wan was currently resting. He took the other master there lowering him gently to the floor, before lowering the temperature in the cabin significantly. He would have to clean and prepare the body once they were underway. But Obi-Wan had been so concerned about the retrieval of evidence from their prior mission that Qui-Gon could not doubt its importance. He knew getting the bag should be his next priority.

He encountered no difficulties retrieving the Zabrak's bike and lightsaber and flew the Deadeye to Mos Espa shortly thereafter. Obi-Wan had been right about following the smoke to find the speeder he borrowed. There was an entire warehouse on fire. Qui-Gon could see where the initial explosion must have occurred and was amazed at the amount of debris and fires still burning. He understood the padawan's injuries better, but wondered how he had survived it.

The speeder was no where around the location. He became worried it may have been enveloped in the fires surrounding the warehouse, but further searching showed that was not the case. After moving the Deadeye to a higher altitude and scanning the surrounding alleys and roadways, he located it approximately eight blocks away, parked in a small alley. One Rodian was examining the damage to the speeder and the other was going through a bag in the passenger seat.

Qui-Gon sought to retrieve the bag quickly, so he probably used a bit more force persuasion than was necessary to get the Rodians to hand it and its contents over. He had at least compensated them generously for the damage to the speeder, after having come across a cabinet full of various credits and currencies in the supply room. If only he had known Master Praethorn was on Tatooine, they could have easily paid for the parts needed for Captain Panaka's ship. But second guessing and "if only"'s wouldn't help now. Besides, he may not have discovered Anakin had it gone differently.

After retrieving the bag, he uploaded the information from the pads and sent it ahead to the Council. As he was finishing up the transfer, he called them as requested. The only masters present now were Mace and Yoda, and he relaxed slightly knowing he could drop any formalities.

“Masters, “ He nodded in greeting, “I’ve uploaded the the data from the pads recovered by Padawan Kenobi. You should receive it shortly. It appears to be heavily encrypted. Much too complicated for someone of my meager hacking abilities.”

“We will get someone on it immediately.” Mace stated glumly. He glanced at Yoda and sighed before turning back and continuing. “We are sending you Master Praethorn’s reports on his and his padawan’s pursuit of Barrick Iessel, a well trained assassin and bounty hunter.” A light blinked on the communications board confirming the receipt.
Padawan Kenobi has gone through more than we knew in the past few weeks, Qui-Gon." Mace's hands clenched tightly in front of him. "You will need to be prepared to offer guidance and support until we can get him to the mind healers." Qui-Gon had become well-versed in reading the different levels of anger in the Korun Master, and the set of his jaw and his stiff stance informed Qui-Gon he was ready to blow a gasket.

"Losing one’s master, difficult by itself to handle.” Yoda continued. “But captured and tortured by Iessel, Young Kenobi was. Witness to two murders, he was.”

“Whose murders?” Qui-Gon inquired.

“Two young wookies.” Mace spat. “The children of Senator Yarua. Iessel was holding them captive to force the Senator into a certain political opinion.”

“I see.” Qui-Gon answered, truly shocked by Mace's reaction.

“No. Not yet, you don’t.” Mace clenched his hands yet again and Qui-Gon’s concern deepened as Yoda placed a calming hand on his shoulder.

“Found in Obi-Wan’s bloodwork after his escape, Domidien was. Know you the effects of this Force suppressing chemical?” Yoda inquired.

Qui-Gon nodded, a dread creeping into his bones. “It creates a physical burning sensation on the skin and an extreme sensitivity to pain and touch. Movement is difficult. It would cause extreme lethargy. If one is strong in the force, he may still be able to sense it, but would not be able to manipulate it.”

Mace nodded in agreement before continuing, “Praethorn reported that when he went in the room where Obi-Wan had been held, the young wookies...they had been skinned. Obi-Wan later confirmed to him they had been skinned alive.”

Qui-Gon felt his stomach drop as he realized what Mace was implying. “And he…he was witness to…”

“And with the force suppressor in his system...you see why we are worried for him?” Mace questioned.

Qui-Gon felt ill, and took a seat. “I do.”

To have felt the two wookies skinned alive, and have no way to mitigate such an emotional nightmare. The terror from the two young ones would have been devastating, not to mention the physical pain that would accompany it!

"Stars!” He shivered.

“Also worrisome was Praethorn’s report that the area where Kenobi had been kept was shielded by a force user. Only a Jedi can create such shielding. And only a talented master at that.”

“Or, perhaps a Sith.” Yoda added.

“You believe one of us may have...turned? That a Jedi is working with this Barrick Iessel to sway political opinions in the senate?” Qui-Gon could not hide the surprise from his response.

“Hard to see, the darkside is.” Yoda answered. “But to ignore the possibility, especially now, careless we would be.”
“But that is not your concern right now. You need to focus on keeping that Zabrak alive and making sure Obi-Wan is okay.” Mace explained.

Qui-Gon nodded, still disturbed by the prospect of a traitor in the Temple. But mention of Obi-Wan gave him an opening to ask some questions.

“Do you know Padawan Kenobi well?”

“We do. Dedicated and talented he is. Wise for one so young.”

“Although he and Praethorn were gone frequently on missions, we always sparred with them when they were at the Temple, and Master Yoda and I both assisted in Obi-Wan's training.” Qui-Gon could see the fondness they had for him in their expressions, which was rare. and now that he thought on it, he could see both of their influences in his fighting skills.

“He is important Qui-Gon.” Yoda's surprising admission led Qui-Gon to believe there was more to it than just a fondness for the padawan.

"Many on the Council believe he will be among us one day.” Mace added.

Qui-Gon’s eyebrows rose at that admission.

“But do NOT let him know we said that.” Mace continued, “I have no doubt he will pull through this, but it will be difficult for him. I just want to know that you will be there for him in the next few days.”

“Of course.” Qui-Gon bowed his head.

“We’re not sure of the events that occurred after their arrival on Tatooine, but Master Praethorn reported Obi-Wan had found Iessel in a bar and there had been a battle between them. Praethorn wasn’t even sure what went down fully, but he sounded worried. Iessel apparently escaped from the battle by running into a sandstorm from which Praethorn then rescued Kenobi."

"End there his written reports did." Yoda explained. "Read them and better prepared to help Obi-Wan you will be."

"I will." Qui-Gon promised.

"He is a strong young man, Qui-Gon, and will likely not want to show weakness. Be ready to look past the brave face he will show you."

"He is in good hands, my friend." Qui-Gon stood. "It is likely he may be asleep for the majority of our trip, but I will take care of him, I promise." He pledged, bowing formally.

"May the force be with you, Qui-Gon." Mace returned the bow.

"And you as well."

Mace signed off the transmission and Qui-Gon sighed in exhaustion as he set the course for Coruscant and engaged the hyperdrive. He had a lot to do before he could rest. He checked the Zabrak on his way back to Obi-Wan. Nothing had changed. All was steady now. Qui-Gon was no healer, but the small medical bay put his mind somewhat at ease. The "voice" or computer, or whatever they might refer to the thing as, told him some minor surgeries would need to be performed within the next 24 hours to ensure the Zabrak's survival. Qui-Gon was no healer, but he could follow simple instructions. And he would study what was needed before hand.
He grabbed some more supplies and headed back to Obi-Wan. He had done some cursory first aid on the Padawan's injuries, but it was time to make sure everything was treated properly. He entered the cabin and noted that the young man had come out of the healing trance and looked to be having a troubled sleep. His brow was furrowed and his breathing had quickened.

He reached a hand out to send calming energy toward him and nudge him into a deeper sleep when he was startled. Something leapt out from under the blanket near Obi-Wan's head and shot toward Qui-Gon's shoulder where a horrible, sharp stinging sensation latched on to him. Qui-Gon's reaction time may have been a bit off as he wasn't expecting to be attacked, but he was quick enough to grab the creature by the fur and pull it off of him. It was a little, round puffball of reddish brown fur, no bigger than his hand. The tiny creature was humming and snarling, twisting and turning to try and escape Qui-Gon's grasp. Several little legs, at least six, or maybe eight, were pushing and pulling against his hand in an attempt to wriggle free and attack him again. The little thing was snapping it's needle like teeth at him fiercely.

A voorpak, he realized. One of the little creatures kept as pets by the people of Naboo. He smiled at the little thing and projected calm and kindness. He loosened his grip and allowed the creature to sense his concern for Obi-Wan. It stopped trying to escape and quit making noises and Qui-Gon gently lowered it beside Obi-wan's head. It hummed at him threateningly once more, but snuggled in next to Obi-Wan's neck and watched him warily.

Qui-Gon reached up to his shoulder and cursed quietly as he saw his fingertips come away with a small amount of blood. He released his annoyance to the force and tried to see the brightside. At least Obi-Wan had a loyal, little protector. It would have been nice to have been forewarned the pet was on board, but there was hardly time for Obi-Wan to have thought that far ahead.

"I'm going to get him cleaned up now, small one. I promise not to hurt him." Qui-Gon reached for the blanket and the humming, distressed sound increased.

"Hmmm." Qui-Gon halted and pulled up a stool. "Don't trust me yet? Are you hungry?" Qui-Gon allowed his mind to brush the Voorpak's and hinted at what he was suggesting. The little creature purred, raised up on its long legs and climbed down and over to a lower drawer on the other side of the room. Qui-Gon could see now that the pet walked on six legs and the other two had been severed at the knees. He went over and opened the drawer and found a container of dead insects.

"Ah, yes, snacks." Qui-Gon took one out and the furball approached the offering slowly and took it. Then he ran back to the container, bumping it again.

"Two?" Qui-Gon asked. The large eyes looked up at him waiting patiently. He got another bug and handed it off. The little creature went to the corner and started to eat.

After that, the furball seemed to trust him more. After helping Obi-Wan into a better, deeper sleep, the pet allowed Qui-Gon to cut away the rest of Kenobi's clothing, clean his wounds to his satisfaction, and apply bacta. But he still watched on warily, ready to spring if he thought Qui-Gon intended harm.

Obi-wan's injuries were more extensive than he first thought. A blaster burn, lightsaber burns, bruises, fractures, and cuts, littered his body. His head, leg and side were by far the worst of the injuries. But now that Qui-Gon knew what had happened to the young man, he could see multiple thin pink lines criss-crossing his chest and back. And one along the top of his forehead. There were some larger scars, likely from some sort of puncture wounds, visible on his lower back that appeared to be barely healed.

"Stars," he whispered, not quite sure he wanted to know the extent or type of torture that must have
been inflicted upon him.

After discovering a slight fever, Qui-Gon applied a fever reducer and received a small warning hum from the voorpak. "I promise, I am helping." He sent the message through the force, and offered a hand for the little beast to come toward. Surprisingly enough, it came over and allowed Qui-Gon to lift it and pet it. It was very soft and it purred happily. Qui-Gon took a moment to allow himself to relax, and fell into a light meditation. He could not afford a lot of time for this, but he needed the break. Time to let go of all the feelings and concerns that were plaguing him and just be one with the force.

After thirty minutes, he brought himself back to reality and decided it was time to get some more chores done. The first thing he did was clean and prepare Master Praethorn. If Obi-Wan woke, he did not want the padawan to have to see his master in his present condition. He cut away the clothes, removed shrapnel and stitched the wounds closed. He cleaned the body thoroughly and washed and dried the Master's hair. Then he dressed him in clean robes and settled him on the bed in the cabin. By the time he was done, Qui-Gon felt colder than wampa bait, but he was very proud of what he had done. He had never had to do anything like it before and he hoped he would never have to again. But he at least felt he had done right by Illeus. While not perfect, the Jedi Master at least was clean and the wounds and trauma were not so evident. He looked at peace.

He moved on to cleaning tasks next, finding the closet with the cleaning supplies just outside the med bay. Obi-Wan had apparently bled over the entire ship in his haste to save his master and follow the Zabrac. There was blood on the walls, the controls, the cabinets, and the floor. Medical vials of adrenaline and pain killers had been knocked over and some had broken when they'd fallen to the floor. He found the piece of shrapnel that must have struck Obi-wan. The padawan must have pulled it out with the force, and a hard pull at that, as it had left a small dent in the cabin wall above where it rested. Grainy bits of Quick Clot and its packaging were in the opposite corner of the room.

Other than the blood and scattered first aid items, it appeared that the ship was kept in pristine condition. For all his lack of decorum and reverence, as he had been known for his skill at cursing and practical jokes, it seemed Master Praethorn was quite disciplined when it came to cleanliness and order.

Qui-Gon was surprised to be finished in two short hours. He went and grabbed a spare pad and had the medical computer upload graphics and instructions of the surgeries he would need to perform. He would look them over in the cabin beside Obi-wan after a hot shower, another nice accommodation available on the Deadeye.

As he entered the shower he noticed a washer for his clothing. His robes and tunics would be clean and dry by the time he finished washing. Convenient.

The shower itself did wonders to ease his sore body. He'd known of course that he had taken some bumps and bruises during the fight with the sith, but the tumble down the sand dune had left some impressive bruises, the size and color of which actually surprised him when he finally removed his clothing to see them. The lightsaber burn to his shoulder was minor. Beside that rested the small welcome bite from Obi-Wan's furball. Qui-Gon thought the bite looked worse than the burn. After examining each injury more closely, he determined bacta would be sufficient enough to treat both. But most of all, Qui-gon was just happy to be rid of the sand!

He entered the cabin, checking on Obi-Wan Kenobi once again, before retrieving his clothing from the fresher unit. There were some tears and burnt spots here and there, but he would repair them later. Neither Obi-Wan, nor Master Praethorn came close to his size and he would have looked quite silly attempting to squeeze his shoulders into one of their robes.
After changing, he went out to check the ship and the Zabrak before settling down to study the surgical procedures. He entered the cabin and lowered the other bunk across from Obi-Wan. He sat in a meditative pose and began to study the material. Every now and then he looked over to Obi-Wan and saw the voorpak keeping a wary eye on him, snuggled up in the crook of his master's neck and shoulder. He would send approving thanks toward the little creature and praise it for guarding his master and it would purr at him.

After finishing his review. Qui-Gon allowed himself to set the pad aside. He rose to check on Obi-Wan and frowned upon finding the padawan's temperature elevated again. He administered another fever reducer and settled down beside him on a stool to do another scan with the force.

His head injury and the minor wounds and fractures seemed to be healing steadily. But the leg and shrapnel wound concerned him. He was not a great healer, but he decided in this instance, the young man needed all the help he could get. He raised a hand over Obi-Wan's side and focussed the force on healing the injury. He did the same for the leg, until he felt his own concentration floundering.

After setting an alarm to wake him in four hours, he allowed himself to lie down on the opposite bunk and fall into his own healing trance which would no doubt turn into a deep sleep.
Darkness. Burning.
Red, slitted eyes.
Screaming roars.
His skin was burning.
A sick sense of pleasure was rolling off the Trandoshan.
Terror and pain from the Wookies.
He had to stop him, distract him. Get him away from the children. Make it his own pain again, not theirs.
His senses were being overwhelmed.
His head felt like it was splitting open. His ribs ached with every breath. And his back. His back was throbbing.
He couldn't move. He physically strained and pulled, but his body would barely respond. He could barely move his hands.
He could sense everything with the force, but attempting to use it was futile. He couldn't make it work. He tried to use it to pull the IV of force suppressors from his arm, but nothing would work. He was completely helpless.
The Wookies began screaming again and Obi-Wan squeezed his eyes shut, wishing he could erect his shields as waves of terror pulled him under again.
He knew he was moaning in pain. It was just too much! He couldn't think, couldn't plan. He was stuck. Helpless.
He reached over and felt at the IV.
Unknowing how it was he was able to move so suddenly, he ripped it from his arm. He forced himself to roll over and land on his feet. Only to find that something was wrong with one of his legs as he crashed to the floor.
As he struggled to stand, a door swooshed open and he flung a hand out pushing the approaching figure away with as much force as he could muster, hearing a grunt of pain in response.
Even as he brought the force to bear on his attacker, he searched the area for his lightsaber and called it to him, flicking it on without thought.
He was surprised he could move, and even more surprised at being able to embrace the force. He scrambled again to stand, his left leg a dead weight. But somehow he managed.

"Obi-Wan?" The figure coughed, pulling himself up weakly.

Obi-Wan gripped his saber so tightly his fingers popped. He was scrambling to find a better tactical position as awareness of his surroundings began to click in his mind.

His cabin on the Deadeye. He reached out with his senses and saw the Jedi in front of him, a light in his mind, so bright that everything else paled in comparison.

But he could sense a dark presence, on the ship as well.

Not Iessel though.

He kept his lightsaber in ready position, still not certain what was going on.

"You are safe on the Deadeye." The Jedi replied, calmly. He was standing now, but cautious in his approach. Obi-Wan saw him lean against a wall and could tell the man was injured and unsteady on his feet. He studied the dark presence with closer scrutiny. Worried that it posed an immediate danger.

"It is the Sith we fought." The man in front of him explained. "The Zabrak."

Obi-Wan watched on in a daze as the man rubbed the back of his head and his hand came away with blood. He felt an echo of the man's pain.

What had he said?

Sith.

Zabrak.

The Zabrak.

His master!

Tatooine.

"No." He whispered, memories returning quickly. A grief welled up inside of him then as he recalled the events.

"No." He heard himself denying what had happened, even though he knew it to be true.

Quick flashes of the fights, of his Master, and of Master Jinn swam before him. He reached for the bond with his Master only to find a horrible emptiness.

He gasped and felt his body shudder. His vision faded momentarily as his grief and fear overwhelmed him. A pitiful moan escaped him.

Someone was speaking to him. A gentle touch brushed his mind and he opened his eyes, to see Master Jinn much closer and looking more concerned.

Obi-Wan realized he was speaking to him.

"Put down your lightsaber, Obi-Wan. You are safe now. Put it away so that I can help you."
He knew that he should listen to Master Jinn, but the dark presence was out there. He couldn't just-
"The Zabrak is sedated." Qui-Gon explained, calmly. "He will not wake. You are safe. I promise. Put down the lightsaber so I can help you."

Obi-Wan nodded, but was finding it difficult to make his body obey.

"I...I can't." He gasped, several seconds having passed. His panic began to grow. "I can't move."

He trusted Master Jinn. He wanted to lower his saber. His arms burned, despite how cold he was, and he felt ready to pass out, but, for the life of him, he could not move. Not even to wipe at his eyes.

Master Jinn seemed to sense his distress and moved around the blade to Obi-Wan's side. "It's alright. I have you now." He placed his left hand on Obi-Wan's shoulder and slowly reached out with his right hand along Obi-Wan's right arm to grasp the blade with him. He then switched it off and took it away.

Whatever paralysis had overcome Obi-Wan disappeared when Master Jinn switched off the lightsaber and he began to wilt. The master caught him and helped him back over to the bunk. Obi-Wan was only half alert but realized that he had been covered with a blanket and something was pressing hard against the crook of his right arm. He cracked his eyelids and watched, curiously detached, as Master Jinn wrapped the arm with gauze.

"You pulled out the IV." The older Jedi spoke gently. "It was delivering antibiotics and fever reducers. I will have to start another in a moment."

"No!" Obi-Wan tensed and pushed up onto his free arm to escape. His fear spiked. He knew it was irrational. The IV was likely necessary for his health. Master Jinn had just said as much. But he couldn't help but think of the Force suppressors again. The Wookies. The room where it all had happened.

A hand was placed on his shoulder gently holding him down. "Relax and breathe, Obi-Wan. I understand. Your fever is adding to your confusion. But I promise that you are safe and no harm will come to you as you sleep."

"No IV." He stated quite firmly, squeezing his eyes shut, as if it would hide the panic consuming him.

Qui-Gon nodded. "Not without your consent. I promise." Master Jinn's other hand rose to touch his cheek, a thumb caressing it gently.

A relief flooded through him and he relaxed, not fully realizing how tense he had become from the thought.

"Now, rest. I have you." A nudge toward sleep accompanied the reassurance and Obi-Wan, feeling the conviction in Master Jinn's voice, allowed himself to fall.

Qui-Gon Jinn sighed and pulled the stool over to the young man's bedside. He carefully began scanning him again with the force to see if he had aggravated any of his injuries. It seemed some scabbing had come open on his side, but no major issues there. The wound and scar tissue would cause Obi-Wan pain until the healer's could repair it, but it would not be anything serious.

The lightsaber burns were healing nicely, though the one on his chest was deep enough that it could
possibly scar. Various hairline fractures to his skull, ribs, wrist and arm bones had almost healed completely and were barely of note. His ear drums were also nearly recovered as evidence by his interaction with him. The concussion was nearly healed too. The confusion and disorientation upon waking were more likely the result of his fever, which stemmed from the infection in his leg.

The leg was by far the ugliest wound Obi-Wan now had. The burns covered over half of his lower leg. The burn had likely been caused in the explosion at the warehouse and Qui-Gon had observed several types of chemicals that could have ignited to cause the devastation to the area, as well as the injuries to Obi-Wan and his master.

The bacta they had on board would have to suffice until they could get him into a tank, but it wasn't pretty. Qui-Gon had delivered an epidural injection that effectively numbed Obi-Wan's lower leg. He had cleaned it as best as he could, applied the bacta, and wrapped it carefully. While the med bay was quite advanced, the voice had told him that it was not equipped for such specialized procedures as skin grafting. There was very little else he could do, except to focus his force healing energies toward the wound.

He started to do just that, but a stab of pain on the back of his head, drew his attention to his own injuries.

Stars, but the man was strong!

And Qui-Gon, like a first year padawan, had walked into that room completely unprepared for a force attack. Knowing that Obi-Wan was in the throes of a nightmare, he should have been more cautious. He should have known better. But after the various surgeries he'd just preformed on the Zabrak, he was fairly exhausted. He was no healer and the stress from the procedures had worn him down. So he allowed himself a little latitude.

He stretched slowly and winced as more pain erupted along his upper and lower back. He was going to have one hell of a case of whiplash, but hopefully nothing that couldn't be fixed in a brief healing trance. His head, however, may need a stitch or two. He hadn't blacked out, but it had been a near thing. He would check himself over in the med bay in a few minutes, just to be on the safe side.

But he wasn't going anywhere until he was certain Obi-Wan had fallen into a peaceful sleep. He looked at the padawan again and could see his youth more easily now as the worry and stress lines disappeared. The lack of a padawan braid had stumped him. Though not a requirement, it was rare to see one without the braid. But the advanced fighting skills were what had him so convinced the young man was a knight. And while Praethorn had been good, he now recognized that Obi-Wan had been trained by more than just Praethorn. He had been instructed by the best in the Order. For some reason this young man had garnered the Council's attention.

And his own for that matter. It seemed he had a way of drawing people to him.

Qui-Gon wondered briefly if everyone he interacted with felt the magnetism. How could they not? But in all his years, Qui-Gon had never connected so easily with another, nor cared so quickly without reservation. The empath theory was the only plausible explanation. But surely the Council would have warned him if they had known. And nothing had shown up in the padawan's file or reports to indicate that this was the case.

Qui-Gon was glad that he had already completed the required surgeries on the Zabrak. It was one less worry on his plate. Now he needed to get himself and Obi-Wan as healthy as possible for their arrival. The young man was looking at a minimum of a week or two of physical convalescence and who knew how long the mind healers might take. Judging from the amount of fear and the images Obi-Wan had projected just now, it may be a while.
Obi-Wan had frozen. He had been paralyzed and unable to lower his saber. It did not bode well for a speedy recovery. But the fever would have added to his confusion, just now, and Obi-Wan did not seem like he was one to stay down long.

After the young man was safely asleep again, Qui-Gon hit the shower to soothe his newest aches and pains. He followed that with a brief visit to the med bay to apply two stitches to the small cut. He picked up the meds he would need for Obi-Wan, along with a pitcher of water and a cup, and with one last glimpse at the Zabrak's vitals and sedative intake, he returned to the cabin and settled on the bunk opposite from Obi-Wan.

He set an alarm to wake him in two hours. He would need to make sure Obi-Wan drank some water and took his meds at that time. For now though, he needed to focus on his own healing.

It took him a few moments to get settled into the trance and all went as expected. The mild concussion and small laceration were easy enough to handle, as were the muscle strains from the whiplash injuries.

Approximately an hour or two had likely passed when Obi-Wan's distress drew his attention. He reached out with the force to assess Obi-Wan's condition and was disturbed by what he saw. Obi-Wan's aura was still very bright, an electric blue much like his lightsaber, but Qui-Gon was able to sense his injuries so much clearer in the healing trance. He cautiously stretched his own healing energy toward Obi-Wan and directed it as he would his own. His primary goal was clear. The infection from the leg was causing a fever. The fever needed to be lowered and the infection dealt with. Of course, Qui-Gon knew that the infection was a challenge, and one possibly above his skills. But he also realized that Obi-Wan could be faced with the loss of a limb if he did not at least try to help him.

So he buckled down and applied a great deal of concentration toward the infection and fever. He couldn't have said how long he had been working. His focus was narrow and nothing else mattered but battling the infection.

His exhaustion was so severe, that once his goal had been achieved, he was confused as he tried to exit the trance. So much of him was a part of Obi-Wan right now, that he nearly forgot it was not his body he had been mending. The confusion lasted longer than it likely should have. But when Qui-Gon realized where he was and what he had been doing, he was able to return to himself and snap out of the trance.

And though he managed to wake, he found it was too difficult to even open his eyes to check on Obi-Wan. He just allowed himself to start to fall asleep.

But a scratchy voice drifted across the cabin. "Master Jinn?"

"Hmmm." He couldn't really be bothered with talking. He was just that tired.

"What did you...did you heal me?" The young man asked.

"Mmmmm." Was all he could do to affirm the man's question.

"Ow!"

Qui-Gon cracked his eyelids just enough to see what Obi-Wan could have done to hurt himself. Of course, Obi-Wan had pulled the bandage off his leg to look at the burned area. It still looked ugly and raw, an open wound inviting more germs and bacteria to find their way inside.

"Not fully," Qui-gon yawned. "Just...the infection,"
"How long have I slept?" Obi-Wan asked with what seemed a ton more clarity than he had displayed earlier.

Qui-Gon glanced at the chrono. "0417." He answered, feeling his reply was not right somehow, but not having the energy to try and figure out what was wrong.

He sensed a spike of worry from Obi-Wan and noticed the young man had sat up and was watching him with concern.

0417!

"Stars!" Qui-Gon got up quickly and steadied himself when his knees wobbled. "I missed the alarm."

"Alarm for what?" Obi-Wan asked worriedly, looking as if he was about to stand.

Qui-Gon's mind struggled with the answer. Why had he set the alarm?

He forced himself to concentrate, rising out of the haze in which his mind had become bogged.

The Zabrak and Obi-Wan's meds.

"Stay there." He pointed at the young man. He went straight to the med bay and added more sedative to the Zabrak's IV drip line, cursing as his fingers fumbled with the fine motor control needed to insert the medicine.

Once done, he plodded back to the cabin, pointed to the pills and water, and gave Obi-Wan an order, "Drink at least two cups and take those meds."

He then fell into the other bunk. "Rest only, Obi-Wan. No walking."

He thought he heard Obi-Wan asking him some questions, but he was already falling asleep. Exhaustion overrode any further need to respond to the young man's questioning.

As he succumbed to the pull of sleep, he thought he might have felt a hand holding his own.
Sorry it's been so long!

Anakin ran as fast as his eight year old legs would go.

He had initially become frozen in place after sensing the feelings of hatred, anger, and the pure evil emanating from the creature that had been following them. But Master Qui-Gon's orders, along with a healthy dose of fear, had him sprinting faster than he had in his entire life.

Still, he needed to move faster.

He wasn't used to running in the deeper sand and he kept tripping, spending more of his time falling and rolling down the dunes than staying on his feet.

He knew he'd only been running for moments, but it felt as if he had gone all day. His very breath was like sandpaper scratching his throat. The evil was still there, but it was not coming toward him anymore. Instead, he sensed the battle between Master Qui-Gon and the creature in the distance. From the moment he heard the creature's speeder crash, the clashing in his head began.

Between his falling, their fighting, and struggling for the extra speed he needed, his head was really starting to pound. He wanted so badly to rest, but he knew that lives, not just his, were dependent on his getting there quickly.

By the time he crested the final dune and saw the ship, he was near collapse. He pushed on, attempting to call out to the people standing on the ground outside the ship. His voice was rough and he had to cough several times before he could shout loud enough.

"Start the ship!" He yelled to them. They turned and one of them raised a blaster in his direction. Anakin kept running toward them praying they would recognize he was not the threat. The other figure reached over and pressed the blaster down and away from his direction and started running toward him.

"Start the ship!" Anakin yelled again. "There's danger!"

The person who had been left behind, dashed inside the ship yelling something that Anakin couldn't make out.

"Mister Skywalker?" A gentleman in a uniform asked loudly, "What danger? What is happening? Where is the Jedi?"

"He said to tell you to leave." Anakin slowed as the man was almost to him. He quickly dropped to his knees and slung his pack onto the ground. "Someone or something very bad is after us. He stayed behind to fight it...to give us time to escape" Anakin tried to catch his breath. He hoped he would not be sick in front of the man, but his stomach was very queasy.

The ship's engines fired up and Anakin panicked. Would they leave without him? Would the man in uniform stay and help Qui-Gon?
"He said we should go to Coruscant and he will meet us there later." Anakin told the man, as the Jedi had asked. "But I don't know if...I don't think he can beat that thing without our help."

The man was watching the dune behind them, but had been listening carefully to everything Anakin said. "If he says he will meet us on Coruscant, then we must go." He spoke gently and with sympathy, "He knows better than us what he is facing."

Just then the com on the man's wrist activated, "Captain. Another ship is closing in fast and will be in range in less than a minute."

"Understood. Come get us." The captain picked up Anakin's bag and pulled him up by the arm swiftly. "Come on. We need to move, now!"

Anakin found himself stumbling again, but the strong man had not released his arm and continually steadied him, keeping him from falling yet again. Anakin saw the ship raise up off the ground slightly. And again, the fear of being left behind flashed through his mind.

The need to escape battled against his desire to stay and help Master Qui-Gon.

Would the ship leave them?

The ramp was still lowered and the man helping him told him to be ready to jump as the ship started coming toward them.

"Ready...and...now!" The Captain leapt and made sure to keep a hold of Anakin's arm, but it hadn't been necessary. Anakin cleared the ramp easily, but they both landed roughly. Anakin hit his knees hard, falling forward onto his right elbow as the ship surged suddenly forward. A sharp pain shot up his arm and it began to tingle momentarily with numbness.

The ramp began to close as the ship gained altitude. For a few, brief seconds, Anakin could see two men engaged in battle. He stood carefully in order to keep watching them. One of them was Master Qui-Gon. The other was some creature with red and black skin.

The two were moving so quickly it was hard to tell what it was. Green and red swords of light were being wielded in a deadly dance as the Jedi master bought them time to flee.

Worry flared in Anakin's mind as he saw the other ship approaching in the distance just before the ramp sealed itself shut. Personnel from deeper within the ship began yelling to raise the shields even as others were shouting a warning to prepare for the jump to hyperspace.

Anakin found himself hearing and seeing all of this, but couldn't for the life of him think what to do. Everything felt weird. Distant. Like it was a dream. Sort of like all the hustle and excitement wasn't even real. He was just a ghost on a ship, watching and seeing. Nothing really mattered now. Everything was hazy, ethereal. His movements were heavy and sluggish.

Suddenly a face loomed in front of his. The face of the angel, Padme. Her lips were moving, but no sound was coming out of them. She took his hands and led him over to a seat. She pushed him down and began running her hands over his head, resting one of them against his cheek.

Anakin pressed his cheek against it, closing his eyes and accepting the comfort being offered. Strange that her hand should seem so warm, when he had just run through the desert. But now that he thought about it, he did feel cold. Really cold. Maybe he was a ghost!

Only, Padme could see him, so he was no ghost. He felt confused.
A second figure came over to him then. Her face was painted all funny, but she looked a lot like Padme physically, though the colors that made her were not as beautiful. She was a rusty orange, while Padme was a forest green with bright blue edges and flares of magenta. Rusty orange girl with the painted face pushed Padme into a chair and pointed at the safety belts. Padme began to latch her harnesses, even as this new girl began clicking belts onto Anakin.

"...injured...going into shock..." He heard Padme saying something. Was she talking about him?

He should say something to reassure her, but found it too difficult. He decided, just watching her colors would be easier. He kept his eyes shut and focused on Padme's colors. But his head started hurting again and he may have moaned.

The next thing he knew, he was being carried in a blanket and laid in a bed. He felt hands pulling at his clothes and began to worry what was happening. He tried to sit up and fight them away. Watto had always warned him what could happen if he were to sell him. There would be any number of buyers willing to take a beautiful blonde boy. They wouldn't care one iota for his brains, or his interests or hobbies. He'd be used for only one thing. He had to wake up. He couldn't let that happen. So he fought against the hands touching him.

A voice rose above the murmuring from the others and told them all to stop and back away. Anakin stopped fighting and realized that Padme was sitting beside him on a bed.

"What happened?" He asked, as she carefully brushed the bangs on his forehead back.

"You gave us quite a scare." She smiled, though the concern was still evident. "I think you are going into shock. You zoned out on us. I feared you may have an injury of which we were not aware. The others were helping me check. I am sorry if we frightened you."

Anakin paused and considered.

"I...my head hurts." He admitted. "I think...I...sometimes it has happened before. Not lots, but...I don't know. It's always after something scary or dangerous." He smiled weakly, "Not really coming across too brave, am I." He winced.

Anakin recalled lifting a speeder off another mechanic about a year ago, after the anti-grav had given out and landed on the man's legs. He'd had a headache for a week after that day. And when he had had to climb out of a canyon after crashing in a pod race. That had been a painful one too, but he had lived.

"We have some medicine that might help with the pain." Padme offered kindly. "Do you have any allergies?"

Anakin shook his head no.

Padme helped him sit up and stuffed some pillows behind his head and back. She took some pills from the white-faced lady and offered him a cup of water.

Anakin took the offered medicine and drank carefully, taking only what he needed to swallow the pills before trying to return it.

"No, Ani." Padme pushed it back toward him. "We have plenty. We are not from Tatooine and there is no shortage of water on this ship. Please, take your time and finish it."

Anakin took several more swallows and although the water tasted funny, it was perhaps the best he'd ever had. It was chilled and it soothed the scratchiness that had seemed to have taken up residence in
his throat.

"Rest now, Ani." Padme urged.

Anakin knew it was impolite, but Padme was telling him it was okay and his head really was hurting. Sleep would bring such welcome relief.

"All will be well. We'll figure out what happened when you wake up. Go to sleep, little one."

He gladly obeyed and let sleep take over.

+++++++++++++

Anakin shoveled the eggs into his mouth barely chewing before chasing it down with Muja juice. He hadn't even bothered to sit down in the seat where his plate had been placed. The faster he ate, the faster he could go down and see the engines again with Captain Panaka.

"Slow down, Ani or you will choke." Padme advised.

"I can't help it." He explained, looking in the direction the captain had gone.

"I will not allow Captain Panaka to show you the engines if you continue to eat so...dangerously." The queen advised, in her deep formal voice.

A spike of worry crossed Anakin's mind and he looked up sharply, but he caught the smallest upturn of the queen's mouth and new that she was messing with him.

Anakin bowed his head, "I'm sorry, your majesty. I was just excited." He pulled his chair to the table and sat down, forcing himself to slow down and at least show some semblance of manners. Padme was sitting at the far end of the table apparently trying not to laugh.

They'd been underway for five days now and after two days of having a splitting headache, Anakin had managed to bounce back during a course adjustment. He had been allowed to join the pilots and watch as they exited hyperspace, sent and received some messages, and then re-entered hyperspace. He was so excited that his questions about the ship, its engines and weapons, and their efficiency measures had everyone on board breathing easier, knowing that he would be okay.

He became much less stressed upon learning that Qui-Gon had defeated the creature and was only about six hours behind them on the journey. Apparently, the other ship had been operated by a fellow Jedi coming to his aid and they had managed to capture the evil one. Anakin shuddered thinking about having to share a ship with that creature for five days.

At meals he was allowed to speak with the Queen who took the time to explain the state of the galaxy and why it was imperative for her to reach Coruscant. On the fourth day after dinner, she even dismissed her hand maidens and gave him a lengthy history lesson on the creation of the republic and how the government worked.

He was surprised that Queen Amidala was the leader. She was very kind and intelligent, if a bit formal. But as he observed the crew, Anakin realized that it was Padme who was calling the shots. All of them went to her for advice and leadership. And while she might not be the queen, she was definitely the one in charge.
The hand maidens had made him some new clothes from what they had on board. He felt exceptionally silly in them, having never worn anything so soft or silky before. But they assured him that he looked wonderful.

Anakin had double checked with the pilots and Captain Panaka, as he was checking out the engines again with them. He had to make sure the clothes were appropriate. He didn't want to look like a buffoon and had no idea why the women had gone through all the trouble. His other clothes had been fine. They assured him that the style was reflective of the Jedi, but the material was a bit too upscale for the Order. Anakin thought that was okay since he wasn't really a Jedi yet. So long as he didn't look like the younger brother whose older sister had practiced her make-up applications, he was content.

Anakin started to pick up on how all the hand maidens had similar features to the queen, though it was harder to tell with all the paint on her face. He had a feeling that if they were all in the painted make-up, it would be hard for anyone to pick the queen out of the set of women.

"Anakin, we will be arriving in the next few minutes on Coruscant. I would like to speak with you for a few minutes." Padme asked.

"Oh." Anakin set the pad filled with facts about the history of the republic to the side, "Yeah, sure." He said as he followed Padme into a more private room. She took a seat on a small couch and Anakin plopped down beside her.

"We notified the Jedi that we had you on board and that Master Jinn was bringing you to be tested. But I requested that you be allowed to stay with us until such a time that Master Jinn can come for you. He will have to report to the Council which may take some time and I did not like the idea of leaving you with strangers, even if they are the most trustworthy beings in the galaxy. I hope that you do not mind." Anakin admitted. "But if all the Jedi are like Master Qui-Gon, then I am certain I would be fine. And I don't want to be in your way. If I am too much trouble, I can just-

"You are no trouble, Ani. Quite the opposite." She smiled. "We have enjoyed these past few days with you."

Anakin smiled feeling contentment settle within him. "I have too. I have learned so much and most of it from you. I really think you're great, Padme." He smiled shyly.

"Why thank you, Ani. You are very special as well." She complimented him.

"The queen wished for me to pass on some good news before our arrival in the next few minutes."

"Do not be discouraged if the Jedi Council decides not to train you. They have a tradition of only training children from a very young age, before life can influence their way of feeling, thinking, and reacting to the world. The Jedi like to mold them into the ways of the light and reduce any outside influences that may effect them."

"That sounds stupid." Anakin blurted.

Padme raised her eyebrows in surprise.

Anakin seemed to realize that sounded kind of mean. "Oops. I didn't mean to say they were stupid. I just mean...I would think you would want people of all different types and ways of thinking so that"
you would have all kinds of ways of looking at things. Not just a bunch of copycats thinking and doing the same thing the same way forever.

Padme smiled. "Perhaps you are correct. I have never given it much thought before." She said diplomatically. "Even so, you are old by their standards and as far as we know, they have never taken anyone over the age of six."

Anakin felt his mood sour and couldn't keep on his brave face, sensing that his dream might be over before he had even met the Council.

"And this is good news?" He wondered what the queen had been thinking.

"Oh, but Ani, I did not mention that to make you upset." He could feel her regret for saying anything about it. "I simply wanted to tell you that if for some reason the Jedi Council are so foolish as to deny you their Order, then you should know Queen Amidala has already had you approved as a full citizen, with all the rights and benefits granted to our people. And there will always be a home, education and a job for you among the Nubian people. We would be honored if you were to make our home yours...that is, if we can save it."

"I-" Anakin swallowed nervously. "That is..." Anakin was overwhelmed. He had actually been really scared what would happen to him if the Jedi did not take him. It was such a relief to know that he was wanted. That he had somewhere to go.

He rushed toward Padme and hugged her tightly, feeling a little embarrassed as a few tears of relief escaped him.

After a minute, Padme pulled back and gently wiped his cheeks with her sleeve. "Oh, Anakin. You will always have us. You never have to be alone again."

"I don't know what to say." He sat back down, "Thanks just doesn't seem like enough."

"You don't have to say anything. Just promise that if things do not work out with the Jedi, you will consider coming to Naboo."

Anakin was more and more certain there was something more to Padme. She must have read something in his expression, "What?" She asked.

"It's just...I think you are pretty great. You may not be the queen," he explained. "But it's clear that you are the one they all follow. This whole crew...they love you and would do anything for you. I even see it in the way the queen reacts to you."

She seemed surprised by his observation.

He smiled, "So I think my original theory is confirmed."

"Which was?"

"That you are an angel." He smiled.

She smiled back and pressed a hand to his cheek. "Such a smooth talker."

"It's true." He argued. "And it is a tempting to offer to want to stay with you and your people, but I feel like this Jedi thing might be really important. Something inside me is telling me I should be with Master Qui-Gon."
"Always follow your instincts, Anakin. It doesn't look like they've failed you yet. But at least now you can make those leaps of faith in more comfort, knowing that you have a place to go if you need it."

"Thank you, Padme." He hugged her tightly again.

After another moment, Padme released him, "Now get your things packed and leave them on the bed. They will be moved to the Senate Apartments for you by our help. And then get changed into your new clothes." She smiled.

Anakin nodded and got to work, putting the last things in his pack as Padme left his rooms.

After stuffing the last of his clothes in the bag, he made his way to the front of the ship.

"Not a moment to soon, Ani." The captain welcomed him and pointed to a seat. Anikin jumped into it and strapped in. "We'll be exiting hyperspace in thirty four seconds."

Anakin was in awe of the planet. He'd never seen anything like it and the books and holovids didn't do it justice. The world was nothing but buildings and lights. The closer they got the more Anakin could make out the other ships and speeders and there were so many! How did they keep from wrecking into one another? The buildings they were headed toward were humongous and beautiful.

"That's where we are landing, Anakin." The Captain showed him the small landing pad and Anakin saw a number of people standing on the platform, some of whom appeared to be dressed like Master Qui-Gon.

Captain Panaka set the ship down gently and everyone lined up formally to exit. The queen was several people ahead and Anikin had to strain to hear her speaking to the welcoming party above the wind and powering down of the engines. There were five guests, along with a number of uniformed guards on the platform. An older man dressed in finery seemed to be the one to greet the queen, clasping her forearms gently and bowing his head to her. The other four people were all in robes like Qui-Gon's and Anakin assumed they were all Jedi. There was a short little green one, whose size did not fool Anakin as to his power. A middle-aged man with long, black dreadlocks had a young teenaged Rodian behind him and slightly to his right. Anakin got the feeling that the Rodian belonged to him.

Then there was a dark complected, Jedi with no hair and an angry look about him. He met Anakin's eyes and Anakin felt a coldness creep into his mind. It shocked him that no one else seemed to sense it. He felt terrified and nauseated, and could think of nothing but escaping the man as fast as possible, but the world was tilting slightly and he-

"Ani." Padme whispered and shook his hand gently. Anakin realized he was crushing her hand. And Padme seemed to pick up on the fact that he was near passing out. She glanced at him with a worried look and the presence vanished suddenly, leaving him covered in a cold sweat, gasping for breath.

"And this is Anakin Skywalker, of whom I have informed you." He heard Queen Amidala's deep voice clearly announce him.

Despite the shocky feel to his system, Anakin tried to stand straighter and calm himself, but he wasn't about to release Padme's hand.

"This young boy!" Palpatine seemed completely surprised as he knelt regally before Anakin. "They had said you were young, but I had thought you must be a teenager at least. Wherever did you learn to handle a podracer with such skill?"
Anankin kept watching the dark skinned Jedi warily. He glanced once more at him before addressing the man in front of him. "Just sort of taught myself, I guess." He answered quietly. The Jedi's face had not changed at all during the encounter.

"Well, I look forward to knowing more about you, Mister Skywalker. Our world owes you a great debt, as do I, for rescuing our Queen."

"I was...I was just trying to help." He swallowed nervously. "I didn't even really know they who they were." He admitted.

The man smiled and seemed about to say more, but the dark skinned Jedi stepped forward, startling Anakin into flinching backwards a bit.

"Might I recommend we move inside, Senator Palpatine. I don't think the boy is used to the thinner air. He's looking a little pale and shaken."

"Oh, goodness." Palpatine fretted, studying Anakin more closely. "You must forgive me for not having noticed, child." He placed a hand on Anakin's shoulder in concern and Anakin shuddered as his vision flickered before him.

It was as if someone had flipped the pages of a picture book too quickly in front of him. All sorts of scenes flashed before his eyes too quickly to follow. Many of them involving lightsabers and droids. Jedi and battles and screaming. And a frightening evil seemed to lurk in the midst of all the scenes. It was over before he could draw two breaths, but he found himself leaning heavily against the senator, held upright only by the man's strong grip.

He pushed himself away feeling the need to get away from all of them. and feeling incredibly embarrassed.

"M'sorry." He mumbled to the man while trying to catch his breath.

He turned to Padme who willingly embraced him and he squeezed his eyes shut against the pain. His head had started to hurt again. He focused on her colors intent on blocking out everything else. Padme struggled as she felt Anakin's body going limp. Anakin felt bad, but his knees were buckling.

"It's okay, m'lady. I have him." Anakin felt his body be lifted and had no strength to protest. He knew it was the strong Jedi with the black dreadlocks. But how he knew it was beyond him.

"It hurts." He admitted pathetically as the man started walking toward the building. Anankin opened his eyes and saw the man's concerned face surrounded by clouds overhead. His vision was swimming and it made him dizzy. He closed his eyes and focussed on the man's colors, bright purple and deep purple all blended together. Surprisingly the colors seemed to reach out to comfort him, lightening the nausea and easing the pain.

"I know it does." The Jedi Knight answered in a sympathetic voice.

Anakin could feel the Rodian's presence tagging along behind them. Green, yellow, and orange swirling around him. The rest of the group was following, albeit at a slower pace, to accompany the queen. He felt all of this, but refused to crack his eye lids to see it. That would only make the headache worse.

"I get visions occasionally as well." The Jedi's voice was strong and full of sympathy. "Once you become more familiar with the Force, it will not be as bad. Not knowing what you are experiencing is part of the reason for your pain and fear. When you are better, we will discuss it more."
"He's very strong, Master." A nasally voice spoke from the other side of him.

"Yes." The man confirmed. "You are very special, Anakin Skywalker. I look forward to getting to know you more." Anakin still did not dare open his eyes, but he felt safe now.

The Jedi placed him on a soft mattress and covered him with a blanket. "But for now, you must rest." He felt a gentle, warmth in his mind, nudging him to sleep.

"This is beginning to be a bad habit." He slurred before succumbing to the Jedi's advice.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Sorry it is taking so long to get these chapters out. But at least it is kinda long. Hope you enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Obi-wan woke abruptly from a nightmare. He sat up quickly and instinctively grabbed for his leg. The throbbing was extremely painful and he found himself gasping for breath.

He forced himself to lay back and began to control his breathing. He remembered where he was this time. He knew he was safe in his cabin on the Deadeye, but he still felt unsettled from the dream. He couldn't even remember what he had dreamed about, but it had been extremely unpleasant.

Obi-Wan rubbed at his temples in an attempt to ease the throbbing in his head. His side ached too, but neither of those aches held a candle to the pain coming from his lower left leg.

He attempted to reach his inner calm in order to release the pain into the force, but he was having difficulty. His unease spiked further after multiple attempts to use the force failed. It was there. He could sense it. He just couldn't reach it. Just like it had been when Iessel had-

"No." He spoke aloud stopping that train of though. He was safe.

He checked his arms for IV’s and found none. Perhaps he was still dreaming. Maybe this was still a nightmare. He could sense everything around him, but he couldn't actually use the force to do anything.

He squeezed his eyes shut and willed himself to wake up, but it wasn't working. As panic started to set in, he was distracted by a bright presence to his right.

He looked over to the other side of the cabin and saw a sleeping Master Jinn.

The chrono on the wall showed at least six hours had passed since Master Jinn had fallen asleep in the bunk across from him. Despite his earlier panic, Obi-Wan began to relax as the scene before him caused him to smile slightly. Even in sleep with the small bit of drool trailing from his mouth to the pillow and a snore that could wake the dead, the Jedi Master looked powerful and handsome.

Obi-Wan felt more secure knowing the man was in the room with him.

He had heard things about Master Jinn. He had the reputation of a rebel and a loner. He was strong in the living force and a gifted negotiator. And on the few times he'd returned to the Temple when Master Praethorn and he had been there, the other padawans would start whispering and gossiping about him.

Obi-wan had never had the chance to meet him before. And truthfully, the most he knew about the man, other than padawan gossip, consisted of the grumbling from the Council members. Master Jinn produced results and most of his missions were successful, but no other man had caused the Council so many headaches. He was very aware of Jinn's promise to never take another Padawan. It aggravated Master Yoda to no end. And the story of Xanatos' turning was always renewed with
Master Jinn's return to the Temple, which was, at most, once a year.

If memory served, Master Yoda had thought he and Master Jinn would have been a good match, but Yoda had dismissed the idea outright, knowing he would refuse.

Obi-wan had never gotten the chance to meet him until yesterday. Or was it two days ago? Maybe three. He wasn't really sure. Time had gotten a little jumbled in his head.

Obi-wan moaned as the throbbing increased in his leg. He cleared his dry throat and attempted again to release his pain into the force. His failure was really beginning to frighten him, so he carefully sat up and slowly swung his legs over the side of the bunk, very mindful of his injuries. Even with due care, the leg still lit up like a lightsaber and his side pulled. He winced and moved more slowly. He would not be able to go anywhere without releasing the pain, so once upright, he settled completely still and took an unusually large amount of time to enter a light meditation.

Once he had physically and mentally calmed and still was unable to reach the force, he tried to wake Master Jinn by calling his name. The man had warned him not to move on his own and now he understood why the warning had been issued.

After multiple unsuccessful attempts to wake him, Obi-wan grew concerned and studied his force signature more closely. The man was well and truly exhausted, his energy reserves extremely low. Obi-Wan was hesitant to wake him knowing that he needed the rest more than Obi-wan would need assistance.

The bottle of pain meds was still at the end of the bed, so he carefully scooted down and took a few sips of water before swallowing more pills.

The need to use the fresher was great, but Obi-wan wanted to let the pain meds begin to kick in before he attempted to move again. Movement was not good at the moment. Definitely not good.

He remembered waking earlier from what must have been a fevered dream and feeling confused. He winced as he recalled force pushing Master Jinn into the hallway and the man sagging against the wall.

"Oh, kriff!" He stood quickly out of concern fearing that he had hurt the man somehow and perhaps it was not just exhaustion that had him lying there so weakly. His leg and side lit up in pain again but he took the two steps over to Master Jinn before he could think about it. He scanned him quickly, but other than the exhaustion, he only found a minor wound on the back of his head. It had been stitched and was nearly healed.

The man had to have received more injuries than that. It had been a hard push and Obi-Wan recalled his leaning against the wall to keep his balance. He must have healed himself before or after dealing with Obi-Wan's infection.

Curing the infection was by itself very impressive. He'd heard Mace and Yoda talking about Jinn's pathetic healing and piloting skills once and they had not been complimentary. So Obi-Wan was surprised he'd been able to do anything to help at all.

He was screwed now. He was standing, but completely unwilling to walk on the leg again. He supposed he could sit on his rear and scoot if need be, but was determined to avoid that if possible. He reached with the force toward the waist high stool and nearly cried with relief when the stool floated gently into his waiting arms.

He allowed his relief to run its course and then began to release his pain into the force. He couldn't
get rid of all of it, but the throbbing ebbed and the stinging, burning sensation became a mere annoyance.

He set the stool down prepared to begin toward the fresher when a small mewl caught his attention. He looked back and watched as Ash bounded from the foot of the bed, onto Master Jinn's chest, and then into his arms. Somehow Obi-Wan managed to catch the little creature. Master Jinn did not react at all.

He cradled the small beast to his chest and it rubbed against him while purring. Obi-Wan rubbed the top of his head and spoke softly, "Hey, little one. You must be completely beside yourself with all this craziness, huh?"

The little guy yelped and Obi-Wan laughed gently. Feeling the Voorpak's affection was refreshing. "I mean we've had some reckless adventures before, but this month...this month has been-" He stopped talking abruptly as he became choked up in his grief and found himself near tears.

He breathed in and out a few times, regaining his emotional equilibrium. He forced a small laugh. "If I get this choked up talking to you, what will the healers do when they get their shot at me!?" He asked.

In answer the tiny creature stretched up and licked Obi-Wan's cheek, bringing out a gentle smile from him. "I love you, too, Ashla. But I rather hope the healers refrain from licking me. Now, I really need the fresher." Obi-pan lowered the voorpak back onto Master Jinn and was shocked as it tucked itself in at his side. It normally didn't like strangers. But he had to admit that Master Jinn had a certain draw. Not that Obi-pan had known him long enough to understand it. But he felt secure in the man's presence. Protected. Safe.

He shook his head at such silliness. It was likely some defensive coping mechanism or some such. Looking outside of himself for support was not the way to show the Council and the healers that he was ready for Knighthood. He would not allow himself to become co-dependent on another. He could make it through this on his own.

He tore his attention away and grabbed the stool. He used it to support his weight and hopped forward a bit each time on his good leg. He kept the bad leg raised behind him careful not to jar it on anything.

After using the restroom, he caught a glance of himself in the mirror and barely recognized himself. He carefully moved closer and studied his reflection. His eyes appeared sunken and he needed a shave badly. He noticed some new wounds that were healing on his face that had not been there before the explosion. A couple of them had been stitched. They would not likely scar, but the bruising didn't help him look any better. He shaved quickly before entering the sonic shower.

He had to admit that he looked like hell. And the shave had not helped much. If he were to arrive at the temple looking as he did, the healers would lock him up for months to come. He needed to eat and spend more time in a healing trance.

But first, he needed to be clean. He truly desired a water shower. The heat and pressure would have helped ease some of the aches from his body. But he knew better than to expose the leg again to any outside sources. He wouldn't risk infecting the wound again. The sonic shower was the next best option.

Thank the Force, he was only in his small clothes. It was difficult enough getting those off, much less the tunics and robes he had previously been wearing. He left the bandages on his leg, unwilling to even peek at the wound again. Once had been more than enough.
He did remove the bandage on his side to change the dressing. Obi-Wan was relieved to see that Master Jinn had kept the cauterization wound to a minimum. He was not a vain man, but he didn't particularly want to mar his flesh any more than was necessary.

Once he'd finished, he realized he needed new clothes, new bandages and a set of crutches. The first was just in the next room. As quietly as he could, though he doubted anything would wake Master Jinn, Obi-Wan "stool-hopped" back to his room and pulled out a new set clothes. Now that he could release his physical pain, the task of getting dressed was not quite as difficult. But he still used the force to help get the pants and shirt on. Gratuitous use of the force be damned! He hurt and he didn't want to deal with more pain. Besides, no one was there to call him on it anyway.

He then grabbed a robe and threw it on over top of the tunics. Space got cold and he didn't like to be cold. Now that he could release his physical pain, the task had not been near as difficult.

He turned to do a quick check on Master Jinn before he left and was again amazed at the man's force signature. He must have stood there for several minutes just admiring it before he shook himself awake and headed to the med bay.

"Force!" He startled slightly upon seeing the Zabrak lying on the surgical table. The darkness he had felt before was muted, but he still should have anticipated the creature's presence.

"Get it together, Obi-Wan." He whispered to himself, vowing not to become so distracted again.

Despite, knowing the man was sedated, Obi-Wan approached warily, still using the stool as a crutch and hopping forward. He studied the darksider closely. Even in sleep, the Zabrak seemed to have a snarl of disdain on his strong features. What could have happened in his life to make him so hateful. Had it been his own choice or could events and circumstances have forced him into the role he now played?

Obi-Wan was near certain that the Zabrak must be the apprentice. He seemed quite young and lacked the discipline Obi-Wan would have expected from a Sith. At least what he thought a Sith would be. He only had the old stories upon which to base his conjectures.

Surprisingly, Obi-Wan found that he pitied the Zabrak. After having so many visions of the man killing his Master, Obi-Wan had always feared he would succumb to the need for vengeance when the time came. But truth be told, when the time came to choose a killing blow or disable the Zabrak, Obi-Wan was so exhausted that emotions were absent and strategy was all that had filled his mind.

A Sith. He sighed, felt himself weaken at the idea, and sat himself on the stool. Why had he never considered the fact that the being in his visions could have been a Sith? It seemed so obvious now. He had always assumed in the visions that it had been a fallen Jedi. Had even gone so far as to search which Jedi were Zabraks, few that there were, and kept tabs on them. He'd read their mission reports and kept track of their comings and goings, despite a near certainty that none of them were the one he had seen in the visions.

Had Master Yoda and his master suspected the return of the Sith all along and not told him anything? The idea that he had been kept in the dark irritated him.

His Master had always been honest and open with him about everything. Why would he not have said anything?

Thoughts of his Master lying on the grav cart surfaced and Obi-Wan wondered what Master Jinn had done with his body. His Master needed to be cleaned and presentable when they arrived. Obi-Wan sighed thinking of the energy the task would require. He was already so tired he did not think he
could manage to eat. He was certainly not up to the task, but he would do it anyway. His Master deserved that much from him.

The thought stirred him to action and he stood and used the stool to hobble the rest of the way to the cabinet where the crutches were stored. He quickly assembled the pieces and abandoned the stool. He lifted his shirt to bandage the wound on his side and saw that it had begun to bleed a small amount, staining the pants and shirt he had just donned.

"Kriffing hell!" He cursed quietly. It seemed that all he had managed to do since waking was curse everything. His master's ability to swear was renowned. He could be as dirty as a Corellian smuggler and it seemed that Obi-Wan had inherited the vice as well. Obi-Wan always found it amusing when some of the words and more colorful phrases would slip out as Praethorn reported to the Council. His master always winced, but Obi-Wan could tell the Council found it as endearing as he did. His Master was always mortified when it would happen.

As Obi-Wan realized he would never hear the slips again, he felt the loss anew. He wiped away the tears that had begun to form and focused on the job of placing a new bacta patch on his side.

"What is the status of the Zabrak?" He asked the computer.

The computer began listing the heart rate, blood pressure, sedation levels, and more before getting to the prognosis. "The patient's condition is critical but stable. Further surgeries are necessary to ensure survival. Estimated life span without additional treatment is one to two weeks."

"When should the sedative be reapplied in order to keep the patient under?"

"2.4 hours."

"Thank you."

"At your service, Padawan Kenobi."

As Obi-Wan finished taping the patch in place, he considered the possible locations for his Master's body. The only logical places would have been the small cargo hold or the guest cabin. The cabin was closest, so Obi-Wan stopped there first. As soon as the doors opened, the chilled air wafted out causing him to shiver.

Master Praethorn was laid on the single bunk and if Obi-Wan had not known better, he would have thought his Master was just sleeping. Obi-Wan locked the knee on his good leg in order to remain standing as the gratitude and grief both overwhelmed him.

Master Jinn had obviously already taken care of seeing to his Master's condition. The difficult task would not fall upon him. There were small wounds on Master Praethorn's face and hands, but Master Jinn had cleaned the blood off and sealed the cuts as best he could. There was no hiding the bruises that had formed, but there were few on his face. Most of the trauma had been to his backside when the explosion occurred. His Master had obviously been bathed as there was no trace of soot or blood. His hands were clasped around his lightsaber and resting upon his chest. His hair, which he normally kept tied back with a leather cord, had been washed and brushed and laid underneath him.

The guest cabin, being much smaller, did not have any additional places to sit, just the bed. And now, Obi-Wan wished he had brought the stool with him, as the entirety of the recent ordeals slammed into him. He carefully set the crutches to the side, put his back to the wall, and slid to the floor, using the force to cushion the bad leg as he settled.

The grief was the most consuming. He could release it to the force, but it would keep sneaking up on
him if he didn't deal with it. He needed to feel it, experience it and then release it to the force.

His master had imparted that lesson early in his apprenticeship. Obi-Wan had only been fourteen when one of the people entrusted to his protection had been killed by an assassin. Obi-Wan had been extremely upset over the death, especially when the mother of the girl had raved that it had been his fault and he should have been the one that died. Obi-Wan had not been so shocked by the Queen's accusations. He had thought the same thing himself, but had managed to squash those feelings as he still had two other younglings to protect at the time. But her words had haunted him. Despite his attempts to not think about it further. He did his best to repress them, refusing to even acknowledge they existed.

Unfortunately, the repression reeked havoc with his health, his studies and his friendships. He had managed to hide everything from his master, not wanting to appear weak and emotional, but it was only a couple weeks later, after several complaints from teachers and after Obi-Wan had collapsed during saber training, when Master Praethorn realized what he had been doing.

He'd confronted Obi-Wan and made him recognize the root of the problem. His lack of appetite, his depression, and his impatience and anger when dealing with friends and teachers all stemmed from his anger at himself for allowing the young girl's death.

"But you didn't ALLOW it, Obi-Wan. Things happen. Sometimes we make mistakes or lose control of a situation, and other times, their is nothing that can be done. There is nothing you could have done differently. And even if there was, or ever is in future events, you must acknowledge it. Learn from it and move forward."

Obi-Wan had protested, but his Master countered every argument he put out there. He held Obi-Wan as he cried at how unfair it was. Obi-Wan would have gladly taken her place. His Master had simply held him and agreed. "I would too, son." His master had taken things in hand quickly then. He'd made Obi-Wan talk through everything with the mind healers and with him. And he'd made Obi-Wan promise to not hide such important things from him in the future. "I cannot guide you, if I do not know what you are thinking or feeling. Promise me you will not shield from me like that again."

Obi-Wan had given his promise, but he was still baffled by the code. Why would it claim there is no emotion when there most definitely was? Obi-Wan had tried ignoring his emotions because the code said he shouldn't have them.

His Master wasn't much help in providing a definitive answer and didn't seem as concerned. He'd just shrugged it off. "Emotions are what make us compassionate beings." Praethorn explained "Without compassion, the Jedi Order could never hope to accomplishment all that we have. I'm no philosopher or translator of old languages, kid, so who knows what it truly means. But if you apply the code to your 'actions' then maybe it becomes a little easier to understand." He'd ruffled his hair and moved on.

Obi-Wan liked the idea. So he sort of thought of it his own way from then on. When you act, do not do so when emotional, do so in peace. When you act, do not act in ignorance, use your knowledge or find the knowledge. When you act, do not act in chaos, act in harmony with others and your surroundings.

Praethorn encouraged Obi-Wan to share how he had felt about lots of things after that incident. He'd shown him how to identify, understand, and manage his emotions, as well as the emotions of others. He showed Obi-Wan how to harness emotions and apply them to tasks and problem solving, especially those involving others. The negative emotions must never be acted upon. They must be recognized and set aside for a time when it was safe to experience them and then release them to the Force.
Now was a safe time to experience his grief. He allowed himself to cry over the loss of his master, and with it everything he knew thus far. He had no clue what would be in store for him. He thought he was much too young to be knighted, no matter what his master had said. And after facing this, he didn't know what to think or feel. But it wasn't the future he was crying for. It was the loss of what he had had. The man had meant so much to him. Changed him in so many ways for the better, and a couple probably for the worse, like his cursing. He would miss his master's reassuring presence.

The sobs, when they started, actually surprised him, but he allowed himself to continue crying. Allowing his grief an outlet.

He woke sometime later. How long he did not not know. But he couldn't feel his rear end or legs because they were so cold from the floor. And although his face felt crusty from the tears and his eyes felt swollen, he felt better for having let the emotions out. Somehow he doubted it would be the last time he cried. He was ashamed for not having better control, but he knew too much had happened for him to be "normal." He'd actually never felt this horribly out of control in his entire life and it was frightening.

He took a minute to ground himself in the present before attempting to stand. He laid down and rolled painfully on to his stomach, before slowly pushing himself up to his knees and then using the bed and his one good leg to regain an upright position. He grabbed the crutches and with a final glance to his Master, he left the room.

Space was always cold, and after having been in the cold cabin, and falling asleep on the even colder floor, Obi-Wan welcomed the rush of warmth as he entered the main corridor. He hesitated on his new course. He was tired, emotionally and physically, but the idea of trying to sleep was not appealing.

He decided to go up to the cockpit to work himself to sleep. He could check the ship's status and perhaps find the energy to meditate for a bit.

On his way back he realized nearly an hour had passed, so he stopped and replaced the Zabrak's IV fluids and sedative. He did his best to focus on the task and not on the evil that lay in front of him. He checked on Master Jinn, too. His snores had only increased in volume.

Falling into the pilot's chair, Obi-Wan checked the ship's operations and was pleased to see that all was well. They were due for a course adjustment in another two and a half hours. He also noticed several messages had been sent to and opened by Master Jinn from the council. He hadn't even had to use his hacking skills to see it. Master Jinn had left the information on the main screen. By the title of the attachments Obi-wan knew the additional recordings were his Master's reports for the past two weeks, dated since the day of his rescue.

"Shite!" He whispered. It was bad enough that the Council would know of his failures, but Master Jinn knowing! Shame filled him again and he did his best to release it to the force. He had failed. And it had cost two children their lives. And then his failure to capture Iessel afterward had led to at least one additional person being killed. Obi-Wan hoped the Jedi they sent to capture him were careful. But he had a bad feeling about it.

He took a few deep breaths. In the long run, he supposed it didn't matter if Master Jinn knew. After he filed his own report, he doubted the Council would think him worthy to become a Knight anyway. And even if they believed he was worth saving, they would assign him a new master, and that was something he would not accept. No one would replace Praethorn.

He was tempted to see just how specific his Master might have been in his reports. He'd delayed telling them of their trip to Tatooine until it had been necessary, which had completely taken Obi-
Wan by surprise. And the Council had seemed upset at not having known what was going on. Praethorn was always prompt with such things. The only rational explanation Obi-Wan could see for it was that his Master feared the Council would have recalled them.

Obi-Wan had been in no condition to pursue Iessel immediately after the incident, but he had insisted, practically begged, his Master to not let the trail go cold. His urgency came from the force, not a desire for vengeance. It was the right course, the only course. They had to go after him. Master Praethorn had studied Obi-Wan closely and believed in him. He had told Obi-Wan that he was willing to allow the pursuit because he felt the rightness of the choice as well. But he admitted concern that Obi-Wan may seek revenge on the Trandoshan. And that, he could not allow.

Obi-Wan had understood, but at the time of the decision he had been in a state of shock and hadn't been able to feel much of anything. He had been emotionally numb as he relayed the facts of his capture and what had followed. And he'd spent most of the trip in a healing trance. His Master had worked with him to overcome the panic he experienced when anything reminded him of that room and his infrequent bouts of paralysis and inability to use the force. He was much better by the time they arrived on Tatooine. At least, he had thought he was.

His master had only sent him to a bar in Mos Espa to make contact with one of their informants. He was only going to gather intel on Iessel's possible locations. A nice easy task, not likely to upset him or endanger him. Right?

When he'd come across Iessel in the same bar, it had all gone to hell. His master had been right. His desire for vengeance had been too difficult to overcome.

Unwilling to endanger Master Jinn's trust in him, and not wanting to embrace any further values the Jedi Order would find appalling, Obi-Wan closed Master Jinn's messages without reading them.

He then accessed his own messages and saw one from Master Jinn, which appeared to be the data upload from Iessel's pads.

The other was a message from Praethorn. It was short and sent just around the time of his fight with the Zabrak.

He activated the recording without conscious thought and saw his Master's concerned face as he was flying the ship. Obi-Wan knew him well and could see the fear in his eyes, something he had not often been witness too.

"Obi-Wan, I regret that I will likely not have the chance to tell you this in person before my death, but I needed you to know. My last years as your Master have been the best of my life. You breathed new life into my weary soul and made a cynical old fool feel cherished again. I am forever grateful for the bond we shared. I know these past few weeks have been rough, the worst you have ever faced. But I do not doubt your resilience, nor your faith in the Force and the Order. You will be fine. Better than fine. I promised you would be one of the greatest Jedi of your time and I have been blessed to be one of your guides along the way. Do not ever doubt the love I have for you my son."

Obi-Wan sat frozen after the message shut off. His Master still had faith in him even after everything he had just done. While Obi-Wan had been experiencing severe doubts as to ever being knighted, it was hard not to have a small bit more hope and confidence now.

The message could not have come at a better time. He would try harder. He may yet rise above this experience. A few more tears fell, but these were happier tears. His Master had been an unbelievable man and Obi-Wan knew he had been blessed to have him as a master, as well. He need not worry right now about what was to come, but rather focus on healing his body and spirit.
And maybe finding out what he could from Iessel's pads.

With a deep breath and renewed determination, Obi-Wan pulled up the information Master Jinn had uploaded and began running it through his own decryption programs.

Chapter End Notes

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan interaction in the next chapter! Yeah!
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

I threw in a mention that their may have been a non-con event during Obi-Wan's torture by Iessel. But it will not be discussed in any major detail. Just wanted to throw that out for anyone who might find it uncomfortable as a warning. Sorry its been so long. Hope you enjoy.

Obi-Wan woke up slowly. Awareness coming to him gradually. He felt as if he was wrapped in a warm cocoon. And despite the aches and stiffness he felt in his body, he refused to move. For the first time in a long time, he felt safe and warm and he didn't want to wake up. He wanted to fall back asleep and stay there forever. It had been so long since he had felt so relaxed.

Someone was mentally prodding him to wake though and he pushed them away. Didn't they understand how peaceful this was. He swatted at the intrusion and tried to fall back asleep again. But sounds and sensations were returning and he heard a gentle laugh as his name was spoken softly.

"Obi-Wan."

He cracked his eye lids and rolled his head sideways to deliver a glare toward the voice that interrupted his sleep.

Master Jinn was kneeling beside him. The corners of his mouth turned upward slightly upon seeing Obi-Wan's glare, his lips pursed as if trying to keep a laugh from escaping.

Obi-wan moved to sit up realizing suddenly that he was giving a death glare to a Jedi Master and feeling horrified, but the man reached out a hand.

"No, stay still. Take your time waking." The master's deep voice put him back into a relaxed state almost immediately. Had he just used a force suggestion?

"Do you know where you are this time?" He asked.

Obi-Wan had not realized he'd closed his eyes again until he heard the question. He opened them once again to the pleasant view of Master Jinn beside him. The man was incredibly handsome and despite having only seen him in a fighting capacity, there was a gentleness of spirit about him. The light from behind him had illuminated his long hair and given him a soft ethereal glow. Obi-Wan felt a desire to reach out and run his fingers through the hair.

The amusement and gentle aura radiating from Master Jinn began transforming into concern and his face took on a more serious expression, his eyes casting away from Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan felt his own worry spike. Had Master Jinn picked up on his stray thoughts? He moved quickly to sit up and show the Master the respect he deserved, but pain pulled him up short and he gasped.

"Easy. Take it slowly. Remember," He advised, pressing a hand to Obi-Wan's shoulder and having him lay back once more. "Give yourself a moment to wake up."
"Sorry." He grimaced through clenched teeth. He must have fallen asleep in the cockpit.

Master Jinn had asked him a question. It took him a moment to remember what had been asked.

"I...I am on the Deadeye." He sighed, "Headed back to Coruscant with you and the prisoner."

The seat had been reclined slightly. He didn't remember doing that. He closed his eyes and focussed on releasing his pain to the force. When the worst had been dealt with, he looked again to find Master Jinn still studying him with a great deal of concern.

"Better?" He asked.

Obi-Wan nodded, feeling completely embarrassed. He knew that Master Jinn had figured out the direction of his thoughts from a moment ago. He concentrated on schooling his features to keep the admiration from being detected. It was the only way the man could have known what he had been thinking upon first waking..

And what the kriff had he been thinking! That was just...he was just...what was he thinking?

"I apologize for having to wake you." The man's brogue accent made it that much harder to purge his inappropriate and unfamiliar thoughts. He'd never been instantly attracted to someone like this.

Obi-Wan straightened slowly this time. He realized his leg was propped on the console and a pillow had been placed beneath it. He'd also been covered with Master Jinn's robe.

"It's okay." He coughed a little, from a dry throat and to cover his embarrassment. "I actually didn't mean to..." Obi-Wan held his breath mid-thought and used the force to cradle his leg as he lowered it. "...to fall asleep."

He exhaled, feeling a cold sweat break out as pins and needles stung his leg awake as he raised the seat. "I was working on something."

A brief moment of nausea took him unaware and he prayed that he would not puke on himself. He was already embarrassed enough as it was.

And Sith Hell! His leg hurt.

Master Jinn was saying something, "...not to get up."

Obi-Wan began to remove the robe just in case he did get sick. But Master Jinn pressed his hands against Obi-Wan's stopping the process.

"Leave it." He ordered. "You were shivering when I found you up here. And I think you need it more right now."

Master Jinn then raised a hand and pressed it gently to Obi-Wan's forehead. Obi-Wan was shocked at the intrusion of his personal space but allowed it, closing his eyes as the man held his head in place against the seat. He didn't have a lot of energy to protest, nor strangely did he want to. The touch brought feelings of comfort and safety. And the nausea faded.

Obi-Wan felt the flush of embarrassment color his cheeks as his breathing quickened. A nervous fluttering was starting in his belly and he couldn't stop thinking about how good the man's hand felt. He tried to think of something else. Anything else. Anything but Master Jinn being in his personal space.
Something totally not sexy.

His master as a cross dresser. In a tight red dress, stilettos and painted lips.

Master Jinn, released his head quickly, pulling his hand back as if he had been burned. He took a step back and stared at Obi-Wan curiously.

Obi-Wan would have sworn the man had reacted to the picture he had just painted in his mind.

Oh shite! Had he seen that!

He checked his mental shields and found them firmly in place. Perhaps it had been coincidence.

"You have no fever." Master Jinn said while eyeing him oddly, "You actually still feel rather cool. But you are sweating and pale. " He said, not meeting Obi-Wan's eyes directly now.

Obi-Wan coughed again, feeling mortified. He doubted the Jedi master would still be speaking to him if he had just seen what he'd imagined. "It was just...the pain was a bit intense when I lowered my leg and sat up." Obi-Wan admitted, feeling thoroughly abashed.

"Ah," The Jedi Master seemed to be nervous now. "Which brings me to the reason I woke you. I believe we have fallen behind in your medication schedule." Obi-Wan noticed the pills and water on the console.

Master Jinn retrieved them and Obi-wan made no protest, taking them into his shaking hands. His pain was still on the high end, but he suspected the shaking was just from being weak and exhausted. Since the incident with Issel, his appetite was practically non-existent and he had to force himself to eat. He couldn't even remember his last meal.

"Now the antibiotics." Master Jinn dropped two more pills in Obi-Wan's outstretched hand.

Obi-Wan swallowed the meds and handed the water back, but Master Jinn shook his head. "Without an IV, you will have to stay hydrated on your own. I'd like for you to finish the glass."

Obi-Wan rested the cup on his thigh, closing his eyes and feeling exhausted already. "Ok."

"You also need to eat something."

He sighed. He should have known that was coming next. "Perhaps later."

Though his eyes were closed, he could feel Master Jinn scrutinizing him for another moment and then sensed him sit in the co-pilot's seat.

"Would you like to rest in the cabin?" He suggested. "You could use more sleep."

"No, thank you." Obi-wn answered. "I was working on something and hadn't intended to fall asleep." Obi-Wan felt a bit silly realizing Master Jinn had unofficially tucked him in without his realizing it.

"Yes. I had noticed you found the files." Master Jinn interrupted his train of thought.

Obi-Wan glanced up and saw the program's decryption status had reached 62% as he slept. "I did. Thank you for going back for them."

Master Jinn nodded.
"I don't know how long you've been out here, nor how long you were sleeping. But that seems pretty impressive, even in the short time we have traveled." He said tipping his head to the read out.

Obi-Wan smiled humbly, "I like a challenge. I'm decent with computers and I always insisted on maintaining top of the line equipment and software on the Deadeye."

"Master Quillis has taught you well then."

"Oh Master Quillis is good," Obi-Wan agreed, squashing a yawn and resting his head. "But I have to give most of the credit to Mox Oadley and Hebris Lettie."

Qui-Gon looked at Obi-Wan askance. "Hebris Lettie?"

Obi-Wan cringed at the feelings of outrage coming Master Jinn. "Yes?"

"The same Hebris Lettie who ruined the economies of five planets, causing massive rioting and destruction in less than an hour with his cyber terrorism?" Master Jinn had moved forward in his seat.

Obi-Wan seemed slightly chagrined. Why had he brought up Lettie? It must have been exhaustion and not thinking clearly. "You're familiar with him then." He stated.

"There isn't a soul in the galaxy who does not know who he is." Master Jinn seemed appalled at the very idea of his being taught by the man.

"Well, to my credit, most of my tutoring took place before he did all that."

"Most?" Obi-Wan could sense that Master Jinn was truly horrified.

"Well, he is one of the best." Obi-Wan shrugged, "Despite his moral compass being...off and his sanity even further, he still knows what he's doing when it comes to computers."

Master Jinn did not seem impressed.

"And my master taught me that there is always something to learn from other beings no matter who they are or what they have done."

"Hmm." The Jedi Master sat back a little, "Well argued I suppose. What did the Council say?"

Oh this just kept getting better. Master Jinn's opinion of him was going to plummet quicker than he thought it might. And for some reason, that really bothered him. He didn't want Master Jinn to disapprove of him, despite knowing he would likely never see the man after they returned.

"My Master also taught me that it is sometimes better to beg forgiveness than ask for permission." He replied quietly.

"So they were unaware." Master Jinn surprised him then by smiling largely, "I barely knew Illius, but I think we would have gotten along rather well."

Obi-Wan smiled, a touch of sadness creeping into him at feeling his master's absence.

Master Jinn seemed to sense this and placed a hand on his shoulder. "I am sorry for your loss."

The hand somehow lightened the sense of loneliness and loss, and Obi-Wan fought back tears. He sniffed once before speaking, "Thank you, Master Jinn." He turned and met the man's eyes. "Not just for this right now, but for what you did for my Master. He looked at peace."
"I am certain he is at peace now. He is with the Force." He smiled gently, "And please call me Qui-Gon."

Obi-Wan nodded and looked back at his lap. He took a drink of water to try and distract himself from crying in front of a Jedi Master.

Master Jinn must have sensed he wanted to move on because he straightened and turned his attention to fiddling with something on the ship's controls.

"So tell me just how you managed to get you lessons from Lettie?" He asked curiously, "That is quite the feat. Hebris Lettie was paranoid of everyone and had more security than the Chancellor himself."

"He still is." Obi-Wan agreed. "But I honestly don't know how my Master got him to agree to meet me. He had contacts everywhere. I learned from a wide variety of teachers in a lot of fields. Most of them were experts at what they were showing me, but several may have been...of questionable character." Obi-Wan sighed. "I know he wasn't the model Jedi. But he wasn't afraid to admit his weaknesses or learn from others' strengths. If he didn't know something, he found someone who did." Obi-wan shrugged. "Ends up, Lettie had quite the sense of humor. He was really funny, if a bit deranged and schizophrenic. He gave me lessons over the next year, whenever we had the opportunity to com or visit him."

"So he taught you enough to decrypt these files rather quickly. What are you hoping to find in them?"

"I'm not sure."

Master Jinn obviously knew he suspected to find something of value.

Obi-Wan shrugged, "Bank transactions. Employment records. Future jobs. Anything that might lead me to who hired him and why. But as skilled as he is at what he does, I still have a feeling that he's a small player in a much larger game. Someone is working to create their own political power base. And they are using blackmail, threats, and sometimes murder to get the people they want elected into power."

"And you know this how?"

"I don't technically know. I suspect." He admitted, sighing in frustration. "I may have overheard some conversations while I was Iessel's...guest." He shuddered and looked away, unable to meet Master Jinn's eyes.

"I don't think he planned on letting me live, so he didn't care if I overheard." But Obi-Wan did remember them saying something about delivering him to someone else. He had entertained the smallest hope that in the transfer, he might find a way to escape.

He must have zoned out while trying to recall details because Master Jinn brought his attention back with a touch, stilling the shaking hands grasping the cup on his lap. He gently took the cup from Obi-Wan and sat it on the console. Concern and kindness radiated from the man. "Is this how you learned of their goal to make an Army of the Republic?"

"What?" He replied in shock, a chill shooting through his mind and body. "How did you know of that?"

"You mentioned it to the Council."
Obi-wan was confused momentarily.

"Just before you lost consciousness after our fight with the Sith."

He closed his eyes, feeling mad at himself for doing something so incredibly rash. "So stupid." He whispered.

"What is?" Master Jinn inquired, not hiding his concern.

"I have no hard proof of that either. Actually, no proof at all. I...It was a vision." Obi-Wan recalled the feeling in the force as he was reporting to the council. "Something... exhaustion maybe, made me think the vision and everything we were investigating were connected. I remember feeling so certain of it. But now, I am thinking I wasn't really firing on all cylinders at that point." He admitted.

"That may be so." Master Jinn agreed. "But sometimes our minds make unconscious leaps that we would not normally make in ordinary circumstances. Perhaps the Force was actually directing you to make such a link."

At first Obi-Wan thought the Jedi Master was trying to make him feel better. But after only a few seconds, he could tell that Master Jinn was being serious. He truly believed what he had said. So maybe then, it was not so outrageous?

"Do you have visions often?"

Obi-Wan closed his eyes, trying to repress the resentment of the gift as images of his master fighting the Zabrak flashed in his mind. "Often enough." He sighed.

If only his master had not sent those reports! A flash of anger surfaced in Obi-Wan.

"But then you should know that already, Master Jinn. I am sure the Council told you all about me and what my Master thought of recent events."

He resented Master Jinn's knowledge. Why had his Master not sent the reports to him as well. At least then he would know what had been said. Know what they knew.

Shame struck him then. He had no right to be angry at Master Jinn. He was being petty, but it hurt. And not knowing what they knew of recent events was frustrating. He felt frazzled. He had no control of anything.

"Obi-Wan." The voice was gentle and Obi-Wan felt drawn to meet his eyes. He hadn't realized he'd been holding his breath and closing his eyes in his attempts to regain control of his emotions. The anger had surprised him and seemingly come out of no where.

Seeing the man's concerned face made him feel worse for the outburst. "Please call me Qui-Gon." He asked again, before providing an explanation. "You must understand the Council only shared your Master's reports with me due to their concern for you. They wanted me to be aware of your experiences in case something were to happen."

"Like what?" He scoffed, still holding on to the anger, but knowing he should let go.

"I would imagine because of things such as your waking confused and throwing me into a wall, your inability to connect with the force at times, the psychosomatic paralysis."

Well, that statement doused any remaining fires of his anger. Now he was flooded with shame.
"I do not say these things to make you feel badly, Obi-wan. There is no need to feel ashamed for what that criminal did to you."

"It still doesn't mean I want everyone knowing!" His voice shook, betraying his fear. The idea of others knowing what had been done to him and knowing how much it affected him was terrifying.

"I will not share anything I have been told, nor anything you confide to me." The statement was honest and earnest, of that Obi-Wan had no doubt. "We were about to undergo a five-day trip and the Council only shared this information with me so that I would be prepared to help you, if needed."

Obi-wan swallowed, barely holding back the dread that threatened to consume him.

"So, he reported everything then?" He asked bravely, though he could not meet the Jedi Master's eyes.

"If you mean the signs of rape, then yes."

Obi-Wan's sense of sound fuzzed out and he squeezed his eyes shut. He was so upset. This could not be happening.

"You did not read the reports then?"

"They were not sent to me." Obi-Wan whispered, shaking his head, doing his best to ignore the nausea creeping up again. "Though I was tempted, it would have been wrong."

"I am sorry I forgot to close my messages. It may have spared you this worry." He explained. "And I am sure it was an oversight on Illius' part. He was in quite a rush to come to your aid against the Zabrak when the reports were sent."

Obi-wan skipped over Master Jinn's explanation hardly worried about that. He was much more concerned with what they knew. "And our encounter with Iessel in Mos Espa?"

Master Jinn studied him with concern. "You're master was not clear on what all occurred during that incident."

The man wasn't stupid. He had to figure something of import had happened there, especially since Obi-Wan was asking.

"But he did tell the council he was worried over what might have happened there and that you would need help in dealing with it."

Obi-Wan felt a small sense of relief at that and worked quickly to shove all of his thoughts and feelings into a box to be taken out and examined later.

He needed to get grip. Step outside himself. His pride and shame. There were more important things going on than this. "It's fine. I'm fine." He consciously relaxed his grip on the arm rests. "Let's just move on. I shouldn't be upset. I should be better than this."

"It is not a weakness to feel, Obi-Wan." Master Jinn was sending comfort and peace through the Force and Obi-Wan allowed it to wash over him.

"Many Jedi would disagree with you." He argued weakly, turning away and brushing the wetness from his eyes.

"That does not make it less true. Your feelings are all over the place and I do not doubt that you will
work through them with wisdom. But know that it is a common response to these types of incidents. It is quite natural to feel what you do and if you need help, I am here."

Obi-Wan nodded, meeting his eyes once again, "Thank you." He still felt ashamed, but at same time, he felt comforted by Master Jinn's reassurances and offers of help.

Master Jinn ended the advice there, likely sensing Obi-Wan's desire to move on. "Will you tell me of your vision then?"

A different sense of dread seemed to seep into his bones anytime he recalled the vision.

"It was strange." He admitted. "There seemed to be no order to it, no rhyme or reason for the way things were revealing themselves and maybe a lot of symbolism or something, because a lot of it was impossible."

"I am not prone to visions myself. But I am aware they can take many forms." Master Jinn agreed.

Obi-Wan closed his eyes taking a moment to focus in order to recall the details more accurately. "There was this dark gray fog that covered everything in the beginning. So thick that when I lifted my hand in front of me, I could barely see it, but I could hear a drumming sound in the distance. I walked toward the sound carefully. The fog began thinning and I could finally make out the ground at my feet and then a ledge. The ledge overlooked a gorge where thousands of troops in white armor were marching in perfect unison, lining up in companies of a hundred. They went as far as the eye could see."

Obi-Wan took another moment to recall the images, sounds, and feelings more clearly.

"A voice that seemed to encompass everything announced it to be the Grand Army of the Republic." Obi-Wan hated the voice. It left him feeling slimy.

"The voice was...it seemed snide and sarcastic. Arrogant. Like...whoever was speaking was mocking the army that...I don't know how to explain it." He heard the voice in his mind again and couldn't find the words to describe what it made him feel.

He could sense Qui-Gon beside him listening attentively. The master surprised him by speaking, "As if the army was just a pawn being used for something more important. And there was no respect for those serving in it. He could throw them away if he needed to and never mourn their souls."

Obi-wan opened his eyes in shock. "Yes!" He eyed the man curiously, "But they are necessary to him. He needs them, but he laughs at how easy it is to manipulate them. Takes joy in using them for his own purposes. How did you-"

"Continue." Qui-Gon said closing his own eyes. Obi-Wan wondered if Qui-Gon was a telepath. It would explain all the little things from earlier, but the Council had never said anything about such a gift.

He shook it off, making note to mention it at a later time. Closing his eyes once more, he continued. "When I watched the army, I was conflicted. I saw good men, loyal men. All very close with a strong sense of purpose. And a precision almost unheard of. I sensed no darkness in them, yet something whispered of danger."

It almost felt like they were his brothers, like Obi-Wan could put his life in their hands and never feel fear with them beside him. And yet, he knows what is coming.

"Despite watching from the cliff, my vision zoomed in closer, as if I was a bird or a drone. It was as
if I leapt off the cliff and began a descent, just...not in a body. As I neared one company, they began removing their helmets and one after another after another. All of them had the same face. It was eerie. I could sense they were all individuals, but their faces were of one man."

Obi-Wan didn't know what the one man symbolized or who he was.

"After I 'flew' past the line, I swooped backward up to where my body was, overlooking the men from the cliff, back in my body again. I sensed danger right away and drew my lightsaber. The soldiers had noticed me and all of them followed my retreat back to the cliff. All of them watched me in unison, their heads moving in the same pattern following me, like they were controlled somehow. Just like battle droids or something." He sighed.

"Then they raised their blasters and began firing at me. None of the shots hit. They were aimed just below my feet."

Obi-Wan stealed himself. Now, the hard part.

"The cliff face gave out and I was falling."

He sensed Master Jinn take his physical hand, but did not open his eyes afraid he would lose the vivid recollection he was experiencing.

As he felt Master Jinn's hand take his, it was as if there was a presence with him in the vision. He was no longer alone. He would not have to face this devastation by himself again. But even so, Obi-Wan did not want to recall this part. He hesitated.

"Continue." Master Jinn encouraged with a whisper, seeming to sense the foreboding.

Obi-Wan gathered his courage and resolve as Master Jinn's presence became stronger. "Below me, was a cold dark lake. I was falling quickly, but in that small amount of time, I sensed Jedi dying. I could see them dying. Everywhere, all of them. The images came so fast, Council Members, life long friends, fellow Jedi I barely knew. They were all being killed by the soldiers."

Obi-Wan gasped as he became inundated with their surprise, confusion, fear, and pain.

"All of them..." He could no longer find words. The images and feelings, the smells and the sounds bombarded him. And in his heart he knew it was the end of the Jedi Order. He sobbed, and felt Master Jinn's presence reaching for him, shielding him from everything as the visions of the dying Jedi began to finally fade.

"Thousands of deaths in seconds. All of us-" He choked back a sob. But this time, Qui-Gon was with him. Next to him. The man felt just as horrified, but somehow Obi-Wan drew comfort from his strength and his presence.

"I hit the water then." Obi-Wan could remember the shock as he plunged into the icy depths. "I couldn't find the will to actually swim. I just wanted to go with the rest of them. I just closed my eyes and wished for death."

He sensed a very strong mental "No" from Qui-Gon. He would not let that happen.

Something in Obi-Wan smiled at the show of support, brightened at the refusal to allow him to leave.

He had to finish the vision though, "I floated there for several moments. No sound, just cold and quiet. The silence was eerie. The loneliness all encompassing. And then...I saw the Temple. A tall man with a green lightsaber, golden eyes, dark cape. He led several companies of the Army into the
Temple. He was ruthless. Full of anger. He-" Obi-Wan tore himself away from the next part, shuddering. He forced his eyes to open and leaned forward feeling sick yet again.

Qui-Gon was beside him a hand on his back rubbing gently not pressing for more. Obi-Wan knew he had to explain, but he didn't want to recall this part as he had been doing with the rest.

"Take your time." Qui-Gon whispered again.

Obi-Wan leaned forward making himself take measured breaths, pulling himself out of the trance like state in which he had found himself. A few seconds of deep breathing and he felt more grounded in the here and now.

Qui-Gon was studying him, kneeling at his side with tears running down his cheeks. But the anger at the other Jedi, the one who turned and betrayed them all, left little room for Obi-Wan to offer comfort to Master Jinn. He was practically vibrating with rage from the betrayal.

"That man?" whispered Qui-Gon.

"A monster." Obi-Wan confirmed. "He killed everyone. Every Jedi in the Temple. Every Knight. Every Padawan. He cut through them like they were nothing. He and his soldiers. And he...he didn't stop there. He went for the Younglings. It was a slaughter and one I do not wish to recall."

Just like the wookies, he had felt the younglings' confusion and fear. And he had no power to stop the man from slaying them.

Master Jinn was watching him carefully, seemingly as shocked as Obi-Wan had been after the vision. "Is that where it ended?"

"More or less." Obi-Wan sighed in frustration. "After seeing him kill the Younglings..." Despite his refusal to give in to the vision, flashes of the slayings played across his mind, causing him to shudder. His hands squeezed the arm rests so tightly that they dented the metal.

"Obi-Wan." Qui-Gon's firm, warning voice brought his thoughts back to the question at hand. "It's okay. Skip over that part. What happened next?"

"Forgive me." He whispered. Finding an anchor in the older man's eyes, he sought guidance. He just wanted to let go. He needed somewhere to crash and burn. "I'm just so angry. It's difficult to...to shut it off right now. I am afraid of my anger and I know the fear is just as bad and I can't-"

"Focus on me." The Jedi Master touched his cheek, never looking away. "Find the calm I am sending you. Breathe slowly. Be with me and just breathe."

Obi-Wan had trouble at first slowing down. But as he matched Master Jinn's breathing, the man spoke again. "Good. Now, as you inhale take in the calm and peace. When you exhale, push out the anger and fear."

The hand on his face was warm and it helped ground him. Obi-Wan closed his eyes and focused on Master Jinn's Force presence. His anger was being replaced with a sense of calm. Of home and belonging.

"What are you doing to me?" He asked, softly. He was not frightened, but his own master had not ever demonstrated these skills. Was this something most Jedi could do?

"I'm just...I was only trying to help you." He lowered his hand slowly, seemingly reluctant to break contact.
Obi-Wan picked up on a small amount of surprise in the other man, before it was squashed.

Master Jinn's presence started to slowly withdraw and Obi-wan panicked. "No. Don't go. It is helping. I promise."

Qui-Gon nodded and closed his eyes again, moving to hold Obi-Wan's hands this time.

After several moments of peace, Obi-Wan had to admit he felt better. But mentally and emotionally, he was done.

The other man seemed to sense this, releasing his hands and settling back in the other seat.

"You're anger is just, but you cannot let it control you. You must recognize it and release it to the force. To harbor it, to feed it. That is where the danger lies"

Qui-Gon understood, but it wasn't that simple. "I feel like a leaf being buffeted in the wind. My feelings are...I have no control over them, which then leads me to fear that lack of control and it's...it's like a vicious cycle."

"As I said before. Your reactions are normal for what you have been through. No one is expecting you to be one hundred percent on your return, Obi-wan. It is unfair to hold yourself to such a high standard right now. I am surprised you are even up and talking. Your recovery may take some time to address all that you have gone through. These few panic attacks are but of small concern."

"You mean I can expect it to get worse?" Obi-Wan inferred.

"No." Qui-Gon reassured. "I mean you are holding up well."

Obi-Wan wasn't sure he could agree but he wanted to be done talking about it. He'd done enough to severely damage Master Jinn's opinion of him.

"There wasn't much more." He explained. "I was angry. So angry that I fought for the surface as hard and fast as I could. I didn't think I would make it. Desperation was quickly winning out over my anger. When I finally broke the surface, I was gasping for air in my bunk."

Obi-Wan leaned forward nervously and reached for the water. He took a few big gulps and felt as exhausted as the night of the vision itself. He barely managed to take a few swallows before he had to sit the cup down due to weakness.

"How did you do that?"

"Do what?" Obi-Wan was tired and confused. He had no clue what Master Jinn was asking.

"How did you share that vision with me?" The man asked in apparent awe. "My shields were up and I am fairly certain a padawan should not be able to do what you just did."

"I didn't do anything." He answered. "I thought 'you' were doing something. I sensed you there. With me, this time." Obi-Wan's last word turned into a yawn and he closed his eyes.

Obi-Wan could feel Master Jinn studying him carefully again, and he rolled his head sideways to look at him lazily. The man looked considerably troubled. And Obi-Wan wasn't sure his focus was solely on him but rather on what he had just experienced.

"It was much easier this time." He admitted. "And even though I am sorry you experienced it, I was glad that you were there with me."
Qui-Gon forced a gentle smile for him. "I am honored by your sharing." He responded, but his voice betrayed the lingering terror of what he had just felt. Obi-Wan could tell he was working hard to rid himself quickly of the fear and shock. Obi-Wan had needed to meditate for hours before he felt even slightly better. And he had needed his Master's help with that.

"You need rest." Qui-Gon insisted, slowly lowering the pilot's seat so that Obi-Wan was comfortably reclined. "Close your eyes and sleep." He ordered. "I will be here."

Obi-Wan closed his eyes and felt tears of gratitude slip from the lids. He could have imagined, probably had imagined, that Master Jinn had been feeling gratitude and respect toward him. And as he fell asleep, he thought he may have felt a hand gently wiping his tears from his face.
Qui-Gon could not have said if it had been moments or hours that he sat there after wiping the young man's tears from his face. But, he finally allowed his mind to wander from the disturbing vision to the strange connection he seemed to have with Obi-Wan. His eyes continued studying Obi-Wan even as his mind worked overtime trying to keep up with everything he had just experienced.

The sharing of that vision had been exceptionally overwhelming. The content and sensations had an intensity that he had never experienced before. His visions, the few he had been granted, were always distant as if seen and felt through a fog. Obi-Wan had implied that he experienced them often. Qui-Gon sympathized if that were the case. A vision could be a plague or a blessing. But the despair and torment in this one, had been near unbearable.

He didn't know what sort of training Obi-Wan had received regarding his gift, but he seemed to handle it better than Qui-Gon had. Qui-Gon could barely string a thought together after it was over. And if he had worked with Master Yoda in the past, Obi-Wan may have some experience in sharing his visions, but not with the ease and intensity he had just experienced.

Perhaps a council member would have been able to manage something like that with the Force but Obi-Wan could not possibly have obtained that level of training. It simply didn't work like that.

The only other instances of shared visions he knew of occurred between Masters and padawans or those with some sort of bond.

The idea froze all of Qui-Gon's thoughts and fear seeped into his mind.

Qui-Gon had never allowed the young man to share his mind directly. Even during the vision, Qui-Gon had never lowered his shields.

He looked at Obi-Wan again and realized that for whatever reason, he knew he would be able to tell you where the young man was and whether or not he was asleep or awake, and possibly even what he was feeling.

Qui-Gon felt a cold sweat begin at the thought. Those were things a master and padawan would experience. Not two Jedi who had met each other for the first time a few days ago.

He consciously calmed himself with a breathing exercise and opened himself to the living force. Once he had calmed significantly he studied Obi-Wan and was again struck by the beauty of his force presence. It drew him forward as a moth to a flame.

As he examined it, he noticed that the very edges of Obi-Wan's force signature were touching his own and it felt extraordinary. But this was also likely the reason they were experiencing so much of
one another's thoughts and feelings.

Although the idea of separating himself from Obi-Wan was not pleasant, Qui-Gon attempted to pull back from the other's signature.

As he moved, a small bit of his signature remained tethered to Obi-Wan, like a line stretched between the two.

He studied where they connected closely thinking that he could untie the connection somehow, possibly untangle it and free himself.

But upon closer inspection, he realized that the ends weren't knotted or entwined. They had merged. They had fused together and Qui-Gon could not tell where either began or ended.

The shock of the realization threw him out of his meditation and he had physically risen out of his chair and backed as far away as he could from the padawan.

A bond of some sort!

He feared it was so. But how and when and why?

No, no, no. This couldn't be. This was wrong. He was seeing things.

But he wasn't. It was there.

Qui-Gon raised as many shields as he could in reaction.

He was more shocked when he realized they weren't really doing anything. It wasn't blocking the padawan at all.

His unease had apparently spread to the young man in front of him, beginning to rouse him from the deep sleep to which he had fallen.

Qui-Gon worked hard to calm himself and release his fear to the force yet again, though it was more difficult this time. Once he had managed to get himself under better control, he examined their signatures once more.

Had he done this somehow when he healed Obi-Wan?

He did not think so. He had never heard of that happening and healers provided such services with no such side effects. But it had been an odd experience forgetting that it had been Obi-Wan's body and not his own that he was healing. Perhaps he had done something wrong. He'd never been able heal anything of the sort before.

If it was a bond, the Council would know how to sever it. He breathed easier, reassuring himself that if it did not fade upon separation, they would know what was happening.

As much as he admired Obi-Wan and as much as he was drawn to the young man, the idea of becoming his Master didn't sit right. It felt wrong. He knew it was not meant to be.

Besides, he was self-aware enough to admit the thought of being responsible for another's fate terrified him now. And Xanatos' betrayal had left him unwilling to open his heart to anyone else. He didn't need anyone else. It was best if he continued on his own.

He ran his hands over his face. He couldn't do anything about this now. He worked himself back towards a state of calm. Or at least as calm as he could be.
Perhaps it would fade, as other bonds do when contact with the other person is lost.

But as much as he feared the thought of being attached to another, the idea of removing the bond made him just as uneasy. In fact, the longer he considered it, the thought of severing the link to Obi-Wan might even outweigh the fear of being his Master.

He was surprised to find himself becoming panicked by that thought as well.

Qui-Gon concentrated on breathing again. His thoughts were scattered and he felt like an emotional train wreck. He knew he had slept for quite some time, but he still felt as if he could sleep another two days straight.

He forced the thoughts of their signatures and what it might mean from his mind. He had reports to write, a Zabrak to monitor and eventually, he wanted to move Obi-Wan back to his cabin where he would rest more comfortably. He would live in the moment and worry about the rest at a later time.

******

He had grown used to waking from the mental nudges from Qui-Gon. Though he was ashamed to say he was never able to stay awake long enough to have any meaningful conversations or help the man with regular day-to-day chores. He was able to drink the broth the man gave him, use the facilities and take his meds. But by the time he had managed all that, he was exhausted and ready to pass out again.

He had accused Master Jinn of giving him sedatives, but Qui-Gon had smiled gently and told him it was his own body demanding the rest and that he would always inform him of any medicines before giving them.

Obi-Wan opened his eyes reluctantly and was surprised to find the Jedi Master already by his bedside.

"We will arrive on Coruscant in just under an hour."

Despite not revealing anything in his facial expressions, Obi-Wan picked up on a great deal of anxiety from the Jedi Master.

"Is that a bad thing?" Obi-Wan's thoughts turned to the Zabrak, and he focused the Force to determine if something had changed. "Has something happened?"

"What?" Qui-Gon seemed confused, and then must have realized Obi-Wan could sense his anxiety.

"No," he reassured, "Everything is fine. Forgive my distraction, I had other things on my mind."

Qui-Gon gently assisted him into a sitting position and handed him another cup of broth. The mug warmed Obi-Wan's hands and the smell was delicious. He took the first couple of sips with his eyes closed, relishing the simple flavors and warmth of the broth.

"Your fever is persistent, though still low grade." Qui-Gon advised him. "But, I have no doubt the healer's will be whisking you away the moment the ship lands."

Obi-Wan frowned. "I'd like to walk there on my own if possible." The idea of needing help always bothered him. He felt surprised at not having minded Qui-Gon's help these past few days. "I would like to accompany my Master." He explained.

"I understand." Qui-Gon allowed his expression to show his concern this time. "Though I'm not
certain you will have the strength."

"I'll make it." He stated determinedly. "And then we should report to the Council."

"After the medical reports they received on you, I'm fairly certain you will be excused from such a duty." Qui-Gon explained. "Nor do I think you would be physically able."

"I've been managing to stay awake longer each time you woke me." He argued.

"Obi-Wan, there is no shame in needing medical attention. No one will think less of you because you need immediate treatment."

"But I don't. I'm doing fine. I could--"

"Perhaps the fever is influencing your reasoning." Qui-Gon reprimanded gently, "You do realize that they will have you and that leg in a bacta tank within minutes of our arrival?"

Obi-Wan clenched his teeth in annoyance, sitting the broth to the side and reaching for his crutches. Qui-Gon sighed and stilled him with a hand on the shoulder. He sat down on the edge of the bunk. "I do have sympathy for your plight. I do not like the Halls of Healing any more than you do. But it is necessary for your health."

Obi-Wan grimaced.

"But if you like, we can get you cleaned up and presentable before they get their hands on you. I thought you would want to look your best if you are to escort your Master."

"That would be appreciated." Obi-Wan felt at the two day growth of a beard, scratching at the stubble. "I'm not sure I should shave. It hides some of the bruising and doesn't make me seem as pathetic."

"You are not pathetic. But surely you know the healers and the Masters will see through anything of that nature."

Obi-Wan agreed silently. Picking up his broth, he accepted the pain meds and antibiotics from Qui-Gon. His hands still shook from weakness, though they had gotten better.

"My hands are still too unsteady to shave anyway." He shrugged, wincing slightly as the still-healing skin on his shoulder tugged uncomfortably.

"I will help you." Qui-Gon replied casually.

Obi-Wan coughed after having just swallowed his meds. He did his best not to choke at the intimate picture of the handsome Jedi Master shaving his face for him.

Qui-Gon sprung up from beside him thinking he was choking.

"Sorry," Obi-Wan cleared his throat once more. "The meds were hard to swallow." Obi-Wan hoped Qui-Gon could not see the blush that he knew was turning his face red, or if he saw it, hopefully he thought it a side effect of nearly choking.

Math formulas, he told himself, trying to think of any formulas to run through his mind so as to banish the inappropriate thoughts in his mind. But of course, his mind failed him completely and he couldn't think of one! Not one!
He thought he might have recovered nicely, but Qui-Gon was looking at him rather strangely. "Perhaps we will let the healer's deal with the facial hair." He said quickly. "I brought a cover for you leg and already placed a bench in the water shower. Whenever you are finished with the broth, I can assist you in wrapping the leg."

Obi-Wan agreed and was very glad for the help. Even thinking of the leg and what lay under the bandages made him queasy.

Qui-Gon helped him to the showers, but left after ensuring Obi-Wan was safe to continue on his own. He was going to wait in shouting distance, just outside the fresher in case Obi-Wan might need him.

It took Obi-wan twice as long as normal, seeing as he couldn't stand up, but he managed to wash and dry off on his own and still felt fairly strong. He decided to attempt to shave and used the force, to steady his hands. He only received two small knicks and was fairly proud of managing the feat.

He hobbled out to the cabin and found Qui-Gon had laid out a new tunic, a single sock and boot, and his lightsaber. There was a note on flimsi next to the items that said he'd meet him in the cockpit after he dressed.

Obi-Wan used the Force to help him dress, yet again feeling great relief at having been able to access it. He went to put the flimsi pad back on the desk and noticed some sketches piled in the corner. He lifted the small pile and was surprised to see the face from his vision. The one that all of the soldiers wore. He looked at the next two and saw the same face from different angles. He was shocked at the accuracy. Qui-Gon had quite the artist's hand.

The last picture in the pile was of him. He was sleeping in his bunk. The picture was very soft and, despite being only black ink on white flimsi, Qui-Gon had somehow created a glow around him.

Obi-Wan wondered why Qui-Gon had drawn him. Had he been bored? He didn't think so. In fact, he could sense the reverence with which it was drawn. The intensity of the feeling in the picture had to be clear to anyone who looked upon it. But he could feel it in his soul as well.

Obi-Wan hadn't realized he'd taken a seat. Nor that his breath had quickened.

This was a very personal work. He quickly wondered if this was how the Jedi Master saw him and if so, he was floored. He knew already that the man sparked feelings in him that he had never experienced before. Perhaps the reverse was true and he need not be as embarrassed.

He shook his head, bringing himself back to the present. He grabbed his pad and took photos of the drawings and tucked the pad into his outer robe. He then placed the drawings back in the corner of the desk as they originally were and left the flimsi pad on the bunk.

He went to leave, but turned back and tore Qui-Gon's note off the pad, folded it, and tucked it in his pocket. It was silly, he knew. It was just a note telling him to meet him in the cockpit. But he wanted to keep it.

He hobbled out to the cockpit and took a seat in the co-pilot's chair as Qui-Gon communicated with the landing personnel.

His anxiety began to increase as they got closer to the Temple. Obi-Wan closed his eyes and concentrated on bringing his shields to full force. He didn't need to be broadcasting all of the emotions he would likely be experiencing upon their return.

Qui-Gon must have sensed his nervousness though because a sense of comfort and peace came from
the man.

Obi-Wan opened his eyes to find Qui-Gon staring at him with concern, "Be calm, Obi-Wan. All will be well."

Obi-Wan could not find his voice to respond. It was a kind gesture and good advice, but not likely to occur.

He appreciated Qui-Gon's attempt to ease him. But he was bringing his Master home. His master, whose voice he would never hear again. Whose comforting touch was now but a memory. He was also about to be thrown in a bacta tank and have to suffer the healers for Force knew how long. He had no idea what his future held with the Order. And he had no doubts he would be forced to visit the mind healers for which he did not feel at all prepared.

But more than any of those worries, he was upset at the possibility of leaving the man beside him. Which was incredibly stupid as he had never even known Qui-Gon before all of this had happened and there was no logical reason for such a fear.

He rested his head back and closed his eyes as Qui-Gon landed on one of the Temple's platforms. He listened to everything from a light trance and heard and felt the landing.

"Obi-Wan."

He opened his eyes and noted Qui-gon incline his head toward the viewscreen. He looked through the glass and saw that the Temple Guard stood ready to honor his Master. He saw many of his Master's dear friends, and some of his own, lining the route into the Temple as well.

He knew it was coming, had known what to expect, but the moment was so intense.

He suddenly found it difficult to breathe. And his vision turned blurry as tears filled his eyes. "I should have done more. I should have saved him." He choked out. He couldn't breathe. "It should have been me."

Qui-Gon rose quickly and knelt before him, taking his hands into his own, "No, Obi-Wan. That is not what this is about." He spoke softly. "All of those people out there. They were touched in some way by your Master. They are his dearest friends and the sheer number of them tells you what a great man he was and how many hearts he has touched. They are not here to doubt your service to him, or place blame or judge you. They are here to give you comfort and to honor his service."

Obi-Wan focused on Qui-Gon and the message he was delivering. "Look out there. Look how proud they are of him and look at all of those who loved him. It is a hero's welcome. Be proud of him now as he was of you."

Obi-Wan nodded, still unable to find his voice.

"Do you still think you will be able to walk beside him?"

Obi-Wan nodded again. Finding it difficult to swallow the lump that was suddenly in his throat.

"There is no shame if you cannot."

"I can do it." His voice shook and he steeled himself. "Will you...will you stay beside me in case...in case I-"

"I would be honored." Qui-Gon smiled.
Qui-Gon helped him stand and gave him his crutches while leading him to the ramp. "The Healers are going to come on board first to begin their examination and transfer preparations for the Zabrak. It will take some time for them to run their tests and prepare him for transport. In the meantime other healers are going to ensure you are able to walk on your own, for which I will vouch, but they will want to check you over first. The Temple Guard will be preparing your Master's body quickly and efficiently and will likely be ready to exit the ship before the healers are done speaking to us. We will follow behind them, accompanying them to the Halls of Healing. You have seen this ceremony before?"

Obi-Wan nodded. He had lined the halls of the Temple on several occasions for the same purpose, fallen comrades who had given the ultimate sacrifice being returned to the Temple. It was always a somber, but meaningful time.

"Are you ready or do you need a minute?" Qui-Gon asked him.

"Let's do this." He whispered, while attempting to banish his anxiety.

Surprisingly Qui-Gon stepped into his personal space then and cupped Obi-Wan's face in his hands. He gently bowed his head and touched their foreheads together. "I will be beside you the entire way."

A sense of strength and comfort flowed into him and served to calm him more than anything else could have.

"Thank you." Obi-Wan whispered, bringing his hands up to grasp Qui-Gon's wrists. His heart beating too fast. "For everything."

There eyes locked for a few seconds more and Obi-Wan could sense the respect and admiration from the man as he gently pulled away.

"Here we go then." Qui-Gon went and lowered the ramp onto the ship and people quickly and efficiently ascended with clear purpose to their steps. The Temple Guards needed no directions, apparently having been previously alerted to where his Master's body rested. A team of five healers acknowledged him with somber nods and moved past him toward the small sick bay.

Master Che came after them and stopped in front of Obi-Wan. She took his hands in her own and met his eyes with sympathy. "It is good to have you home, Obi-Wan. I am sorry for the loss of your Master."

"Thank you, Master Che." His throat was tight and it was difficult to talk. But Master Che apparently did not expect more from him.

"Obi-Wan wishes to accompany his Master's body, as is his right." Qui-Gon spoke quietly.

Master Che nodded. "I did not expect to find you in such good condition after having received the past medical reports. It is impressive." She admitted as she began to scan him. She frowned at what she was seeing, but she nodded her head. "I would recommend a hover chair to be on the safe side, but I will have my padawan follow behind you with the chair at a respectful distance, just in case it is needed. From these readings, I believe you can make it. But you must promise me that if you begin to feel weak, you will use the chair."

"I promise." He agreed. "I will not be too proud to ask for help." Besides, passing out behind the Guard would be much more shameful than requesting the hover chair.

Master Che nodded and gave Qui-Gon some sort of "instructions-in-a-glance." Qui-Gon nodded,
apparently understanding the silent communication.

Obi-Wan attempted to distance himself emotionally from the proceedings. He did not want to be seen weeping as he trailed his Master's escort. The maelstrom of thoughts and feelings would not be tamed though. So he clenched his teeth and hobbled forward on the crutches as the guard exited with his Master's body covered with a ceremonial blanket.

Qui-gon rested a hand on his back as they came to a stop outside the ship. Somehow he offered Obi-Wan the calm he needed. Obi-Wan watched as Council Members fell to the front and rear of the procession. He did his best to simply focus on the Guard in front of him and put one foot in front of the other as they started.

At first his steps felt mechanical and all he could hear in the respectful silence were the sounds of footfalls. But as their steps continued, memories began to flash in front of Obi-Wan: his master's request to take on Obi-wan as his padawan; his voice promising to make him one of the greatest Jedi of his time; his master playing sabaac amongst friends and laughing as he raked in his winnings: his master spurring him on as they ran from an angry mob and checking him for injuries once they were safe.

Qui-Gon gently grasped his arm, alerting him to the turn in the hallway. His gentle smile seemed to reflect that he knew Obi-Wan was thinking of his Master.

He felt comforted that he was doing alright and still felt strong enough to continue. So he allowed the memories to continue.

His remembered his master telling stories to a group of orphans on Ryloth and how the children were completely enamored with him; his constructive guidance as Obi-Wan learned his katas and trained to fight and duel; their sad task of digging graves at the site of a horrible raid on Malastare. His master had been determined to assist the people there with anything they needed. His Master's drunken shouting in his attempts to sing tavern songs amongst friends. Songs that made Obi-Wan blush; his master's arm around his shoulder and the fond looks he would give Obi-Wan on special occasions.

Each memory only made him prouder of his Master and he was reminded of how lucky he had been to have been chosen by him.

Before he knew it, they had arrived at the Halls of Healing.

He wobbled slightly as they came to a halt and Qui-Gon reached out to steady him. "You did good."

Obi-Wan had no voice, but nodded gratefully and wiped at his blurry eyes. He had managed not to cry during the procession but now it was as if he felt the loss anew.

"This way, Qui-Gon." Master Che instructed as she walked past them into a private room.

"Come." Qui-Gon steered him quickly to follow and Obi-Wan was very grateful. His energy was dwindling now that his task was complete. Qui-Gon led him to the edge of a bed and Master Che took his crutches from him. Qui-Gon removed his outer robe and tunic and had him sit on the bed. Healer's were hooking him to monitors but they somehow worked around Qui-Gon who hadn't moved from his side.

"Lay down and rest now, Obi-Wan." Master Che told him. "We will take good care of you."

Obi-Wan shivered slightly but Qui-Gon was quick to cover him with a pre-warmed blanket.
"Thanks." He whispered, pulling the blanket slightly higher.

He had almost fallen asleep when he sensed a presence at his side and felt a familiar hand brush across his forehead. "Miss him too, we will."

Obi-Wan turned his head and cracked his eyelids to see a sad Master Yoda at his bedside.

"Yes." He agreed.

"But never truly gone, is he. Part of the Force and part of you, he is." Yoda's hand moved to Obi-Wan's chest over his heart and tapped twice.

Obi-Wan nodded, touched by the words. "Very well you have done. Most proud he would be. Rest now."

Obi-Wan nodded. "Thank you, Master Yoda."

Master Yoda turned to leave and waited at the door, "Coming, are you, Qui-Gon?"

"I will join you in a moment." Qui-Gon answered respectfully, bowing his head slightly toward Yoda.

Obi-Wan braced himself mentally. This was where Qui-Gon would say goodbye. They were home and Qui-Gon would be assuming that he didn't need anything further. The very idea brought him despair.

Yoda nodded. "Convene in one hour, the Council will. Expect your report then, we will."

"I will be there, Master Yoda." Qui-Gon assured.

Qui-Gon approached Obi-Wan's bedside once again. "I already told the Healer's to avoid IV's." He smiled, taking Obi-Wan's hand. "If it is agreeable to you, I would like to check in on you occasionally."

Relief swept through Obi-Wan. "Yes. I would like that very much."

"Master Che wants you to sleep now and I sense it will not elude you for long."

"I agree." He said even as he closed his eyes.

"I will remain as long as I can." Qui-Gon assured him, tracing his cheek with one of his hands.

His other hand slipped beneath the covers and gently caressed the top of Obi-Wan's hand.

Obi-Wan felt himself finally relax fully and slipped into sleep within seconds.
Chapter 12

Anakin snuck through the halls fearing he'd lost his way.

He'd been to the Halls of Healing several times with Qui-Gon during the short time he had spent with the Jedi. They'd gone to visit Obi-Wan Kenobi so many times that he thought his legs would fall off. With Qui-Gon's long stride, he was always running to keep up with the man.

"Left or right?" He whispered to himself.

He looked both ways and knew he was hopelessly lost. He'd never even been in this hallway before. The older Jedi he'd been assigned to stay with while Qui-Gon was away had fallen asleep and it had been quite easy to sneak out. Maybe it would have been better if he waited until the old man had woken up, but something told him he needed to go to the Halls of Healing now! And his current caretaker would not have allowed it.

He'd slept for twelve hours after falling asleep upon arrival to the Senate. He was so embarrassed at how badly he handled that. The healers told him there was no cause to be concerned and that he had been suffering from something called psychic shock. Qui-Gon had been there when he'd woken as well. Anakin was so happy to see him healthy and whole he jumped up and hugged the man.

Qui-Gon had taken him back to the Temple with the Healer's permission along with orders to have him rest even longer. He hadn't been able to say goodbye to Padme, but the Queen was there dressed like one of the handmaidens. It confused Anaikin, but she assured him that she was in disguise for her protection. She promised to tell Padme that he had looked for her in order to say goodbye and told him she would contact him later on a private com channel.

They'd traveled from the Senate to the Temple in a taxi, a newer speeder than Anakin had never even heard about. In fact, as they rode, he had realized that there were hundreds, maybe thousands, of speeders and droids and transports he never knew existed. The trip hadn't lasted long. He remembered talking about the speeders the whole way there. Qui-Gon didn't say much, but he kept smiling and appeared amused. Despite the slight queasiness and headache, Anikin informed Qui-Gon that was probably the best moment of his entire life. The city and the traffic around him were amazing. He never would have dreamed anything like it existed!

Qui-Gon had smiled at him again and then nodded ahead. "There she is, Anakin. The Jedi Temple. Home." When he saw the Temple, a sense of rightness and peace overcame him. He was definitely meant to go there.

After arriving, Qui-Gon could barely convince him to leave the hangar bay. But Anakin sensed an urgent need and impatience in Qui-Gon to be elsewhere. What had followed was his first trip to the Halls of Healing. Qui-Gon had introduced him to Master Che who gave him a cursory exam.

Master Che was perhaps the most beautiful Twi'lek he had ever seen. If she had been on Tatooine, her fate would have been sealed as she would have, no doubt, been one of Jabba's personal pleasure slaves. Probably his favorite. She was nice too. She frowned when he told her about his implant, but she had seen them before and told him they would remove it another day. She gave him a berry flavored syrupy liquid and promised it would help with his headache and queasiness. Then she asked if she could take some of his blood to test for infections. He agreed though he'd been nervous about it. He didn't want to appear scared in front of her. So he gathered up his courage and faked it. He was a bit surprised to learn that it was a mere pin prick to his finger. He got worse than that working in Watto's shop everyday.
When she took him back to Qui-Gon, the Jedi was standing by a tank full of water with a man floating inside of it. That was the first time he saw Obi-Wan. Master Che appeared worried for Qui-Gon. She put a hand on his shoulder and told him that Obi-Wan was responding well to the bacta and should be fine.

Anakin had heard of bacta tanks but had never actually seen one. They weren't too common in the Outer Rim. It looked frightening. He couldn't imagine being in that much liquid.

Qui-Gon seemed to pick up on his trepidation and started to explain the tank's function to Anakin. Anakin only half listened though. He was surprised to see the light that glowed where Master Qui-Gon's and Obi-Wan's signatures touched. It was beautiful and warm, and it practically hummed.

Master Che chided Qui-Gon, telling him that he needed to rest and so did Anakin.

Anakin understood Qui-Gon's reluctance to leave. He would never want to pull away from that kind of connection. Anakin wondered why the Healer would make him leave. "We can sleep here, can't we?" He offered.

"My Halls are not for napping. Besides, Master Jinn needs to feed you."

Master Qui-Gon took him to his rooms where he claimed they had a modest meal of meats, breads and cheeses. But all the food was better than anything Anakin had ever tasted on Tatooine.

Qui-Gon made up the couch for Anakin to sleep on. It was more comfortable than anything he'd ever felt. Too comfortable. There was no way he could fall asleep on it. He tried moving to the floor. The rug was soft enough, but it was far too cold. Qui-Gon had come out of his bedroom then, apparently having heard him move around, despite his best efforts to be quiet. The man looked well and truly exhausted and Anakin felt horrible for having kept him awake.

"I apologize Master Qui-Gon, sir. I can't get comfortable." Anakin could feel the slight frustration from the man and took a step back, lowering his head and preparing for a reprimand. But Qui-Gon moved to the couch and sat down, patting the seat and raising an arm for Anakin to join him. Anakin approached cautiously before climbing in and snuggling close. Qui-Gon pulled a blanket over the both of them and rubbed Anakin's upper arm softly. Finally feeling warm enough and comfortable enough, Anakin relaxed as Qui-Gon spoke to him.

"I never gave much thought to it before, but when the Jedi use the term Master, it is intended to mean teacher. It is in no way meant to be construed as owner?"

Anakin had not really considered it and had in fact thought of Master Jinn as his new owner even though, maybe, he should have known better. He remained quiet.

Qui-Gon sighed. "That is what I thought."

He seemed disappointed, but Anakin felt it was more with himself than with Anakin.

"No one will hurt you here, Ani. Especially for something as minor as finding it difficult to fall asleep. You are safe now. And from now on, you should simply call me Qui-Gon."

Anakin felt a rush of relief and he snuggled even closer to the giant man. He felt truly safe for the first time since leaving his mom. Qui-Gon continued to gently rub his arm and back and told him to get some sleep.

When he woke the next morning, the room smelled like baking bread. Qui-Gon fed him the most wonderful pastry he'd ever tasted. And then offered several more with a smile.
Then Qui-Gon suggested he take a shower. Anakin had been allowed to shower on the Queen's ship, but the room had been tiny, but it was an amazing experience. When he saw the room Qui-Gon's shower was in, he stared at the size in amazement. Anakin would have stayed in it for hours had he been allowed. Water showers were the best invention ever! In Qui-Gon's he could change the temperature and the strength of the water and the speed with which it came out and there were bubbles everywhere when he used the soaps.

The only thing that smelled better than the soap had been Padme, he thought fondly.

They'd visited Obi-wan again and found out that he was doing well even though he was still in the tank. This put Qui-Gon in a really good mood. But Anakin still sensed impatience from the man.

After that Qui-Gon had taken him to a room that had so much water in it that Anakin became terrified. He'd jumped behind Qui-Gon and backed out the door before anyone could stop him.

"This is the Room of a Thousand Fountains." Qui-Gon explained as he walked back to Anakin's side. The water was rushing from so many different places and it was roaring. The shower had been fun. But this was definitely too much.

Qui-Gon's rested a hand on his back gently urging him to explore. "No, no. I'm good right here."

Anakin explained, moving away and to the side to escape the gentle encouragement. He relaxed when Qui-Gon smiled and did not push him to go in.

"Perhaps you will enjoy the Temple Gardens more than the fountains." Qui-Gon suggested. "Come. I will show you my favorite spot."

He'd seen all of the green from afar as they rode to the Temple on the speeder, but he had never imagined it was plant life. There were so many flowers and trees and plants. It was like nothing Anakin could have ever imagined. He was worried to walk on it lest he crush it, and he squealed in alarm as the tall Jedi strode across the ground without a care that he would be breaking the plants.

"You just stepped on them!" He accused.

Qui-Gon laughed out loud. "It is grass, Anakin. You can walk on it without damaging it."

Anakin reached down and felt it tickle his hands. It had been crushed where Qui-Gon had walked. "I'm pretty sure you damaged it."

"It grows and recovers so quickly that the small amount of damage is not important."

The ground was spongy soft and Anakin jumped on it and rolled. He laid on it and ran his fingers through it. Qui-Gon had him remove his shoes and taught him how to climb trees by testing the branches.

There was water in the gardens too. But nowhere near the amount he'd seen in the other room. The water in the Gardens was more peaceful and Anakin doubted the small streams could sweep him away and drown him like the Fountain Room might. There were some big ponds though. Those were too deep for Anakin to want to go near.

Qui-Gon let Anakin feed some of the birds and fish. One of the birds liked sitting on Anakin's head. Qui-Gon said it was likely thinking of making a nest in the unruly mop. Anakin laughed so hard at the thought. He wished his mom could have been there to share it all with him.

After that his belly started growling, Qui-Gon suggested they check in on Obi-Wan and then go get
something to eat. This time they went to the Commissary. Anakin met several people who were all quite interested in him. He'd never met a Nautolan or a Mon Calamari before and was excited to see several others species he wasn't familiar with. He wasn't shy at all about introducing himself to any of them. They were all very nice.

During his conversation with the Mon Calamari, Qui-Gon's com chirped and he was told by someone on the other end to report to the Council Chambers. Appraently it was a big meeting because as they arrived, twelve other Jedi were waiting outside some massive doors to go in the next room with Qui-Gon.

Anakin was told to wait outside where he made friends with three of the Temple Guard. One of them entertained him with some slight of hand. And even though Anakin could sense what the guard was doing, he took pity on the man and laughed at his tricks. Then he asked to be taught and showed them what an excellent student he was.

The meeting had lasted about thirty minutes. The Jedi came out looking very determined and walking away with a purpose. The young Rodian Anakin had met upon his arrival waved at him and Anakin waved back. He was accompanied his master, Schrin.

Qui-Gon came out behind them all and Anakin thought he looked a bit nervous. He told Anakin that the Council wanted to see him. Anakin was introduced to the members, some of whom he recognized from his arrival. One of them was the bald, dark-skinned man who he learned was called Master Windu. Upon feeling Master Windu's scrutiny, he ducked behind Qui-Gon so as not to have to be in his line of vision. Qui-Gon tried to get him to step forward again, but he refused, so Qui-Gon gave up.

The really old, really nice green one was watching him carefully. But Anikin liked him and smiled when he winked at him.

Master Mundi was the one to explain why they had been summoned. "We have not had time to test young Anakin to determine whether he would pass the initiate tests. However, we plan to schedule a test in the next few days. We recognize the force is unusually strong with him. To send him away would risk exposure to darker callings. Especially in light of the Sith's return. Regardless of whether he passes the initiate test, we shall permit him to be your ward, Qui-Gon-"

A shock of surprise came from Qui-Gon and he spoke quickly, interrupting the Council member. "I don't think that's such a-"

"Should he pass the tests, we will allow you to take him on as your padawan, but the ultimate goal of becoming a Jedi may prove to be a difficult path for you, young Skywalker."

"Master Mundi, this was not discussed-" Qui-Gon interrupted again, but was promptly ignored as the Cerean kept talking over him.

"You have experienced a lot in the past few days. Your fears at present are understandable. The life of a Jedi is a noble and rewarding choice. However, it requires a great deal of sacrifice. It is not meant for everyone. You have time to study and learn just what the Order is and what we do. But you need not make any decisions right away. There are many paths you may choose to follow that might be better suited to your desires. There is no shame in choosing something different. What matters is that you have a special gift, a very strong connection with the Force. You must always choose to use that talent wisely and responsibly. The Council believes that you could gain such wisdom and training among us and we would be honored to be your teachers."

Qui-Gon seemed stunned beyond belief now and completely incapable of speech.
"Unfortunately, Qui-Gon is being sent on a mission for what could be several weeks. We will find you a caretaker until he returns. You would be required to take some academic tests to determine your proper placement in classes or any private tutoring that might be required to bring you up to speed with other initiates of your age. Does this meet with your satisfaction?"

"Very much so. Thank you, Master Mundi." Anakin bowed.

The Council members looked at Qui-Gon. "And you Master Jinn?" Master Yoda seemed pleased with himself, "What say you?"

Anakin grew worried, he could see Master Qui-Gon was very angry about something. He was sending a death glare at the little green master, but it didn't seem to perturb Master Yoda. He simply smiled smugly.

Anakin couldn't remember anything that would have made Qui-Gon so upset.

The Jedi Master looked at Anakin and studied him. Anakin thought he might have sensed a bit of fear coming from the tall man, but he was incredibly hard to read in that moment.

"I'm nervous too." Anakin whispered quietly, taking his hand. "But I'll do my best, Master Qui-Gon. I promise."

"It's just Qui-Gon, remember." After several more seconds of worry, Qui-Gon nodded at him. He forced a smile to reassure Anakin that all was well, but Anakin could tell his heart wasn't in it. His free hand was clenching tightly and his breathing had quickened. He was tight as a bow string as if preparing for a fight.

He watched the Jedi Master close his eyes and consciously relax his body before looking back to Master Mundi. "I agree."

It was like a wave had crested. So much tension had built up so slowly in the room that Anakin had not really noticed how much there was until it disappeared.

"Then may the Force be with you both."

Qui-Gon sent another death glare toward Master Yoda, but bowed respectfully, but his voice was angry and he spoke through clenched teeth. "And with you, masters."

Anakin copied the bow and followed Qui-Gon out of the room.

Anakin had all kinds of questions, but he sensed Qui-Gon was in no mood to answer them. He was still quite upset. Anakin wisely kept silent. What could possibly have made Qui-Gon this out of sorts?

Anakin stumbled as the answer came to him suddenly. Qui-Gon didn't want him. Had the tall Master changed his mind? He had seemed kind enough all day. Had Anakin done something wrong? Had he given him reason not to want him?

No sooner had the thought crossed his mind than Qui-Gon stopped him. He knelt down so that he was eye level with Anakin. He took Anakin's hands in his own giant ones and spoke firmly. "My reservations to undertake this role are in no way due to you. You are a wonderful boy, Anakin Skywalker, with a good heart. Never doubt that. Had I not accepted the Council's proposal, there would have been masters lining up for the chance to teach you."

Anakin was relieved to here him say that, but sensed more coming and so remained silent.
"I have reason to doubt my own abilities to serve you in such an important role. I do not think I would be good enough for you." He admitted. "It is not something I undertake lightly. But above all else I do not wish to fail you."

Anakin sensed great pain from Qui-Gon and wondered what had happened to cause so much doubt and fear.

He knew it was not the time to ask though. It was time to reassure.

"You won't fail me, Qui-Gon. I won't let you." He smiled and brushed Master Qui-Gon's hair behind his ear.

Qui-Gon gave him a big hug and they walked hand-in-hand to the Halls of Healing.

Qui-Gon had seemed quite torn at leaving Obi-Wan. It was clear he was someone very special to Qui-Gon. So Anakin had promised to check on him lots while he was gone. The tall Jedi Master told him that was just what he'd needed to hear. He had smiled and ruffled Anakin's hair.

Anakin asked if he could go to Naboo with Qui-Gon, but he'd been told that it was not a place for a child right now. He would be in too much danger. Apparently it was true because they had sent a bunch of Jedi back on the small ship on which he'd arrived. Including Master Windu who Anakin was certain had to be evil.

He'd tried to tell Qui-Gon that the man was dangerous, but Qui-Gon had laughed. "He scares a great many of the younglings with that stern face, but he is a good man, Anakin. There is no cause for concern." Anakin had seen there would be no convincing him so he'd just requested Qui-Gon to be careful around him. He'd gotten another smile and hair-ruffling for his concern. He thought he could grow to like those.

Qui-gon and the others had left very shortly after that. And Anakin had been placed in the care of Master Jarkai. He was nice, but a little too serious and boring. He'd seemed worn out with all of Anakin's questions within the first thirty minutes. And he had put him to bed awfully early. Definitely, a stickler for the rules.

That was why Anakin was now completely and hopelessly lost within the Jedi Temple trying desperately to find his way to the Halls of Healing. The sense of urgency was increasing and he was starting to panic a little. What he felt now had only happened a few times in his life, but each time it had occurred, something big had happened.

He sensed someone coming toward him and ducked quickly into a doorway, pressing his back flat against the wall so that he wouldn't be seen.

"You did well, Padawan. But we will have to work harder to keep your anger in check. You allowed Nevair to anger you once again with his words alone. The distraction cost you the match and caused your injury."

Anakin held his breath so that they would not hear him breathing. He needn't have worried though, as the master and padawan were loud enough that they would not detect such a minimal sound.

"I know, Master. I am sorry." The young man replied, wincing from an apparent injury to his arm. "He just knows exactly what buttons to push."

The two rounded the corner and Anakin wondered at his luck. They were obviously heading to the Halls of Healing. The voices got far enough ahead
"Yet you still blame his actions, instead of examining your re-actions. You must come to terms with these buttons he is pushing and not allow them to work against you. Now tell me what he said?"

Anakin followed and listened with half an ear. But focused more on staying at a safe distance behind them and not being detected.

As they got closer, he snuck right behind them and pretended to be part of their party in order to make it past the guards without being questioned as to why he might have been alone. He broke off quickly after they successfully entered and headed toward the room with the bacta tank. Only it was tough getting there without being seen. A ton of healers were rushing in multiple directions. And Anakin spied Master Yoda and Master PloKoon standing in silent observation of the room.

Not good. Had something happened to Obi-Wan? Was he dying?

Anakin tried to block them out and listen to the call. It wasn't coming from where Obi-Wan was. It was coming from further down the hall.

Anakin wished with all his might that none of the Healers or Masters would see him. He needed to stay hidden!

He sprinted behind the two Council members and ducked into the room across the hall. He couldn't see what was going on with Obi-Wan until multiple people moved out of his line of sight. He nearly gasped when he saw a boy in the tank. It wasn't Obi-Wan.

The boy's arms were missing from the elbows down and there was a nasty wound on his left lower abdomen. It looked like several gashes with incredible bruising to the area. There was another Jedi nearby, who appeared to be in shock. Healers were treating his injuries and although he was sitting there apparently awake, Anakin realized his mind was in shock. A third Jedi who seemed dirty and bloody, but not seriously injured, called to Masters Yoda and PloKoon from another bed. The two moved forward to speak with him and Anakin felt the draw to continue further down the hallway.

It felt cold. Sort of like the Zabrak had, but without malice. Is that where he was being led? To the zabrak? Should he warn the others?

No.

Whatever wanted him to proceed wanted for him to go alone and it had always ended up for the best when he listened to the feeling.

He went a few more doors down.

Here.

He turned to peer into the darkened room and saw Obi-Wan backed up against the far wall, standing in a healing gown.

Anakin studied him carefully. The heels of his hands were pressed against his eyes and he was gasping for breath. The chair beside the entrance was vibrating and Anakin noticed that some of the small items on the tables had risen about an inch into the air.

Guilt and despair flooded his senses to the point where Anakin could barely breath. He felt tears on his own face. But the feelings were coming from Obi-Wan. The grief was turning to self-loathing. And the items in the room started vibrating.

How was no one else feeling all of this?
He glanced down the hallway expecting someone to come running. No one was.

Anakin had to do something. He had to stop the downward spiral because he sensed the emotions were going to explode. And after seeing all the objects floating and vibrating he was terribly frightened they might explode when Obi-Wan did.

Scared out of his mind, but knowing something had to be done, Anakin stepped into the room.

"Obi-Wan." His voice shook.

Obi-Wan's hands came off his face. He looked up surprised to see Anakin in the doorway.

Anakin's distraction was enough to break through the anguish momentarily and the small items that had been floating, dropped from the air suddenly, one of the glass jars broke.

A shudder wracked Obi-Wan and he sunk to the ground. Anakin ran to his side.

"Should I get help." Anakin asked, his voice stronger this time.

"No." The Jedi opened his eyes, and took a deep breath, seemingly shocked at what was going on and surprised to find a boy kneeling in front of him.

"My name is Anakin." He told him.

"And how do you...how do you know my name?" Obi-Wan was shivering hard.

"I'm friends with Qui-Gon." Anakin got up and pulled a blanket from the bed and returned to his side.

Obi-Wan didn't object as Anakin helped him adjust to a sitting position with his back against the wall and blanket around his shoulders.

Obi-Wan still seemed skittish, his eyes searching the room nervously.

"He told me how brave you were. And that you defeated the Sith that was going to attack us." Anakin winced. Perhaps not the best topic at the moment. The guy was already freaking out.

"Is Qui-Gon here?" There was a desperation in the question.

"No. He had to go back to Naboo with the queen." Anakin felt an aching loneliness coming from the man.

"He didn't want to leave you. He felt horrible about it. We came to visit you like a million times. He wanted to talk to you before he left. But the Healers didn't take you out of the bacta tank until just recently." He explained. "I promised to look in on you while he is away."

Something like hope sparked in the Jedi and Anakin thought the out-of-control side of things may have been sidetracked for now.

"I wasn't aware Qui-Gon had taken a padawan." Obi-Wan stated, looking and sounding a bit more in control.

"I'm not his padawan. Well, not yet anyway. But maybe one day."
"How is it you know him then?"

"He found me on Tatooine." Anakin smiled, "Do you want me to tell you the story."

The young man leaned his head against the wall and patted the area beside him. "That would be a nice distraction."

Anakin settled beside him and took Obi-Wan's hand. Obi-Wan seemed surprised at the contact, but offered no objection.

"It started when I was working in Watto's shop one day. The most beautiful girl in the history of the galaxy came in with Qui-Gon. I thought she was an angel. They were looking for parts for their ship."

Anakin realized that Obi-Wan was listening carefully even though his eyes were closed and his breathing was even. Anakin told him everything that had happened to him so far. Obi-Wan never interrupted, not even when Anakin spoke of Qui-Gon fighting the Sith. He had just finished telling him about how scared he'd been in the Fountain Room when a person's outline appeared in the doorway.

He squeezed Obi-Wan's hand in warning just as the light switch was flipped on.

"Vokara, I found him. He's in here." A man's voice shouted down the hall.

"Busted." Anakin whispered.

Obi-Wan smiled gently over at Anakin. "It seems my absence was finally noticed?"

Master Che burst through the door past the Healer who had yelled for her, "Obi-Wan, I swear you are trying to give me a heart attack." She seemed surprised to see Anakin sitting beside him. And he saw her eyes taking in the broken jar and the items that were askew.

"Well, I suppose It is a good thing we are in the Halls of Healing then, isn't it?"

Master Che did not seem pleased with his answer, but Anakin couldn't stop a chuckle of amusement.

She glared at Anakin who quickly drew a straight face.

"There are people searching the entire Temple for you." She did not bother to hide her frustration. Anakin found it easy to pick up on just how worried she had been.

Obi-Wan must have too.

"I apologize, Master Che." He said in all seriousness, "I did not mean to alarm you. I wouldn't have thought finding me would be so difficult."

"Yes, well. I wouldn't have either." She glanced nervously at Anakin for some reason.

"I just...I wasn't thinking straight. I saw Rivan..." Obi-Wan swallowed nervously and clenched his eyes shut.

Anakin squeezed Obi-Wan's hand in support.

He looked at Anakin and seemed to sensor his speech before addressing the Master Healer again. "I saw something upsetting. And I...didn't really pay attention where I was going or what I was doing after...after..."
Master Che moved closer as if to examine him or help him. But Anikin felt the surge of panic in Obi-Wan at her sudden movement and the dangerous feelings in Obi-Wan made a comeback. Anakin moved quickly to block Master Che from reaching him.

She read the warning in Anakin's eyes and backed off a little.

"It's fine, Obi-Wan." She spoke and moved slowly, "To be honest, it was our fault. You should never have been left alone. It was an oversight. A lot happened in a short time and your aide stepped out briefly to assist someone else."

She shook her head, "But you never should have been awake with the level of sedatives we gave you." She sighed in exasperation. "Stubborn boy."

At first Anakin thought she was talking about him being stubborn and was surprised and a bit defensive.

But Obi-wan chuckled a little and tried to relax. "Can't let my image slip, can I?" He teased, but Anakin could sense it was an effort for Obi-Wan to keep up the screen of nonchalance. The cold feeling was still very close to the surface. Anikin could also feel just how exhausted the man was. He turned to check on him.

"Did Qui-Gon assign you as my bodyguard as well?" Obi-Wan smiled gently. His eyes were tired and failing to focus.

"No." He answered, getting down beside him once more and making good eye contact.

Obi-Wan's eyes were tired, but warm, and somehow Anakin knew with certainty that Obi-Wan would be extremely important to him. As close as family.

"I chose that role for myself." He said.

And suddenly a light flashed before Anakin's eyes. A healthier Obi-wan was standing in front of him among some tall grasses. The smile the man was gracing him with was large and proud.

Obi-Wan stepped beside him and put an arm around him tucking him in close for a half hug as they walked.

He looked much stronger, even though a small scar crossed his eyebrow that hadn't been there before.

"I'm very proud of you, my mischievous padawan." He squeezed Anakin's arm gently and tugged him tight again.

Anakin turned the half hug into a full blown one. He felt such glee and pride.

Obi-Wan picked him up fully and swung him up onto his back for a ride. Anakin whooped in surprise and then laughed loudly resting his chin against Obi-Wan's shoulder.

"You know your in for it if Qui-Gon ever figures it out."

"He won't."

"You seem awfully certain." Obi-Wan commented as he trekked toward a settlement of some sort in the distance.

"I framed Master Windu for it." Anakin felt pride suffuse him once more as Obi-Wan laughed.
loudly.
The light flared again.
Anakin found himself staring at Obi-Wan who had apparently also seen the vision.
"Anakin." He whispered, almost as amazed as Anakin felt.
"You saw it too?" He asked.
Obi-Wan nodded.
"That was wizard!" He whispered moving next to Obi-Wan again and snuggling closer.
Obi-Wan smiled but his eyes were fluttering closed.
"It was." He murmured in agreement. "But I think I need some sleep now."
Anakin looked up toward the Healers for help, but they were all staring at the two with mouths agape as if they had just done something crazy.
"Ummm, Obi-Wan?"
Obi-Wan opened his eyes again wondering what Anakin needed. He saw the healers all staring with wide eyes.
"Did you...did all of you just see that too?" Anakin asked.
There was a bustle outside the doorway as Master Yoda pushed his way into the room. He sighed deeply, shaking his head, and studied them both for a moment.
"Interesting, this development should make things."
"Four, three, two, and lower slowly."

Obi-Wan grimaced as Healer Kai pushed him through the last of his physical therapy for the day. At least today he had worked up a sweat. He was finally accomplishing a little something.

The Mirialan healer looked concerned. "You are doing well, but I sense your pain. This should be challenging, but it should not hurt."

"It's just the headache, Healer Kai. I have no complaints with the leg. Or my side. In fact, I wish we could move more quickly with the rehab."

"And Master Che has discussed with you the need to go according to schedule. There is such a thing as over working it." He warned.

"I know." Obi-wan sighed. "And I understand. It was only a wish."

"I will tell Master Che the headache persists. But for now, would you like to walk back to your room, or would you prefer the hover chair?"

"Need you ask?" Obi-Wan gave him a big smile.

"I suppose not." The Healer smiled. "Go slow and steady. Crutches ready but try not to depend on them. I will put these things away and catch up to you."

He made sure Obi-Wan was standing well on his own once again and began picking up the items used during his rehab session.

Obi-Wan had no idea why he had the constant headache. It was a persistent dull ache that he couldn't shake. And the medicine Master Che had plied him with had not been successful at improving it. It wasn't anything he couldn't handle, but it was annoying. Master Che was of the opinion that it may be some form of psychosomatic illness and the mind healers might help more than she could.

He'd already had several sessions with Master Gant, the mind healer who had helped him years ago. Master Gant had been surprised when Obi-Wan had called for him rather than being sent to him with mandatory orders. Obi-Wan knew he would be required to see him soon enough. But the incident with Anikin in the hospital room had left him terribly shaken. He'd called for Master Gant the very next morning upon waking.

He'd been so cold and so close to-

Hells! It had to have been the darkside! But he was so scared to say it out loud.

It had felt similar, but nowhere near as intense, to what he'd experienced on Tatooine when he'd fought Iessel in the bar. Obi-wan had still been in rough shape when he'd run into him. He had still been recovering from the multiple injuries and tortures inflicted by the Trandoshan. And he had been losing the fight. He-

He shook his head. He didn't want to think of that right now.

Needless to say, after seeing Riv like that in the tank, Obi-Wan had felt the same way. He didn't just want to kill Iessel, he wanted him to suffer. Suffer like Riv had, like the wookies had, like...like he
had. But, those feelings left him fairly quickly this time. They were, however, replaced with a tremendous amount of guilt and despair.

He shuddered briefly and was surprised off-balance when a hand touched his shoulder.

"Easy." Healer Kai had moved in beside him preventing him from falling. "I apologize. I didn't mean to surprise you."

Obi-Wan concentrated on breathing normally. "No need. My thoughts were elsewhere. It was my mistake." He forced a smile, attempting to clear his mind.

"It appears you have visitors."

"Oh?" Obi-Wan looked up and smiled upon seeing Siri Tachi and Anakin. Anakin was sitting awkwardly in a chair in the back of the room. He didn't jump to see Obi-Wan like he normally did. And Siri moved forward blocking him from their view. "Thank you, Healer Kai. I'll be happy to get Obi-Wan settled in from here. We brought his dinner."

Obi-Wan sensed there was something going on, but Healer Kai seemed oblivious, likely because he did not know Siri quite as well.

"Thank you, Padawan Tachi. Obi-Wan will be grateful for the sustenance, I'm sure." He said with sarcasm.

"I've been eating everything you tell me too." Obi-Wan argued defensively.

"Hmmm." The healer did not necessarily agree. He patted Obi-Wan on the shoulder as he left, "Good work today, Padawan. I'll see you in the morning."

"Thank you, Master Kai."

As soon as the man was out of the door Anakin and Siri both relaxed a great deal. "What have you done and how much trouble are you in?"

"Obi-Wan Kenobi," She chided, hands on hips. "How dare you infer that I would-"

Anakin bumped past her and almost knocked Obi-Wan off-balance. "We have a surprise!" He said excitedly, giggling. "Sit down. Quick! It tickles."

"What are you!?” His arms were grabbed cautiously by Siri as she backed him into the comfortable recovery seat.

"Siri! What are you-Ashla!" Obi-Wan exclaimed as the little voorpak jumped from Anakin's shirt onto Obi-Wan's lap. He scurried quickly up Obi-Wan's chest and nuzzled his cheek.

"Hello, dear one." He looked up at Siri and smiled, as his hands supported the pet. "Thank you, Siri. Ash always lifts my spirits."

"It wasn't my idea!" She smiled. "This is all on Anakin."

Obi-Wan smiled and looked to Anakin as the voorpak licked his cheek. "But how did you know?"

"Avenza Vees." Anakin smiled proudly, raising to his tiptoes proudly and then settling back. "I'm so glad you introduced me to him, Obi-Wan. He knows everything about ships! It was the best morning ever!" Anakin jumped and spun in excitement, shocking Obi-Wan. His actions were so far from the way a Youngling or an Initiate would have behaved that it left Obi-Wan in a bit of a shock.
Siri rolled her eyes, but Obi-Wan could tell she was fond of the boy.

"Anyway, " Anakin continued, not noticing their reactions, "He was showing me the ships and asked if I had seen the Deadeye. He thought since it was your ship, I should see it."

Obi-Wan winced a little. Rumors that Anakin would be his padawan were running rampant it seemed. Anakin didn't seem to notice his reaction, but Siri gave him a sympathetic smile. And technically the Deadeye was not his ship! It was the Order's. He'd told Vees to stop saying stuff like that, even if it was sort of halfway true.

"Ashla kinda followed us around real quiet as Mr. Vees showed me the ship. He didn't seem to notice, but I did. I could tell he was curious and he seemed lonely. So I scooped him up and hid him in my robes." Anakin smiled. "It seems they're good for more than just keeping me warm."

Anakin had hated wearing the robes at first because he was unused to them. But he had been cold since he arrived at the Temple. Used to high and dry temperatures on Tatooine, the poor kid was continuously cold. His sinuses were having trouble adjusting to the moisture too. He'd been brought to Master Che a few times already by his caretakers to help relieve the symptoms.

"Vees will worry if he can't find him later." Obi-Wan said as he stroked the curled up ball of fur, now sleeping on his chest. "He takes care of him when I'm unavailable."

"Oh, he knows." Anakin quickly assured Obi-Wan. "He started calling out 'Ash' and making these strange kissing noises. When he couldn't find who he was looking for, it clicked in my head that it was probably this little womprat." Anakin laughed, rubbing Ash's head. "Mister Vees showed me how to care for him and then told me I should sneak him in for a visit. So here we are."

Obi-Wan chuckled. "Mister Vees is a sly old man." Obi-Wan told Anakin.

Anakin spun around, grabbed a fried tuber from Obi-Wan's dinner plate and popped it in his mouth, chewing quickly.

"Anakin!" Siri scolded briefly.

Anakin stuck his tongue out at her and she sighed deeply before looking back into the hall. Apparently she really was nervous about getting caught.

"He said that if you agree, I could come visit Ashla everyday and play with him so he doesn't get so lonely."

"I think that is an excellent idea." Obi-Wan smiled. "Ash must really like you. He doesn't usually go near strangers. Unless it's to threaten them away from me or Master Prae-." A sharp pang of grief hit him, leaving him speechless. He found it difficult to swallow the lump that taken residence in his throat.

Anakin was at his side before he knew it, gently placing a hand on his shoulder.

"It's okay, Obi-Wan." Anakin spoke softly. "I know it's not exactly the same, but...I miss my mom. And, well, you miss your master, so we can be here for each other, right?"

Obi-Wan met Anakin's eyes. They were like floodgates to his soul and Obi-Wan could feel the intense ache Anakin felt in his heart for his mother. He was also afraid. Afraid for his mom and scared of an uncertain future and what it might hold. On the outside he appeared to be an overly exuberant boy discovering a brave new world. But it was clear he needed someone as much as Obi-Wan did. So it may just be that the Force had brought them together for this purpose.
Obi-Wan swallowed down his grief and released it to the Force even as he nodded at Anakin. It did feel as if they were destined to be together somehow. But Obi-Wan was unable to determine just how the whole padawan master relationship would come about when he hadn't even been knighted and when said padawan was already promised to someone else.

"You are a remarkably perceptive boy, Anakin. I'm honored to be your friend. You can always come to me with anything, no matter how big or small. Understand?" He sent waves of reassurance to the young man and got a giant smile in return.

"Ahem." Siri coughed gently from the doorway, distracting them from the important moment. "Someone's coming." She whispered.

"Ash, kichar." Obi-Wan whispered the command to hide. He was surprised when the furball jumped up and crawled quickly into Anakin's tunic rather than his own, causing the boy to laugh out loud as it squirmed its way round his back.

A healer passed by their room and continued down the corridor.

"False alarm." Anakin sighed, just before another giggle escaped him. "How do you get him back out?"

"Ash, chaka."

Anakin laughed again as six legs tickled their way around and out of his shirt. The voorpak came up and out of his collar, stood on his shoulder, licked his cheek and jumped to Obi-Wan again, settling atop his shoulder and resting.

"That is so fun!" Anakin chuckled. And Obi-Wan was surprised to hear Siri laughing as well.

"You want to try, Sir?" Obi-Wan asked. "I can have him hide in your shirt."

Siri raised her hands and backed up. "Nope. Not me. I'm good."

Anakin laughed harder.

Siri smiled fondly in Anakin's direction and then spoke to Obi-Wan. "Bant is going to pick Anakin up in an hour for swimming lessons. And I've got to go help the initiates with saber practice. Are you good? Do you need anything?" She reached out and gave Ash a brief head scratch before resting a hand gently on Obi-Wan's cheek.

"Thank you. No, I'm fine." He smiled, leaning into the touch.

"I'll check back in with you tomorrow." She smiled. "Just comm if you need me. You too, Anakin."

"Thank you, Siri." Obi-Wan was grateful to have such good friends.

"See ya tomorrow, Padawan Siri."

She laughed a little at Anakin, waving goodbye as she stepped out into the corridor.

"She liiiiiiiikes you." Anakin teased in a sing song voice.

Obi-Wan smiled smugly. "Yes. I know."

Anakin's mouth fell open. "You and her-"
"No!" Obi-Wan was quick to dispel that notion. "No." He laughed at the thought. "She's always had a crush on me, but I don't." He stopped momentarily, wondering exactly how much Anakin knew about love and relationships. "I'm not attracted to women. And besides attachments are frowned upon for Jedi."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well," Obi-Wan blushed. "I, that is...are same sex relationships not permitted on Tatooine?" He coughed nervously.

"No, not that. I mean the attachments thing."

"Oh, of course." Obi-Wan felt a huge relief, although his embarrassment was all too evident. He had never been comfortable discussing relationships or sexuality. "Jedi are required to remain unattached to any one individual or group of individuals for a few reasons. The first of all being that we are to remain neutral in all of our assignments and judgments. But the more important reason is that attachments can be used against us and unhealthy attachments can lead to the darkside."

Anakin apparently became chilled at his words. Obi-Wan could sense that he was upsetting the boy for some reason. "So you aren't ever allowed to love anyone?"

"Not quite. We can love, we SHOULD love, but it cannot be a possessive kind of love, nor a love which would put one person or group above all others. I have to admit that I'm not the best person to ask about this. I've always been a bit confused by it all and my own Master thought most of it was nonsense. He taught me that to love and to feel is not wrong, but we must recognize our emotions and not make decisions based on them, but rather on what is best for the majority."

"I'm not sure I understand." Anakin was listening closely though, seeking to work it out in his mind.

"One of the reasons the Jedi may have been hesitant to accept you into our Order was because you are older. You have already formed attachments. For example, if you had to choose between these two hypothetical situations, which would it be? Option one, you stay here in the Temple and are able to save one hundred lives, but your mother, back on Tatooine, would perish. Or option two, you can go back to Tatooine and save your mother, but one hundred lives on Coruscant would be forfeit."

"That a horrible thing to make someone choose." Anakin's sense of outrage spiked in the force.

"Ignore that for now." Obi-Wan instructed. "What would your gut tell you to do?"

"I would...I would want to save my mom." His eyes grew moist and the resentment and outrage grew. "But I...I-"

"Come here." Obi-Wan smiled and Anakin walked quickly over and sat in his lap. "I didn't want to make you upset-

"Too late." Anakin moaned but Obi-Wan could sense a lessening of tension in the boy.

"This is simply a hypothetical question. Yet, you see how difficult it is. When you love someone as much as you love your mom, it makes you think twice and hesitating for something like that in the field could cost us to make huge mistakes."

"Yeah, I guess. Maybe." He was quiet a moment, considering what had been put forth.

"Now let me ask you this. What would an outside observer, one who didn't know you or your mother or any of the hundred people you would save... What would he say you should choose."
"He'd say choose the hundred." Anakin answered with certainty.

"And most importantly, what would your mother tell you to do?"

"That's easy. She would tell me to stay and save the hundred people."

"What would she think if you did not do this and saved her instead?"

"She would still love me," Anakin replied defensively, but then shame filled him, even though this was a hypothetical situation, "But she would be disappointed in me. And I would too. I wouldn't...I don't like talking about this."

Obi-Wan hugged him, "Then let's not. I was just trying to explain the danger of attachments, I didn't mean to make you upset. For that I apologize."

Ash came down off of Obi-Wan's shoulder and curled against Anakin.

Anakin offered up a weak smile after peering at the voorpak. "You don't have to apologize. I'm the one who asked." Anakin stood up and pulled away a bit. Ash climbed to the top of his head making Anakin giggle. Obi-Wan could feel his sense of humor returning for some reason, "Geesh, I see what getting nosy about your romantic life gets me. Lectures!"

Obi-Wan laughed. "I have no romantic life. I am completely and utterly hopeless."

Obi-Wan considered Qui-Gon, who had somehow captivated his thoughts after having known the man for so short a time period. It was sad really. It had to be a reaction to having lost his master and everything he was undergoing. He really needed to get a handle on it.

Anakin reached up and tried to pull Ash out of his hair, "I don't know if I would say hopeless. Does Master Qui-Gon like girls or guys?"

Obi-Wan was startled that Anakin's line of thought followed his own. He checked his shields which were perfectly in place.

Obi-Wan chuckled as Ash jumped from Anakin's head onto the bed where he started sniffing at the dinner tray.

"No silly. That's Obi-Wan's." He grabbed Ash into his arms before he snagged any food. Then looked back to Obi-Wan. "Well, do you even know?"

"I have no idea, but I don't see why that would make a difference."

"Look, I don't know how these things work for the Jedi, but the way he was acting when you were in that tank tells me that he cares a lot about you."

Obi-Wan scoffed. "We've only known each other since Tatooine and I was asleep most of that time. I am sure he simply felt concerned as I was a padawan under his care."

"Yeah," Anakin answered sarcastically. "I can promise you it was more than that." He smiled devilishly, "But ok. It's fine if that's what you want to believe." Anakin snatched another fried tuber, ate half, and handed the other piece to Ash.

Obi-Wan felt butterflies in his stomach and a strange excitement had him flushing, but he became very uncomfortable talking about it.

"How was the rest of your evening last night?" He asked, abruptly changing the topic. "Weren't they
going to give you some tests in order to place you in classes?"

"Uuuuggghhh." Anakin groaned and fell dramatically onto Obi-Wan's bed with a forearm to his head, as if he were fainting. Ash quickly bit his snack and carried it back over to sit in Obi-Wan's lap, clearly not impressed with Anakin's dramatic fall.

"That doesn't sound promising." He observed, as he stroked the little monster's forehead gently between his eyes, just where he liked. Ash set his snack down and began purring.

"I am so good at the math and the navigation and most of the everyday stuff." Anakin answered, sitting up once again. "But I really didn't know how stupid I was when it came to the rest."

"Anakin!" Obi-Wan admonished in a very stern voice. "Do not ever refer to yourself that way again."

Anakin looked up sharply, shocked at Obi-Wan's tone. He'd never reprimanded him like that before. Obi-Wan could tell he'd frightened him for a second.

"Ignorance of a certain topic, does not make one stupid." He explained in a gentler voice. "You must realize that lack of exposure to, or knowledge of a topic does not negate one's intelligence?"

Anakin nodded, more from shock than anything.

"It's doubtful that I could ever build a pod racer as you did. But you would not consider me stupid. Would you?"

"Well...not for not knowing how to build a pod racer at least." He dead panned.

"Ha ha." Obi-Wan grinned.

Anakin giggled as Obi-Wan continued. "These tests and questions do not measure how smart you are, but the areas of knowledge in which you are lacking. It is important for a Jedi to know all sorts of things from cultures and languages to governments and religions. Engineering and biology. All of it will come in handy along the way, believe me. You just haven't had the chance to learn some of them. The only purpose of this test is to determine the classes you will need. Not to judge your intelligence level. I have no doubt that you can learn all of the information required. And having seen your determination, I know you will catch up to the other Initiates even more quickly than the Council thinks you can." He smiled encouragingly.

Obi-Wan seemed to sense a bit of doubt from Anakin when he mentioned the Council. "Anakin, the Council would never have allowed you to stay if they didn't believe you could do this. And for what it is worth, I think they are right."

The boy seemed awfully shy all of the sudden.

"I'm sorry if I startled you earlier. It's just, I didn't like hearing you speak ill of yourself. You are brilliant. And you will be amazing."

"You sound like mom." He smirked.

"Well, then I imagine she must be very wise!" Obi-Wan raised his chin and quirked an eyebrow.

Anakin smiled even bigger, "I'll make both of you proud." He claimed. "I'll be the best!"

Obi-Wan shook his head, "Not THE best. Just be YOUR best." He smiled. "It's not a competition."
Anakin looked at him like he'd grown two heads.

"Yes, well." Obi-wan admitted, "It took me a long time to understand that one too. But it's quite a relief when you realize no one expects perfection. We learn some of the most important lessons from our failures."

"Now you are definitely sounding like my mom. This is weird. Do the Jedi have some sort of ability to channel parents from great distances."

Obi-Wan smiled, and nodded toward the pad. "What types of questions are on there?"

"Well, the most recent ones have been about government and I know some of them because Padme and Queen Amidala gave me lessons on the ship about the Republic and how it works. But some of them ask about certain people and I don't know who they are or where they are from. And this last one has me stumped."

"If you don't know should you just not pass on it."

"But I do know. But I have to pick between two possible right answers."

"What's the question?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Who is the current chancellor and what are his duties? Which should I choose? Will the test count it wrong if it was written before or after Mr. Palpatine took over?"

"Palpatine?" Obi-Wan ran thru his mental checklist. "No. He is the senator from Naboo. But I am fairly certain I shouldn't be giving you the answer."

"Palpatine WAS the senator from Naboo. But he's the NEW chancellor now. He took over for Vallorum a few days ago."

"Wait. What!" Obi-Wan stood up before he knew what he was doing startling Ash into jumping back onto the bed with Anakin. Anakin stood up quickly reacting to Obi-Wan's sudden move. "Vallorum is no longer chancellor?"

Anakin shook his head, "The senators did a vote and said they had no confidence in the Vallorum guy or something." He explained. "So you see my dilemma? I have no clue who I should put."

Obi-Wan could only stare at Anakin, mouth agape. The wheels in his head were spinning. What in the sith hells could have happened to cause that?

"I don't understand it, but I guess since the first guy wouldn't help Naboo, the people got mad or something and."

"Give me your pad." Obi-Wan demanded of Anakin, thrusting his hand out.

Anakin hurried to comply and then took Ash and withdrew to a seat in the corner. Obi-wan plopped back into his chair and started activating the pad's connections to the holonet and disabling many of the restrictions placed upon it. He looked over the recent news and was completely shocked at how much had transpired in the past few days.

"Obi-Wan." The boy felt worried like he did something wrong.

"It's nothing you did, Anakin. I simply need to look something up." He responded while still tapping on the pad.
He sensed Anakin's relief and barely heard the reminder to eat the dinner they'd brought. But this was much more important than eating. Why would no one have said anything! He sat quietly and tapped on the pad and read.

Anakin had given up trying to talk to him. He was using some of the medical supplies as toys to play with Ash. None of the three realized someone had stopped in the doorway.

"Obi-Wan Kenobi!"

Anakin, Ash, and Kenobi jumped at the loud reprimand that had come from the angry looking Mon Calamari.

She strode in and took the pad before Obi-Wan could manage to object. "You were specifically told not to do this!" She accused.

Anakin jumped up and came to his side. "He was helping me with my homework, Padawan Bant. I promise."

Bant turned her glare from Obi-Wan to Anakin. But Obi-Wan interfered before she could blame the kid. "Anakin, I appreciate you trying to protect me, but Jedi do not lie."

Anakin narrowed his eyes, "It wasn't a lie."

Obi-Wan took a moment and considered it. "It was still a misdirection to keep me out of trouble. But there's no need. Bant is my best friend and she is not going to tattle on me."

He looked at Bant's angry glare and reconsidered, "Are you?"

"Tell me one good reason I shouldn't" She asked. "You need to take your recovery seriously, Obi-Wan."

Of all his friends, Bant had been the most upset when he returned.

"I am. I promise you." He said in earnest. "But Anakin just happened to inform me that there is a new Chancellor and that Vallorum was removed from office. What the kr-" He stopped himself just in time from cursing in front of Anakin. "Did no one think that might be something I should know?"

"Know, you would have." Yoda's voice came from behind Bant, who stepped aside in surprise to let the small master into the room.

"Coming to brief you I was." Yoda explained.

"Master Yoda!" Anakin raced around the bed to stand in front of the old Jedi Master and delivered a perfect bow.

Yoda studied him carefully, waiting quietly for a moment. Obi-Wan realized that Anakin was putting up shields around his mind. His feelings and thoughts becoming slightly more difficult to read.

"Excellent, little one. Clear it is, practicing you are."

"Thank you, Master. It's still hard to do it all of the time."

"Second nature, soon it will be." Yoda replied. "Swimming lessons you are to now receive, eh?"

Anakin paled slightly and Bant walked over and laid a hand on his shoulder, "Not quite, Master
Yoda. We'll take it slow. Today we'll just be getting wet in shallow water. We may even go under the water a few times. Swimming will come soon enough.

Anakin shot Obi-Wan a "rescue me" look and paled a little. Obi-Wan smiled reassuringly, "Your in good hands, Anakin. Trust, Bant. She won't let anything bad happen!"

Bant handed Anakin his pad. "Get your robes, Anakin, and say goodbye to Obi. Master Yoda wants to talk to him."

"Hide the Voorpak you should before leaving. In the next room, Master Che is." Yoda chuckled. "Not you would I wish to be, if catch you she does."

"Ash," Anakin looked at the little creature who was now watching him intently as he chewed on some medical gauze. "Kichar." The creature dropped the gauze and ran to him. He climbed up Anakin and into his shirt with a five foot string of medical gauze trailing behind him. Anakin gave another chuckle, yanking it free and walking toward Obi-Wan. He gave him a small hug. "I'll miss you until tomorrow."

"Be brave. And have fun." He smiled.

"I'll try." Anakin said and started toward Bant.

"Do or do not. There is no try." Yoda informed him as he passed.

Obi-Wan couldn't help but laugh as Anakin shot a confused look at Yoda as he passed.

"Behave, Obi-Wan!" Bant warned. "Good evening, Master Yoda."

"And to you, Padawan."

Yoda limped over to Obi-Wan's bed and jumped up to sit comfortably on the edge. He used the force to pull Obi-Wan's tray table toward him and shamelessly started eating the dessert.

How was he expected to eat anything when everyone else was stealing his food?!

"So will you finally tell me why the others went to Naboo now?"

"Know you why, I expect." He gave Obi-Wan a reprimanding glance. "But tell you everything I will."

Yoda jumped right into the description of Qui-Gon's mission. He told of the Trade Federation's blockade which had disguised an invasion force. He told him about the actions the Senate had taken, or failed to take, to protect the planet and the reasons behind the vote of no confidence and removal of Vallorum.

"So all the Jedi accompanying the queen and her retinue are going for the sole purpose of determining whether the Sith are involved. They are not aiding the queen in freeing her world."

Yoda sighed. "Not yet awake is the Sith, but proof of Sith involvement already we have. Attempted to capture or kill the queen he did. So help free her world we will."

"But the Senate-"

"A Jedi matter this is." Yoda stated. "No say they have in it."

"Are they aware we are aiding her?"
"Aware the new chancellor is. Mixed his feelings are. Glad saving his world we are, upset because unrest this will cause."

"I imagine so." Obi-Wan agreed. "How could we have not seen this coming? I feel completely blindsided."

"Draws a curtain over our eyes, the darkside does. Hard to see the future is. Hard to see for some time now." Yoda explains.

"Did you expect their return?" He asked. "When we discussed my visions of the Zabrak, you never said anything about the Zabrak being a Sith."

"Suspected I did."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Asked me not to, Praethorn did."

"Why?"

"Too much trouble dealing with the visions already, you had. Add to your fears, he would not."

Obi-Wan waited out the silence trying to put his thoughts in some semblance of order. There was a lot to take in with all this new information. The last thing he needed to do was become accusatory toward Master Yoda. He would get no more answers if that happened. And he refused to react in such an immature way. He would meditate on their secrecy and if still bothered him, he would discuss it with Master Yoda later.

"Another vision, Qui-Gon told me you had." Yoda said ending the silence, "His to tell, he said it was not. Ask you about it I should, he said."

The dread that accompanied the vision filled Obi-Wan once again. Even thinking about it, made him uneasy.

"When ready you are, share you may. Not necessary now."

"No." Obi-Wan explained, "I can tell you. Especially if Qui-Gon- I mean Master Jinn. Especially if he feels it is important." Obi-wan grimaced at the mistake. "It's just...difficult."

"Visions of your master, difficult they were at first. Help, sharing will."

"Perhaps." He agreed doubtfully. The vision of the Zabrak had involved only one death. The death of a man who meant the world to him, but still, one death. It was a walk in the park compared to the most recent one.

He told Yoda of the vision. But it was no where near as detailed as the "sharing" he had experienced with Qui-Gon. Master Yoda did not interrupt him. Obi-Wan relayed what he could, but skipped over much detail when he came to the end. He knew Master Yoda would be able to tell how horrified and soul shattering the experience had been. But in his description he did his best to remain emotionally distant, not quite ready to go there again.

Once he concluded, he looked up to meet the concerned eyes of the wise master.

"Speak of this to Master Gant you have?" Yoda asked.

Obi-Wan shook his head. "We have more than enough to cover without adding my visions to the
Yoda nodded. "Mmmm. Keep this amongst ourselves we should for now. Tell no one else, you will."

Obi-Wan nodded, surprised that Yoda would be so secretive, but no further explanation was forthcoming.

"Much you have been through, young one. But survive, you have. Recover, you will. Proven yourself worthy. Knighted you will be in three days."

"Knighted? But I have not yet undergone the trials." Obi-Wan had expected to be knighted, but not this soon. He wasn't ready. He wasn't worthy. They were wrong.

"Trial enough the past few weeks have been. Decided the Council has."

Obi-Wan swallowed against the doubt that threatened to consume him. "I see." If they knew everything that happened they might not have been so quick to judge.

"Agree with us, you do not." Yoda stated, sighing and shaking his head.

Obi-Wan said nothing, sensing the Master's disappointment and finding himself unable to meet his eyes.

"Struggled with this in the past, you have." He lectured. "Believe in yourself you must. Why undeserving do you see yourself?"

He had made progress with Master Gant in their conversations, but they hadn't really touched on the issue that scared him the most. He had used the darkside. And he didn't really know what to expect after he confessed. He was terrified to admit the truth but knew he must. Now was the moment.

Small green hands took his own and he was surprised to see Master Yoda in front of him.

"More to your doubt there is, mmmm?" He touched Obi-Wan's cheek gently. "A brush with the darkside you had, yes?"

"Did Master Praethorn tell you that?" Obi-Wan's voice broke.

"Read between the lines, I can." Yoda explained. "Tell me he did not. Tell me you will."

Obi-Wan shook his head and was surprised as tears shook free from his eyes. "I am not worthy of Knighthood, Master Yoda."

"On Tatooine, this happened. When fought Iessel you did."

Obi-Wan nodded, trying to find the courage to confess. "I had recovered on the way to Tatooine, but I wasn't close to mission ready. My Master had me go check with a few of our contacts while he checked out the more likely leads."

"He gave me busy work." Obi-Wan sighed. He had been disgusted with his Master at the time for keeping him from doing anything useful. It had been the right call to make, but Obi-Wan didn't have to be happy about it. "The chance of learning anything was low, but I went because he told me to."

"Neither of us expected Iessel would be at that bar. And I was in no shape, mentally or physically to take him on."
"Agreed on that we are." Yoda nodded. "For your Master to follow him, a mistake it was. Returned home with you he should have."

"The lead would have gone cold. And we both knew it was important to follow. I begged him to follow Iessel to Tatooine." Obi-Wan defended his Master's choice.

"Done it is. No going back. Continue, you will. At the bar, encountered Iessel you did."

Obi-Wan did not like hearing his master second guessed. But he set those feelings aside and went on.

"He saw me first. I barely sensed a warning in the Force and dodged to the side as three tranquilizer darts hit the wall next to me. They were the same type he...he hit me with before."

Obi-Wan remembered the paralyzing fear at seeing the darts. "I froze." He admitted. "I could see him loading more of the suppressors and still, I couldn't move."

He closed his eyes and hung his head. "I barely got my lightsaber activated to strike down the next round of darts. Then he slammed into me not a second later, knocking my lightsaber away and taking me to the ground."

Obi-Wan was filled with shame. All the fighting skills they had taught him, and he'd failed so horribly.

"It was like I was paralyzed. I know he hit me several times. I just couldn't-" He shook his head again. "It's...I'm not clear on all of that. But I know the bartender shot at us with a blaster, which caused Iessel to climb off me. He pulled his own blaster and shot toward the bar. I kicked out then, started to come back to myself. I gave as good as I got for a while. The bartender was still firing at the both of us, but the force was with me finally and I was able to dodge the shots whereas Iessel began to flounder. I had him backed into a corner. But...he...he grabbed a child, held him in front of him at blasterpoint. The bartender kept firing at me and I ripped the blaster from his hands and pointed it at Iessel.

"He was saying something, but I had become so angry I couldn't hear him. I was NOT going to let him harm another child." Obi-Wan realized his hands had formed into fists in his lap and he consciously made an effort to relax as he relayed the events of that night.

"Iessel's blaster was in my hand before I knew it and the boy ran free. I had Iessel pinned to the wall with the force. And I was...I was using the force to cut off his airway." Obi-wan shivered recalling the amount of power he wielded at that moment.

"He was nothing to me, Master Yoda. He was like a bug, and all I had to do was step on him to end his existence. The power I wielded was so...immense."

"Understand I do, how tempting the dark can be. How powerful! Yes?"

Obi-Wan nodded.

"Continue." Yoda encouraged.

Obi-Wan took a moment to gather his courage again. He centered himself with the force.

"I had him pinned to the wall near the ceiling. But his arms and legs...they were thashing about. He was panicking at the loss of air. And I was enjoying every second of it, but I eased up and let him breathe. In my thoughts, he did not deserve such an easy death. I wanted him to suffer." Obi-Wan sobbed. "I don't know how I did what I did next. But nothing was impossible with that amount of
power. I called every knife in that bar into my control and they hovered at all of his crucial organs. But I...only one knife moved toward him...I was going to...it was my intention to...to skin him alive."

Obi-wan felt sick, admitting it. He swallowed back bile and felt Master Yoda rubbing his back in soothing circles.

"It wasn't me. I don't think like that. I am not like that, yet there I was. Planning where to start."

"There now, you are not. Over it is. Do it, you did not."

Obi-Wan nodded. "I wanted him to suffer, Master Yoda. I wanted him to feel what those children felt, what...what I had felt." He near shouted, the last, but it ended up more like a sob. "I...told him too. I told him that was my intention. I repeated the words he used when he explained to those young Wookies. He told them how to skin a beast. I let the knife drag across his neck, just deep enough to draw a bit of blood."

Obi-Wan was lost in the horror of the memory for a few seconds.

"And then?" Yoda asked with great patience.

"He pissed himself," Obi-Wan choked on a laugh. But it wasn't a real laugh. "Oh, kriff. He was terrified. So scared he couldn't even scream." Obi-Wan lamented.

Obi-wan shook his head, drawing in a deep breath. "But his fear...it was like a bucket of cold water. It hit me out of nowhere. I realized that what I was doing... I had stooped to his level. I had become the monster-" He sobbed and Yoda pulled his head against his chest and let Obi-Wan cry for a few moments.

When he had managed to control his breathing and regained some emotional control, Master Yoda spoke, "What then?"

"I let it go," Obi-wan admitted. "It was so hard. And it hit me like a punch to the gut, releasing all of that power. Releasing all of my anger and hatred. I found I couldn't move, could barely think."

Taking a napkin offered by Master Yoda, he wiped his face and nose. "As soon as Lessel fell from the wall, he ran. I knew I should go after him, but I was scared of what I might do. Scared of what I had become. And honestly, it was hard to even get my legs under me."

He breathed deeply. "But I did. I ran in the direction he had gone. Managed to keep him in sight for a bit, but then visibility became severely limited by a sand storm. I tracked him as far as I could, but the sand was becoming painful and I felt so cold and weak. I sheltered in my robes behind an outcropping of rock. I think I may have gone into shock or something. I never felt my master coming until he picked me up and placed me in a speeder. And I'm not sure exactly what happened after that, but when I woke, my Master and I were in a hotel across from the place where Lessel had been staying, apparently watching for his return. Not a day later, we encountered the Zabrak."

Obi-wan shuddered, remembering how cold he had been after the incident. He had never felt so hollow and lifeless before. His master had tried to get him to speak about what happened, but he couldn't.

It felt good having finally confessed everything. He could face whatever might come now. But he never wanted to feel that way again. He would not succumb to that pull again.

After he settled more, Yoda finally spoke, "Experienced what you did, many Jedi have, most to a much lesser degree. Make you unworthy it does not. Turned away you did, when the darkside
called. Serious this is, very serious. Counseled you will be. See you through it, Master Gant will. Come to Mace and I, as well, you can. Know this you do."

The relief Obi-Wan felt was so great. But the emotional rollercoaster had taken it's toll. And a cold similar to the one from that night echoed in his bones.

"Into bed with you." Yoda said, guiding him from the recovery chair to the bed. "Stay with you this night, I will."

Obi-Wan settled onto his side. Yoda always seemed to know what he needed. The small master leapt up beside him with surprising agility. He began to brush his clawed fingers through Obi-wan's short hair while sending comfort and warmth along the light bond they shared.

"I don't think I can sleep right now." He admitted. He was tired, but his thoughts were chaotic.

"Help you, I will. Better you will feel tomorrow." Yoda reassured. "Ready now."

He sniffed and tucked the pillow under his head. "Yes, Master."

He closed his eyes and prepared for the sleep suggestion. "And thank you. For everything."

"Rest now, my child. Have you, I do."

With Master Yoda's help, it took but seconds for Obi-Wan to surrender to the comfort of a deep, dreamless sleep.

******

Master Che entered the room quietly, coming to stand behind Yoda who was seated on the bed beside Obi-wan. "Will he be alright?" She whispered.

Yoda nodded, "Right Ileus was. A great Jedi Knight he will be. Overcome this, he will."

Master Che reached out and gave Master Yoda's tiny arms a squeeze and rested her chin on his shoulder. He reached up and patted her cheek as they both looked down at Obi-Wan.

"Would you like for me to bring in a cot." She asked.

Yoda shook his head, "Much meditating, ahead of me I have this night. Overheard all of it, did you?"

"You know I did." Che responded, standing upright again.

"Speak of it, you will not." Yoda ordered firmly.

"You know I would not." She chided, not liking the inference that she would gossip.

"Clear, I wanted to be." Yoda said. "Very disturbing was his vision. Much danger to come there is. Clouded much, the Darkside has of late."

"Will we be alright?" Che asked.

"Prepared our Order must be, if we are to survive." Yoda turned and met her eyes with a promise. "Prepared we will be."
Chapter 14

Darth Sidious sat in his secret chambers watching the holo recording from the Mos Espa bar.

"Obi-Wan Kenobi." He whispered to himself with a leering smile.

There was no doubt in his mind that this young man had reached a breaking point during the fight with the bounty hunter. He never should have attempted to take on Iessel alone, especially in the condition he was in. The very fact that he had followed Iessel to Tatooine and sought him out led Sidious to believe the padawan was seeking revenge for what had been done to him and the young Wookies.

And revenge was not the Jedi way. So he was already headed down the path of hatred. Even before the fight.

But it would seem the confrontation had finally tipped the scales.

He could pinpoint the moment Kenobi lost his precious Jedi control. Iessel had pulled a child in front of him to use as a hostage. Kenobi's expression and bearing suddenly changed completely. He stood straighter and with a certainty he had not shown before. His countenance was now menacing and his expression went from one of fear to that of rage in less than a second.

The Sith lord took special note of that. The harming of innocent children would be a trigger for his anger.

Kenobi threw the Trandoshan against the wall and began to choke him using the force. His free hand was outstretched, his fist clenched tightly. But it was the words Kenobi had spoken that convinced him that young man was ripe for the picking.

As he allowed Iessel to breathe again, the padawan levitated over a dozen knives and had them hover just inches from various parts of the Trandoshan's body. He then repeated the very words Iessel himself had used when he was torturing the Wookies.

"To skin a beast, you split the hide from tail to throat." The voice on the holo had been hard to hear in its original form, but after cleaning up the audio, he had been able to catch all of the exchange.

Obi-Wan spoke calmly and coldly, leaving chills of anticipation on Sidious' arms. One of the knives traced a pattern lightly from groin to neck. There was not enough pressure for the knife to draw blood at that point.

"Next you insert the knife under the skin. But take great care not to cut into the body cavity. You should peel the hide back quite a few inches on both sides to keep the hair out of the meat."

It appeared as if Kenobi had been staring blankly at the knife while reciting, but now, his head tilted sideways in thought and his eyes sought Iessel's. "But it is different with reptiles. Did you know?"

He took a step closer then, barring his teeth in what was clearly an aggressive display. The knife hovered at the side of Iessel's neck and Kenobi glared harshly, his breathing increased roughly and his body was practically vibrating with rage. "I learned in survival training, that the first step in skinning a reptile is to remove the head." The knife slowly drew blood as it began to pull ever so lightly across Iessel's neck.

Kenobi abruptly laughed and cried as the Trandoshan lost control of his bodily functions. Sidious
could practically taste the fear coming off of Iessel even though the holos did not transmit smells.

It was here, however, that Sidious became disappointed. For some reason, Kenobi just stopped.

Iessel was released and all of the knives clattered to the floor. Iessel fled the moment his feet touched the ground and never looked back. Kenobi fell to his knees, his body wracked with shudders and Sidious watched as he coughed through some heaving.

His rather abrupt cessation in using the Darkside, although disappointing, could still be admired. It demonstrated a level of control that most beings would never establish without training. Knowing when to ride the wave of the dark and when to pull back was a very hard concept for most early users.

Sidious shivered again in anticipation.

Yes. This was a Jedi worth turning.

And as wonderful as the padawan had been in his anger, he was just as beautiful in his suffering. After seeing the initial holos of the torture sessions from Iessel, he had been intrigued. He had ordered Tyranus to instruct the bounty hunter to continue to record the sessions.

Luckily, the surveillance on Senator Yarua's people had revealed the senator's secret request to the Jedi for assistance. And they had time to warn Iessel that the Jedi might be attempting to locate him. Iessel had been prepared and managed to catch the padawan, but the master had eluded him.

The Trandoshan had been an excellent hire, but Sidious should never have used him for as many jobs as he had. The bounty hunter had not seemed smart enough to put together anything from the jobs they had assigned him, but others might. And that had to be avoided at all cost.

Tyranus had been very clear that Iessel was not to endanger the life of the Jedi nor disfigure him permanently. Those were things Sidious would look forward to himself.

Oh, but the sessions had been entertaining. Iessel had caused Kenobi tremendous pain and the drug he had been given had prevented Kenobi from being able to mitigate it. He had been forced to experience his own pain, as well as the Wookies, in full.

It was something to behold. He found himself becoming aroused at just the memory.

To discover the prospect of his turning might come easier than initially thought thrilled the Sith Lord. He had no doubt the young man would fight him for a bit. His pride would allow nothing less. But he would see reason eventually. He would Fall, and in that moment, he would belong to Sidious.

He had only turned one other Jedi.

Lord Tyranus, his former apprentice.

Tyranus had been the wisest and most logical choice. He had taken his time in grooming the man. The utmost caution had been necessary. Years of friendship and patience were required before he felt confident enough that Jedi Master Dooku would switch sides. Tyranus was cold and calculating, a brilliant tactician. But he lacked the passion he could see in Kenobi.

Ah, Kenobi.

This was too good of an opportunity to pass up. Sidious felt excitement flare within his chest. He desired to turn Kenobi not just as a means to an end, but for pleasure. No grooming this one. He
would break the young man and mold him into whatever he wished.

In the moment where Kenobi had released the Darkside, he could see the fear and horror on the young man's face. Doubtless he was overwhelmed by the sheer amount of power he had held. It took him several seconds to gather his wits and go after Iessel.

But he did.

Despite his injuries and the clear exhaustion from which he was suffering, he stumbled out after the killer, unwilling to let him slip through his fingers.

Such persistence!

He switched the feed back to the shorter holo recordings. One of his disciples, Asajj Ventress, had obtained them from local businesses. The first was only seven seconds long and much of it was blurred because of the speed at which they were moving, but it was clear that Kenobi had flipped from his speeder and dealt an unexpected blow to Maul. The other few videos were of his initial encounters with Maul, where Kenobi had a determined look on his face, but chose to retreat rather than fight. A tactically sound option, though not very exciting. Ventress had conducted several interviews that allowed for an account of the fight to be patched together. But he was not able to watch the majority of it.

Once they left the city, he had to rely on what the Jedi Order shared with him. They had not given him much to go by. But they did explain that Masters Qui-Gon Jinn and Illius Praethorn, along with Padawan Kenobi encountered and fought a Sith. The Order had footage of the duel which would eventually be shared with him privately.

Sidious had no doubt that Kenobi was skilled with his lightsaber and had held his own against Maul. But somehow, with the aid of Jinn, he had managed to cut him in half! If he could do that without aid from the Darkside, then with it, he would indeed make a worthy apprentice.

His com beeped and a blue holo of Ventress appeared. She bowed her head before reporting. "I have Iessel. Many Jedi arrived for him, but I was able to ensure his escape without being detected. He is in my custody now." She moved aside so that Sidious could see the Trandoshan behind the force field. He was wearing binders, lying unconscious on his side.

"Excellent. Deliver him to me immediately." He ordered. "I may have found one last use for our friend."

"Yes, my lord." Ventress bowed her head once more. "Our departure has been delayed due to the increased search efforts. I fear he drew more attention to himself than we had hoped. It has made it more difficult to leave the planet. We are scheduled to depart in thirty minutes. I will forward our flight plan and arrival time."

"You have done well, my disciple." He clicked off the feed.

Ventress had originally been scheduled to meet with Barrick Iessel in order to deliver payment for his services with the Wookies and to collect the Jedi prisoner. However, everything had happened on Tatooine a day ahead of the scheduled meet time and she only arrived in the recent aftermath. She had done well tracking down evidence of what had occurred. He would find a way to reward her efforts, perhaps by allowing his former apprentice to become her official master.

But Maul.

The situation with Maul vexed him.
His most recent apprentice had been caught and was now a liability. He didn't know if a rescue would even be possible yet. But if not a rescue, he would have to be terminated.

"Such a waste." He growled to himself.

Of course, Sidious' position as Supreme Chancellor of the Republic was the only reason that he knew his apprentice had been injured and was currently in a coma. The Jedi had filled in those blanks quite easily, even if the accounts of those events were being delayed.

The Jedi healers were skilled and he could not count on Maul remaining in a coma for long. Darth Tyranus was not available to handle the situation. He was tasked with more important matters for the moment. Had Tyranus been on Coruscant, a rescue might have been possible, but as it stood, Maul would likely have to be terminated before the Jedi could make him talk. Sidious could barely detect Maul's force presence meaning he was being kept on suppressants despite the coma. He could not afford to wait much longer.

He slammed a fist onto the armrest of his chair, startling the gagged and naked male Twi'lek chained to the foot of his throne. His frustration with the Jedi Order's inadvertent interference with his plans grew by the hour.

Yet, despite that frustration, he had no real concern the job would be done. He had recently coerced two of the unsuspecting Jedi to do his bidding anytime he needed. It had not been an easy process, but he had managed it and was quite confident that they would get the job done undetected. Sidious' powers and control were growing stronger everyday and that excited him.

He would check with his two spies and see if the possibility of rescue was plausible. What he truly loved about the situation was even if caught, the poor Jedi would be unaware of their actions. And if confronted...well, the problem would fix itself.

Yes, it was definitely time to utilize his newest resources. Best to do it before Maul became a liability.

Having reached a decision, he drew in a deep breath and turned to examine the Twi'lek at his feet. He could use a bit of a distraction to release his tension and restore his patience.

He took a moment to relish the fear coming from the captive Twi'lek. He was a prime specimen. Muscular and well fit. The fiery look in the young man's eyes was a good front, a courageous expression if he'd ever seen one. But Sidious could sense the fear underneath it. This one's spirit would break just as quickly as the rest of his victims. Sidious stood, reaching down to remove the gag.

"Come." He said, gathering the chains and pulling him forward despite the slave's attempts to dig in his heels and remain. Sidious allowed the struggle for a moment, slightly amused. But he tired of it quickly and used the force to crush the young man's ankles. A painful scream filled the air and Sidious' ears drank in the sweet music.

He knelt beside the Twi'lek and used the force to yank his head back so he could see the slave's expression. He reached forward with a hand, smiling as the man tried to flinch away and failed. He caressed the man's lekku gently, causing the young man to moan in fear.

The terror was finally peeking through the cracks. "$mmm...I do enjoy your screams, slave." He dropped the chains and force pulled the Twi'lek by his broken feet to hang upside down before him. When the screams stopped, he rotated the slave in slow circles, feeling his groin, his chest, and his
firm behind.

"Oh, yes. You will do nicely."

Before handling Maul's failure, he would definitely have some fun with this one.

All his other plans continued to fall into place just as he wanted. And when he was finished here, he would attempt his first real deception from within the Temple walls.

The giddiness he felt burst forth as a giggle as he entered his personal chambers with his entertainment for the evening.
Chapter 15

Master Nu had told him in no uncertain terms that running the sketch of a person through facial recognition programs was not authorized because one had a vision.

"I am sorry, Knight Kenobi, but I cannot authorize your request." She explained kindly, "However, if you obtain permission from a Council member or have a mission reference number to authorize the search I will be more than happy to enter the three sketches."

Obi-Wan nodded his head kindly, despite his frustration, "I understand. Thank you, Master Nu."

Yoda had not mentioned the vision since the night he had confessed to using the Darkside. Actually, Yoda had been quite busy with reports from Naboo and the uproar in the Senate. The political changeover was causing headaches everywhere and the lack of action against the Trade Federation had a lot of worlds concerned should the same type of thing happen to their planets. Thankfully, no flags had been raised as to the Jedi involvement. But inquiries were imminent and Obi-Wan had not wanted to distract the Council from preparing their response.

Obi-Wan did not envy Master Yoda's position. But he was glad the Jedi Council had decided to do something that stood in opposition to the Republic's decision. His Master had often warned Mace and Yoda in private that the Jedi were becoming too obedient, too subservient to the Republic. Of course, he never spoke against them publicly or called them out in the Council Chambers, but individually, he would let them know when he thought they had made unwise decisions or were doing things ass backwards.

Despite all of his duties, Yoda still found time to teach a few classes and he had called on Obi-Wan at least once a day, which Obi-Wan appreciated, even if their conversations had been short. But since Bant and Siri had left on missions, he was feeling a bit lonely. Garen and Reeft weren't expected back anytime soon, either and he found most of his support system was wanting.

Had it not been for Anakin keeping him busy, he may have already lost his mind. There was only so much meditating and physical therapy he could do.

So now, he stood under a shaded archway in the courtyard, watching from a distance as a group of about fifteen younglings lifted small balloons into the air. Yoda was encouraging the younglings to lift the balloons higher, then lower, and have it circle their heads above them. There was a nervous feeling amongst the younglings, but Obi-Wan couldn't understand why.

Obi-Wan's eyes were immediately drawn to Anakin. He was very obviously the oldest in the group of children. This type of lesson was normally taught to four and five years old, but Anakin didn't seem bothered by it. In fact, it appeared he was having the time of his life. Excitement was flooding the small training bond that had developed between them and Obi-Wan couldn't help but smile at the scene.

Obi-Wan was far enough away that he could not hear what was being said, but he sensed a spark of mischief from the boy. He said something to Master Yoda and Master Yoda was suddenly lifting several balloons from the nearby bucket and moving them in a beautiful pattern into the sky above his head as he spoke. The nervous energy of the children climbed a little higher.

Anakin laughed out loud and shouted, "He's gonna hit us with them. Don't drop your balloons." He eyes jumped in nervous anticipation between Yoda and the Younglings. "We should strike first." He declared loudly. "Aim your balloons at Master Yoda!"
He directed his balloon to fly toward the Jedi master and it was followed by over a dozen others. Anakin's balloon struck first, hitting Master Yoda square in the chest. Obi-Wan was surprised when it burst open splashing water on the small Master. It was followed by at least five others that found their target and a few that only got close.

Obi-Wan understood the children's nervousness at that point. They had not wanted the balloons to burst open above them. But he was most surprised that Master Yoda had allowed himself to be drenched! There was no doubt, he could have avoided the small missiles.

What Master Yoda did next was quite humorous and very intentional. All the balloons that had been circling his head, he allowed to fall on top of him as well, as if in reaction to the children's attack.

All of the children burst out laughing at once, some had fallen to the ground and were rolling with glee. Happiness was flooding the bond now and Obi-Wan couldn't help but smile at the scene, especially when Anakin caught sight of him and gave a little wave.

Master Yoda was laughing too, but then he got their attention and said something else. Likely a lecture on maintaining one's attention amidst distractions. He dismissed the class and the children bowed respectfully, Anakin a little slower in remembering. But as the Younglings started to relax and turn to leave, Yoda began counting down loudly. The kids started running and screaming in every direction as more water balloons began rising from the bucket.

The screams took him by surprise. He knew it was just a game, but it caused him to freeze and he felt his breathing quicken. He closed his eyes to concentrate and calm himself.

"It's just water balloons." He whispered. He turned away pressing his back up against the great column and focused on calming his heart rate and breathing evenly, even as he heard the children laughing again as splashes of water signaled successful strikes.

Anakin was in front of Obi-Wan before he knew it. Rubber from a busted water balloon rested in his newly cut hair, but there was a frown on his face.

"You okay, Obi-Wan." He asked. He had obviously sensed Obi-Wan's distress through their small training bond.

"I am." He answered. "Just..." Just the screams, he was going to say. "I was just recalling an unpleasant memory. Nothing to worry about." He corrected himself, giving Anakin the best smile he could force, "That was a highly amusing class."

"It was amazing." Anakin began to speak of how he had never managed to levitate stuff on purpose before, but he had managed to call things to him a couple times when he had been desperate to reach something. He was still going on about how awesome the class was when Master Yoda finally made his way over to them.

"Enjoyed today's class, he did." Yoda told Obi-Wan.

"That much is obvious, Master Yoda." He smiled at Anakin who was just finding the balloon remnants in his hair and running his hand quickly across the top causing small droplets of water to splash every which way.

"Run along you must." Yoda attempted to poke Anakin with his gimper stick, but Anakin jumped back before it could make contact, "In class you must be, and change robes quickly, you must."

"Yes, Master Yoda." Anakin bowed respectfully. "See you for dinner, Obi-Wan."
Obi-Wan nodded and Anakin turned and sprinted away.

"He looked to be doing well with the lesson." Obi-Wan commented.

"Multiple objects he could have handled, but stay with the class today, he did. Overstep the assignment and show off, he did not." Yoda nodded, "But a rebellion, he led! Strike first an initiate has not, in all my years of teaching." He laughed.

"Well, he is a bit older and very likely anticipated what you had planned from the beginning."

"Agree with you, I do." Yoda sighed.

"I see he has learned to avoid your stick rather quickly." Obi-Wan smiled.

Yoda thwacked Obi-Wan's healthy shin and he yelped, bending forward to grasp the injury.

"Anticipated his anticipation, I should have. Still learning, I am. Ha." Yoda shook his head sideways attempting to get water out of his ear. "Learn still, should you also."

"Yes, Master." Obi-Wan grimaced. while still feel feeling a bit lighter inside.

"Sought me out for a reason you did." Yoda inquired.

"Yes, Master."

"Walk with me. Tea we will have in my quarters."

"That sounds...nice." Obi-Wan agreed, internally wincing. Yoda made horrible tasting cookies that he had plied on Obi-Wan since his youth. And his choices of tea left much to be desired.

They walked in comfortable silence for a while. "Recovered you are from your brief scare in the courtyard?"

Obi-Wan looked down, ashamed, but nodded.

"No shame there is in recognizing the signs after one's trauma. Part of healing it is."

"Yes, Master." He replied respectfully, but still not feeling reassured "But it had to do more with the vision."

"Ah." Yoda understood. "The Younglings, of which you did not wish to speak."

Obi-Wan swallowed back a sick feeling just thinking of it. "I've been considering the vision a lot. It's part of why I wished to speak to you."

Yoda nodded. "Talk about this when alone we are."

"Yes, Master." Obi-Wan wasn't sure why Yoda was being so secretive. He had asked Obi-Wan if he could share the vision with other members of the Council and Obi-Wan had, of course, agreed. But Master Yoda did not want others to know. Perhaps he did not want others to fear what he had seen.

They reached Yoda's quarters moments later and Obi-Wan went to the cabinet to reach for the kettle. But Yoda tisked and made him sit at the table. "A knight you are now. No longer a padawan. Serve you I will now as my guest."

"Oh! Thank you, Master Yoda." He sat down on his usual stool, surprised by the gesture. "Though it
is not necessary. I always enjoyed our time here and I do not mind serving you."

After putting the water on to boil, Yoda went to his room and changed his robe before coming back to join Obi-Wan. He set a fresh plate of pastries out, not the horrible little cookies Obi-Wan was used to.

"What's this?" He asked, once again shocked at the change in routine.

"Mess with padawans, I do." He chuckled. "A test, you see. Tells much about a person, it can."

"Oh?" Obi-Wan chastised himself internally for not having stood up for himself. For not having told the truth to Yoda about the foul tasting cookies sooner. "And what does it say about me that I ate those horrible treats for years and never said a word?"

Yoda studied him quietly. "The only one to have done so, you are." He smiled. "Speaks ill of you it does not. Shows great courtesy and respect for me it does. Humbled I was each time you continued to eat them. Knew how proud I would be to tell you such, once knighted you were."

Obi-Wan looked down at the pastry and smiled a little, embarrassed by the praise. "Thank you, Master Yoda."

"No thanks." He shook his head, "Honor me, you have all these years."

Obi-Wan had a thought. "Has Anakin had a chance to try them yet?"

"To the waste basket, made it barely, he did. Spit it all out. Ha! Commented how repulsive the cookies were, he did!" Yoda laughed and began to pour the water into the cups.

"Yes." Obi-Wan said, unable to keep from laughing. "That sounds about like Anakin."

Yoda handed him the cup so that the tea could begin to steep. "Tell me now, why here, you are."

He pulled out the pad he had stashed in his robes. "These three sketches are of the soldier in my vision. I had hoped to run them in the facial recognition program, but Master Nu insisted I get permission from a Council Member first."

Yoda studied him carefully, "Permission, I give. But secret this information must remain."

Obi-Wan nodded, but had to ask, "And why are we being so secretive, Master?" He forwarded the pictures to Master Nu with a short message, making sure to copy Master Yoda on the communication so she knew he had his approval.

Yoda sighed. He went to retrieve the water for their tea. He considered his response carefully, while pouring the water into both cups.

"Master Sifo-Diyas. Know him you do?"

"Yes, of course. He was on the council for years before he stepped down."

"Stepped down, he did not. Removed he was."

"What? Why?"

"A vision Sifo-Diyas had." For the next several minutes Obi-Wan listened intently as Yoda told him that Sifo-Diyas had also experienced a vision wherein the Jedi Order and even the Republic itself would fall. He claimed that unless an Army of the Republic were created both would be brought to
ruin.

"Obsessed with the vision he became. To the point that mattered, nothing else did." Sifo-Diyas had apparently even gone to a multitude of senators with his suggestions and sought funding for the project, even though forbidden to do so by the Council.

"Removed from his seat, he was in hopes that stopped, his foolishness would be. Watched him carefully we did. Seem to work, this step down did. Appeared to have left it alone, he had."

"Appeared?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Mmmm." Yoda hummed. "Assigned him some missions, we did. Handled them well, but suspected more he was up to, I did."

"What did he do?"

"Do? I know not." Yoda shook his head, looking down at his hands on the tea cup. "Missing he is. Sent to Felucia he was to settle a dispute. Diverted from a mission near the Oba Diah moon. Arrived at Felucia, he did not. Find him in the Force, no longer I can."

Obi-Wan finally thought to take a sip of tea and winced forgetting how awful it was. He eyed Yoda warily, wondering if the tea, too, was a test. He decided to grin and bear it as always. And as long as Master Yoda served the bitter brew, he would consume it. Just as he had with the cookies.

"There are no clues as to what happened to him or where he may have gone?"

"Found were the remains of a shuttle from his ship. Crash landed on Oba Diah's moon. Verify if he was on board, we could not. Find any bodies, we did not."

"So you think he is still alive?"

Yoda nodded. "Possible it is. Though if so, hidden he is from me."

"And if so, he is going to try to form an Army for the Republic?"

Another nod. "Was. Is. Has. Know not, do I."

"The very army that, in my vision, will betray and kill every last one of us?"

"Perhaps." Yoda agreed. "If true your vision is." He sighed. "Tricky things they are. Easily misinterpreted."

Obi-Wan squashed a flare of anger. While it was true that lesser visions had at times not panned out for him, this vision was as strong as the vision of his Master's death. It didn't feel like a possibility. It felt inevitable.

And it was coming.

He could not let what happened in this newer vision occur. He would not!

"We have to find him!" Obi-Wan stood up and began to pace. "We can't just let that happen. He would-"

"Calm, you will remain." Yoda ordered sternly, thumping the table with a fist. "Sit down, you will."

"Master Yoda, I don't think you understand-"
"Understand, I do." Yoda cut him off. "Finding him, our top priority is. Working on it, many Shadows are. Help us, your sketches may."

Obi-Wan felt out of sorts, nervous. He took a deep breath. "How is that?"

"Sit first, you will." Yoda ordered sternly. "'Calm, your mind must be. Act rashly, we will not."

Obi-Wan understood the wisdom of Yoda's words, but it was tougher than it looked to keep his emotions at bay. He sat, closed his eyes, and did his best to center himself.

Yoda waited patiently and spoke only when Obi-Wan had found his equilibrium. "Creation of a military, Sifo-Diyas always said. Creation of an army, also your words. The same every soldier was."

Obi-Wan opened his eyes. He was confused. How did the sketches of the soldiers' face....the same!

"You mean he is going to actually CREATE an army from scratch? With cloning technology?"

"My conclusion, this is." Yoda confirmed. "By identifying the soldier, lead us to Sifo-Diyas, it might."

Obi-Wan understood what he was saying. It made a lot of sense. Find the original man on whom the clones were developed and he might lead them to Diyas. Then the cloning operation could be shut down.

Obi-Wan's mind followed the logic, but he was also still hung up on the fact that someone would clone an army.

"An entire army of clones? How could he even consider doing such a thing?" He was mortified one of their own would even suggest it. "It's wrong on so many levels." He shuddered. "To create life, just to train them to fight and die. That's...I don't..." He shook his head, finding it hard to grasp the possibility. "The Republic would never agree to such an Army even if it was created by someone else. Would they?"

Yoda shrugged. "Know what the future holds, I do not."

That had not been what he wanted to hear.

"Shrouded, our vision has become. Darkness nears." A small green hand was placed over Obi-Wan's. "Reassure you, I would. But happen, many things could, to influence such decisions. Especially, if formed and battle ready, the Army is."

Obi-Wan did not want to believe that was possible. He was glad he had taken his seat as a wave of hopelessness crested over him making him feel as weak as a baby. He closed his eyes and took a moment to find his center yet again.

"Even if the Republic does authorize such an army to act on their behalf, the Council would not condone it." Obi-Wan was looking for some sort of confirmation, but Master Yoda remained quiet.

"Master Yoda, our Council would not allow that to happen. Would it?"

"Many evils there are in the galaxy." Yoda spoke slowly, hanging his head. "To be as certain as you, my wish would be. But spoke not of the reason for war, did Sifo-Diyas. At times, the only choice, the lesser of two evils may be."
Obi-Wan felt like the rug had been pulled out from under him. Anger quickly replaced the shock though.

"We will not- cannot- use them, Master Yoda." He stated firmly, sensing the Master's doubt. "No matter what happens, we cannot use this army. At the very least, NOT as originally intended. And if the Republic disregards such advice, then we should have no part in it. You cannot let our Order direct or manage those soldiers."

"So sure are you?"

"I am." He answered meeting Yoda's eyes confidently.

"Told me you did, good people they were. Like brothers to you, they felt."

Obi-Wan nodded, "And then they turned on us. Killed us...every last one of us!"

Yoda did not speak for several minutes, leaving Obi-Wan to his own thoughts, allowing him to calm down yet again. He was not proving to be a very good Knight during this conversation. He needed to present his stance to Yoda with more logic and less emotion.

"It isn't just my vision that should convince us not to take on a role with such an army. It should be our moral obligation to defend beings who were created for the sole purpose of dying to protect us. It's slavery. Each of them should be allowed the chance to choose who and what to be."

"Agree, at present, I do with your arguments." Yoda nodded. "But nothing can we do, until discovered Master Diyas' actions are. Or the lack thereof." He sighed. "As with the Younglings this morning, distractions recognized, must be. Important, it is, the big picture we see."

Obi-Wan agreed, slightly embarrassed by showing such an emotional investment on a topic might never become an issue. He was somewhat reassured by Master Yoda's support, but disturbed that the wizened Jedi did not automatically dismiss the idea of using a army of clones.

He glanced cautiously toward the Jedi Master, attempting to gauge what the reaction to his next idea would be. It might be better to present it at a later date. He knew he was already being judged for "jumping the blaster." But if the Jedi ended up condoning use of the clone army, if they disregarded his advice, then they would need to be prepared for the possibility of betrayal.

"Worry not, young one. Speak your mind here, always you can. Judge you, I will not."

Obi-Wan still hesitated, "I...I don't want to come across as paranoid or as obsessed with my vision as Master Diyas was. Especially in light of everything that's happened lately. But I promise you this is more out of a tactical line of thinking than fear." He hesitated, wondering if it were true. Perhaps some of it came from his fear. "At least...I want to believe that. I don't know anymore."

"Go on." Yoda encouraged.

"We should spread out." He explained, "The majority of the Order is based here in the Coruscant Temple. We are assigned missions from here, we leave, we come back, we attend and teach classes. At any time there are over 3,500 Jedi in the Temple, if not 5,000. Why do we need so many here?"

Yoda considered his words for a moment in silence. Obi-wan waited patiently for his response.

"The attack on the Temple. In your vision, the hardest part to deal with, it was?"

"All of it was terrible." He sighed. "Sensing all of our people returning to the Force, feeling their fear
and pain." He looked down shaking his head for a moment. "But yes. The Temple was particularly gruesome."

"So split us up, you would?" Yoda accused.

"It makes more sense from a deployment standpoint, as well. Our response times to disasters and emergency runs would decrease and we may very well save more lives for the decreased travel distances."

Obi-wan could not tell what was going through Master Yoda's mind. But judging by his questions, he was likely judging the proposal based on how badly Obi-Wan was handling the vision. Obi-Wan fervently prayed that he was not judging the his idea from the standpoint of a scared, newly made Knight who had just been through a traumatic experience. This is exactly what he had not wanted, but it was too late to change the timing. He could only go forward from here.

"There are Jedi Temples on hundreds of planets throughout the galaxy. I won't presume to know the exact number, but it would seem that we could have several bases of operation. Bases that would make our response times more efficient. They would also make an attack against the entirety of the Order a bit more complicated. Perhaps some of the bases could remain unknown to the general public, for that very reason."

Yoda nodded. "Bring this before the Council, I will. Safer we need to be, with reemergence of the Sith. Even if no attack on the Temple is ahead, a sound decision, this still is."

Obi-Wan nodded and sighed in relief, glad that Yoda found some merit with the idea. Perhaps there was still reason to hope. And even if he could not prevent the creation and use of the Clone Army, he would do everything in his power to make sure the Jedi survived whatever was to come.

***************

"When did you last sleep?"

Qui-Gon startled, not having heard or felt Mace enter the viewport of the ship. The queen had sent the Jedi back in style with just a few representatives from her government joining them, the pilots, and the service personnel. The colorful patterns of hyperspace whisked by and Qui-Gon found it comforting. He had almost been lulled to sleep.

"On Coruscant, perhaps?" He smiled as he rolled his head to the side to look at Mace. He was almost too tired to lift it. "I got about three solid hours last night. You?"

"About the same." Mace responded, plopping down heavily next to Qui-Gon. The sofa upon which they rested was sinful in its luxury. "Naboo is a beautiful planet, but I am very happy to be escaping further clean up efforts. They have a lot of work ahead of them."

"Mmmm." Qui-Gon grunted his agreement. "Home sounds good."

Qui-Gon could feel Mace staring at him and opened his eyes to find him studying him.

"What?"

Mace shook his head. "Home. I'm just surprised to hear you say it."

"Huh, I suppose I deserve that." Qui-Gon admitted, closing his eyes again and rubbing his brow. "I haven't had anything to look forward to in a long while."
"They were there. You just weren't ready to see them yet." Mace advised.

Qui-Gon agreed, but he knew Mace wasn't expecting a reply. They both rested for a few moments, but Qui-Gon could tell Mace wanted to say something more.

"Just spit it out, Mace." He said, expecting a lecture of some sort.

"I'm just worried about you, Qui-Gon. Something has been off with you since we got here." He sighed. "And no, I am not being sarcastic because you are happy to be going back to the Temple." He answered before Qui-Gon could reply. "You've not done anything to cause me concern, but something is...wrong. Are you hurt?"

Qui-Gon sat up straighter and stretched his back before leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees, fingers massaging his temples. "It's these blasted headaches. They started around the time we got here and nothing seems to help."

Now Mace did look concerned. "You went to the Healers?"

"I did, if you can believe it. Nothing they gave me helped." He sighed.

"Make sure you see Che when we return then. That is an order."

Qui-Gon agreed with a huff. "You know it's probably your fault," He leaned back again and began staring at the ceiling, "You and the other members of the Council having tricked me into taking on the most powerful force gifted individual since...I don't know, FOREVER! Ward or padawan, either way, my life is about to get crazy."

"Padawan." Mace said simply.

Qui-Gon looked over sideways toward Mace. The man's eyes were closed as he spoke. Apparently he really was as tired as Qui-Gon was.

"Come again."

"He passed the Initiate trials and is staying in the Initiate's Wing until his Master can officially ask his permission to train him." Mace smiled, still not looking over at him. "I don't even need to see your eyes to know how surprised you are."

Qui-Gon straightened back up into a sitting position once more, "But how, I mean, never in a million years would I have thought-"

"I'm not sure myself, Qui-Gon." He admitted. "Yoda, in particular, has been acting...different. He's taken a lot of leaps of faith that I never would have imagined. But then a lot has been happening, and a lot of us feel like we are flying blind."

Mace sighed. "The future has been hidden for some time. Difficult to see. The appearance of a Sith, the discovery of this boy." He shook his head. "I didn't get a chance to tell you. But the sheer number of shatterpoints around him when they arrived was staggering. He is important Qui-Gon and up to the moment in the Council when you accepted responsibility for him, I would have said he was a danger and threat to the order. I actually fought against allowing this."

Qui-Gon was wide awake at this point. "But now?"

Mace shook his head, "Once you agreed, it was like dozens of shatterpoints disappeared and less than a handful remained. He's very important. He may even be the key to the Order's survival. But
he is not a danger to us. Not like I felt before."

"Our survival?" Qui-Gon asked. "Padawan Kenobi shared his vision with the Council then?"

Mace smiled, "Knight Kenobi did. Yes."

"Seems a lot has happened in the past few days." Qui-Gon smiled. "I am happy for him."

"I am as well. Though I worry about him."

Qui-Gon nodded. "He seems to be the type who will be able to adapt. And he has a remarkable support system."

Mace harumphed, "Are you referring to Yoda and me? Remarkable, huh? Flattery will get you nowhere."

"I am well aware of that." Qui-Gon laughed.

But then grew serious once more. "You told me it was part of why Illeus agreed to take Obi-Wan as his padawan all those years ago...because you had promised your help in training him." Qui-Gon let go of his pride, allowing his fears to be felt. "I can't mess this up, Mace. I need someone who will call me on my faults, tell me when I am doing things that-"

"Stop right there." Mace started.

"Don't turn me down yet." Qui-Gon warned.

"Qui-Gon, you don't need an overseer."

"I do!" Qui-Gon shouted, standing up abruptly.

"Xanatos made his own decisions." Mace said, leaning forward. "It was-"

"I know that." Qui-Gon threw up his arms and started pacing. "Don't you think I know that! I've been over and over it with Mind Healers, with myself, with Yoda. With you. But somewhere along the way, I screwed up. I never saw it coming, Mace. I never saw the signs. What kind of master doesn't realize his own padawan..." He stopped pacing and hung his head in shame. He walked slowly to the window, allowing the shifting patterns to calm him. "I never realized how thoroughly he manipulated me. How he used my pride to blind me...he had me doubting the opinions and advice of life long friends."

"I understand your reservations. But you are a good man, Qui-Gon. You learned from Xanatos. And I very much doubt that the situation will repeat itself." Mace stood and walked over to his side. He put a comforting hand on his shoulder. "You didn't want to hear this advice before, but you are practically begging for it now. And I am telling you, you won't need it this time around. But if it gives you the confidence to go forward with his training, then so be it. Yoda and I will make ourselves available as needed. We will keep a close eye on you both. Though I am fairly certain that would have happened anyway." Mace moved back to the couch and plopped down again. "It seems that you will also have a lot of assistance from Obi-Wan."

"Assistance or competition?"

"Ah, so you've heard about the other vision then?"

"Anakin told me about it. He was very excited at the prospect of being a padawan. But he was a bit
upset over the confusion as to who would be his master." Qui-Gon sighed. "Telling him that visions were only possible futures and to remain focused in the present was like talking to a stone wall."

Mace laughed. "He has a lot of visions, that one. It will be a lesson learned fairly quickly, I think." Then he sobered a bit, "However, Master Yoda was quite impressed with the clarity of it. Everyone present was, apparently. He claimed if ever a vision felt more certain, this was it."

Qui-Gon grew puzzled. "What do you mean everyone present?"

Mace looked at him oddly, "Everyone in the Halls of Healing and a few outside of it experienced the vision at the same time Obi-Wan and Anakin did. You did not know?"

He shook his head in surprise and frowned, "Anakin failed to mention that."

If Master Yoda felt it was destined to happen, then Qui-Gon could only assume that something would happen to him to make him unable to continue as Anakin's master. An injury or something of that nature, perhaps.

"Obi-Wan will be awfully young to take on the role of his master."

"I agree." Mace shrugged, "But, at least we know you are alive in the vision. The bigger concern is my having to worry about getting pranked by the little Lothrat. And YOU should fear being falsely accused of said prank."

Qui-Gon smiled a bit, letting go of his concerns as he knew that is what Mace had intended with his comments. "You know he is convinced you are evil incarnate."

Mace frowned. "I know I come across as intimidating, but I promise you I did nothing to deserve such a reaction."

"I believe you. Is there something that could have happened indirectly? Could he have misunderstood a conversation he overheard or.""

"I promise you, there are no grounds for it." Mace insisted. "When we return, I will attempt to be less....stern and try to ease his fears. But I do not understand from where they originate."

"I will speak with him about it when a moment presents itself."

Mace nodded in appreciation.

"Anakin is highly impressed with Obi-Wan though." Qui-Gon admitted, feeling tired enough to take a seat again. "The few times we have spoken, Anakin sings his praises non-stop."

"Kenobi is a good man. He will make a fine knight." Mace agreed. "What did you make of his other vision?"

Qui-Gon visibly shuddered at the thought, not quite able to repress the feelings that accompanied even the thought of the vision. Mace's eyes narrowed in concern.

"That was by far one of, if not the weirdest experiences in my life."

"How do you mean?" Mace asked.

"He was telling me about the vision, and I was somehow...pulled into it with him. I saw it. Felt it. Experienced everything with him. And it...it was horrifying. Feeling every Jedi out there, thousands of us dying, fighting for survival, beginning to disappear. It makes me glad I am not prone to visions
myself."

Mace was staring at him again. "You saw it that clearly?"

Qui-Gon nodded.

"I was not aware of that." Mace had moved to the edge of the seat.

"I thought it may have been something he picked up from Yoda. Perhaps it is something unique to him and he is subconsciously projecting the visions somehow. It bears looking into."

"Perhaps," Mace pondered the statement for a moment before asking more. "Tell me more about the army."

Qui-Gon was surprised at the request, but closed his eyes and relayed what information he could. "Why the sudden interest?" He asked after he shared what he could.

Mace studied him for a moment. Qui-Gon could tell he was debating whether to share something with him and sat patiently while Mace reached his decision.

"This is not common knowledge, Qui-Gon and I do not expect it to be shared with anyone else, but for some reason I feel the Force wants you to know."

Qui-Gon sat a little straighter and listened closely. He could feel the gravity of the decision weighing heavily on his friend.

"I understand. I will say nothing." He promised. "What is it?"

"Sifo Diyas did not choose to leave the Council as we have allowed others to think. He was forced from it. He had a vision about the future of the Republic and the Order. He claimed that everything would be lost unless an army was created to protect it."

Mace had paused and Qui-Gon was confused, "How could that get him removed?"

"He became obsessed with it. It was effecting his work, his personal time, it was all he though about. He was forced to speak to mind healers who could do nothing for it. And despite warnings from the council, he continued to insist on the matter being addressed. It was as if he had gone mad, Qui-Gon."

Mace shook his head, "He was removed from his seat and that seemed to sober him up for a few months. We began to assign him a mission here and there. Nothing too daunting or important. But he went missing a few weeks ago."

"Missing?"

Mace nodded. "So you see, Obi-Wan"s vision is not to be taken likely. For it would seem that the army which Obi-Wan describes may be the very army that would help destroy us in the end."

Qui-Gon sat stunned for several moments. Mace seemed to wait patiently for him to gather his thoughts.

"You don't believe Sifo Diyas is lost. You think he went rogue for the purpose of forming this army."

"We hope not." Mace sighed. "But based on his past behavior, it is a very real possibility."

Qui-Gon shook his head, he was missing something, "I don't see how a Jedi raising an army of that size would go unnoticed. The recruitment and-"
Mace raised a hand and stopped Qui-Gon in the middle of his statement. "He is not going to need to recruit. Think about the vision. Each of those soldiers had the same face."

The answer came to him several seconds later, "Clones?"

Mace nodded. "We never paid close enough attention to catch Sifo Diyas's meaning when he said 'creation' rather than 'formation'. It wasn't until Obi-Wan elected to use the same wording in his description of the vision and described the cloned army that we figured out what Sifo Diyas intent was."

"But that would take a fortune." Qui-Gon argued.

"I agree. He had mentioned seeking funding from the Senate for the project. It was around this time that we decided to step in and end his obsession with the vision.

Qui-Gon stared at Mace still reeling from what he had learned.

"The council is looking into all of his past affairs since he originally had the vision."

"But surely there are only a few companies or sites that would be able to fill such a request, and even then, the soldiers would have to be raised, trained and-" 

"Yes, we are aware. We have several Jedi shadows investigating the matter. It would likely have to be a spot in or around the Outer Rim in order to avoid notice. Of course, secrecy would be his utmost concern. And while he may have seemed to be going crazy, Sifo-Diyas is a brilliant man. He will have covered his tracks well."

Qui-Gon let out a sigh and Mace let him simply think for a few moments.

"We should track down the man on whom the clones will be based. I sketched a few-"

Mace raised his hand once more halting him. "Obi-Wan already turned the sketches in to Master Nu to run in the facial recognition programs." He looked at Qui-Gon curiously then, "He didn't mention you were the artist, though I should have put that together having seen your work before."

Qui-Gon tried to suppress the sudden spike of nervousness at the thought. If Obi-Wan had found the drawings, he would have seen the one of himself, as well. That had never been Qui-Gon's intention and he had honestly forgotten the drawings after arriving on Coruscant. The picture of Obi-Wan was special. It had been, well revealing would be a good word. Anyone who looked at it could never doubt the artists feelings about him. There would have been no mistaking that Qui-Gon was fascinated by the young man and-

"What's wrong?" Mace interrupted his thoughts.

"Nothing." He shook, knowing that Mace could read his tells better than anyone. "Has it turned up anything?"

"They were entering the data when we departed." Mace said suspiciously, but he pressed no further.

"Obi-Wan also suggested that we consider spreading out our numbers instead of keeping the majority of our Jedi on Coruscant. He was a bit worried about coming across as a paranoid after everything that happened to him recently. But Yoda assured him, he understood. The Temple is too convenient of a target and a strong enough attack could cripple the order. The return of the Sith means we need to start improving our security and tactical considerations."
Qui-Gon nodded, recalling the small flashes of the attack on the Temple and the slaughter of the younglings. Obi-Wan had sought to keep that from him, but he had still seen some of it.

"It is a very good idea." Qui-Gon agreed.

"Yoda thought so too." Mace agreed. "Kid Adi is heading a committee to open and update several of our old Temples throughout the galaxy in preparation. Though we haven't decided if they are to be kept secret or not. So this, too, is confidential" Mace stated with a warning tone.

"Why are you telling me all of this if it is so secret?" Qui-Gon probed again.

Mace sat back. "I told you, the Force-"

"Come on, Mace. The real reason." As well as Mace knew him, Qui-Gon knew Mace just as well. He was holding something back.

Mace leaned forward and looked at Qui-Gon intently, "The shatterpoints around the boy..."

"Yes." Qui-Gon prodded, waiting patiently.

"They are shared by you and Obi-Wan."

"Shared?" Qui-Gon asked.

Mace simply nodded in response.

"But you said that those shatterpoints could effect the fate of the Jedi Order."

"Exactly." Mace sighed. "I don't understand it. But the three of you are linked somehow, each playing an important role in the future of the Jedi and maybe even the galaxy as a whole."

Qui-Gon considered the fact that Mace was pulling one over on him, but after studying him another moment realized he was as serious as he'd ever seen him

"A former slave, an old disgruntled Jedi Master, and a newly made Knight?" Qui-Gon asked, "Sounds like the beginning of a child's tale." He laughed nervously, "And the fate of the galaxy is in our hands?"

Mace nodded not laughing at all. He even looked a little ill.

Force! Qui-Gon felt just as sick.

"So much for sleeping." He sighed.

***********

Asajj was seething in her anger as she set the coordinates for Tatooine once again. She had just come from Tatooine a week ago and did not relish returning. The Hutts were disgusting and the planet itself was miserable.

But even in her anger, a great sense of pride and anticipation filled her. She had pleased Darth Sidious yet again and he was giving her more important assignments. He was finally taking notice of her.

But she may have some competition ahead. The way he watched the surveillance of Obi-Wan Kenobi and his new child pet, was somewhat disturbing. The humans were simply visiting the Air
and Space Museum not far from the Temple, walking from one exhibit to the next. But Darth Sidious seemed borderline obsessive in his observations. Asajj could not determine his motive for going after the two Jedi. But she did not like the idea that either of them might somehow take her place.

"Find out everything you can about the boy." Sidious had ordered. "And bring back anything and anyone who can be used to manipulate him. Especially the boy's mother, Shmi Skywalker."

"As you command, my Lord." She bowed and when she stood, she found him but a foot in front of her, somehow closing the distance between them undetected. "You have done well, Ventress." He spoke soothingly, and rubbed a hand gently on her cheek, before grasping her chin tightly and giving it a small shake. "Do this and you will be rewarded greatly."

"I seek only to please you, Darth Sidious." She spoke humbly, basking in the strength and power he held, power that would one day be hers.

She shuddered recalling the sheer amount of darkness that had flooded her soul in that moment. With a deadly smirk, she punched the controls to enter hyperspace once again.
Chapter 16

It was not like him to lose focus, and especially not like him to have fallen asleep twice in the same meeting, but he was unsettled and exhausted. All morning long he had sensed something awful was going to happen. Not just a "bad day" type awful, but a huge, monumental type awful.

And now he was headed needlessly to the Halls of Healing thanks to two overprotective Council members. He had hoped to avoid Master Che for another two days at least. She would not be happy with him.

He had not managed any amount of restful sleep. In his dreams, he kept seeing a woman in the desert trying to escape two red lightsabers. The images themselves in the dream were not that disturbing and they lacked clarity and details. The woman's terror, however, was bone-chilling. It wasn't until the second dream that Obi-Wan realized they were not his dreams. Anakin was having nightmares, possibly visions.

"Hi, Obi-Wan," The boy looked crestfallen. He had not been surprised to see Obi-Wan, opening the door before he'd even made it there.

"I felt you coming." He'd explained. "I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

Although Anakin had been attempting to seem brave, Obi-Wan could tell he was deeply affected by the dream. And there were clear tear trails on his face.

Obi-Wan shrugged. "I'm your friend, Anakin. Friends are there for one another whenever they are needed, even in the middle of the night. Besides, it's not your fault. You can't choose when to have a nightmare. Or a vision." He smiled gently, but Anakin's frown stayed in place. In fact, the boys shields were deteriorating quickly. Obi-Wan feared the whole Temple would be sensing his distress if he couldn't calm him soon.

"I always felt better when my Master was there for me after nightmares. It might help if you'd like to talk about it."

Anakin sat down on his bed, but his feet were bouncing nervously on the floor. Obi-Wan could sense the fear and the urgency he was feeling. The boy was practically vibrating with the need to do something. Looking around the room, Obi-Wan noticed Anakin's robe on his dresser, obviously covering something of a decent size.

Obi-Wan strode over and peeked beneath it.

A travel bag, with items haphazardly thrown into it. Clothing, toiletries, and not a small amount of emergency ration bars. When Obi-Wan turned back to him, Anakin had begun unknowingly projecting waves of guilt.

"You saw it. Right?" Anakin asked, breaking eye contact with Obi-Wan to look at his feet which were still tapping nervously on the floor.

Obi-Wan sat down beside Anakin on the bed. He reached out and laid a comforting hand on the boys leg, halting the nervous movement. "I saw a woman running from two red lightsabers. She was terrified." Obi-Wan explained, "Was there more?"

Anakin shook his head. "So...there's not much more to say." His desperation and nervousness were spiking and Obi-Wan quickly extended his own shields around him.
"It's alright if you don't want to speak about it. I am- oomfp!"

Anakin suddenly wrapped his arms around Obi-Wan and started sobbing. Obi-Wan had never been all that good at physical comfort. It wasn't something the Jedi were big on. But he'd offered enough comfort to little ones over the years to know what Anakin needed. He pulled the child up onto his lap and rocked him, smoothing back his newly buzzed hair and projecting a calming presence while uttering a soothing word every so often.

After about ten minutes, the roaring inferno of emotions had abated. Anakin had somehow latched on to the calm and seemed to be more rational.

"She told me not to look back," He sniffed, pulling back slightly to meet Obi-Wan's eyes, tears still filling his own. "But she's in danger. I just know it."

Obi-Wan was drying the tears from Anakin's cheeks with the sleeve of his robe when the connection sparked in his mind and he halted suddenly. "That was your mother?" He asked. "In the dream?"

Anakin nodded pressing his face back against Obi-Wan's shoulder. "I have to go to her. I don't want to use the dark side - I don't! - but I can't stay here when she could die, Obi-Wan. I don't want to choose between the Jedi and her. But that woman will catch her and...and-" He shook his head, struggling to vocalize his thoughts, nearing panic once more.

"Anakin!" Obi-Wan breathed hard, practically throwing the boy off of his lap as he scrambled to stand in alarm, pressing a hand against his chest where the burning still echoed.

That thought, that memory had not come from him.

"I'm sorry Obi-Wan. I wasn't thinking. I didn't mean..." He was crying again, sobbing.

Obi-Wan's mind noted this, knew he should be calming Anakin, but he was still stuck in the realization that Anakin had seen his nightmares.

"I just...I don't want THAT to happen to HER!" He explained.

"You...You've seen..." He swallowed back the guilt and horror, "Oh, Anakin, why would you not have told me? I would have found a way to shield you from seeing those things. You should never have had to experience..." Obi-Wan shook his head.

Anakin answered quietly. "I didn't want them to take it away. They might have taken it away."

"Taken what away?" Obi-Wan asked, still horrified that Anakin had experienced any of his pain.

"Our bond."

Obi-Wan looked away this time, overcome with emotion, tears in his eyes. That this child would put up with seeing such atrocities, and never say anything just to keep his friendship, just to protect the bond between them. Perhaps not such a small bond after all!

He was overwhelmed with a rush of affection for him. Anakin obviously felt it as he moved in for
another hug.

"Besides," He explained. "I can handle it. I saw lots of bad stuff back on Tatooine."

Obi-Wan winced, thinking about the things to which he might have been exposed. Anakin would definitely need to speak with the mind healers. He made a mental note to add it to the list of things to cover with Qui-Gon.

Qui-Gon.

He and several others were expected home tomorrow, late tomorrow. Or today rather, if he remembered correctly, seeing as it was past midnight. Truth be told, he was really nervous about it. Nervous that Qui-Gon had just been being nice before and wouldn't want anything to do with him upon his return. And nervous that he might resent the friendship he'd formed with Anakin.

It was something he should share with Master Gant. Was he just doing these things, thinking and feeling these things, in order to replace what he had lost? Was it fair to Anakin and Qui-Gon?

He had become too attached. And it had happened so quickly! The threat of losing the bond with Anakin and his connection to Qui-Gon frightened him. It was enough to cause his heart rate to quicken and mild panic to begin.

He had grown protective of Anakin and had caught himself having to rein himself back in several situations where he needed to let Anakin find his own way and make his own decisions.

He knew it was wrong, but he would not let them take this from him. He needed them. And something was whispering that they needed him just as much. He prayed it was the Force speaking to him and not his own arrogance and desire.

He knew deep down that this went against everything the Jedi taught. He shouldn't be so dependent on them. So attached.

Kriffing hell, he'd only just met either of them a couple weeks ago!

Nervous anticipation best described what he felt towards Qui-Gon's homecoming. He needed to see the man. Yet he dreaded the possibility of rejection.

Anakin took Obi-Wan's hand in his own, drawing him out of his thoughts and back to present. It was a sign of how distracted he had become not to have noticed.

Pushing the thought of Qui-Gon from his mind left him feeling lonely and caused a physical ache in his chest.

He met Anakin's eyes letting him feel the truth of his words. "I, too, am unwilling to sacrifice our bond so easily. Thank you for bearing those burdens with me. But please always tell me the truth. There is no reason you need to suffer through my nightmares. I will take extra efforts to ward against it."

Anakin nodded obediently and then hugged Obi-Wan. "I can't let them do those things to my mom, though." His voice cracked slightly as he begged Obi-Wan to understand. "It's why I have to leave."

Obi-Wan recalled using Anakin's mother to explain the danger of attachments. It seemed he had not completely grasped the concept. "I understand more than you might think, Anakin." He kept hold of the boy's hand but knelt to be eye level with him. "Protecting your mother is not wrong in and of itself. Protecting others is expected of a Jedi. There is no moral conflict in wanting to go to her right
now. This is not a choice of right and wrong.

"But, you should not make any hasty decisions in leaving just yet. For one thing, visions are tricky. They can be highly deceptive. Sometimes they come true and sometimes they never pan out. Sometimes, the vision may come true just because you tried to prevent it. How can you be sure that going back to Tatooine will not be the CAUSE the vision you have seen. If we were to leave tonight to go and save her from what you have seen, it may be possible that we will be the ones who lead the Sith to her?"

Anakin was considering his words. "I never thought about it like that." Obi-Wan could feel the conflict raging inside him now. "I don't want to put her in danger. How do I decide what to do?"

"You talk about things with your elders. You listen to their advice. You do not act hastily. And sometimes, you have to accept that what is to come, will come, no matter how much..." He choked up a little as he thought of his master, "No matter how much you wish it could be different." He finished.

Anakin considered the situation some more. "That happened to you?"

Obi-Wan nodded, not quite ready to explain. So he remained quiet.

"You said, 'If WE were to leave tonight?' Does that mean you'd go with me if that's what I chose?"

"Well," He explained, "If we were to go, it could not be tonight. We would have to book a flight. And likely we would want the fastest ship. But let's wait a little. I am having early morning tea with Master Yoda. I will mention the visions to him. Perhaps the Council can get your mother freed and settled safely somewhere."

"Really?" Anakin smiled up at him with such hope it wrenched his heart.

"Of course," He said, wiping the last of the tears away with his thumb.

Anakin hugged him tightly once more. Obi-Wan scooped him up. But for now, I think it best if you try to sleep." He walked him back to the sleep couch and tucked him under the blanket.

"Will you stay?" Anakin yawned, closing his eyes even before he laid down.

"I will." Obi-Wan promised.

There had been no more nightmares, but Obi-Wan had not slept. There was too much to think about. He saw no reason Master Yoda would say no to the request, but the dream had been intense. And like Anakin, Obi-Wan could feel an urgency to get Shmi Skywalker to safety.

After contemplating it for over an hour, he decided to err on the side of caution. His Master and he had set up several emergency fund accounts. Accounts that they would occasionally use if they needed money quickly or needed it for something which the Council may not have technically been able to approve. Obi-Wan had thought the man was a little paranoid when he'd first learned of the accounts, but they had come in handy a number of times. And as always, his Master had sought advice for his investments from those who knew best. It was no little amount of money he had stashed across the galaxy. Upon taking him as a padawan, he'd told Obi-Wan that he was now an active registrant on all the accounts and they were at his disposal should he ever have need of them.

After checking a few of the accounts, he'd contacted some old friends through an encrypted channel. They were half a day away from Tatooine and had just completed a job.
Mishar Torvin and his crew were bounty hunters. Very respectable bounty hunters. The man had a code and his crew abided by that code. His crew and their safety came before any of their jobs. They worked smart and used the minimum amount of force needed to complete their contracts. They were also known to take on some charity cases from time to time.

Master Praethorn had considered Mishar his best friend. It had been a difficult conversation for Obi-Wan, discussing his Master's death. But the man deserved an explanation.

"Not your fault, son." Mishar reassured him. "There would have been no better way for him to go out. Saving you was well worth it. And besides, men like us, we don't want to get old and die in a bed. He was proud of you. He'd have told you that if he'd had the chance."

Obi-Wan nodded and tried to smile, "He told me."

He was still not comfortable discussing all the feelings he had tied to the situation despite Master Gant's help. Mishar seemed to pick up on the fact and changed the subject. "So tell me what you need us to do."

Obi-Wan had been very clear that the job could be dangerous. It sounded simple on the surface. Go buy a slave from a fellow named Watto on Tatooine and deliver her to Coruscant. He wasn't at all worried about their being on a Hutt controlled planet. Mishar and his crew could fit in anywhere. But the thought of them going up against a Sith did not sit well with him.

He'd shared information that he probably should not have disclosed, but he would not let his friends go up against such a dangerous enemy without knowing what they were facing.

Come morning meal, he was glad he had taken the initiative.

Master Yoda had disappointed him greatly when he denied his request to go back for Shmi Skywalker. He'd even denied Obi-Wan's request to send another Jedi for her.

"Watched closely, the Jedi are right now. Since going to Naboo, with a microscope, all are looking. Against the law, participating in the slave trade is. Even if buying to free the slave. Know this, you do. Such exposure, risk right now, the Order cannot. Already, unhappy are many, that went to Naboo before the Senate's decision, we did."

Obi-Wan had argued his point of course. But he had not changed Yoda's mind. He was ashamed to say he'd been rather short with Yoda for the remainder of the breakfast. He'd been angry. Upset by the fact that the older Jedi would not even consider the idea. He knew he was being petty and should set the anger aside to deal with it at a later time. There were more important things that demanded the Council's attention. But in that moment, it had been too difficult for him to be forgiving.

As soon as their tea had been finished, he rose to take his leave, offering his usual respectful bow, even though he really wanted to skip it.

"Sorry I am, Knight Kenobi. But resourceful you are. Know that you will find a way, I do. Not everything, by a Jedi, must be done. Sometimes, a better fit, others might be."

Obi-Wan nodded, letting Master Yoda know he understood, "Yes, Master. Thank you for the tea."

At least Yoda's words had reassured him that he'd made the right call last night. Mishar and his crew would be there in another six hours or so. They'd promised to send word upon their arrival and regularly update him on their progress.

After seeing Yoda, he'd joined two of the Council members to discuss relocating parts of the Order
to other planets. Much to his surprise, and after an hour long debate, the Council had agreed to look further into the idea. Not everyone agreed the idea was in the best interest of the Order, but they all agreed that the idea merited further study.

Masters Oppo Rancisis and Ki-Adi Mundi were spearheading the assignment. Obi-Wan had been asked to assist them. He suspected Yoda was responsible for his inclusion in their meetings. The old troll was likely trying to help by giving Obi-Wan something to do while he was recovering. However, Master Mundi had claimed the idea was his. He explained Obi-Wan should be a member of the team seeing as it had been his proposal to begin with.

Today's meeting had dealt with establishing the necessary criteria for the search parameters. Everything had to be considered. Power and food sources. Terrain and climate. The amount of time in a daily cycle. And so much more! It was clear from the get-go that the two masters would make a good team. Master Rancisis was a rather serious Thisspiasian, very matter-of-fact and logistics based, while Master Mundi was more focused on how the choices would effect morale, team functioning, and scheduling.

Once Obi-Wan saw how many Temples there were to choose from, he understood the need for establishing the search criteria.

As Master Mundi excused himself to handle a com call, he remarked, "I knew there were a lot of Temples. But I could not have imagined this many."

"Mmmm." Oppo Rancisis murmured in response, while keying in more data into their program. He hadn't been talkative so Obi-Wan had started glancing at what various planets had to offer. He couldn't imagine a time where the Jedi could have been so prolific as to need of all those locations. Too many Initiates these days were turned away due to not having enough masters to take them on. Just as he had almost been turned away. His mind started drifting as he imagined a time when there were enough Jedi to populate all of the Temples. He did not realize he'd started to nod off.

A touch on his shoulder and a gentle nudge in his mind served to wake him. It was the way his Master would have woken him and he felt a moment of melancholy at the thought. "...would perhaps prefer a planet with a longer sleep cycle." Master Rancisis laughed quietly.

Obi-Wan had been incredibly embarrassed. But Master Mundi had waved off any response he was about to give. "Having trouble sleeping?" The master probed gently.

Oppo Rancisis listened attentively, but still carried on with his work. They had both seemed genuinely concerned.

"Last night was a bit difficult." He agreed. "I apologize for drifting."

"Think nothing of it. Perhaps a little food will help." Master Mundi said, shoving a plate lunch of nerf burger and fried tubers into his hands.

"Thank you, Master Mundi." He agreed. "I didn't eat much for breakfast. I am starving."

"We know." Rancisis interrupted, hitting a final button dramatically. "Yoda told us to make sure you ate something."

"Oh." Obi-Wan wondered how much Yoda had shared with the Council. During their morning work, Obi-Wan had kept picking up on Master Mundi's scrutiny. He caught him staring a few times during the discussion and thought at one point that the two masters may have been having a mind-to-mind conversation about him without his knowledge. But it was the first time he'd seen Master
Mundi in over a year and he reasoned the man was just concerned with how he was recovering from his most recent mission and the loss of his Master.

Master Yoda had obviously not informed them he was a vegetarian. He raised a fried tuber in gratitude, before chomping it to bits.

Mundi smiled and began to devour his own plate while asking for an update from Master Rancisis. The lunch went by quickly and they began working again. They had started to discuss the specifics of the computer program they were creating and Obi-Wan found it difficult to keep his eyes open. He had just planned on resting them for a minute, but he must have dozed off again.

Master Mundi's voice startled him, "Right, Obi-Wan?"

Obi-Wan snapped up and knew there was no hiding the lapse. "Ummm, right?" He guessed.

Both were staring at him intently while doing that mind-to-mind thing.

"Maybe?" He offered instead.

"Well," Mundi smiled softly, "If you stick with that answer, you would agree that the entire Order should be moved to Alsmen IV's moon and we should all work for a roving circus where we would perform feats of wonder, but Yoda would wear a dress and do a tumbling act and Mace would be assigned janitorial duties."

Obi-Wan would have laughed if he had not felt so chastised. "I apologize, Masters. Perhaps I am in need of more rest than I thought." He felt like an initiate again.

"We are not upset with you, Obi-Wan." Mundi explained. "Just worried."

Obi-Wan nodded. "I promise I am fine. Last night was tough, but for once it was not my nightmares that kept me up. Initiate Skywalker was having a difficult time with a recurring vision." Obi-Wan cursed himself silently. Master Rancisis had been one of the men opposed to giving Anikin the opportunity to become a Jedi. The last thing he should be doing is giving the man reason to doubt the Council's decision. "I stayed up to watch over him as he slept and neglected myself in the process. I regret that it has effected my assistance with the-"

Obi-Wan trailed off with his explanation as Oppo Rancisis waved his hands in a manner dismissing it. "That may be so, but it is more than a lack of sleep." His brow furrowed as he continued to study Obi-Wan.

"I assure you I am fine," Obi-Wan argued. But with the way they were watching him and the things they were saying, he was beginning to feel real concern.

Mundi shook his head. "I'm sorry, Obi-Wan. I am in agreement with Master Rancisis. There is something more that is wrong. Something's off about you. A nap will do some good, but I don't think it will improve this."

Obi-Wan looked at them in disbelief. "Are you messing with me? Is this some sort of new Knight hazing or something?"

Oppo Rancisis gave a brief short laugh. "These new ones!" He shook his head and typed some more.

"No." Mundi said, clarifying politely. "Not this time. I think you should go see Vokara. Tell her do a full work-up."
"Master Mundi, that is not necessary. I was given a clean bill of health a few days-"

"That was then." He looked truly concerned and Obi-Wan was beginning to realize he wasn't kidding.

Obi-Wan was about to ask further for details, but Mundi spoke before he could.

"Go on." He shooed.

Obi-Wan bowed to the two masters, stared in complete confusion once more, and then turned and began to leave the room.

"Don't think of skipping out." Mundi warned. "I am calling ahead to let her know you are coming."

Obi-Wan forced a confused smile and nodded. As he turned the corner, he heard Master Rancisis whisper softly, "Yoda was right. But I think Master Gant should be notified as well."

It brought him up short and he hesitated.

If he were at all a paranoid person then this would be enough to have him hightailing it out of there. But he knew the masters had his best interest at heart. He wondered why Yoda had said nothing to him that morning if he had been so concerned.

And so here he was walking to the Halls of Healing when he wanted to nothing more than crash in his own bed. He pressed his palms against his eyes, attempting to ease the background headache that still persisted, but nothing helped.

Perhaps he had been wrong about their decision to send him to Master Che. Despite his lack of sleep, the headaches had been worsening slightly, and spreading to become an almost constant physical ache all over his body. He hadn't wanted to report it. He'd been in the Halls of Healing too long to want to go back so soon.

Besides, nothing they gave him made him feel better. Nothing Master Che or Master Gant had tried was successful in ridding him of it.

The sense of doom was looming large now. Something was imminent. And he did not think it had to do with his health.

He felt his exhaustion more readily as he approached the Halls of Healing. He considered stopping to rest for a few minutes before facing the wrath of Master Che, but he decided against it. He really just wanted to sit down and take a nap.

As he drew near the Halls of Healing, Master Yaunell, a small Mirialan Master, was leaving. Obi-Wan had enjoyed his political science classes and done well in them.

"Good morning, Master Yaunell." Obi-Wan bowed respectfully.

Obi-Wan was a little surprised when the Master brushed by him with no acknowledgement whatsoever. He turned and watched as the man continued down the hallway and turned left. The increasing dread that had been with him most of the morning was definitely coming to a head. He could feel it.

The Temple Guards at the entrance to the Halls of Healing nodded their masked faces in acknowledgement and allowed him entry.
Unfortunately, they had seen him often enough to know that he was a regular. He started to head toward Master Che's office when the Force tugged his attention towards the recovery rooms. The dread began to increase.

The Sith was in that wing. He was walking that way before being conscious of doing so.

The guards were standing at attention in their usual spots, but something seemed strange. His concern grew as he approached them and received no reaction to his presence. He had expected to be challenged by them, at the very least. The entire wing was restricted to a small number of personnel. And he was not on that list.

Neither of the guards said a word as he drew even with their position. They simply stood at attention, staring straight ahead, not acknowledging him in the least.

Obi-Wan waved a hand in front of the first guard's mask. No reaction.

As he was preparing to shout for help, he glanced down the hall and saw a foot sticking out of a doorway a few inches. The second pair of guards to either side of that door were also staring straight ahead, as if they were mere statues. He thought twice about shouting not willing to let an assailant know he was present.

His drew his lightsaber from his belt and activated it. Approaching the room cautiously, he was surprised at the guards continued lack of action. Something must have been done to them. They were breathing, but Obi-Wan sensed no awareness from them at all.

Inside the room a fifth Temple guard was prone, face-down, his head twisted at an awkward angle, neck snapped. The Jedi assigned with the Temple guards was laying on his back, a lightsaber wound to the chest.

But the sight that stole his attention was the Zabrak. Or rather, the Zabrak's head on the floor beside his feet.

The hospital bed on which the Zabrak had been secured, was in two pieces, likely collateral damage from the Sith's beheading. The damage appeared to have been caused by a lightsaber.

A strange rasp drew Obi-Wan's attention back to the Jedi on the floor. The man was still breathing!

Obi-Wan was spurred into action, slamming a fist against the alarm on the wall before dropping to the Master's side and raising his free hand to the man's chest. Using the Force, he attempted to determine where best to send the healing energy.

He kept his saber up, covering the doorway in case the assailant were to return. But It was difficult to divide his attention and the Jedi had but a thread of life remaining. Obi-Wan had to focus on the Jedi fully if he were to keep him alive.

The sound of the alarm seemed to be waking the guards from their stupor. Obi-Wan heard voices through a fog. He was too invested in saving the man in front of him to hear what was going on anymore.

But a loud shout startled him enough that he turned his attention just in time to see the end of the lightsaber pike swinging toward him. He was able to block the blow with his own lightsaber, but was stunned when a kick to the chest knocked him backward. The back of his head struck the frame of the bed and he was seeing stars and gasping for breath.

He rolled on to his knees attempting to push himself up while calling for the lightsaber he'd
inadvertently dropped. But a heavy weight landed on top of him. He felt another blow to the face and his hands were being pulled behind his back. Stars still littered his vision, highlighting the face of the Zabrak’s head beside him.

And then all of a sudden, the Force was gone.

He screamed. At least he thought he did. A physical strength born of desperation allowed him to throw the guards off of him and he stood. He jumped and pulled his bound hands around his legs to his front while in the air. But he was wobbly. His legs felt like they would give in moments.

His saber- sabers, maybe, he was seeing double, no triple -there were three of them- had been kicked to the corner of the room and two guards- six guards?- stood menacingly in front of him their lightsaber pikes glowing a bright yellow, causing him to wince from the light.

"Lay on the ground!" One of the masked guards demanded of him.

Obi-Wan was breathing too fast. The Force was gone. His chest felt so tight. He couldn't use it, couldn't even feel it. He shook his hands and twisted his arms in an attempt to get the binders off.

"Take them off!" Obi-Wan yelled. "I was helping him!"

"On the ground!" One of the guards took a step closer.

"Please!" Obi-Wan put the binders out, palms up, attempting to show he was not challenging them. "He's dying! He needs immediate assistance."

Several people were running into the room now. The additional guards were taking in the whole scene and healers were rushing to the downed guard and Jedi.

He thought he heard Anakin somewhere screaming his name.

Master Che entered next and started barking orders to the guards to clear the room, until she saw Obi-Wan in binders and stopped abruptly, surprise clear in her expression.

She was saying something to him, but his hearing was overwhelmed. Too many people and too many voices. And no Force to call on for strength.

The room was starting to spin and he saw Master Che lunge for him just before the world went dark.
Chapter 17

Hearing returned first. Obi-Wan was floating in a haze, but he could hear voices coming in and out.
"...right about something being off..."
"...cannot account for everything that happened when he was taken by the bounty hunter..."
"...explanation for the headaches..."
"...like a wound that is growing..."
"...had motive, means and opportunity to carry it out."
"...if he'd wanted the Sith dead, he could have left him laying in the sand on Tatooine. I don't think..."
"...waking, he is..."

Obi-Wan felt Master Yoda's presence at his side. He was being nudged to consciousness.

He obeyed and forced himself to open his eyes. The room was darkened. It took him a moment to find and focus on the older master.

Where was he?

Where was his master?

What was happening?

He actively reached for his Master through the Force only to find the bond was gone. The loss came crashing back anew. He had died on Tatooine.

"Calm your thoughts. In the Halls of Healing you are." Yoda's voice was carefully measured to convey peace, but Obi-Wan could feel that something awful was happening.

Or had happened.

Daggers were jabbing his mind, making it difficult to even string a thought together.

Master Yoda reached out and placed a hand on his head, drawing some of the pain away.

"There now." Yoda spoke softly, "Remember what happened, do you?"

Obi-Wan swallowed some of the pain on his own and tried to remember why he was here with Yoda at his bedside. The voices from before had said some things that seemed important. One of them had mentioned a bounty hunter.

He reached out with the Force and realized that there were at least half a dozen people in the room with them.

"Iessel?"

Yoda shook his head no.
Obi-wan began to make out the Force signatures.


"Master Mundi...Master Rancisis. I was working with them, maybe? I think." Visions of Rancisis working at a console and Mundi commenting on something flashed in his mind. "I don't know. What happened?"

His fear at not remembering was only held in check by the throbbing in his head.

"We sent you to see Master Che?" Master Mundi confirmed. "Do you remember anything upon arriving?"

He didn't even remember coming.

"Was I ill?"

"In a manner of speaking." Mundi answered cryptically. "When you got here, you went to the recovery rooms. Can you remember why that would be?"

Someone in the background made a comment about leading questions, but mentioning the recovery rooms did stir his memory.

The guards. The Zabrak.

"Oh, kriff." He realized his concern was escalating and did his best to control his panic.

His connection to the Force was there. He relaxed a little, finding it comforting. Something had happened to take his connection to it away.

Binders?

He'd been cuffed in the room where the Zabrak had been-

"The Zabrak. The guards." Obi-Wan stated, then he started to sit up suddenly recalling more, "The Jedi guarding the Sith? He was hurt badly. Did he-"

"Knight Krellen did not survive his wounds." Mundi informed him as Yoda pushed on his shoulder to keep him prone.

Obi-Wan choked on his grief, laying back with little resistance. He only knew the knight by name, but he had a good reputation. More lives lost because of the Sith. That hurt more than anything he was feeling physically.

"Answers we need and quickly." Yoda explained.

"We have no suspects and need to know everything you do." Mundi added.

Obi-Wan tried to sit up again, realizing how important his recollection of events would be. But Yoda shook his head and pressed a hand against his shoulder once more. "Not recommended is sitting. A concussion you have."

Concussion might have been putting it nicely. His head was pounding, his thoughts scattered, and everything felt skewed. He was doing his best right now and still couldn't concentrated well.

"What do you need to know?"
"If you can manage, we would like a full account of your arrival at the Halls and what happened. Everything you saw, heard, felt. Any possible suspects you may have fought or seen." Mundi clarified.

Obi-wan nodded. He took a moment to gather his thoughts. The masters waited patiently. "Master Mundi and Master Rancisis sent me to see Master Che. I got here and was going to check Master Che's office, but I felt a pull. As if the Force was...it wanted me to go to the Recovery Wing. The guards didn't react to me. They were statues, unaware of everything. Not moving. Not reacting at all."

Obi-Wan shifted to relieve an ache on his right side. He winced quietly when the pain increased. More damage than his concussion then. He decided to stay still and pushed the pain once more from his mind. He needed to continue.

"I was... think I was going to alert someone when I...I saw of a boot...a foot...sticking out of the door...further down the hall. The other guards, the ones at the entrance to the room, they were just as...not moving." He sighed. "Sorry, it's hard to find words."

"Alright it is. Doing fine, you are." Yoda encouraged.

"I thought whoever...I thought the bad guy may still be in there. Didn't want to...to alert them to my presence and so I moved quietly."

"How did the guards react to that?" One of the Council members asked. Obi-Wan could not make out who it was just then, but found he was hurting too much to put forth the effort.

"They didn't move. Not at all." He closed his eyes. "They only snapped out of it at the sound of the alarm."

Obi-Wan continued thinking about the course of events, but apparently neglected to speak. He may have even started to nod off again, because Master Yoda gave him a mental nudge to bring him back to alertness.

"Sorry." He sighed, really wanting to give in to unconsciousness. Staying awake was starting to make him feel nauseous. He swallowed down the sick feeling. He absolutely refused to throw up in front of half the Council.

"What happened when you reached the room?" One of the Council members asked.

"I saw...saw the Zabrak's head on the ground...body was still on the bed. Another Temple Guard was laying face down. Neck looked broken. The Jedi...lightsaber wound to the chest."

He must have forgotten to keep speaking again, because Master Yoda touched his arm, "And then?"

"M'sorry, Master Yoda. It's hard to stay awake." He opened his eyes, finding it more and more difficult to stay aware of what was happening.

"A bit longer, we need. Walked into the room you did and saw the three. What then? Find another, did you? Someone else."

"No." He stated. "The Knight...Krellen was still breathing...tried to save him. The guards...they attacked me." He shuddered recalling the binders, but pushed it from his mind. "Everyone came to help then."

"How was the alarm sounded?" A woman's voice asked.
"The wall." He sighed to himself after hearing how that sounded. Particularly intelligent. He gathered his strength and thoughts once more and tried to form a coherent reply. He knew the pain and exhaustion were creeping into his voice, but he would give them the best he could. "I hit the alarm on the wall as soon as I realized Krellen was alive." Obi-Wan raised his hands to his eyes because his head hurt, but the movement made him feel more nauseous, so he put his arms right back down. "Tried to help him"

Yoda asked if anyone had further questions at this time.

"The Guard reported your lightsaber was on. He thought you were a threat to Knight Krellen. It is why he attacked. Why did you have your lightsaber activated?" Master Rancisis asked.

Obi-Wan focussed on the voice and opened his eyes looking toward him, unable to see in the dark.

"Why are the lights off?"

"Bad concussion it is. Painful, the light will be."

Oh yeah. Concussion. That made sense. He probably owed Master Che for telling them to keep it off. She was good at that sort of thing.

Obi-Wan swallowed against the sick feeling trying to recall what had been asked with no success. "M'sorry. What was the question again?"

"Why was your lightsaber on?" The voice repeated.

"Didn't know what was going on...where a threat might come from."

He sighed, hearing his own slurred speech. Force, his head and his chest hurt!

"Master Mundi?"

"I'm here." The man came forward to the edge of Obi-Wan's bed.

"If you ever tell me to go to the Halls of Healing again, m'not gonna listen."

Master Mundi smiled in sympathy, "Understood."

"So no suspects?" He asked disbelieving.

"None." Mundi confirmed.

"Surveillance videos-

"Tampered with, they were." Yoda responded quietly before he could finish.

Obi-Wan sighed, thinking back to the discussion to which he had awoken. "So then, you think it was me?"

"Told the truth here you have. Doubt that, we do not." Yoda turned and the others nodded their agreement.

Yoda patted his hand and jumped to the ground. The others filed out quietly.

"You can rest now, Obi-Wan. Master Che will be here shortly." Master Mundi advised. "I will be staying here to ensure your safety."
"Safety, right." He huffed, immediately regretting the quick, sarcastic breath as his chest protested. "Do you believe I am in danger?" He asked, trying to call Mundi out on the lie.

"Just a precaution." Mundi explained.

Obi-Wan knew it was because they believed he had done it. They'd been discussing that very thing as he woke. Their comments made a lot more sense in retrospect.

He groaned at the pain, as much as at the idea of being a suspect.

Master Mundi was his jailer, his guard. Not his protector. His account of events had not been enough to change their minds.

"Do YOU at least believe me?" Obi-Wan asked. "You sent me here. I did not plan on coming."

The pause was answer enough.

He nodded his head in understanding, but regretted it as the world swam around him once again.

He supposed he'd suspect himself as well. He shouldn't blame them.

"I want to believe you, Obi-Wan. And I do believe you are telling the truth as you know it. But it is our job to find answers now. And certain things about you have been different since your return from Tatooine. It has many of us worried."

"What things?" He winced as a stabbing pain continued to shoot through his head.

"You were taken for several days, unable to account for every minute of your captivity. Yoda is the only one who has ever even seen a Sith, but our records show they can do horrible things, including forms of brainwashing and."

"That's ridiculous. Iessel was a bounty hunter. M'not brainwashed."

"That's what all the brainwashed suspects say," Obi-Wan could here the smile and note of levity Mundi was trying to bring. But he couldn't rise above the situation to appreciate it fully just then. And Mundi had a point. He had been in a room shielded from Force Detection.

Mundi answered more seriously, "We cannot explain the headaches you are experiencing and nothing seems to help them. And your..." He trailed off and Obi-wan felt his hesitancy in going further.

"I'm...what?" He pressed.

"We don't know." He sighed. "Master Yoda asked us to look closer. He noticed that you don't seem right somehow. Like a part of you is missing or injured. The physical manifestation may be the headaches, but your Force signature seems...wounded."

"What?" Obi-Wan sat up at the disturbing thought. And regretted it immediately.

"No, no, no." Mundi admonished, "Don't do that. They weren't joking about that concussion. Vokara will be here any moment to help. You need to go back to sleep for at least four to six hours and let the medicine and healers do their job."

Had his use of the Darkside changed him somehow? Could Iessel or someone have done something to him during his captivity?
Mundi assisted him back against the pillows just as Master Che entered.

"What are you thinking!" Her voice was kept low, which Obi-Wan appreciated due to his headache, but her tone was admonishing and he hated upsetting her.

"Sorry." Both Obi-Wan and Mundi spoke at the same moment.

"Not you, Obi-Wan." She said gently in his direction, before giving Mundi a hard stare. "I only allowed the Council to wake him for this 'interview' because you all insisted it was necessary to catch the killer. But you promised not to upset him further or risk his health. And here he is climbing out of the bed!"

Obi-Wan relaxed minutely, honestly glad it was Mundi taking the hit and not him.

"He was hardly crawling out of bed, Vokara. He tried to sit up before I could advise against it."

Vokara gave a huff and ordered Mundi out of her way. "Lay still." She whispered gently, placing her hands on Obi-Wan's temples.

Obi-Wan felt some of his fear diminish as the ache in his brain eased a bit as she worked.

As she finished several minutes later, the pain had lessened significantly and the vertigo was gone. He whispered his thanks to her.

His head still hurt, but he felt a thousand times better.

He opened his eyes as a cold hypospray was pressed to his neck, "That should help even more. You must sleep now. But you have someone in the hall who wishes to visit."

Obi-Wan sensed it was Anakin and raised his shields almost immediately locking the boy out.

"No." He whispered.

"He is frightened Obi-Wan. He thought you had died." She explained. "He came in hear screaming for you and had to be stopped by another master. He tossed a Temple Guard aside like he weighed nothing."

Obi-Wan closed his eyes and swallowed. Of course he wanted to see Anakin, but if he really were compromised as Mundi suggested he did not want to put the boy in danger.

He looked pleadingly to the man, who nodded his head in understanding.

"Watch him for a moment Vokara." He indicated Obi-Wan as he stepped into the hallway to go send Anakin away.

"Kriff," He cursed quietly remembering that he should be hearing from Mishar very soon. He needed to let the man know he wouldn't be able to reach him for a while. But if he sent an encrypted message out of the Temple now, it would only look more suspicious.

Vokara reached forward and took his hand. "You did not do this Obi-Wan. I know you did not. Do not fear what Mundi is telling you. Master Gant agrees with me. You are under no compulsions. They would have shown themselves in your sessions."

"And he's dealt with compulsions enough to recognize them?" He sighed, doubtful.

"Master Gant has. It is not only Sith who would do such things. There are other Force sensitive
beings in this galaxy. Some are cruel and have no reservations about compelling others."

She straightened the cover, pulling it up higher on his chest. "Master Gant has been sitting with Anakin. Keeping him calm all this time. He will speak with you when you wake. But I am afraid you are about to fall asleep any moment because of the sedative."

"I'd like to go back to my quarters to rest." He stated.

She smiled and he already knew her answer.

"Not until after you rest and I check you over once more."

Obi-Wan had expected as much.

"If not a compulsion, then what is wrong with me, Vokara?"

"I don't know." She admitted. "But I promise you, we will find out."

Obi-wan closed his eyes, giving in to the effects of the sedative. He wanted nothing more to do with the real world right now. It was too cruel and it hurt too much. Perhaps it would be better when he woke.
Chapter 18

Qui-Gon waited by the ramp impatiently, trying not to let his concern manifest itself outwardly.

As they exited hyperspace, Mace and the other two Council members had been sent an urgent communiqué from the Council. Mace had told him everything upon exiting the small meeting. He had been serious about keeping Qui-Gon informed.

Hearing that the Sith had been beheaded and Knight Krelten and one of the Temple guards had been killed was shocking. But to have him believe that Obi-Wan may have been the killer! That was ridiculous.

"It seems as if Kenobi has been having headaches as well. The Healers couldn't help him either." Mace studied Qui-Gon carefully, a worried frown crossing his features. "Apparently some feel that it may have been a side effect of a compulsion."

The news surprised Qui-Gon, but he made sure to keep his shielding up and not allow his surprise to register to the Korun master.

"That's absurd." He responded.

"Is it?"

"What are you implying, Mace?"

There was no doubt now that Mace was studying him with a suspicious look.

"I am wondering if you are dangerous, Qui-Gon. You show the same symptoms they were describing. It's almost like a wound in the Force."

Hearing it put like that was worrisome, but Qui-Gon was more certain than ever that it had to do with whatever bond had spontaneously sparked to life with Obi-Wan. But he wasn't prepared to say anything yet. It had been difficult to keep Obi-Wan from his thoughts these past few days. He was worried the young man would want nothing to do with him when they returned. Not that it was a likely option seeing how Mace thought their fates would be entwined, but there was still that possibility. Qui-Gon couldn't deny the pull he felt toward the young man, but he worried that once Obi-Wan learned of the bond, he would resent being saddled with someone so much older.

And then there was Qui-Gon's habit of keeping everyone at arms length. A habit he had gotten used to over the past several years. Perhaps if he could get past his insecurities, he could overcome this isolation mode he'd erected for years, he might actually find happiness again.

He came back from his thoughts to find Mace finishing a statement.

"...on Tatooine or on the Deadeye, but I am not going to take that chance. You'll stay in my presence until we determine what is wrong with you."

"Now wait just a moment-" Qui-Gon protested.

"You are not going to change my mind on this. Consider it an order."

The ramp began to open and before he could attempt to argue further, a child's voice was calling his name from across the hanger. A small head was visible just before it ducked down and Anakin came
running out from behind some stacked crates toward Qui-Gon, clearly afraid and apprehensive.

He slowed upon his approach and swung wide upon seeing Mace, approaching from Qui-gon's free side. Qui-Gon noticed the tears streaks on his face and that his robes were covered in dust. But he didn't dissuade the boy from approaching or seeking physical reassurance. He knelt down and hugged him, not caring if Mace disapproved. The boy was distraught.

"They won't let me see Obi-Wan." He cried.

"I understand. And I am aware of what happened. Come we will discuss it more, but not in the hangar. Let us walk." He stood and held out his hand.

Anakin took it and walked with them, eyeing Mace carefully when he got the chance.

"Will you take me to see him?" Anakin asked quietly, trying to hide the question from Mace.

"Not just yet." Qui-Gon answered honestly. "You have to understand that even though we are holding him right now, he is not a condemned man. I know that he did not do this thing. You know. And others will come to see this as well. Though it may take a little time. Patience is needed right now."

"That's what everyone is telling me. But I hate patience. I want to see him now. He needs me and I need him!"

"Anakin-

"I will promise to be good. I will wait patiently as long as YOU promise to go see him right now. Both of you need to be with each other again. Can't you see how bad it is to be apart. Your colors are hurting just as much as his."

Mace and Qui-Gon stopped in their tracks as Anakin kept going, his hand coming free. He turned back quickly and ran to Qui-Gon's side to be out of Mace's line of sight.

"What did you say?" Mace asked. Qui-Gon could tell Mace was attempting to be less imposing, and more kind. The question wasn't quite as accusatory as it could have sounded. "I'm just curious, because none of us understand why they are feeling this way." Qui-Gon would have smiled at Mace's attempt at being nicer, but he was too shocked by Anakin's statement.

Suddenly, the idea of the bond's existence was more concrete than ever.

Anakin still hid behind Qui-Gon, unsure of how to deal with Mace, fear and wariness at the forefront of his thoughts.

"Anakin." Qui-Gon knelt once again. "It might be very helpful if you could explain further."

Anakin eyed him like he was being dense. "You know. Your colors. Master Schrin says you call them signatures. They belong together now. They shouldn't be apart so long or your souls will hurt. I've seen it once before on Tatooine between this human man and a Twi'lek lady. The colors were so mushed together that you couldn't tell where one began or ended. They were just the same. I think that's how you and Obi-Wan should be."

Qui-Gon wasn't sure he could rise again. Hell, he wasn't sure if he could even draw a breath. Mace's hand suddenly resting on his shoulder gave him strength.

"Perhaps we should go visit Obi-Wan after all." Mace admitted.
"Oh, good!" Anakin sighed, forgetting to be afraid of Mace for a moment. Qui-Gon could sense the shock and concern coming from his friend. But also the amazement.

Qui-Gon somehow found it in him to rise to his feet and start walking again, but he was unable to find his voice. He slowed occasionally, wondering what he would say to the other man.

Hey. How have you been? We have a Force bond. You're stuck with me forever, unless you'd like to go unimaginable pain to break the bond.

Stars!

He nearly panicked several times along the way. But Anikin distracted him every time. The child had no problem filling the sudden silence.

"I am so worried about him. He won't let me feel him in my head. It's like he slammed a door shut and he won't open it. They told me HE did it. On purpose they said. But I thought maybe that was a lie. Except it didn't feel like they were lying. But then, why would he shut me out like that. Right? At least this time I know he is there. When he disappeared the first time it scared me real bad. I thought he was dead. I kinda freaked out a little and fought some people trying to get to him."

That actually distracted Qui-Gon into paying more attention to the present moment. "You what?"

Anakin winced a little and thought he was about to be punished. Qui-Gon caught the burst of fear, followed quickly with resignation. And then came the guilt. The quick turnaround between feelings had his mind reeling, so he strengthened his shields so as not to be so effected.

"I apologized afterward and they said they understood. They were really nice about it and even gave me a dessert to try and calm me down. I didn't want it though. I was still too worried. And I was still too mad at them from keeping me away from him."

As Anakin took a breath, Qui-Gon could feel amusement rolling off of Mace.

"Also," Anakin continued, "I apologize now for running away from Master Gant. I know I shouldn't have, but I just knew Obi-Wan needed me. Then I couldn't get into the Halls of Healing. They were watching too closely. Especially after what happened. So I finally gave up and came to wait for you."

Qui-Gon felt the level of amusement in Mace reach epic proportions. He leaned in closely to Qui-Gon. "Fifty credits says your hair will be completely silver in a month."

"I can't take that bet." He sighed, shaking his head, "Now you understand my request for assistance more thoroughly."

Mace laughed, earning a look of shock from Anakin.

"I do have a sense of humor, young one." He smiled. "Just try not to let the others know. You'll ruin my reputation."

Anakin didn't quite smile back, but he didn't hide as he had before. He seemed more perplexed that anything.

Qui-Gon stopped walking again.

Mace and Anakin turned back to look at him to see why. "I believe we may be going the wrong way." He explained.
"No this is the way. I learned it, believe me." Anakin stated matter of factly.

Qui-Gon smiled, "I agree this is the way to the Halls of Healing, but I do not think Obi-Wan is there. Was he released from questioning?"

"I'm not certain, I'll check in with Ki-Adi." Mace suggested, pulling his com from his belt.

Qui-Gon was so certain he went ahead and started walking toward the Master's quarters.

"You already know where he is." Anakin smiled, "Just like I can tell normally."

Qui-Gon was surprised the bond between Anakin and Obi-Wan would be so strong, but he nodded. "Yes. Just like that. And I can tell he's sleeping." Qui-Gon sighed in relief. He wouldn't have to have any uncomfortable discussion tonight.

But he did feel a need to be closer to the man. The relief he felt as they neared their destination was amazing. The pressure, the constant ache, was easing with every step.

They reached a door in the North Wing and Qui-Gon hesitated before ringing the chime. "He's sleeping." He explained. "I don't want to wake him."

"Impressive." Mace whispered. "Of course you are right. These were Praethorn's rooms. Obi-Wan hasn't moved out of them yet."

Mundi opened the door surprising Anakin and Qui-Gon, though Mace seemed to have suspected it. "Gentlemen, how can I help you?"

"Hello, Ki-Adi. May we come in."

He seemed wary.

"Trust me, he is not dangerous." Mace reassured. "Quite the contrary, actually."

"Obi-Wan is sleeping." Mundi made way and allowed the three to enter into the common room. "He was given a sedative. You will not be able to speak with him tonight."

"Why the sedative?" A spike of concern and anger flashed through Qui-Gon.

"It was a condition of his release to his quarters. He hasn't been resting well."

Qui-Gon felt the pull to enter the room on his left, but resisted out of politeness sake. He followed Mace, forcing himself to remain calm. Anakin must have sensed his struggle. He came to stand beside him and grasped his hand in a show of support as Mace started explaining things to Mundi.

He was so distracted, he heard very little of the explanation. He couldn't have said how much time even passed. He was just relishing being so close to Obi-Wan. Knowing he was in the room next to him, safe and sleeping.

He only came back to himself when he felt a hand touch his upper arm.

"Come on, Qui-Gon." Ki-Adi gently steered him. "He's just through here."

Qui-Gon couldn't speak. He was too...emotional.

Ki-Adi, Anakin, and Mace all watched him as he entered the room but his awareness of them faded completely when he saw the young knight sleeping on the small padawan bed.
As Qui-Gon drew closer Obi-Wan's face turned toward him and his brow which had been furrowed began to relax. His eyes cracked open and he smiled at Qui-Gon, before closing them again.

He noted the large bruise and blackened eye on the right side of Obi-Wan's face. But the concern was not enough to overcome the relief of having him there beside him and safe.

Strong arms pressed him down into a comfortable chair that had been brought to the beside. He reached out and took Obi-Wan's hand in his own. It was like coming home again after being away for so long. He could finally relax and not worry about anything else. It would seem that the feeling was echoed even as Obi-Wan slept. The young man released a sigh and scooted to the edge of the small bed promptly falling asleep once more.

"How was he hurt?" Qui-Gon's voice was scratchy and he had to force his attention back toward the others.

Mace turned to Ki-Adi apparently not having been informed of the injuries until just now.

Mundi looked ashamed. "The guards thought he was attacking Krellen when, by his own statement, he'd been attempting to save Krellen's life. I don't think he knew what hit him. And once the binders were on him, well, what with his most recent mission and what he had been through...and combined with his injuries, he passed out."

The anguish Qui-Gon felt for him in that moment filled the room. "Force help him."

"He's really mad at himself. Second guessing everything he did after arriving in the Halls of Healing, holding himself responsible for his own situation. For not being able to save Krellen. And...he was frightened that we could have been right...about the compulsion issue. But you've completely squashed that theory with your arrival. I am much relieved. He is a fine young man."

"I agree." Mace assured him. "The Council will understand after they see for themselves. I can't believe I didn't put this together myself after finding out Obi-Wan was having the same symptoms."

"Who would have put that together? It's...I've never seen a Force bond like this. Not just the strength of it, but the way they are bound." Mundi added. "I may have read something once. Long ago, but I thought it was just an exaggeration."

Qui-Gon had been frightened of how the colors merged when he examined them on the ship. He'd at least harbored the hope that the Council would be able to sever it. But there was always a price for severing a bond. A psychic wound which he would never really wanted to inflict on himself or Obi-Wan. Apparently being apart from one another for long periods would harm them as well.

He turned sensing despair in the far side of the room. "Anakin, what's wrong?" Qui-Gon motioned for him to come forward.

Anakin just shook his head.

"Something is upsetting you."

He shook his head again.

Qui-Gon asked Mace and Ki-Adi if he could have a moment alone. They nodded their heads and went to the common room, the door swishing shut behind them.

Qui-Gon let go of Obi-Wan's hand and walked over to Anakin. The boy was so choked up, he couldn't even voice what was wrong.
"You don't have to say anything." Qui-Gon reached under Anakin's arms and pulled him up into a hug.

The action seemed to cause the dam to burst and Anakin started to cry into his shoulder, clutching him tightly.

"There. There." He said, rubbing Anakin's back softly. He moved toward the seat again and allowed the child to cry it out, sensing it was needed.

After a few minutes, Anakin had stilled. Qui-Gon thought he may have fallen asleep. His emotions had calmed and his breathing was even. So he startled slightly when Anakin spoke all of the sudden. "It's so beautiful. I don't ever wanna stop looking."

"What?" He requested clarification.

"Your colors." Anakin said sadly.

"Then why does it sadden you." Qui-Gon asked trying to figure out what was wrong. "Will you tell me what troubles you?"

He shook his head once more.

"Why not?"

"It's selfish. And that's something I shouldn't be if I am going to be a Jedi."

"You've been through a lot lately. I think you are being too hard on yourself. I promise not to think less of you if you share what it is."

He pulled back and met Qui-Gon's eyes. "You promise? Really?"

"I do."

He ducked his head. "I want to be a part of it too, but my colors won't blend with yours." The despair was less this time, but still there.

"Oh." Qui-Gon thought on it for a moment. "That may be true. What has happened to Obi-Wan and me is very rare. For the Force to spontaneously bond us together, it indicates a compatibility that is seldom heard of."

Anakin's face fell, but Qui-Gon lifted his chin with a finger to meet his eyes once more. "But you should know that even though we may not share this type of bond, you are already a significant part of our lives Anakin. You are important to Obi-Wan and you are important to me. You already share a bond of friendship with Obi-Wan. And I am certain we will have a special relationship as well. Wouldn't you agree?"

Anakin nodded, but Qui-Gon wasn't sure he fully believed it.

"Whatever, the future brings, I promise you will not be alone." Qui-Gon vowed.

Anakin smiled a bit and Qui-Gon felt his reassurance as Anakin hugged him tightly once more.

He would have formally asked Anakin to be his padawan then and there, but he felt he should at least consult with Obi-Wan about any major decisions seeing as they would be stuck with each other. And to be truthful, he was still terrified of the idea of taking another padawan.
Anakin yawned loudly as his cheek rested on Qui-Gon's shoulder.

"Why don't you crawl in behind Obi-Wan and I'll tuck you both in."

He shook his head no and the despair returned. "He didn't want me here. I should just go back to my own rooms and-"

"I doubt that was the case, Anakin. Obi-Wan is a noble spirit. If he believed he was any sort of danger to you, then he would have kept you away to protect you. The Council thought he had been brainwashed to murder the Zabrak. Because of the headaches, because his colors hurt. But now that we know there is no threat, I am certain he wouldn't mind if you stayed in here tonight. Besides, I want you here too."

Anakin stood there considering it for a while. "It does sound like something he would do." He finally agreed. "We won't let him get away with it again though, right Qui-Gon? He's not allowed to do that anymore."

"Definitely not." Qui-Gon agreed. "Now climb in there." He lifted the blanket and Anakin crawled up behind Obi-Wan and draped an arm over his waist cuddling up to his back. Qui-Gon tucked him in before settling into the chair beside them and holding Obi-Wan's hand once again.

"Get some rest now, Ani. I'll watch over you both."

"Yes, sir." The boy whispered, nearly asleep already.

Qui-Gon took a moment to run a hand through Anakin's hair. It was only two minutes later and the boy was out. He'd clearly been exhausted emotionally and physically.

He sat back and stared at Obi-Wan in the dim light. His hair was cut shorter than Anakin's. Gods, but he was young! Way too young for Qui-Gon to even consider more than a bond of friendship, but Force he was beautiful! It would be difficult to school his thoughts away from such temptation.

As Qui-Gon reached out to place his hand over Obi-Wan's once again, he felt a mental nudge from Mace and he let him know they could reenter.

"It's truly amazing." Ki-Adi whispered.

"You should stay for sometime," Mace spoke quietly, "Both of you are starting to look better. I think the proximity is benefiting you."

"I agree." Qui-Gon sighed.

"Yoda will be dropping by in a few minutes. He will be looking in on you, but won't disturb you. Try and get some rest."

Qui-Gon nodded, though he did not intend on resting. He had healed Obi-Wan once before. He was going to do his best to see to his wounds now. He had several days rest on the ship, so it was the least he could do.

He checked the young man with the Force and noted the injuries to the ribs again and the bruise to his face, but also the back of his head.

"Qui-Gon," His name brought him back from his study of Obi-Wan's injuries. Mace was looking at Obi-Wan as well. "He's been through a lot. Knowing Obi-Wan and the state of mind Ki-Adi described, he's..."
Mace was apparently searching for a way to be tactful yet again.

"Just say what you are thinking, Mace." He sighed. "You should know that by now."

"I don't know how he will take this news. You seem to have taken all of this in stride, but Obi-Wan may feel differently at first. I know that he will come around, but so much has happened to him...I don't want the two of you to start off on the wrong foot."

The thought of leaving him right now was difficult. But Mace did have a point. "When is the sedative supposed to wear off?"

"You have at least six more hours before he is expected to wake."

Qui-Gon nodded, considering, "I have to admit that I was a bit concerned on how to break the news to him when we were on our way here. When I found out he was sleeping, I was very relieved."

"Do you want to be here when he wakes? Or do you want me to explain what has happened and you can meet him later in the day."

"Will you share with him everything you have shared with me?" Qui-Gon asked. "Not just about the bond, but the shatterpoints and Anakin."

"I realize that I made you promise to tell no one, but it will be difficult to keep secrets of that nature from one with whom you are so closely bonded. I will tell him everything."

Qui-Gon nodded. "I think it would be better hearing it from you, though I feel I am being a coward in some way."

"I think it is the right choice, if that helps."

Qui-Gon nodded then, mind made up. "Very well."

"Obi-Wan is known for coming awake from sedatives earlier than most. I will wake you in around three hours and Anakin and you can go rest in your room."

"That will be fine. Thank you, Mace."

Mace nodded and started to pass by him toward the door. Qui-Gon caught his hand and met his eyes once more. "Not just for this, but for everything. For not giving up on me in the past several years, for sending me messages and keeping updated on what was going on here. Even when I never responded to your coms."

Mace smiled slightly. "Someone had to, you stubborn ass."

Qui-Gon smiled, knowing that Mace was deflecting with humor but very grateful for the acknowledgement.

"I'll see you in three hours." He spoke over his shoulder.

Qui-Gon placed a hand on Obi-Wan's chest and began a healing trance on himself as he had done last time. He wasn't sure what he'd done, but perhaps he could repeat it. He was sure the Force would guide him. And he was more than ready to follow.
Chapter 19

He woke again to a darkened room, but this time there was the glow from a pad illuminating Mace Windu's face. Whatever he was reading must not have been pleasant as his brow was furrowed and his face appeared sterner than usual.

Despite his reputation for being an ass, Obi-Wan knew the man cared about everyone in the Order. He felt things deeper than most would expect. Mace had taken the time to teach him a great deal and allowed Obi-Wan to accompany him on several missions to vary his experience and strengthen his diplomacy and negotiation skills. He was one of the few people Obi-Wan trusted implicitly.

Obi-Wan had discovered they had met when he was but a toddler. Mace had gotten in trouble. For what, he would never say. But he had been assigned creche duty and he assured Obi-Wan this was the worst possible torment as he could not stand younglings. He'd been watching over Obi-Wan who had just discovered the fun of spinning in circles. Unfortunately for Mace, it was just after lunch and when he'd gone to help the tiny toddler who had fallen down. Obi-Wan had thrown up all over him. Mace had told him in no uncertain terms, it was in that moment, he knew Obi-Wan would do great things.

Obi-Wan had no memory of the event itself, but he loved the fondness and humor in Master Windu's tone when the man shared the story. He'd been fourteen when he'd first heard it, and completely intimidated by the scary Korun Master who had joined his and his master's mission. It had been rewarding coming to know and learning from Master Windu. He had become a key figure in Obi-Wan's life after that.

He had been extremely lucky to have such a selfless master in Ilius Praethorn. The man had allowed him to learn from multiple mentors. To gain insight and understanding into multiple views of not just the force, but life in general, was a gift to cherish. He'd come to appreciate all types of beings and belief systems, knowing that each had a place in this universe and all should be respected and valued. He'd come a long way from his thirteen year old self. His master and his mentors had given him so much.

A pang of regret passed through him. What would Master Praethorn have thought?

What must Master Windu think of him now?

Obi-Wan had been struggling so hard with such thoughts these past few days. Along with so many other things. He felt he had let Praethorn down. Despite the message about believing in him and his having suspected what happened in Mos Espa, Obi-Wan felt unworthy. He had always been his own worst critic, but he had never doubted himself to this degree before.

Could something have been done to him by Iessel and whoever had hired the bounty hunter? Could that have been why it was so easy to use the darkside? Or was he just that weak? The thought of falling terrified him. And any reassurance offered by Master Gant and Master Yoda paled in comparison to that fear.

A thought struck him then. If Mace were here, that meant Qui-Gon would be back. He bit back a groan. Well, it was probably for the best. Obi-Wan was...well, what he wanted was...it was totally inappropriate.

So maybe it was best that Qui-Gon think badly of him. It would keep certain temptations away.
And it would keep Anakin away. It would be safer for both of them. He was a train wreck waiting to happen.

But in a way, it kriffing sucked, because having Anakin to care for was the only thing keeping him from going crazy. And the idea of staying away from Qui-Gon...

Force, it hurt!

Even though his eyes were closed, he could feel tears forming behind the lids.

Kark it all! He had no clue why it mattered so much. He'd only met either of them a few weeks ago. He was sure it was a a classic case of co-dependency and his trying to resolve his recent losses by replacing his master with other people.

"Heavy thoughts?" Mace asked quietly.

Obi-Wan raised his hands to his eyes pretending to rub them awake in order to wipe the tears away.

"Welcome home, Master Windu." Obi-Wan tried to sound cheerful, but it was hard to hide what an emotional mess he was. "I'm fairly certain you weren't anticipating such excitement upon your return."

Mace placed a hand on Obi-Wan's shoulder sending reassurance through their bond of friendship. "I think it's past time that you start calling me Mace. At least in private settings. Wouldn't you agree?"

Obi-Wan smiled. "It would be weird."

"You'll get used to it." Mace smiled back.

Obi-Wan began to sit up and Mace placed the pad aside to offer his assistance.

"I suppose you've heard all about the mess I've gotten myself into." Obi-Wan put his feet on the floor and rested his elbows on his knees, allowing himself a moment to get used to being upright. His ribs twinged, but not nearly as much as he thought they would, and his head felt better than expected as well. "And that you want to question me again, which is fine. But my memories are kind of hazy about the whole thing. Master Che says its because of the concussion. But if I had been brainwashed then whose to say how it might have affected my recollection of-"

"There have been some developments." Mace spoke, cutting him off abruptly.

Obi-Wan perked up. "Did they find the assassin?"

"No, it has nothing to do with the investigation. Except that you are no longer a suspect. Or at least, you are very much less of one."

"I don't understand. What did you discover?"

"We have confirmed that you are not under any outside influences."

Obi-Wan waited for an explanation, but Mace just smiled. "Why don't you take a moment to shower and I'll go prepare tea? We can speak of it as you eat something. I have strict orders to make sure you have a healthy breakfast. And I can see now why it they made it an order. You've lost too much weight."

Master Windu was a hard man to read, but their bond alerted him to the man's nervous excitement. He was amused at something, but also concerned.
Well, if nothing else, Obi-Wan should be happy he was no longer under suspicion, or as much suspicion anyway. He supposed he could wait a few moments before finding out what had happened and a shower sounded wonderful. As Mace went to the kitchen, Obi-Wan pulled a new tunic and a robe out of his closet and made his way to the fresher.

After hanging his clothes on the hook on the back of the door, he took a moment to glance at the damage to his face. His eye had been swollen shut last night and he expected horrible bruising.

He was surprised to find the bruise had already faded to a yellowish green and was only slightly sore to the touch.

Just how long had he slept? For some reason the idea of oversleeping made him worried.

He was forgetting something.

Kriff!

Mishar Torvin!

He raced back to his room and pulled up his com. He sensed Master Windu's concern and felt him following from the kitchen.

"What's wrong?" He called.

Obi-Wan explained briefly, "Before all of this...this latest incident with the Sith, I hired Mishar and his team to return to Tatooine and purchase Anakin's mother."

Obi-Wan risked a glance at Mace whose eyebrows were raised in surprise, but no lecture was forthcoming, which sort of surprised Obi-Wan.

"Dear Force," Obi-Wan exclaimed seeing the time, "You've let me sleep too long."

"We had strict orders that you were to wake on your own. And it's not that late."

"Well it's a lot closer to second meal than breakfast." Obi-Wan accused. He scanned through multiple messages looking for Mishar's, noting that he had several messages from Bail, Bant, Reeft, and Siri. Even Garen had sent something and he was on a covert assignment, quite a risk.

Kriff, he must have scared the hell out of his friends.

He'd been terrified himself.

He quickly sorted the messages from the senders and found five transmissions from Mishar Torvin, the last was sent about six hours ago.

There was a lot of interference and background activity as Mishar came on screen.

"We are leaving Tatooine, but that bitch may have put a tracker on the ship. She may even be watching our current transmission. We're going to have to go dark for a while, but we'll contact you when we feel we've lost her for good. Everyone's alive. Branger is still in shock, definite concussion, and Hurgan is...he's hurt pretty badly, but they'll both make it. We got Lady Skywalker out with only bumps and bruises."

In the background, they could hear one of Torvin's crew screaming in pain. Obi-Wan new the med bay was just down the corridor. Another voice was yelling back at him to stop screaming. Someone else was yelling to get to one of the gun turrets, and if Obi-Wan wasn't wrong, Shmi Skywalker was
yelling something about bypassing some of the safety protocols to achieve hyperspace capability.

"We'll be scanning the ship once we hit hyperspace to see if that woman has tagged us somehow or messed with my ship. I fully suspect it's been compromised and we'll have to change rides a few times before we contact you again. You tried to warn us, but I didn't really expect her to be this good."

"Hyperspace is a go." Shmi yelled. "Coordinates entered."

"I'll call when I can. Not out of the woods yet. Punch it." Mishar yelled back to them.

The transmission ended.

"Nothing since then?"

Obi-Wan shook his head. "That was the last transmission sent six hours ago."

"Force." Mace sighed. "If someone has Mishar Torvin at such a disadvantage, I'm not sure I'd want to face them."

"Her." Obi-Wan corrected. "I hope I'm not correct. But they are likely being pursued by a female Sith."

"What in the name of...are you serious?" Mace asked with concern.

Obi-Wan pulled up the previous transmissions in the order in which he had received them.

On the first Mishar was just checking in as he said he would. The had arrived on planet and were preparing to go find Watto's shop.

The second call explained that they had discovered Watto had been killed by a man in a dark robe with a lightsaber. His slave and property defaulted to Gardulla the Hutt so they were seeking an audience with one of her underlings.

The third transmission indicated that they had successfully bought Shmi from Gardulla's slave master and were headed back to the ship.

The fourth comm was a lot harder to make out. The transmission was extremely unsteady with a lot of movement and the wind made it hard to hear anything. The crew, along with Shmi, seemed to be in a speeder, racing through the streets as Obi-Wan had done as the Zabrak pursued him. The com was passed to Hurgan who attempted to film the bald headed female coming at them on a speeder bike. She was deflecting shots from their blasters with a red lightsaber. One of the bolts could be seen coming back toward the com and the video cut off suddenly.

Obi-Wan leaned forward onto his elbows on his desk, running his hands through his hair nervously before covering his face. The frustration and fear, along with the guilt were overwhelming. He slammed the desk back against the wall with his palms and stood up, wanting to go to them. To help them.

"Calm yourself." Mace advised. "The news is upsetting, but we know they made it to hyperspace."

"Not without casualties." He explained, "Force, Mace! Hurgan doesn't scream for just any old blaster wound. He's one of the toughest guys I know. I should never have sent them." He sighed. "No. That's not true. I know I should have...it's just hard watching that."
"Why DID you send them?" Mace asked pulling the chair over to sit at the desk. He pulled the video up again and watched the Sith swing her lightsabers deflecting the blaster fire.

"Anakin and I...we...he had a vision and I saw some of it as well." Obi-Wan admitted beginning to pace nervously. "You know I've learned my lessons. I don't react to my visions out of fear. I am patient, I try to see all the angles. But there was an urgency to this vision. One I cannot say I have felt before. It was telling me to act immediately. But now..." He shook his head.

"Obi-Wan, you need not defend your decision to me. I believe you have learned enough about the Unifying Force to handle yourself and act accordingly. If you thought it was necessary, then I believe you."

Obi-Wan was shocked, "You do?"

Mace paused the video on the best shot of the attacker and zoomed in more closely to see her face. Obi-Wan thought he heard the man whisper, "Dathomirian" before turning and reacting to Obi-Wan's honest surprise. "Of course. And it would seem you were correct. Had Mishar and his team not shown up to free Shmi, the outcome could have been very different. But this cannot be kept from the Council. You have evidence of another Sith. One that was after the mother of Anakin Skywalker. That is not just some coincidence and we will need to find out her motivations. But we can't exactly tell the Senate we are out there buying slaves. So for now, I must ask you to keep this to yourself."

"And if Anakin asks-"

"If he asks for an update, let him know the team has made contact with his mother and left the planet. And for Force sake, tell him not to speak of it. Not to anyone. That child can talk the ears off of a Lannik. I do hope Qui-Gon will teach him some discretion."

Obi-Wan smiled. "I fear negotiation will not be his strong suit, but then we always need a few Jedi who will tell it like it is, right?"

Mace took the intended jibe with grace and ignored it, but Obi-Wan sensed his amusement.

He could also tell Mace wanted to go to the Council immediately with this. The transmission had unsettled him.

"I can forgo the shower if you would like to take this to the Council now."

"No." Mace shook his head. "I'll inform Yoda of what we saw and heard and I will forward him these transmissions. We will see what we can do to anticipate Mishar's next moves and get him the help he needs to arrive safely with Miss Skywalker. You get cleaned up. We still need to talk."

"Very well." Obi-Wan agreed.

Lost in his thoughts regarding the attack, it wasn't until halfway through his shower that he realized the normal constant ache that had been his companion this past week was gone. Perhaps he had been under some sort of compulsion and they just figured out how to lift it. That made him more worried and he struggled to recall exactly how Mace had explained the issue.

He had used the present tense. "We have confirmed that you are not under any outside influences."

He told him he was not under the control of outside influences, but not that he never had been.

"Karking hell!" He muttered, drying off and dressing in record time.
He made his way to the kitchenette, where he quickly ate the high protein yogurt and fresh fruit Mace had prepared. In his haste and worry, he hardly tasted any of it. It was followed by a few sips of his Master's favorite tea before he finally pushed for an explanation. "Now that you have allowed me to stress for the past few minutes, please tell me that I am healthy and that I didn't really do what they are saying."

"The cause of your headaches was determined. Oddly enough, Qui-Gon Jinn suffered the same symptoms. He reported them to the Healers during our time on Naboo and they continued up until we returned to Coruscant last night."

Obi-Wan waited patiently but Mace was just studying him. "Well, what was it? Did we pick up a virus or something on Tatooine?"

"No." Mace shook his head. "Tell me what you think of Qui-Gon?"

"Why? What does that have to do with anything?"

"Indulge me." Mace was wearing that expression that said, "I'm going to listen to what you have to say, but I already know the answer."

Obi-Wan was confused by the line of questioning having so abruptly changed. There was no way he was going to share ALL of his thoughts and impressions.

"He is nothing like what I would have expected after all the Council's grumbling over the years. The man is a strong fighter, a slightly better pilot than you give him credit for and he healed me. He took great care of me on the Deadeye. He was patient and kind. He was the model Jedi."

Obi-Wan did not mention how it felt as if Qui-Gon could read his mind at times, nor how they shared the vision, nor how without Qui-Gon, he never could have been strong enough to accompany his Master through the Temple to the Halls of Healing.

Mace, of course, seemed to suspect he was holding back but did not press the issue.

"When Anakin arrived here weeks ago, just ahead of you and Qui-Gon, there were shatterpoints around the boy. So many. I was astonished. I'd never seen anything like it. I couldn't even count them. After Qui-Gon accepted the task of being his guardian, the shatterpoints reduced drastically. I cannot tell how many disasters may have been averted in that moment. Now only a handful remain."

Mace's gaze seemed to lose focus for several long seconds as he seemingly stared through Obi-Wan. Obi-Wan began to feel nervous and coughed politely drawing Mace's attention back to the present.

Obi-Wan was fascinated by what Mace was saying, but couldn't understand why he was bringing it up. "I'm not following. What does this have to do with my headaches?"

"Obi-Wan, this will be a lot to take in. But, the shatterpoints surrounding the boy...they are shared by Qui-Gon." Mace paused, "And by you. I believe both of your fates, both of your destinies will intertwine with young Skywalker's."

Obi-Wan shook his head in disagreement. "Anakin will be trained by Qui-Gon. I am a newly made knight. That makes no sense."

It would never happen. Qui-Gon would find out about his use of the darkside and refuse to allow him anywhere near Anakin.

Mace studied him intensely for a moment. And Obi-Wan thought he might be able to read his soul in
those brief seconds.

But he was not going to share his thoughts on the matter, not when they were still so mixed up in his own mind. Besides, it was better to make the clean break now, right?

He'd already come close to the darkside. He didn't need to tempt himself further with thoughts of attachment.

"Actually, it is very likely." Mace smiled slightly and Obi-wan could feel the nervous excitement in the man.

After a moment of nothing further he realized, Mace was going to make him ask. So he did, allowing a bit of frustration to slip out as sarcasm. "Then tell me, please. Don't leave me waiting in suspense. Why would you find it so likely?" He was growing weary of the round about way this encounter was going.

"When Qui-Gon and you fought the Zabrak on Tatooine, something happened between you. Qui-Gon told me that when you joined the duel, it was like nothing he'd ever experienced. It was like you'd been fighting at one another side's for a lifetime. He said that after the fight, he caught you as you were collapsing. He thought he had been injured, for in that moment, a pins-and-needles sensation rocked through him."

Obi-Wan shivered, remembering a similar odd sensation.

"Master Nu has done a bit of research. We believe in that moment, a force bond developed."

Obi-Wan's breath caught. He'd heard of Force bonds, but knew they were extremely rare. Some believed them to be myths.

"This is not your everyday sort of bond, Obi-Wan." Mace seemed annoyed by Obi-Wan's lack of a response.

But Obi-Wan didn't have a clue what to say. In a way, it made perfect sense, he supposed.

"Pair bonds, life bonds, master and padawan bonds. I've seen all types. But never one like this. It's highly unusual and very strong."

Obi-Wan was still running the idea through his mind. It connected all the dots. The shared visions, the unspoken thoughts they seemed to just pick up on from nowhere. The ease with which they had read one another.

"Who made this connection?" Obi-Wan inquired, "Qui-Gon?"

Mace looked sheepish for a moment. "I should have put it together the moment I knew you both shared the same symptoms. The headaches and the psychic wounds." He hung his head. "But I am afraid my mind has been so focused on the enemy lately and the threats to the Order, that I jumped to the wrong conclusions and assumed you both had been compromised, just as the others had suggested."

"Then how did you- Oh Force! Tell me he was not here. He did not see me like this!"

"I think he has seen you in worse shape." Mace answered, clearly not understanding Obi-Wan's reaction.

"He came here then? It's the only explanation for my having healed so quickly. He did the same
thing on the Deadeye. With my leg."

Obi-Wan did not like the idea that others had come in when he had been sedated. Not one bit. He'd confessed his fear of sedation with Master Mundi. But he'd accepted the deal with Master Che because he was either going to be sedated in the Halls of Healing or in his room. And seeing what happened to the Sith, he had no desire to be drugged where others had access to him.

"Anakin was the one to show us." Mace explained.

"Anakin?" Obi-Wan was confused and still disturbed at the thought of others standing over him as he slept on unaware. He fought to push down the anxiety, feeling cold sweat break out on his neck and forehead.

It was over now and he had survived. No need to dwell on it. He was safe.

"He claimed to have seen another bond like yours on Tatooine once. It is how he recognized what you were to one another. He made Qui-Gon promise to come see you so that you would both stop hurting."

Obi-Wan shook his head slowly and planted his hands in his face.

"What in the sith hells..." He breathed, rubbing his face, before looking directly at Mace. "Are you...I don't...This is..."

"I know. It's incredible." Mace stated, "I thought that-"

"No!" Obi-Wan interrupted, standing suddenly. "Just...just give me a moment." He began pacing back and forth. It was hard to even string a thought together.

But this was far from good. Not incredible.

"It's not...This is not okay." He huffed.

What had happened as he slept on unaware? What had they spoken about as they stood over him? He had been sedated and Master Mundi had promised to keep him safe, to keep others out.

Mace stood and blocked his path. Obi-Wan had not realized he'd even been pacing until that moment. Mace reached up and felt Obi-Wan's brow and Obi-wan fought the urge to knock his hand aside. Mace sent a gentle brush across his mind and Obi-wan's shoulders sagged and he felt a wisp of weariness take hold as the tension drained from him. Mace was offering comfort. He was trying to understand Obi-Wan's reaction.

"Master Mundi shouldn't have let either of you in." He confessed. "I was...under sedation...it was a frightening thought and he promised no one would be allowed in."

Understanding dawned in Mace's eyes, "Qui-Gon was in pain, Obi-Wan. As were you. Master Mundi saw the necessity. Though that information does explain his overprotective attitude. He practically interrogated us before we were even allowed a glimpse of you."

Obi-Wan felt a bit better after hearing that, but still...

He looked up into Mace's eyes. "Qui-Gon helped to heal me again though, didn't he? Like he did on the Deadeye. You said he wasn't a good healer."

"Never has been before." Mace agreed. "But the bond could make a huge difference when it comes
"And so the headaches we felt?" Obi-Wan was so grateful they were gone at least. It had felt like forever since he'd been without the pain. But he hated the fact that so many people had stood over him as he slept on unaware.

"Apparently your being apart for such a long distance or perhaps for so long of a time period caused both of you to suffer. When we arrived last night, we came to see you and Qui-Gon's headache all but disappeared. The psychic wound he was showing in the Force seemed to melt away and as corny it sounds, there was almost a hum of energy between the two of you."

Obi-Wan plopped back down into his chair. Shock seemed to have taken up residence in his mind. He couldn't think of much. He felt like he wanted to run to the man now and just take shelter in his arms, but at the same time the logical part of his brain was yelling at him to run the other way.

He would have to admit to Qui-Gon that he had used the darkside. Something he had only shared with a few. When that happened, Qui-Gon would want to be rid of him, to keep him from seeing Anakin. He would resent being tied to Obi-Wan. And rightfully so.

"Is it...could the bond be severed?"

Obi-Wan wasn't looking at Mace as he asked the question, but he sensed how quickly the man's head whipped up to look at him.

Obi-Wan could only meet the man's eyes for the briefest of seconds, before shame filled him and he looked once more at the floor.

"I suppose, theoretically." Mace advised. "But to do that would cause you both great pain. And I am not certain either of you would escape unscathed. You would both likely suffer the pain of the loss for the rest of your lives. The headaches would be the least of the symptoms."

Obi-Wan forced himself to take several deep breaths. "So that's it then? The Force just gets to decide for us!" He spat angrily. But the anger was just a smokescreen for his fear.

"We follow the will of the Force, Obi-Wan. If it is the will of the Force for this bond to have formed, then it should be honored and strengthened."

"It's not fair." He shook his head again, wanting to curl into himself and never let the world in again.

Mace started to appear suspicious. He knew Obi-Wan too well it seemed, "Fair to you or fair to Qui-Gon?"

"I don't deserve him." Obi-Wan admitted, "And Anakin doesn't deserve my stealing his master from him."

"While you may be a Knight, you still have much to learn." Windu corrected gently. "Qui-Gon Jinn is terrified of putting himself out there again, but I have felt hope return to his soul. He fears you will reject him for his past failures and that he would be holding you back from your own hopes and dreams. As to you coming between him and the boy, that is utter nonsense. There is no limit to the number of friends and mentors one can have in their lives. You are the perfect example of that. And by the Gods, Qui-Gon is going to need all the help he can get."

Obi-Wan is stunned by the sheer amount of passion Mace just unloaded on him. "I would not be a good role model."
"You've always been too hard on yourself, Obi-Wan." Mace walked around the table to take the seat beside him. He pushed Obi-Wan's chair out and lifted his chin up so that Obi-Wan could hear the truth. "You have so much to offer both of them. And they need you. The Force seems to think so. They think so. And I happen to agree. It's true, neither of you are perfect. None of us are. But I can already see how the two of you will compliment one another. And Anakin will benefit from those differences. One of you is strong in the Living Force, the other in the Cosmic. Obi-Wan, you have been given a gift, and your master would come back and haunt me for life if I stand by and let you sabotage this because you don't think you are good enough for it."

It was everything he wanted to hear, but it was so difficult to accept.

After a moment of silence, Mace spoke again, "There is no pressure to change everything at once. You've been through a lot these past two months and no one is expecting things to change immediately. Meet the man. Spend time with him. And with the boy. I think you will be surprised at how easy it will be to care for them both."

"It won't be a surprise." He admitted.

"Then where does the problem lie?"

Obi-Wan shook his head and turned to look out at the Coruscanti skyline. He didn't want to answer.

Well, he did. He just wasn't ready to yet.

A hand was placed on his shoulder as Mace joined him at his side.

"I'm here, Obi-Wan. My door is always open. You need not go through this alone. Master Yoda says you are having a hard time meditating. If you'd like me to join you, I would be honored to guide you."

Obi-Wan blew out a frustrated sigh. "I feel like I'm a newly made initiate. Needing help just to meditate."

"There are times when all of us find it difficult. There is no shame in needing assistance." The hand on his shoulder squeezed gently. "I also know you are seeing Master Gant. But sometimes it takes another who has gone through similar experiences to fully sympathize with your thoughts and fears. I am here for you in that capacity as well should you need to bend my ear."

There was no way Obi-Wan could hide the shock he felt at the statement. He wondered if Mace was referring to the rape or the use of the darkside. Both had left him with issues. But it was the latter that terrified him. He knew he wasn't ready to speak about either at the moment. But having Mace with him, offering to be that person for him, reminded him that he had people who cared about him and believed in him.

He basked in the warmth, comfort, and reassurance Mace was providing. All things that a Master would do for a padawan. It was nice to feel it again.

He turned his own moist eyes to meet Mace's and was so choked up, he couldn't even whisper words to thank the man.

But Mace seemed to hear them anyway. He pulled Obi- distant into his arms and hugged him tightly as he began to cry.

He'd mourned for his master weeks ago and Yoda had been at his side. But he had not yet cried for himself. Not like this. It had always felt wrong, selfish to mourn for what had been taken from him.
Or to give himself any pity for the injuries and torture he’d experienced. Especially after what he had done.

Bereft of any reservation as to how he would look or what Mace would think, he cried for what had been done to him and what he allowed himself to do after.

And Mace was there telling him he was still loved. Still needed. Still appreciated. And it was okay to allow himself to love and be loved still.

After he cried for Force knew how long, he began to feel like himself again. The hollow feeling, the loneliness and fear, that had started to creep inside him was dissipating. "Thank you, Master Windu."

"Mace." He corrected.

"Right. Mace." Obi-Wan sniffed, pulling away slowly with a smile gracing his face. "I think I really needed that."

"I know you did." Mace agreed.

Obi-Wan thought maybe everything could still work out. He would do what Master Windu- Mace- had suggested. Take his time. Meet Qui-Gon. Take it slowly. It was comforting, in a way, to know that Qui-Gon would have his own insecurities. He wouldn’t be the only one with issues.

He could sense Qui-Gon more clearly in his mind now. The man seemed to be very focused, very worried.

Obi-Wan startled a bit realizing that concern was directed toward himself. He sent a bit of reassurance Qui-Gon's way and it seemed to pacify him.

"I think I will be fine now." He told Mace. "I am going to try and meditate again. It may not be as difficult now that Master Jinn has returned. The pain was a distraction I couldn't put aside, but it appears to be gone now."

Mace nodded and immediately moved to begin tidying the kitchen. "I'll get this and get out of your hair."

"You aren't staying? It was my understanding that you were my current jailer." He asked, somewhat surprised.

"There is nothing keeping me here except our friendship, Obi-Wan. The Council is no longer keeping tabs on you. If you'd like me to stay, I have a lot of work to catch up on and I can do that from her as easy as anywhere else."

"Your presence would be comforting." He admitted, hoping he truly wasn't causing Mace any problems.

Mace smiled, "It's settled then. If you haven't completed your mediation before third meal, I will wake you and we can go eat together."

"That sounds nice. Thank you, Mast- Thank you, Mace."

Mace nodded and Obi-Wan headed in the direction of his room.

He felt better than he had in a long time. The emotional release, despite being frowned upon by some, had somehow lightened his heart and the news of the Force bond brought him hope, in spite of
his concerns.

"Obi-Wan!" Mace called.

He looked back as Mace set the tea cups in the sink before meeting his eyes. "Remember, no matter how much this world seems to be spinning out of control, you can always come to me for help. I'll set you straight again."

Obi-Wan smiled at the irony of the statement and his thoughts upon waking, "And this time, I'll try to avoid puking on you."

He laughed quietly at Mace's confused expression.
Chapter 20

Obi-Wan could sense both Qui-Gon and Anakin as he neared the Gardens.

He closed his eyes and shook his head, he knew he was being foolish. He shouldn't be this nervous to meet with them. His heart was thundering and his palms were sweaty. It was almost as if he were about to dive off of a cliff from a great height or try to fly a Mandalorian jet pack for the first time.

He'd just finished eating with Mace who claimed he'd never seen Obi-Wan so distracted. He'd been right. Obi-Wan had to ask for almost every comment to be repeated and he felt fidgety.

Mace had tried reassuring him there was nothing to be nervous about, but it clearly wasn't something his mind was buying into.

He wanted to see both of them, but the idea of any sort of deep discussion or future planning was not appealing. Meditation had helped a great deal, but he still felt out of sorts. And it hadn't really sunk in yet that this was real. He was so tired physically, mentally and emotionally. He felt as if he could sleep for days.

"You need to go see them. Anakin needs to be reassured you are safe and well," Mace argued. "And so does Qui-Gon." Mace surprised him by slapping a hand down onto his shoulder. "Go. Keep it light. You don't have to stay long."

So here he was, approaching from one of the upper levels and staying in the shadows so as not to disturb them. He was still shielding fairly well from Anakin, just not completely. Anakin did not seem to realize he was there, but Qui-Gon glanced up slowly and smiled before turning back to his ward. Obi-Wan caught the pleasant surprise and welcome upon being seen.

It was only thirty seconds later that Anakin finished the kata, the same one Obi-Wan had been teaching him for the past week. Qui-Gon approached and began correcting his foot positioning, the very same misstep Obi-Wan had corrected a number of times. But other than that, he'd nailed the routine perfectly.

Obi-Wan couldn't stop a small feeling of pride for Anakin from bubbling forth as he began a careful descent down the steep slope. His leg still ached now and then, but it was holding up nicely.

"Obi-Wan!" Anakin brushed past Qui-Gon and ran full speed to get to Obi-Wan. The boy barely slowed before slamming him into a fierce hug. The relief coming from him was so strong that any form of shields might as well not exist.

It was nice to have someone care so much.

But just as Obi-Wan relaxed into the hug and began to raise his arms to return the embrace, Anakin pushed him away. A wall of anger abruptly replaced the relief and happiness. His small features drew tight in accusation and his cheeks went red. Obi-wan was barely able to get his hands up in time to grab the fists aimed for his chest.

Anakin tried to break out of the grip Obi-Wan had on his wrists to no avail.

"Anakin!" Qui-Gon called, beginning to jog toward them.

Obi-Wan felt the violent reaction fade and released the boy's hands.
However, the anger was still evident as Anakin fumed and took a step back from him, eyes shining fiercely, "Don't you ever do that to me again!"

Obi-Wan could feel Qui-Gon's shock and surprise as he came forward to help against any further assaults, but Obi-Wan stopped him with a mental warning and hand barely raised at his side.

Obi-Wan just waited a moment and watched as Anakin's eyes filled with tears. The hurt was far greater than the anger. Obi-Wan held the boys gaze and then opened his side of the bond a little more, sending understanding and reassurance, but following it with gentle admonition.

Anakin's breathing increased with his excited emotional state. He huffed loudly, before turning and running away from both of them.

"Anakin." Qui-Gon started after him, but hesitated. He seemed torn between going after Anakin or staying with Obi-Wan.

"I think he just needs a minute." Obi-Wan suggested. "He won't go far." Despite not having been physically hit, the abrupt emotional change had still been like a punch to the gut. On top of that, Obi-Wan sensed how upset Qui-Gon felt which made him feel all the more tired.

This was not how he'd imagined things would play out. And it was definitely not the best way to start a new relationship-

PARTNERSHIP!

He corrected his thoughts almost immediately, cursing softly under his breath.

Qui-Gon raised his eyebrows at the curse, obviously shocked.

"Is this something that happens often between the two of you?" Qui-Gon still seemed ready to run to Anakin at the slightest indication that he was needed.

"It's the first time he's been mad at me." Obi-Wan admitted, "But he has been having a hard time adjusting to Temple life. When he is under too much stress, I have noticed that anger tends to be his outlet. It's not always expressed so...physically, but it is the emotion he tends to use to recover. Definitely a tendency that will need a lot of attention. We've talked about it a little, after an argument he had with some of the other initiates. He will have to work to retrain his cognitive thought processes when he gets into...challenging situations."

Obi-Wan turned and walked to the nearest seat, a rock bench about ten paces away. "He's doing exactly what I advised him to do. If possible remove himself from the situation, think on his feelings, and determine why they formed. Then think on what may have motivated the other person to be disagreeable and see if there is some common ground or way to understand, forgive, or compromise. It's a lesson I had to learn as well. His is a bit more problematic though. Because of the anger and...his other experiences as a slave, I do not believe assistance from a mind healer would be remiss."

Qui-Gon studied Obi-Wan briefly before turning to watch Anakin again. "I don't know whether to be completely worried or reassured."

Obi-Wan smiled gently. "Maybe a bit of both. He is worth the extra time and patience. He has it in him to be a wonderful person. He's just had to look out for himself and his mom for so long, that it is hard to think of others first just yet. Or to put himself in their shoes. I would imagine it was difficult to risk any emotional investments in a life of slavery. He likely had to shut off that part of himself. He is too sensitive to the emotions of others. Because of this, he may have hardened himself to the pain
others experience. It may come across as selfish, but I believe it may have more to do with self-preservation. Empathy may be a challenge for him for many years to come."

He glanced over to find Qui-Gon studying him closely. "Are you sure you are not a mind healer yourself?"

Obi-Wan let out a small huff of laughter, "It's all the recent personal experience."

They watched Anakin stop at the edge of the pond. He picked up a small rock and threw it into the water. He glanced back toward them with a frown, but any sign of anger was gone from his expression, before he turned back away from them.

"My pushing him away, was a much bigger stressor than anything he'd gone through since being here. I suppose I should have expected this response, but I hadn't really thought it through."

Obi-Wan wondered if the man was picking up on his exhaustion or the guilt he felt for pushing Anakin away.

"His whole life has been turned upside down. We might see his rescue as a huge blessing...or a great favor to him. And in many ways it is. But in other ways, he has no clue what is going on. He had no idea what to expect. And he is being asked to make choices, a new skill for him. It's difficult for him to do this. From deciding what to eat to determining how to spend his free-time, actually MAKING decisions is challenging for him at times."

Qui-Gon and he watched as Anakin plopped himself down at the edge of a stream and sat with his legs and arms crossed and his shoulders slumped.

"I've learned a lot about him in the few weeks we have had together. And I've got a ton of notes to cover with you." Obi-Wan smiled, peeking a glance at Qui-Gon. "You have your work cut out for you."

Qui-Gon seemed a bit surprised and possibly overwhelmed. "Your advice is very welcome. I had not thought too deeply about the dramatic changes he would be experiencing. I'm glad he had a friend to rely on while I was away."

"Well, if I am to believe him, it was actually the other way around. Apparently he promised you he would look after me while you were away." Obi-Wan explained.

Qui-Gon smiled and looked away quickly and Obi-Wan would have put money on the fact that he was blushing. "I may have been a bit concerned for your well-being." He admitted.

"Well, thank you. Anakin has helped me a great deal these past few weeks. Without him to keep me distracted, well...he's kept me in the present, kept me from dwelling to much on what's happened. I'd like to think we've been good for each other." Obi-Wan sighed, shaking his head. "I have to admit though, this caught me off guard. I wasn't expecting-" He exhaled quickly trying to release his feelings to the Force. He'd never meant to hurt Anakin.

Of course, Qui-Gon recognized his turmoil.

"I think we've all undergone life-changing experiences these past few weeks that have us a bit on the sensitive side." He smiled in understanding.

Obi-Wan nodded. It was diplomatic of Qui-Gon to overlook his extreme emotions.

Obi-Wan coughed quietly and changed the subject away from those topics. "I hear I have you to
thank for healing me again." He forced a smile this time. "I was surprised to look in the mirror and see I resembled myself and not a Twi'lek in anaphylactic shock."

Qui-Gon smiled. "Your appearance was closer to a Keshiri with a tumor."

"You flatter me." Obi-Wan deadpanned, happy to see Qui-Gon's smile in reaction.

"You do seem to always find me at my worst." Obi-Wan admitted, "Master Che told me I'd be wearing a prosthetic right now, if not for your healing the infection. That's two for which I owe you."

"There's no owing between friends, Obi-Wan." Qui-Gon remarked.

For some reason, the statement made Obi-Wan's heart feel lighter. It brought a smile to his face and he could feel his own cheeks brighten with heat this time.

The feeling, however, was short lived as fear flashed quickly in his mind.

Anakin!

The boy had shot up off the ground and was tripping over his own robes in his haste to move away from the stream.

Obi-Wan was at his side faster than lightning, lifting him with his left hand and putting himself between the boy and the anticipated threat, while scanning the water and the surrounding gardens. His lightsaber was drawn and ready in his right hand.

Qui-Gon moved to the edge of the water, chuckling quietly at both of them.

"There is no reason for alarm, Anakin." Qui-Gon explained kneeling at the edge of the water. "This is Gorm."

Obi-Wan turned his saber off, but kept it in hand as he advanced cautiously toward the water's edge with Anakin safely behind him. Anakin was clutching tightly to Obi-Wan's arm, his fear still present.

A huge fish was resting its head on the sand of the shallow water, its tail swishing every now and then to maintain its place on the bank instead of allowing it to drift back into the stream. It was hideously ugly. And it looked like something that would eat your face off given the opportunity. No doubt Anakin thought it was going to attack him.

"How have I never seen this creature before?" Obi-Wan asked, calming his breathing in an attempt to mitigate the huge adrenaline rush.

"Gorm is new to the gardens. He is a force sensitive fish from Ichturius 3. He was injured and can no longer reproduce. His species has been hunted to near extinction. They are quite sensitive to emotions. They will flock to those radiating happiness, but have been known to offer comfort to those in despair."

Obi-Wan was a little surprised as Anakin squeezed his arm once before letting go to approach the bank beside Qui-Gon.

"You are so strong in the Force, Anakin that I believe our friend here sensed you may be in need of cheering up." Qui-Gon rubbed the fish's head between it's eyes and sent soothing energy its way.

Anakin knelt down and reached out his hand bravely and Qui-Gon encouraged him to rub the fish's
face just as he had.

"It's slimy." He said nervously, looking back to Obi-Wan. Obi-Wan nodded his acknowledgment. Anakin didn't seem to realize he was still trying to deal with his own panic.

Weak in the knees over a stupid fish of all things!

He'd completely expected to face an attacker.

Qui-gon's hand slipped to the back of the creature and continued petting. A small laugh escaped the boy as he spoke to the fish, "Hello, Gorm. I bet you think you were being very funny sneaking up on me like that. Huh, you naughty fish?" He teased.

As he began to feel better, Obi-Wan felt a pang of emptiness watching the two of them. It would be nice to have this. To have them in his life. But he still doubted Qui-Gon would be so forgiving of his use of the Darkside.

Something in him hoped for it though. Perhaps Qui-Gon would think him worth the risk. It was a chance he was willing to take, he just dreaded confessing the matter to anyone else.

Best to tell him sooner rather than later. If it were meant to be, then he would want to begin with complete honesty. It would be nothing but selfish and cruel to allow a partnership to develop and then have it derailed once the truth became known.

Qui-Gon looked back at him seeming to realize he was still disturbed.

Not wanting to ruin the moment, he forced a smile and attempted to push the heavier thoughts aside.

Anakin was officially taken with the fish now. Qui-Gon rose as the boy continued to play, drying his hands off on his robes as he walked to Obi-Wan's side.

"Everything ok?" He asked meeting Obi-Wan's eyes briefly before turning to watch Anakin with him.

"Yes. Of course." Obi-Wan replied, putting on a brave face and faking a smile.

They both knew he was lying. He should just go. He wasn't ready for this discussion and he didn't want to ruin their evening with his fretting.

Qui-Gon was about to say something, but Obi-Wan didn't give him the chance.

"I've had a long day." Obi-Wan began his excuse to leave. "I simply need some rest and-Anakin!"

Obi-Wan was surprised as the boy appeared suddenly, grabbing his arm and pulling him over to see Gorm.

"You've gotta try this." He claimed.

Before Obi-Wan knew what had happened, he was rubbing Gorm's forehead with two of his fingers. The fish was indeed slimy! It was also incredibly relaxing. And there was great joy and comfort emanating from Anakin's new friend.

"Do you want to see what else I just learned?" Anakin's eyes danced with excitement.

"Of course." Obi-Wan answered.

Anakin closed his eyes and concentrated. Obi-Wan could sense his contact with the Living Force
strengthen. He watched as a swarm of smaller fish began swimming toward them. Then all types and sizes were headed in their direction.

"Anakin." Obi-Wan murmured his appreciation and wonder, "How did you-?"

Obi-Wan glanced at Qui-Gon feeling a spike of concern come from him.

"That is very impressive Anakin." Qui-Gon noted, moving to the edge of the water, "But I do want you to be careful. Experimenting with the Force can be a dangerous thing. Especially for one as talented as you. You will not always see the consequences of what you are doing without more wisdom."

Qui-Gon's attention was obviously on one medium sized fish that suddenly lunged to attack a group of smaller ones. He caught it with the Force and raised it above the water, slowly moving it to an area much farther downstream and releasing it back into the water as he explained. "By calling all of the fish forward, you put some in danger as they left their areas of protection to come to you."

Qui-Gon used the living force to encourage the fish to return from where they had come.

Anakin stood and watched in wonder and amazement. Qui-Gon placed a hand on his shoulder as he continued to watch the fish leave. "I will not stifle your curiosity. But if you wish to try new things, I ask that you do so under the guidance of another until you have a better understanding."

Anakin met Qui-Gon's eyes and nodded. Obi-Wan could sense the hero-worship within the boy and knew the lesson had indeed been learned.

It was touching. But it also made Obi-Wan feel rather incompetent. He was neither so powerful in the living force, nor so wise. He'd been as giddy as Anakin as the fish responded to his call.

Qui-Gon sent a bit of reassurance his way with a kind glance. But it only made him feel more foolish.

"Say goodbye to Gorm." Qui-Gon instructed "And let's see if Obi-Wan will join us for iced cream." He looked over at Obi-Wan, drawing him out of his self-pity. "I hear it was you who introduced him to it after all."

Obi-Wan forced a smile, pushing the embarrassment aside, "I figured he would not have had much of an opportunity on a desert planet to have experienced it."

"Well, he's addicted now." Qui-Gon informed him. "He claims knowledge of a store within walking distance of the Temple called 101 flavors. He insists that he is going to try every last one, even the one made from Klatooine Paddy Frogs."

Obi-wan grimaced, "Those are not meant for the human palette."

"It seems the threat of a foul taste will not deter him." Qui-Gon smiled.

"Please go with us, Obi-Wan. I am sorry, I got mad. I did what you said and I-" A tear escape his eye and he wiped it quickly away and hugged Obi-Wan, "I thought about it. And you were right. I was more scared than mad. Actually I was really, really, really scared. And I was a little bit mad because you made me feel that way."

Obi-Wan hugged him back, but then held his hands in his own, putting a little space between them so he could look Anakin in the eyes as he apologized, "That was never my intention. I thought I was doing the right thing. I thought I was dangerous, Anakin. They had me convinced that something
was wrong with me. The timing of the Sith being killed and my headaches increasing was too much of a coincidence for them. But I hear I have you to thank for figuring it all out."

Anakin beamed under the praise, "How about I'll forgive you if you forgive me?"

Obi-Wan smiled, "Done."

"So you'll go with us?" Anakin eyes grew excited and he was bouncing on his toes.

"I appreciate the offer." Obi-Wan explained, "But even with Qui-Gon's assistance in healing, I feel the need to rest. I think I will turn in for some sleep tonight. Perhaps next time?"

Anakin nodded, his disappointment plain on his face, "Promise?"

Obi-Wan nodded, "So long as I have no other commitments, I will join you on your next venture for iced cream."

Anakin was pleased by the answer.

"Run on ahead, Anakin. I will meet you at the door." Qui-Gon gave him a gentle push.

Anakin moved to go, but hesitated. Obi-Wan sensed he had more to say. "Were you able to speak to Master Yoda? About freeing my mom?"

Obi-Wan plastered a smile on his face and locked down on his shields. "A team has been sent to look into the possibility. When I hear more from them, I will let you know."

Anakin rushed forward hugging Obi-Wan once again. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

"Alright, run ahead now and let me have a moment with Obi-wan." Qui-Gon said, shooing the boy off.

When Anakin was a sufficient distance away, Qui-Gon stepped closer to Obi-wan and lowered his voice. "Something went wrong?"

Obi-Wan sighed, "Was my reaction so obvious?"

"Only to me, I suspect." Qui-Gon admitted, "What is this about his mother?"

"Anakin had a vision about his mother. She was in danger." Obi-wan looked over to ensure that Anakin was not within hearing distance. He was busy climbing a tree at the entrance to the gardens. "A woman with a red lightsabers was chasing her through the desert."

Qui-Gon glanced over as well before meeting Obi-Wan's eyes. "He had not mentioned it to me. I am assuming you asked for the team to be sent?"

Obi-Wan nodded. "But the Council would not take action due to the current level of scrutiny on our Order. I hired some associates to look into the possibility of buying her freedom."

"And something went wrong." Qui-Gon could obviously pick up on his anxiety.

"The team was pursued by the Sith in his vision. She...The crew took some casualties, but got Ms. Skywalker off planet with minor injuries only. The Sith messed with the ship, though, and the last I heard from them, they had managed to jump to hyperspace and were going to lay low, possibly swap ships before contacting me again. That transmission was over fourteen hours ago."
"They are likely being thorough." Qui-Gon reassured, "But you are worried."

"For several reasons." He nodded. "For their safety of course. But also, another Sith has surfaced."

Qui-Gon nodded, "You have informed the Council?"

"Master Windu has." Obi-Wan confirmed. "But..." He took a shaky breath, "Why send a Sith after Anakin's mother, Qui-Gon? Who is she or what has she done to garner their attention. Who could Anakin be?"

Qui-Gon was silent for a moment. Obi-Wan could tell he was weighing something in his mind. "You know something?" Obi-Wan asked with a small bit of suspicion.

Qui-Gon shook his head, looking back to Anakin. "I had limited contact with Shmi." He sighed and met Obi-Wan's gaze after a few more seconds passed, "She claimed there was no father to Anakin. I believe he may be the Chosen one."

Obi-Wan knew his confusion was likely evident. He had no clue what-

"Wait a second. You mean that ancient prophecy?" He shook his head. He would have bet money that the man was messing with him had he not been able to sense how serious he actually felt. "What?"

"You doubt me, just as the Council did. But I am telling you, there is something about him that..." Qui-Gon shook his head clearly not able to express his thoughts, but Obi-Wan did not - could not - doubt the faith of his belief. "Shmi claimed there was no father. She had never lain with anyone. And Anakin is exceptionally strong in the Force. Shmi is Force null."

"She was a slave, Qui-Gon." Obi-Wan remained highly skeptical. "Is it not more likely that she was...taken advantage of, that she would have no memory of the event due to repression or drugs-"

"No." Qui-Gon disagreed, "She was very adamant on this topic."

"Please tell me that you've not told Anakin any of this." Obi-Wan hoped with desperation. That's all the kid needed, having the pressure of fulfilling some ancient prophecy.

"Not yet." He admitted, "I have only shared my theory with the Council. And once again, they dismissed my thoughts without consideration." Qui-Gon sighed in frustration. "The confirmation that the Sith have returned is likely the only reason he was accepted as an Initiate. No one wants to leave him vulnerable. Left to the Sith and turned to the darkside...could you imagine the power he would hold? The devastation he could bring forth."

Obi-Wan closed his eyes and turned away, cursing under his breath once more. He began to feel ill.

His reaction caused Qui-Gon to conclude that he was in agreement. That he understood the consequences of the Sith turning Anakin. Of course he would not understand yet that Obi-Wan was more worried about what he would think about his own use of the darkside.

"You do understand." Qui-Gon whispered.

Obi-Wan knew he should just tell Qui-Gon everything. Confess to having messed up severely. The guilt and the fear of rejection were making him sick and he began to feel light-headed.

"What's wrong?" Qui-Gon stepped forward and placed a hand on his back gently.
He shook his head, unwilling to face the older Jedi. "It's-"

"How much longer, Qui-Gon?" Anakin shouted in the distance. He was coming back toward them from the tree.

"It's nothing." Obi-Wan finished quickly. Attempting to rein his emotions in and bring some semblance of normalcy back to their conversation.

"It's not nothing." Qui-Gon's concern had increased. "Something is upsetting you. Was it something I did or said. If so, it was not my intention."

Obi-wan smiled, sensing Qui-Gon's sincerity and appreciating the man more for it, "You've done nothing." He assured. "It's simply my own inadequacy rearing its ugly head."

Qui-Gon's expression showed he was not buying the explanation. "Obi-wan, I do not want to be a burden to you. I am sure you had hopes and dreams of your own that-"

"You are not a burden, Qui-Gon. This..." Obi-Wan gestured between the two if them. "This is a gift. I just...I'm not sure I deserve it."

Qui-Gon studied him carefully as Anakin arrived at their sides.

It was the truth of the matter, just not specific. He allowed his gratitude and appreciation to be felt.

Qui-Gon forced a smile, still clearly worried. "I feel the same. Will you meet us in the morning for first meal in my quarters? Anakin has class after breakfast. We would have more time to speak."

Obi-Wan agreed, already missing the man, but not the topic they would have to address.

Qui-Gon surprised him by once again closing the space between them. He took Obi-Wan's hands and squeezed once before letting go to turn Anakin with an about face and steer him toward the exit.

"Qui-Gon."

Both of them turned back after only a few paces.

"Be careful outside the Temple. I realize nowhere is very safe right now, but... with so many unknowns, just...please stay alert."

"I will be vigilant." He promised.

"We both will." Anakin smiled.

Obi-wan watched until they made it to the door. Qui-Gon turned back and gave one last wave. Obi-Wan returned the gesture before heading in the direction of his quarters. He fully intended to get a good night's rest. He would need it if he were going to make it through tomorrow.
Chapter 21

Obi-Wan breathed a sigh of relief as the thick doors of the Council Chambers clanged shut behind him.

That had been a grueling three hours. He was fairly certain that the Council had left no stone unturned, touching on just about everything that had happened to him in the past month and a half. Thank the Force he had gone to bed early and managed a full night's sleep for once or he may not have made it through their questioning.

He'd been woken by a padawan at his door telling him that the Council requested his presence immediately. He was grateful now for having the forethought to send a message to Qui-Gon explaining the summons and that he may be late or absent from their breakfast date.

The first topic of business had been Mishar Torvin and his crew. Master Tholme and Padawan Vos had located them at a medical facility on Bothanwui. Branger had taken a blaster bolt to the right side of his face, but luckily enough the bolt had lost a lot of velocity as it had been deflected by the Sith's lightsaber which had minimized the damage. He had no brain damage, but he had lost consciousness and suffered severe plasma burns. He may yet lose his right eye.

Hurgan, the ships mechanic had lost his left arm at the elbow and had been thrown against a wall by the Force user. Apparently he had gotten a little too close to the Sith as he attempted to shield Shmi Skywalker as they ran. It explained why Shmi had been doing the repairs on the ship.

Obi-Wan had pushed his guilt aside after hearing how badly they were injured. He would have to face it sooner or later, but now was not the moment. He would need to deal with it properly before he saw them in person. At least he had fully informed them of the risks prior to the mission.

Master Tholme had politely questioned Shmi Skywalker as to why the Sith might be pursuing her. She was adamant she knew nothing of their intentions and had not even met a Force user until Anakin had brought Master Jinn into their home. Master Tholme was convinced she was telling the truth, as was Padawan Vos. They had requested Lady Skywalker return to the Temple on Coruscant, but she had refused, vowing not to leave the people who had helped her. So the Council agreed that they would all be welcome and the Jedi Healers on Coruscant would do everything they could to help the two injured crew members.

"As if they'll be safer in the Temple." Obi-Wan spoke sarcastically, wincing as he realized he'd said that aloud.

Nothing was said in response. At least, not out loud. He could tell they were talking amongst themselves mind to mind and several councilors looked fairly irritated with him before Yoda spoke up.

"Right he is! Safe it is not, but safer than being alone out there, it still may be."

Obi-Wan wasn't sure he believed that, but he kept his big mouth shut this time, bowing his head in apology.

His comment provided a segue into a discussion regarding the death of the Zabrak. Obi-Wan had no new information for them, but they asked very detailed questions and sought clarification on several matters. In the beginning there was plenty of silent, mind-to-mind conversations after his responses. The questions inferred that they suspected another Jedi may have been responsible for the murder.
The idea that one of their own would aid the Sith was upsetting. Obi-wan had considered it a possibility since that night, but having his own suspicions confirmed by their questioning was disturbing.

When asked his thoughts as to whether the Zabrak or Dathomirian was the master or the apprentice, Obi-Wan shook his head. "I have no experience in dealing with a Sith, nor do I have any knowledge of them other than what is covered in our classes."

"Unfortunately, other than Master Yoda, I am afraid that you are the one with the most practical experience, insofar as having dealt with one personally." Master Plo Koon explained. The Kel Dor's breathing mask could not hide the friendly voice of the kind master. "We have all needed a bit of brushing up on the ways of the Sith. For this answer, we do not seek hard facts. Just tell us what your gut says?"

Obi-Wan closed his eyes and thought back to his first encounter with the Zabrak.

"The Zabrak was clearly adept with a lightsaber. His strategy and planning were exceptional. Cunning." It burned Obi-Wan to admit the Zabrak's strengths when the creature had been responsible for his master's death. He released the feelings to the Force and tried to focus on on the topic from a third party viewpoint. He covered every thought and deduction he had gleaned from the encounter.

"As to the Dathomirian, I do not have enough information to speculate. All I have with which to base an opinion is a second hand vision and the small amount of video which has been turned over to you." He explained.

"All very interesting, but you did not answer the question," Rancisis seemed annoyed, as if Obi-Wan had just wasted his time. "Which do you feel is the master?"

Obi-Wan suppressed his irritation and looked back to Master Plo Koon. "My 'gut' says...they are not alone. Neither seemed old enough or wise enough to be a Master." He sighed, "I realize I have nothing with which to compare a Sith Master to his or her Apprentice. But these two...they seemed like errand runners, low level players...assassins maybe? It would explain their skill sets. They are given tasks to follow, but not entrusted with much information. They were intimidating, but...I don't know." He shook his head. "I think we should expect more like them."

After a few moments of watching the mind speech and sensing that it was dying down, Obi-Wan shared his big concern.

"What I don't understand is why would they reveal themselves to us now. If, someone else is giving them their orders, and telling them when, where, and who to strike, why risk discovery now? Why be so careless? After so many years of operating in the shadows, why risk alerting us to their existence?"

Again there was more discussion amongst the Council, but Master Yoda piped up rather quickly, "Thought on this you have. What say you?"

Obi-Wan had not been prepared to answer his own question. He had just wanted to make sure the Council had been considering it. He took a moment to consider, "Unfortunately, we have no way of knowing. There are so many unknown variables. Perhaps there was a power change amongst them? Or perhaps they have enough resources to pose a threat to the Order and are no longer concerned with remaining hidden? I cannot say, but the fact that they have begun to show their hand is not comforting. I feel certain that there is a much larger plan at work and many more enemies than we suspect in our midst. I fear that we are considerably behind in discovering their motives." He sighed,
"What we do know is that they had some sort of stake in what occurred with Naboo. And Barrick Iessel kept me in a room shielded from Force detection, which indicates someone able to manipulate the force is working with him in an effort to corrupt the Senate through blackmail and intimidation. Whoever is behind this must have some end goal. And what would a Sith's end desire be but chaos, destruction, and war?"

Obi-Wan had forgotten that the Council members were even listening as his voice faded to a whisper during his last question and his thoughts turned toward his vision of the Clone Army and the voice echoing in his head once more.

The Grand Army of the Republic.

He shuddered at the voice and slowly came back to the room, where Master Yoda was now standing in front of him. "Continue, you can?"

Obi-Wan nodded slowly, "Forgive me, I did not mean to..." He looked around, embarrassed at having lost his concentration so completely.

"Mmmm. Your fault, it is not. Saw the army in white armor again, you did, yes?"

Obi-Wan nodded and Yoda looked to the various counselors clearly having a conversation without him. Obi-Wan used the precious time to regroup.

As far as he could tell, there was a lot of talk going on and it felt tense and alarming, even if he could not hear their words. After several moments, the tension seemed to ease and Yoda touched his arm gently before returning to his seat beside the others. "Mmmm. Tell us about Barrick Iessel now, you will."

He nodded, looking at his feet and shoving his hands inside of his robes where they grasped his forearms tightly as an icy dread filled his soul.

After realizing how he had reacted, he forced himself to lower his arms and raise his head. If he faked strength, perhaps it would follow.

"Yes, Master Yoda." He had been expecting this line of questioning. They had yet to debrief him personally and once he realized how involved this meeting was, he knew it would be coming.

They delved into specific moments, requiring him to recall conversations word for word at times. It had been difficult, challenging to keep himself grounded in the present. Things he had seen, felt, and overheard tried to drag him back into the memories.

A chair and water had been brought into the room for him after he'd begun to experience a cold sweat. The recollection of events was causing him to slip up and lose his composure. The terror he had felt then was just as potent in the retelling, even though he knew he was in the Temple, safe and protected. Master Yoda had rejoined him in the center of the room, casting a feeling of warmth and safety over him as he relayed the rest of his experience. "There now you are not." Yoda reminded him. "Necessary it is that we know all you do."

Something he had not considered but they asked a lot about was the shielding around the room. He couldn't grasp what they wanted from him. They asked what the shields felt like, who they may have reminded him of. "If have no answer you do, alright it is." Yoda explained.

Only when asked about the bar in Mos Espa, did he find himself unable to speak further. Thankfully Yoda answered for him upon realizing his failure.
"Discussed this part with Knight Kenobi, I have. No need to hear further details, there is. Learned that night, nothing of further value was."

Small mercies!

In addition to Master Yoda, Obi-Wan had begun to feel a steady presence in his mind that began to lend him strength. He grasped onto it without hesitation and knew it to be Qui-Gon. Somehow the man must have sensed his distress and was sending him reassurance and confidence. He could feel the concern, but couldn't spare the time to focus a response as he was barely making it through each question.

The conversation seemed to shift after that. It circled back around to Anakin. He had been an inconvenience to them before, but now that a Sith had tried to abduct his family, their questions seemed endless. They covered the shared vision; the bond that had formed between Anikin and Obi-Wan; what he had learned of Anakin's past; how Anakin was adapting to Temple life; would he have the temperament to become a Jedi; his thoughts regarding Master Jinn being the boy's master.

No sooner had he answered a question than another was put forth.

Finally, he began to get a little ticked off on Anakin's behalf.

"I have something to say." He interrupted Master Adi Gallia as she began to ask another question.

All of their heads turned to him quickly and their attention made him shrink slightly, though he stood his ground.

"Go ahead, Obi-Wan." Master Piell spoke encouragingly. They no doubt sensed his frustration and then his embarrassment. But he had spoken up and he was determined to follow through with his statement.

"Anakin is first and foremost a child. One who has faced difficult hardships in his short nine years. He is an innocent. Whatever the Sith want with him or his family, he has done nothing wrong here. He will need assistance to overcome his fear and attachments. Part of that assistance will be the understanding and encouragement of those surrounding him, NOT their judgment. He has already faced criticism and resentment from instructors and fellow initiates due to his age and his differences. Leaving a life of slavery is an adjustment for any being, but leaving a life of slavery to begin training in an order with such high demands will be incredibly stressful. He needs our continued support while he adjusts to and questions this new world. The way he reacts, thinks and feels about everything is going to have to undergo drastic changes. He is going to mess up. He is going to do things we would never consider or approve. But we can correct those things. It is an enormous task, but it can be accomplished. It will be." He affirmed, meeting each of the Council members' eyes as he spoke, "He is very powerful. We are all aware that his midichlorian count is higher than master Yoda's. That alone could be the reason the Sith want him. But what I am asking of you is to not look at Anakin and see the threat of that power or how he can be used by us or against us. I want you to see the nine-year old child who wants nothing more than to help people and to keep his mother safe. A child who would risk his own life in a pod-race to aid complete strangers, with nothing to gain from it for himself. A boy who is incredibly smart and talented, who has already mastered his first kata, who loves mechanical engineering and iced creams. Just...please. Don't forget he is a person and deserving of this chance. And of our protection."

When he finished, it was quiet. Even the background hum in the Force that indicated mind speech was not present. Obi-Wan seemed to realize that his speech reeked of attachment and they were all probably horrified at how strongly he had argued for the boy.
Finally, Oppo Rancisis coughed politely to gain attention, "There are some of us who were against the child's entry to the Order." He admitted. "But a decision was reached and he was made an initiate. We are a highly traditional Order, Knight Kenobi, and change does not come easily. But change is coming. Of that much, we are certain. The future has been unclear and full of uncertainty for some time now. But this Council will do what we must to ensure the Jedi Order continues to follow the will of the Force and the path of the light. Initiate Skywalker's differences will provide a massive challenge for him, but we will give him the assistance he requires. If anyone gives him trouble, you may come to me and the matter will be addressed promptly and fairly."

Obi-Wan was too shocked to respond. Knowing Master Rancisis had been the one that led the fight against allowing Anakin to be an Initiate, he would have been suspicious of the man's motives. But he had felt the truth behind the man's promise. This was so much more than he had expected with his statement. He had simply wanted to remind them that Anakin was a person, and a young boy, not some pawn or prize.

"Initiate Skywalker is lucky to have someone so dedicated to his care and well-being." Oppo Rancisis smiled then. "I do not doubt that you will mold him into a model Jedi."

If Obi-Wan had not been so well-trained, he may have stood gaping at the Jedi Master. And while he knew his expression may not give away his reaction, there would have been no hiding his shock at the endorsement.

Obi-Wan nodded politely, "I am certain that Master Qui-Gon is up to the task."

He sensed a storm of mind speech and had a feeling they were very amused at his response.

Yoda spoke up then, "Breakfast with my Grandpadian you have now, no?"

Obi-Wan blushed. "If you no longer have need of me, I did promise to share first meal with Qui-Gon and Anakin."

"We thank you for your time and patience, Obi-Wan." Master Billaba, "And all of the sacrifices you have made." She smiled.

"We know you are aware that none of this information is to be shared outside of this Council, but a reminder is necessary." Master Mundi stated..

"The only exception being Qui-Gon." Mace interjected. "What you know, he is permitted to know and vice versa."

"Yes. Of course." Mundi agreed. "However, we did promise Miss Skywalker that we would pass on a holo message to her son."

"Although it will only serve to reinforce the child's attachment, the majority of the Council believed it the right thing to do." Rancisis added.

"That and the woman drives a hard bargain." Master Piell smiled.

Obi-Wan felt called to defend the young man once more, "The attachment to his mother is no fault of his own. It helped Anakin and his mother survive a life of slavery and hardship. Anakin cannot simply will an attachment like theirs to disappear overnight, nor should he be asked to do so. I am confident in time, that he will deal with it appropriately. Knowing that she is safe for now will ease much of his stress and allow him to focus better on his studies."

"Agree with you, the majority does." Yoda smiled gently, floating the holodisk over to Obi-Wan.
Obi-Wan grasped it and placed it in the pocket of his robes.

"The Council is moving forward with the occupation of an off-planet Temple." Master Mundi spoke, changing the topic rather abruptly. "This information will not be shared with those outside the Council. Master Rancisis and I would value your continued assistance with the project. We are meeting later this afternoon if you are free."

"Yes, of course." Obi-Wan bowed his head, pleasantly surprised by the decision. "I am honored by the request."

"If you have nothing further to add, Knight Kenobi, then you are dismissed. Give our regard to Qui-Gon," Mace smirked and Obi-Wan found himself blushing as several council members started smiling, apparently amused at his reaction.

And so here he was, hand raised to ring the bell of Qui-Gon's door, pleased to finally be the bearer of good news. But before his hand could make contact, the door opened and Qui-Gon Jinn stood before him, meeting Obi-Wan's eyes with a relieved, but concerned expression.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Sorry this chapter is a short one. But the next is much longer, and almost done!

Qui-Gon had woken Anakin fifteen minutes ago, but the young man simply wanted to curl up and stay under the warm covers. It was always cold here. And this Jedi business was wearing him out. He'd almost drifted off to sleep again, when the covers were yanked off the top of him.

"I can see you are not a morning person." The deep voice of Qui-Gon boomed.

"Five more minutes." He begged, reaching for the blankets.

Qui-Gon moved them out of reach easily and shook his head. "Let's go. I've already let you sleep too long. You will be late for class if you do not get up now."

Anakin sat up grudgingly rubbing his sleepy eyes. He put his legs over the side of the bed and stood slowly. "What's that smell?" He asked, wrinkling his nose. "Is something burning?"

Qui-Gon took a moment to smooth the blanket back on the bed as he answered, "It's nothing. Go jump in the shower."

Anakin grabbed a new set of tunics and plodded into the fresher. It wasn't until after he'd washed up - taking another amazing water shower - and pulled his shirt on that he remembered their breakfast appointment with Obi-Wan. He sincerely hoped the smell from earlier was not Qui-Gon's attempt at cooking.

"Is Obi-Wan here yet?" He asked, skipping into the common room.

"What?!" Qui-Gon startled at the sudden entrance, seeming to snap out of a trance.

Anakin noticed the burnt smell had gotten stronger, and small wisps of smoke were rising from the stovetop toward the ceiling.

"Umm. Qui-gon, sir. You may want to get that before it starts a fire."

"Oh Force!" Qui-Gon scrambled to pick up the pan and quickly dumped the burnt flip cake into the sink.

Qui-Gon's initial annoyance with himself quickly turned to humble amusement as Anakin began to laugh at him. Anakin saw the corners of Qui-Gon's mouth turning upward a bit. But he zoned out again and Anakin could tell he was somewhere else. Something was worrying him.

"Mister Qui-Gon, sir?" He asked quietly. "What's going on?"

Qui-Gon's gaze turned to him once more and he explained, "The Council summoned Obi-Wan early this morning. He sent a message saying he may be late or absent."

"That's not good." Anakin took a seat at the dining table, as Qui-Gon started to pour new batter onto
the pan. He thought back to all the disapproving faces he'd seen as the Council had asked him question after question, trying to trick him into answering wrong. Obi-Wan said they weren't trying to make him mess up, but he wasn't so sure.

"No way will he be here on time." It had seemed liked the tests were never ending. "We should find a way to help him escape." He suggested, glancing back at Qui-Gon.

Qui-Gon was staring into space again, his brows drawn as if he had a headache.

Anakin got up and positioned himself on one of the high stools at the counter directly across from Qui-Gon and waited patiently for him to see him.

"I'm sorry, Anakin. Did you say something?"

"I think you are burning another one!" He advised.

"Force!" Qui-Gon jumped into action, scooping the cake onto a plate, only to display a blackened bottom. "This is highly unlike me."

"What is that three now?" Anakin asked, getting up to look in the trash can.

"Hmmm." Counting the ones in the sink and on the plate would mean the man had already ruined five cakes. Anakin wasn't sure the room would ever lose the burnt smell.

"Don't sweat it." He said jumping down. "I helped mom cook lots. Well, at least when we had the food to do it." He pushed Qui-Gon out of the way and drug a chair over so he could reach the stove top. "Let me cook. You can watch if you want. Or go sit down for a while. Judging by your attention, I'm guessing things aren't going well for Obi-wan."

Qui-Gon nodded and walked to the table and sat down. Anakin took that as permission to continue. He turned the burner down and rubbed some of the butter stuff on a fresh pan. Then he poured a small circle of the batter on it as he had seen Qui-Gon do earlier. He'd also seen chefs doing that on the holonet before. It looked pretty easy. Nothing he couldn't handle. He had this!

"I like the milk here, but blue milk is much yummier. I miss it a little. But the consistency would be all wrong for something like these flipcakes." Qui-Gon was watching him, but he didn't seem to be listening closely. That was okay though. "I would give anything for some BlueMilk." He sighed in nostalgia. "But I'll tell you what I don't miss. Morning mush. I don't even know what the ingredients were, but we had it for breakfast almost everyday. I'll be happy forever, so long as I never have to eat that shite again."

He looked up quickly to see how Qui-Gon would respond to the curse word.

But there was no reaction. He hadn't even noticed.

Hmmm. Not good news for Obi-Wan.

"If they had mush flavor as one of the iced creams, it would be the one flavor I would refuse to sample. Blah." He made a sour face.

Still no reaction from Qui-Gon, so things were definitely not good for his friend.

He closed his eyes and poked at the bond he shared with Obi-Wan. He was shocked when it seemed another layer of protection suddenly slammed up between them. Obi-Wan had been distant before, but now there was a blast door between them.
The action made Anakin's concern increase, but it was an important meeting and he probably shouldn't have tried to spy on or distract Obi-Wan. He wondered briefly if he might get in trouble for having done so.

Anakin used the cooking tool thingy to peak under the cake to see if it had browned. It had.

Oh yeah. He could do this!

With gusto, he took the pan handle in his two small hands and gave a mighty push into the air.

Unfortunately, he was a little too enthusiastic. The cake hit the ceiling with a rather loud splat sound and stuck.

He glanced quickly to Qui-Gon, grateful to find the man was still not looking. He had his head in his hands and his eyes closed, not even facing Anakin's direction anymore.

Anakin quickly rebuttered the pan and poured another cake, pretending that hadn't happened. He was going to have to work on the flip technique. And also figure a way to get the cake down without alerting Qui-Gon.

"Yup...just call me Chef Ani! Best flipcakes in town!" He bragged, nervously looking up to see if the cake was going to fall. "Actually, let's make that best in the Temple." He amended and then under his breath, "Orrrrr, maybe just the kitchen."

He could use the Force, but then Qui-Gon would notice and probably be upset with him.

Nervously he checked the newest flipcake. This time, after the cake turned brown on the bottom, he took one of the delicate plates Qui-gon had sitting out and covered the cake while still in the pan. With one hand on the pan handle and the other still on the plate, he quickly flipped it over. The browned part of the cake was now topside on the plate and the uncooked batter was face down. Putting the pan back on the stove, he gently let the cake slide off the plate and back onto the pan to start browning the uncooked side.

The plate was covered in batter now, but it had worked. He smiled to himself. "Wallah!"

Anakin had been so attentive to the cake, that he hadn't realized that Qui-Gon had returned to the counter and was watching him. He slid the finished flip cake onto a clean plate and startled upon seeing Qui-Gon at the counter.

"Oh!" Anakin smiled in surprise, "Here, try this and tell me how wizard of a cook I am." He began to butter the pan to start another.

"I am impressed, Anakin." Qui-gon took the plate and grabbed a fork and used some of the sticky sweet stuff that Anakin couldn't wait to pour over his own flipcakes. After cutting a small bite, Qui-Gon dipped it in the sweet stuff and then tasted it.

"Delicious." He declared with a grin.

"Ha! Told ya." Anakin leaned forward and poured a new circle of batter onto the pan. "Chef Extraordinaire."

"Thank you for taking the initiative, Ani." He chewed and swallowed. "Obi-Wan has finished up in the Council Chambers. I believe he is making his way here now. He will be delighted to try one of our flipcakes."
"And who wouldn't be!" Anakin flicked his gaze above Qui-Gon and thanked the heavens that the pancake appeared securely stuck. Hopefully he could sneak back in later and clean it up.

He turned his attention back to the current cake and placed a plate over the top again, flipping the pan over once more.

Qui-Gon's brow furrowed. "Interesting technique."

Anakin released a nervous giggle as he slid the cake back onto the pan, "Trade secret. Don't tell."

Qui-Gon continued to eat, "Your secret is safe with me."

Anakin laughed a bit nervously.

Qui-Gon rose from the bar stool and went to the cooler, pulling out the Muja Juice. "Do me a favor once you finish that cake. Take those tea packets over to the table and I will get the teapot. Then you can knock out one more flipcake for Obi-Wan."

"Sure thing." Anakin answered, looking up once more. The cake hadn't budged. He was probably in the clear for now. He set the tea packets down and rushed back to begin the final cake.

Anakin had heard others mention how Obi-Wan had lost a lot of weight and needed to gain it back. He was only doing his part in making sure that happened. He wasn't going to let his new best friend neglect himself. And he made a promise to do whatever it took to keep Obi-Wan happy.
Chapter 23

Qui-Gon knew exactly when Obi-Wan turned onto their wing, he sensed exactly where he was and he knew the man was in desperate need of support. He opened the door before Obi-Wan even had a chance to ring.

Meeting his eyes, Qui-Gon felt relieved at seeing the weak smile that suddenly graced the young man's features.

"Please forgive my tardiness. I hope I haven't arrived too late for breakfast."

The soft spoken words with the upper Coruscanti accent were melodic. He hadn't realized he'd been staring at Obi-Wan until the man coughed politely.

"Not at all," Qui-Gon answered with a blush, "I'm sorry for..." He motioned between the two of them, and unable to find the words to explain his distraction. He shook his head, stepped aside and motioned Obi-Wan inside, "Please, come in."

As he closed the door behind the man, he sensed the exhaustion and stress being tucked away and a determined will to be happy surging forward in Obi-Wan.

Qui-Gon smiled at the gesture, even though Obi-Wan might not know he sensed it.

Moving to the table, he pulled out a chair gesturing for Obi-Wan to be seated.

"Something smells...interesting." Obi-Wan commented diplomatically, as he took the seat.

It seems his distraction at seeing Obi-Wan had caused him to ignore everything else in the room.

He'd completely forgotten about the burnt cakes and what his apartment must smell like.

He flushed again in embarrassment, "Yes, well. I may have been a bit distracted and burnt a flipcake or two."

"Try five!" Anakin shouted from behind the counter area. Obi-Wan glanced over at Anakin before turning back to Qui-gon with a smile. Qui-Gon did not mind one bit being dropped in by the boy, so long as it made Obi-Wan smile like that

"Yes, ok. Five." He admitted. Perhaps red was to be his new color. "But to my credit, I was quite distracted and prior to today, I have not burnt a flipcake since I first learned to make them."

Obi-Wan's face sobered somewhat, realizing he had been the cause. "Oh dear. I was the distraction, wasn't I? I am so sor-".

"No!" Qui-Gon was quick to reassure him. "Think nothing of it. There was a lot going on. And it was just batter."

"And air quality." Anakin mumbled quietly, causing Obi-Wan to smile again.

"Besides," Qui-Gon continued, shooting a playful glare at Anakin before looking once again to Obi-Wan, "Anakin stepped up and finished the cakes perfectly. Therefore, I now know he is fully capable of taking on cooking chores. In a way, you have done me a great service."

"Wait. What?" Anakin shouted, realizing he'd been tricked. "That is devious, Qui-Gon!"
Obi-Wan laughed and Qui-Gon was delighted to hear the sound.

"I must admit, I was hoping you were making your flipcakes. Do you mind?" He asked gesturing to the teapot.

"No, forgive me. Go right ahead."

Qui-Gon passed the selections of tea toward him along with the sweetener and honey.

"Masters Yoda and Windu always claimed you made the best flipcakes. Anytime we ate breakfast outside the Temple with them, they would boast how your flipcakes were better than anyone's. I never expected I would get the opportunity to sample them."

Qui-Gon smiled at the information. "Well, today, they are part Anakin's creation as well. But I am certain they will be just as delicious."

Obi-Wan selected his packet of tea and turned toward the kitchen, "Good morning, Anakin. How was the iced cream adventure yesterday?"

"Oh! I sampled something from Cato-Nemoida!" He said with excitement. "Some type of fish flavor. It was pretty gross, so my second attempt and the one I stuck with was some sort of fruit flavor from Mandalore."

"Buyan Fruit." Obi-Wan nodded. "Delicious choice."

"I agree." Anakin announced. "And this one is finally finished!" He plated the flipcake, came around from the counter and placed it in front of Obi-Wan before taking his own seat. All three were now seated at the table and ready to eat.

Qui-Gon passed the syrup to Obi-Wan allowing him to pour first. Obi-Wan then handed the bottle to Anakin before cutting his first bite with a fork and bringing it to his mouth. The young man closed his eyes and moaned, causing a jolt of desire to flash through Qui-Gon. He very quickly squashed it, attempting to banish the image and sound from his mind.

"This is divine." Obi-Wan stated. "What is in it?"

Qui-Gon cleared his throat attempting to find his voice. "Along with the dry ingredients, milk, Dreslian eggs, Cerean oats and raisins, and crushed Jama nuts."

"It's wonderful." Obi-Wan smiled, meeting Qui-Gon's eyes.

Good lord, this was going to be a lot harder than he had thought!

"But I think someone is attempting to turn it into soup." Obi-Wan replied, glancing over at Anakin.

Qui-Gon had forgotten Anakin was even at the table until he followed Obi-Wan's gaze.

"Anakin, Stars!"

Qui-Gon stood quickly, grabbing the syrup bottle from the boy's hands.

"Hey!" Anakin protested, reaching out to try and get the syrup back.

Obi-Wan was laughing as Qui-Gon ran his free hand over his face in exasperation.

Anakin's flipcake was drenched, sitting in a giant puddle of syrup that nearly flowed over the rim of the plate.
"Your instructors will kill me." Qui-Gon stated in dismay.

Anakin looked confused. "Why?"

"If you eat that much sugar, you will be wired all day." Obi-Wan explained. Anakin looked at him confused, clearly not understanding the expression.

"Bouncing off the walls?" Obi-Wan tried again.

Anakin raised one eyebrow clearly still not understanding.

"That much sugar will make you extremely...excitable." Qui-Gon spoke plainly. "We'll have to work on the idioms as we go."

"Oh." Anakin did not seem to care.

"Especially since you are not used to such extraordinary amounts of sugar. It could make you sick, like the Juju berry pie. Remember?" Obi-Wan advised.

Anakin stuck a finger in the gooey stuff and licked it. "That was my first week here. I think I can handle it now," he boasted confidently.

"Manners." Qui-Gon warned half-heartedly.

"I suppose we shall see." Obi-Wan suggested. "It's so rich, you won't get but half the cake down anyway, if that."

"No way. I am devouring this thing." He said confidently, using the fork to scoop up his first big bite. Syrup dripped down his chin and he hastily wiped it with the back of his hand making Qui-Gon cringe.

"So what are your plans for the day?" Obi-Wan asked Anakin.

"Just classes." Anakin spoke with his mouth full, causing Qui-Gon to roll his eyes and shake his head in dismay. At least Obi-Wan seemed to be amused by the ill manners.

"Then katras with Qui-Gon and then I don't know. Probably studying. And more studying. You Jedi are relentless when it comes to learning."

"Anakin, please use your napkin and wait until you have swallowed your food before speaking." Qui-Gon requested politely. "And you should say, we Jedi, as you are now among us."

Anakin smiled and started to say sorry, but stopped, swallowed and then apologized.

"Much better. Thank you." Qui-Gon replied, "And you Obi-Wan? What are your plans?"

Obi-Wan looked at him and he'd be damned if he didn't feel his heart flutter once again at having the young man's attention so focused on him.

"Well, I kept my morning free for this." He smiled and took a sip of his tea. "But I am meeting with Masters Rancisis and Mundi this afternoon to work on a project with them."

"Anything interesting?" Qui-Gon probed.

"It is. But it is quite sensitive and I regret that I am unable to elaborate further."
"That's alright. We understand." Qui-Gon reassured, "Do you think you might be finished in time to work on katas with Anakin and I this evening?" He asked hopefully.

"I don't know how long the masters are planning to work." Obi-Wan answered honestly, "But I would be honored to join you. I will let you know by late afternoon whether I will be free." Obi-Wan smiled.

Qui-Gon smiled back. It felt so right just being near him. Qui-Gon found himself unable to look away. His lips, his hair, his eyes... gods but his eyes were beautiful! He watched as Obi-Wan cut another bite and brought it to his lips.

"Uuuuggghhh." Anakin moaned, startling Qui-Gon and causing him to think the youth was disgusted with how smitten he must appear.

"I give up." He set his fork down and wiped his chin and mouth, this time with a napkin. "You were right! I can't finish it."

Thank the Force it had just been the food!

Qui-Gon needed to get a grip. He was acting like a stalker.

"I told you so." Obi-wan remarked. "You couldn't manage to eat even a third."

"It really is good," Anakin looked at Qui-Gon apologetically, before glancing back to Obi-Wan, "But you were right. It sits heavy in my tummy."

"Along with half the bottle of syrup." Qui-Gon added, reaching out with his napkin and wiping some missed syrup from the boys cheek. "I think another shower is called for. It appears you have syrup and batter in your hair. Run along quickly. Shower, brush your teeth, and change your top. You only have twenty minutes until your first class."

"Yes, sir." Anakin took his plate to the sink and made his way to the fresher.

He looked back at Obi-Wan to see a confused expression, "Have you not asked to become his master yet?"

"Not officially." Qui-Gon shook his head. "I am certain he knows it is coming. But it was one of the things I wanted to discuss with you first."

"Ah." Obi-Wan looked way too serious now and Qui-Gon couldn't tell what he was thinking. But it didn't seem as if he wanted to share.

"Tough morning?" He prodded.

Obi-Wan sighed and his shoulders sagged. "You have no idea."

Qui-Gon smiled, "Actually, I have a bit of an idea."

"Oh, of course." Obi-Wan blushed, clearing his throat and wiping his mouth with a napkin. "I suppose you do."

For being Praethorn's padawan, Obi-Wan was awfully polite and well-mannered. Praethorn had the reputation of being a bit... well, less formal would be the polite way to say it.

"At least I am able to bring good news for Anakin." Obi-Wan interrupted his thoughts.
"Oh?"

"Master Tholme and Padawan Vos are with Mishar Torvin and his crew, including Lady Skywalker. They plan to return to Coruscant as soon as it is medically safe for the crew. She sent a message for Anakin. With your permission, I will allow him to watch it before he leaves."

"Of course. That is excellent news. When do they expect to arrive?"

"The healers expect they can depart in a day or so."

Qui-Gon nodded. "And do they expect further pursuit from the Sith?"

"The crew took every precaution, but they are on high alert, nonetheless."

Qui-Gon nodded. There was a moment of awkward silence before Obi-Wan spoke again.

"Before I went to sleep last night, I dropped by the archives and read the prophecy of the Chosen One of which you spoke."

Qui-Gon was genuinely surprised. At first he thought, Obi-Wan may support his idea, but then he sensed the hesitation and doubt. "I don't outright disbelieve you, Qui-Gon. I have faith in visions. But I also know how deceptive they can be and how stressful. Prophecies can be the same."

"I am aware of that. But he is the Chosen One. I feel it. And I believe it is the reason the Sith are pursuing him. And his family."

"I cannot doubt the strength of your belief. In fact I can sense it very clearly." He assured Qui-Gon. "But despite the multiple ways the prophecy could be interpreted, if he is the Chosen One, do you not think that putting the burden of such a belief on a child who has been thrust into a new world with very little sense of security is the wisest course of action? Can you imagine the burden such knowledge would cause him? There are Initiates, and masters, that already resent him for entering at such a late age. Imagine the social implications of having a prophecy to fulfill. For now, I simply wanted to advise caution when it comes to sharing your beliefs with Anakin."

Qui-Gon was shocked by the statement. He had not even considered what it would mean to Anakin.

"Or with anyone, for that matter." Obi-Wan added.

Shite! How could he not have considered that.

He hung his head ashamed at his lack of consideration for the boy. Obi-Wan would be so much better suited for this.

He swallowed his pride and acknowledged Obi-Wan's point. "I find your reasoning sound. And your concern admirable. And I agree. This is not the time to share the knowledge with Anakin. Perhaps we can discuss the prophecy in greater detail when we are alone."

Qui-Gon watched as the tension drained from Obi-Wan and his shoulders sagged a bit in relief. "Yes. I would like that."

"This meant a lot to you." Qui-Gon queried, though it was more of an observation than a question.

"Anakin has come to mean a lot to me." Obi-Wan admitted.

Qui-Gon felt a bit of shame come from Obi-Wan with his admission.
"Is that something to feel badly about?"

"I am too attached to him." Obi-Wan admitted looking down. "And to you." He murmured.

"Of course you are, we are Force bonded." Qui-Gon explained, "You do realize that what we have is rarer than a life-bond. Someone can choose a life-bond, but this..."

Qui-Gon's adamant explanation seemed to reassure Obi-Wan. "I do know that now. It's just...for weeks I was trying to fight the idea, deny the attachment I felt and it has only been a day or two that I know that I am allowed to do this. To feel this. It takes a little getting used to."

Qui-Gon nodded with a smile. "I suppose that makes sense."

Obi-Wan smiled back, "But it is something I look forward to."

"As do I." Qui-Gon admitted.

"Do you?" He sensed Obi-Wan's doubt creep up once again. "You're not just making the most of it, then? Puttind on a brave face because you are stuck with me?"

"You would be able to tell if I were lying." Qui-Gon reminded.

Obi-Wan rubbed his brow "Yes. I suppose you are right."

"YOUR words however, do not match your feelings. I sense a reluctance and an anxiety within you each time our bond is discussed. Is this something YOU want, Obi-Wan?"

"It is." Obi-Wan stated firmly.

Qui-Gon felt the sincerity, but the anxiety was still present.

"Then we should discuss whatever is worrying you after Anakin leaves for class. Yes?"

Obi-Wan nodded in agreement. But now, the dread in the young man intensified and he was taut as a bow string.

"Drink your tea, Obi-Wan. And relax. Whatever troubles you, we will find a resolution." He sent comfort and confidence through the bond and was surprised when Obi-Wan's eyes get moist before he looked down into his cup.

Anakin returned to the room not seconds later. "I think I have everything I need." He sighed, reluctant to leave for class. "Tell me again why you can't just teach me everything I need to know."

Qui-Gon laughed. "If only I were so knowledgeable. And patient!" Qui-Gon admitted.

Obi-Wan smiled with amusement, offering reassurance. "Just smother them with the kindness and the insufferable energy that is you Anakin. You are not expected to be a normal student here. So don't try to fit some ancient mold of the perfect Initiate. Be yourself, while being respectful of our ways. If you have questions as to why something is the way it is, just ask. If you make an error, simply admit it, explain you didn't know and ask how to fix it for the future. Or make a note to ask us later. We will answer any questions you have."

Qui-Gon frowned slightly realizing from Anikin's reluctance and Obi-Wan's reassurances that problems may have arisen already. He hoped they had been minor.

"You make it sound a lot easier than it is." Anakin whined, "But I'll do my best."
"Well you shall always have Qui-Gon and me in your corner. That's saying something. But there is one thing I can think of that would be brighten your day a bit more."

"What?" Anakin asked with a lack of excitement.

"Your mom has been freed."

"What!" Anakin's eyes went wide, "Really?"

"She is no longer on Tatooine. You can expect her to arrive on Coruscant in the next three or four days."

"She's free? And safe?" The excitement and wariness both battled within Anakin.

"She is." Obi-Wan affirmed again.

He was hugging Obi-Wan before Qui-Gon had even registered the movement.

Watching them now, the depth of their bond was evident.

Obi-Wan had been right to free Anakin's mother. The boy never would have been able to truly dedicate himself to the Jedi while his mother remained enslaved on Tatooine. Qui-Gon regretted the fact that he had missed so much during his return mission to Naboo.

Obi-wan finally drew back from Anakin, wiping the tears of relief and joy from the boy's face.

"Here now. Dry those tears so you can see her message." Obi-Wan activated the Holovid as Anakin blew his nose into a napkin.

Qui-Gon watched Anakin's reactions more than he did the video. The boy was clearly elated. Almost overcome with excitement and happiness.

"My dearest Ani, they will not let me speak of all that has happened. But I want you to know that I am safe and that Mishar and his crew have freed me. The tracker and explosives have been removed and they tell me we will be coming to join you in a few short days. I do not know how you knew I was in danger or what is going on, but I am so grateful you were able to send help. I am so terribly proud of you and I cannot wait to see you again. The other Jedi here tell me you are doing well and that you have become an Initiate in their Order. I am so proud of you, my son. I love you and I will see you soon."

Anakin was smiling now, wiping the last of the tears from his face. "This is the best news ever." He squeezed Obi-Wan quickly in another brief hug. "What will happen now?"

"We will help her to find a job, or provide training in a field of work that she prefers. Then we will help her find a location she wishes to settle and see that she is comfortable in her new life.

Anakin smiled. "You know I am not going to be able to concentrate on lessons now. Maybe I should just skip tod-"

"Not going to happen." Obi-Wan shook his head. "Let today be a lesson in focus."

"That's just cruel." He argued.

"But necessary." Qui-Gon piped in. "Obi-Wan and I have a lot of logistics to work out today. We need the time you will be in class to work through them."
"What sort of logistics?"

"We have to figure out how things are going to work, with Obi-Wan and I being bonded and you being our responsibility. Things like where we will live, what our schedules will be, who is responsible for what."

A burst of surprise came from Obi-Wan. And Qui-Gon felt the young man's attention sharpen on him. But Qui-Gon pretended not to notice.

"I think you might need my opinion on those things too." Anakin hesitated.

"Nice try." Obi-Wan smiled, displaying none of the anxiety Qui-Gon could sense within him. "But Qui-Gon gets to make the calls for you from here on out. If he needs your opinion and input, he will seek it."

Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon both picked up on a spike of anger and fear as Anakin glanced at Qui-Gon resentfully.

Qui-Gon was too shocked to understand, but Obi-Wan apologized immediately.

"That didn't come out right, Anakin. I did not mean to infer you were being enslaved once more. You are not losing your freedom or your choices. But as your...teacher, as your guardian, Qui-Gon does need your WILLING obedience and consent to make certain decisions for you. As a parent would for his child."

Qui-Gon grasped the misunderstanding then and explained even more clearly. "Things like practice, study, and bed times. Your free-time allowances, and trips outside the Temple."

Anakin relaxed a bit after hearing the list.

"And Force help him, your diet." Obi-Wan smiled.

"Will he be in charge of you too?" Anakin asked ignoring the joke. "We'll be together right? You'll move in here in Qui-Gon's room?"

"Um..." Obi-Wan floundered, shocked and embarrassed by Anakin's suggestion.

Qui-Gon stepped in to answer seeing that Obi-Wan was fumbling still for a response."Obi-Wan is a knight now, Anakin. He makes his own decisions. But those are also things we will discuss while you are in class."

"Oh, ok." Anakin shrugged. "As long as I don't have to stay in the Initiate dorms again, I'll be happy. But my vote is for all of us to be together." He smiled.

"So noted." Qui-Gon responded, "Now you are late as it is, I will send a message to Professor Tvoren requesting he excuse your tardiness. I am allowing you ten minutes to arrive at the classroom, so no exploring!" Qui-Gon warned.

"Yes, sir." Anakin drawled out the response as if it were a chore. He grabbed his pad and hugged Obi-Wan briefly before turning to Qui-Gon and giving him a strong hug as well. It was infused with gratefulness, respect, and love. Before Qui-Gon could think to even wish him a good day, he was out the door.

Qui-Gon turned to Obi-Wan then to find the young man still a brilliant shade of red.
"That may have been a tad bit embarrassing, but it is something that will need to be discussed. I had it much later on my list of things to cover. I was thinking a three room apartment."

"I should have requested new rooms in the Knight's hall by now," Obi-Wan admitted shrugging. "I just...I wasn't ready to leave my master's quarters yet and no one was pushing me to do so."

Qui-Gon nodded, trying not to judge. "If you wish to keep your independence, Anakin and I will respect that. You haven't had much time on your own. We can work things out. However, I have a proposition."

Obi-Wan flushed red once again and Qui-Gon laughed. "Not that sort of proposition. Allow me to make a new pot of tea and we can go out to the balcony, if you'd like."

Stars, the young man was making this difficult!

They cleared the dishes from breakfast, taking them back over to the kitchen. Obi-Wan carried the tea necessities to the balcony and waited for Qui-Gon to arrive with the new kettle of hot water.

Qui-Gon took a moment to regroup as the kettle heated. He observed Obi-Wan as the young man leaned on the railing watching the Coruscanti traffic. There was a lot he had learned during the morning exchange between Anakin and Obi-Wan. Anakin had confided in Obi-Wan to a great extent. And Obi-Wan was handling him with a skill, patience, and understanding that would rival any creche master. He had not expected the boy to adopt their ways blindly. Something that Qui-Gon was not sure he would have considered. There bond of friendship was already strong. It would not take much to mold it into a padawan master bond. In his mind, he'd already felt it right that they both serve as Anakin's masters. Seeing their interactions today only solidified the idea in his mind.

Now he had to sell the idea to Obi-Wan.

As he carried the tea kettle to the balcony, he wondered if he had left Obi-Wan outside a bit too long. The man was a ball of anxiety again.

"So not all this tension stems from the Council meeting." Qui-Gon observed, setting the kettle down on the small table.

"A great deal of it does." Obi-Wan sighed, "But not all of it, no. Truly, I don't think they left any rock unturned today. It was question after question about everything that has happened up until now. They sought more details, more opinions, educated guesses. And they brought up a lot of things I've managed to avoid thinking about."

"I am sorry you had to go through that." Qui-Gon replied.

"Don't be." Obi-Wan answered, looking out toward the traffic again. "They should have asked me much sooner than this. I think they were still in denial, hoping against hope that the Zabrak was simply a darksider, an aberration of some sort. Especially after nothing further was discovered on Naboo. But the appearance of the second Sith on Tatooine seems to have given them the swift kick in the arse they needed."

Qui-Gon received an image of a giant boot kicking Mace, Yoda and the other Council Members up and out of their seats.

He laughed a bit and Obi-Wan smiled at the sound of it.

"That wasn't very kind of me." He said sheepishly. "You should not encourage me by laughing."
"I find it refreshing, but the imagery that accompanied your statement was highly amusing."

Obi-Wan seemed surprised. "You saw what I-"

"I did." Qui-Gon confirmed. "Would you like to try one from me?" He closed his eyes and pictured Mace and Yoda in the native grass skirts of Daryndeen VI doing a dance that required a lot of belly and hip movements and not much else.

"Oh Force, stop!" Obi-Wan choked on his laughter. "I think you may have traumatized me more in the past few seconds than I have been this past month and a half."

Qui-Gon smiled at the pure joy on Obi-Wan's face and knew he had to move on to more topics or risk his admiration being recognized for what it was. He didn't want to scare the young man off.

"The tea is prepared. Shall we?"

At least Obi-Wan was smiling again as he took the seat across from him. The tension had decreased.

"I find it extraordinarily difficult to shield from you." Obi-Wan admitted as Qui-Gon poured the water. "I apologize for not having found a way yet. I don't mean to drag you down with me during all of my emotionally challenged moments."

"I enjoy being here for you." Qui-Gon replied honestly.

"And I appreciate the comfort and reassurance you have provided. But it seems very one-sided. I haven't really experienced anything equivalent in you. You are very controlled and level minded. I hate to be the one to throw that askew."

"You do no such thing." Qui-Gon assured. "It is nice to feel needed, though I would prefer you to be healthy and happy."

Obi-Wan looked deep into Qui-Gon's eyes as if he were a puzzle. "I can tell where you are, when you are awake and what your general mood is. But for the life of me, I cannot figure out how to shield you or shield myself from you. I do not want to negate your desire to help, but I have to admit...I don't necessarily want my every thought revealed to you. Especially if you can SEE what I am thinking. I'm not...I am not certain I am ready for that level of..."

"Intimacy?" Qui-Gon smiled gently, "Have you examined the bond yet Obi-Wan?"

"I have not had an opportunity to do so, no." He admitted. "I am ashamed to say that I only successfully meditated on my own yesterday for the first time in weeks."

Qui-Gon moved his chair closer to the table and offered Obi-Wan his hand.

The young man placed his hand into Qui-Gon's needing no encouragement or instruction.

"It is like nothing I have seen or felt. I would not have thought it even possible." He felt breathless just thinking about it. "Close your eyes. Focus on us. Reach for my mind."

Obi-Wan didn't even have to try. As he closed his eyes and concentrated, he fell into the extended mental invitation.

*Look,* Qui-Gon showed him how their Force signatures merged at the point of contact. Obi-Wan could not hide the startled fear at seeing himself so irrevocably tied.

*Not tied. Merged.* Qui-Gon had been ready for the fear, and was already sending soothing calm
toward Obi-Wan through the bond.

After studying it for several moments and basking in Obi-Wan's light, Qui-Gon stepped away from the mental contact, coming back to the physical world.

Obi-Wan's eyes were still closed. His breathing had quickened and his heart rate had increased. His thoughts were racing as well. But Qui-Gon was not concerned, for under all of that, Obi-Wan understood now. And there was a wonder within him.

"So then." Qui-Gon whispered and cleared his throat to draw Obi-Wan out of the trance he appeared to be in.

Obi-Wan opened his eyes and offered up a nervous half smile, "There really is no choice. We ARE literally stuck together."

Qui-Gon chuckled. "When I first saw it, I was terrified. Much more so than you were just now. I have always thought of bonds as links to another person. Links can be broken and mended or reattached in new ways. But this..." He sighed, "This is more like pouring two glasses of water into one bowl. You cannot separate the molecules back into their original glasses. All of the molecules mix and become one. Even if you do pour the water back into the original cups, it is forever intermixed with the other glass."

"That...that is...it's incredibly accurate." Obi-Wan admitted. "This is most definitely not a typical bond." Obi-Wan seemed excited, a nervous excitement, but still genuine and positive. Qui-Gon felt his mind ease, having confirmed this was something Obi-Wan wanted. He had not been sure, given the mixed signals he'd been receiving.

"Anakin described two individuals on Tatooine, both of who had nearly identical Force signatures. He refers to them as colors. He claimed the two were nearly a perfect match. I suppose ours might also change over time until we are much the same." Qui-Gon was pleased. Obi-Wan seemed to be taking this a lot better than he had.

Obi-Wan was studying Qui-Gon, the wonder and shock still plain on his face. But his lack of words was making Qui-Gon nervous.

"So returning to your concern about shielding," Qui-Gon continued, "I'm not sure it's possible. Shielding from me, would be like shielding from yourself from your own thoughts. It may not be something we can do, especially if the bond continues to develop." He sighed, "And from what I have read, once we become even more closely tied together, distance might not even matter."

"It mattered when you were away on Naboo." Obi-Wan argued. "I literally ached. Mentally and physically."

"As did I." He agreed. "But I think that was due to the timing and the level of the bond. It was but a thin strand before. And when separated, it was not enough to keep us connected and so we...we 'ached' for that missing part of us."

Obi-Wan nodded, the explanation made sense to him.

"The archives have a few older manuals on Force bonds, but I have not had the chance to read many of them yet. I will make sure to send copies to your com."

"Thank you." Obi-Wan replied. "I would appreciate that. But just to clarify...what you are inferring is that we will not be glued to one another's sides forever? We will actually be able to go on separate missions and not feel the same...side effects...as we did before?"
"I believe that is correct." Qui-gon answered. "But Master Yoda has already informed me that a situation would have to be dire before they would order us apart. We can choose to accept different missions and assignments, but they will never order us away from one another unless there is no other alternative."

"Huh." Obi-Wan rubbed his brow. "Mace had said the bond was different, but I...I don't know why I wasn't paying more attention. I thought...I would think that this should be terrifying in some way. And it was at first, but now, it is completely the opposite." He smiled and Qui-Gon sensed not a small amount of awe from Obi-Wan.

"I agree. I can't imagine going back to being...to being just me." Qui-Gon admitted. "I hadn't realized just how lonely I was before. The thought of losing this..." He shuddered.

Obi-Wan's free hand came to rest on top of their joined hands. "I agree. I can't...this is...well, it's like something finally clicked and it's...I don't want to return to what I was before. This is..." Obi-Wan took a deep breath, unable to find the words.

But Qui-Gon could feel the same need within himself that Obi-Wan was experiencing. "I understand. There is no need to explain it. I believe we are both experiencing the same sentiment."

Obi-Wan nodded his agreement.

"I am quite understanding of your wish for privacy. And you will no doubt sense things in me that I would prefer to keep to myself. Should we set some ground rules about what to do in such situations? Would that make it any easier?"

Obi-Wan frowned slightly. "You ask that as if I would have a clue on how to answer." Surprisingly, he pulled his hands slowly from Qui-Gons and stood, running a hand nervously through his hair, making small tufts stick up in the wrong directions. Qui-Gon looked away before he could consider how adorable it was.

Obi-Wan breathed out nervously, completely unaware of Qui-Gon's thoughts. The young man's anxiety reappeared tenfold. He stood and began pacing. "It's...it's not that I am so much worried about my general thoughts. So much as a specific few."

"Ah." Qui-Gon could understand that. He had a few things he was worried about as well.

Obi-Wan looked up barely making eye contact before looking down and resuming his pacing. Shame and guilt were trumping the anxiety now.

None of Qui-Gon's secrets would have caused him this level of concern. But with age, came wisdom. Qui-Gon's self-awareness allowed him to admit his strengths and weaknesses. He had learned from his mistakes and was not ashamed to admit his past failures and transgressions as they had all played a role in shaping who he was. Even if Obi-Wan could feel his attraction, it would not make him this ashamed or nervous.

"I came here this morning intent on speaking to you about something that I feel- felt-" He shook his head, stopping and facing Qui-Gon. "Krriff! It may yet still jeopardize this." He alternated pointing to himself and Qui-Gon. "Us."

And he was pacing again. The action was fairly impressive considering he only had about eight feet before he had to turn each time.

"I cannot imagine anything that would change the way I feel about being bonded to you." Qui-Gon replied, attempting to reassure Obi-Wan, but it was like he hadn't even heard the words.
"The Force has given this to us for a reason and I..I hope you will be understanding of what I am about to share."

"I will." He replied honestly.

Obi-Wan obviously did not believe Qui-Gon understood the depth of the situation. "Please." He stated plainly, meeting Qui-Gon's eyes with his own. "However, you react, I will not blame you for it. But I beg you to consider my past accomplishments and everything that led up to...to what happened before dismissing me completely."

"Of course." Qui-Gon vowed, knowing this was extremely upsetting Obi-Wan.

The young man faced away from Qui-Gon, going to lean on the the balcony again. His hands clenched the railing, loosened, then clenched it again. He ducked his head and turned it sideways, apparently unable to meet Qui-Gon's eyes now, or perhaps gathering his courage.

"I did something awful on...on Tatooine. It was horrible. Unforgivable." He barely got the last word out before nausea seemed to have him in its grip.

Qui-Gon stood and moved next to him, placing a hand on his back. The younger man did not flinch from the touch, but his eyes squeezed shut and he looked the other way.

"Whatever it is, you can tell me." Qui-Gon assured. "I'm not going anywhere."

Obi-Wan released a breath that sounded a bit like a scoff. "I'm not so sure of that."

"I promise you, I'm not going anywhere. Whatever you have done, allow me to share your burden."

Obi-Wan shook his head. "That's not...kriff...I wasn't at my best, I...it happened after I was Iessel's prisoner. We followed him to Tatooine and I found him first." Obi-Wan's eyes were filling with tears. "I was alone. By some cruel twist of fate-" He inhaled quickly. "Iessel attacked me and I...I..." He shook his head causing tears to spill down the sides of his cheeks. "I was so scared. But then I was angry."

He sobbed and Qui-Gon moved to embrace him but Obi-Wan raised a hand. "Please don't. I do not deserve the comfort you are offering."

He returned to the table, grabbed his napkin from beside his teacup. He wiped his face dry and took a moment to regroup. Qui-Gon respected the small distance he had created and waited patiently.

"I never really understood it before, when Master Yoda would preach the saying to us. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. And hate..."

"Leads to the Darkside." Qui-Gon finished, feeling a coldness nip at his insides.

Obi-Wan walked to Qui-Gon's side again and looked down over the railing. "I hated him then. In that moment. I felt the Darkside. The power of it. I grasped it. Surrendered to it. I used it against that karking bastard. And I was...I was so very close to killing him."

As Obi-Wan spoke, Qui-Gon could see images flash in his mind.

The Trandoshan...Barrick Iessel...held against a wall with the Force...knives leveled at all his major organs.
One knife dragging slowly and gently across the Trandoshan's neck, just enough to bleed a little, not to kill. Not yet.

Qui-Gon managed to ground himself to the present and not get caught up in what he was seeing. "But you didn't kill him." Qui-Gon whispered. "What stopped you?"

Obi-Wan took a few deep breaths. "I realized what I was doing." He said simply. "I hadn't understood at first. Not truly. When it dawned on me, it was...it shocked me back into reality. It was almost like it hadn't been me standing there doing those things." He shuddered, "But it was. I had used the Darkside. I was so cold. And I don't think I had ever felt so alone. Pulling away from it. Making myself release that power...it was the hardest thing I'd ever done in my life. The simple feat...of dropping all of those knives. To release Jessel from my hold. It took every bit of me to end it, to push it away. And by the time I had recovered, he'd fled. I pursued him but...he got away."

Qui-Gon could hear the wind and feel the tiny grains of sand stinging his face and hands.

"In the sandstorm." Qui-Gon whispered.

Obi-Wan nodded, dropping his head in shame. Qui-Gon had started rubbing Obi-Wan's back at some point and only now realized it. "Turning from the Dark takes courage. You were very brave."

"I was stupid!" Obi Wan shrugged the hand off and put some distance between them. "I should never have used it to begin with! He escaped, Qui-Gon! And he killed more people. Injured so many others." The pain and guilt spiked and it felt like a dagger in Qui-Gon's mind.

"Some quite severely." Obi-Wan cried, backing away until he hit the exterior wall. "I don't deserve forgiveness. Not from myself and not from you. Not from Rivan. I wasn't brave. I was weak. And with what happened with your former padawan...I would think that you would do all you could to keep me away from Anakin. I don't understand why you haven't. Why they haven't! Why the Council has encouraged this! Why they have allowed me to become so attached!"

He shuddered and slid down the exterior wall. Exhausted, confused and spent.

"I don't understand." He admitted, pulling his knees up to himself and resting his head on them. "I should have been locked away, but no. Instead, they knighted me." He laughed at that. "That's crazy, right?!!"

Qui-Gon felt the moment Obi-Wan gave up. Whatever, Qui-Gon decided now, Obi-Wan was resigned to it. He could tell Obi-Wan felt completely undeserving of the second chance he was being given. And completely undeserving of the bonds which had formed. His confidence was shot to hell.

Qui-Gon walked over and slowly lowered himself down next to Obi-Wan. He waited patiently as the young man swallowed back his grief and shame and met his eyes. Tears continued to fall down his cheeks, even as Qui-Gon sensed him building up his resolve to finish what he had started.

"I'm still here." Qui-Gon smiled gently. "I'm not sure I can make it better. I think that one day you will find peace again. You will learn from this and forgive yourself. You don't think it is possible right now, but I am telling you it is. It will happen."

Obi-Wan swallowed nervously, but Qui-Gon felt a bit of hope flicker within him.

"I have been through something similar. I am ashamed to say mine occurred over the course of several days and I willfully did many things that were...well, they were far worse than threatening a former captor who'd tortured me." He admitted. "I felt the call of the Darkside, same as you, but I am ashamed to say I was nowhere near as strong as you in turning away from it so quickly."
Qui-Gon had expected some form of condemnation or judgement from Obi-Wan, but only sensed sympathy and concern. "I regret that my experience did not occur before Xanato's fall." He couldn't prevent the despair and hurt that surfaced anytime he mentioned Xan. Obi-Wan quietly reached out and took his hand.

"Perhaps I could have helped him then." Qui-Gon admitted. "I would have been more understanding. Less righteous and condemning."

Obi-Wan leaned his head against Qui-Gon's shoulder.

Qui-Gon gathered his thoughts and shared his own story.

The Force had sent him visions. He did not often experience visions, so he was extremely worried. The visions weren't clear, but they warned him that something was going to happen to his creche mate and dear friend, Tahl Uvain. The Council had explained that she went to New Apsolon against their wishes. She and Qui-Gon had negotiated a peace on the planet several years earlier and Tahl had been contacted and led to believe something on the planet was amiss. Qui-Gon had gone after her of course. He'd fought with her before she left and his dumb ass hadn't realized he was in love with her until they'd reconnected on New Apsolon. He had surprised himself in asking her to become his life-bonded partner. But he was more surprised when she accepted and kissed him.

He caught himself smiling fondly at the memory.

Obi-Wan squeezed his hand, "And then what?"

"Then all kinds of things went wrong. She was kidnapped, tortured, poisoned. I got her back, but it was too late." He admitted, "After she succumbed to the poison, my fear and anger took control. I wanted the man who killed her. I sought revenge and I did a number of deplorable things to find him. Mace showed up. He tried to talk some sense into me, but..." Qui-Gon shook his head, "There was no breaking through the veil of darkness that I'd gathered around me."

Obi-Wan no doubt could sense the strength of his emotions. All this time and it was still difficult to speak of it. Tahl's death had broken something inside of him. And it took well over a year to get himself back on track.

"I found him. I fought him, though it wasn't really a fair fight. And like you, I very nearly killed him." Qui-Gon admitted.

"What stopped you?" Obi-Wan whispered.

"Tahl." He choked, feeling his own eyes filling with tears. "I swear I heard her voice. I was ready to deliver a killing blow, and I heard her. She spoke to me. Somehow, she found a way. She did not want me to go down that path. She didn't want me to become a monster. She told me to let go of the need for revenge. I couldn't have done it on my own. I wouldn't have. But her voice. It brought me back." He smiled and looked at Obi-Wan. "I secured him in binders and Mace showed up about ten minutes later. Thank the Force! Because I don't know how I held it together after that. The cold and shame that followed were nothing compared to the emptiness of a world without Tahl. I don't even remember what Mace did then. How I got back to our rooms, or even the Temple on Coruscant. It was a dark time for me. It took me over a year to truly begin healing from the experience."

Qui-Gon felt no judgement from Obi-Wan. Only sympathy and something else.

Disappointment, perhaps.

No, more of a resignation.
He tilted the young man's chin up and met his eyes. "I see no darkness in you, Obi-Wan. We are all capable of atrocities. It is important to recognize that we all have our weaknesses and we must be prepared to face them. You handled your challenge exceptionally well and despite your arguments to the contrary, you were brave and you are very strong. Hell, compared to what I did, you look like a saint. Hopefully, I have not scared you off?" He felt a tiny jolt of fear shoot through him that perhaps Obi-Wan would think him damaged goods.

"You haven't." Obi-Wan affirmed.

"I don't see how not. If you had judged yourself by such harsh standards, what must you think of me?"

"It's as you say. I see no darkness in you either, Qui-Gon." Obi-Wan smiled slightly, "And the Force has bound us together. If you say I will eventually make peace with it, then I will trust that it can happen. Knowing that you know, and that you still want me here...well, it comforts me a great deal."

Qui-Gon smiled. "No doubts about this, then?"

"No doubts." He agreed with a smile. Qui-Gon once again sensed the sad resignation within Obi-Wan, but felt the time was not right to ask about it. At least he had put Obi-Wan's mind at ease, that he was in this for the long haul.

Then I should like to tell you of my proposal." Qui-Gon switched the topic to something lighter. "But first, let's go back inside. I'm afraid my arse has fallen asleep and my back is protesting the concrete floor. Getting older is not fun."

They both stood. Qui-Gon gathered up some of the dishes and Obi-Wan followed with the rest.

Qui-Gon stood at the sink and began to wash the dishes and was pleasantly surprised when Obi-Wan went to gather the other dishes from the dining table. He asked a few questions about the location of the garbage and where to find a towel and rag to wipe the table. Once the task was complete he began to accept the dishes as Qui-Gon finished. He would dry them and set them on the counter. His mind was curiously quiet, perhaps relaxing in the mindless job.

Qui-Gon finished washing the last dish and pulled the plug from the sink. He picked up a plate and began drying it beside Obi-Wan. The young man gave him a shy glance and smiled.

"I want to ask the Council's permission to allow Anakin two masters. Seeing as we share this unique bond, and your bond with Anakin is already exceptional, I believe he would benefit from having us both as his masters."

Obi-Wan's eyes grew wide and he shook his head. "I...I was just knighted. They would never-"

"Not under normal circumstances, perhaps." Qui-Gon agreed, "But we are anything but normal. The boy is far too old to be an initiate. The one who should be his master has a force bond the type of which has not been witnessed for decades, possibly a century. And the Sith have returned. If there was ever a time to make an exception, I think we are in it."

Obi-Wan clearly doubted he was ready for such a responsibility. He walked around the counter and took a seat on one of the stools. Qui-Gon leaned on the counter beside the stove across from him.

"He is strong in the Living Force, Obi-Wan and I will be able to teach him well. But when it comes to his visions, when it comes to the Cosmic Force I would do him a disservice. While I have experienced a vision or two in my time, you are far better suited for such things. And you have this innate understanding of him. I've seen it several times now. I can't claim to be as aware of his needs
or thoughts as you are."

Everything Qui-Gon was saying made perfect sense. But he could tell, Obi-Wan wasn't sold on the idea yet.

"And perhaps it is meant to be, for you yourself have seen it with Anakin in a vision when you first met."

"Attempting to self-fulfill a vision?" He asked nervously, but at least there was a bit of teasing to it.

"Perhaps." Qui-Gon smiled.

"It is a great responsibility." Obi-Wan drew in a breath considering it.

"It is. But you will not be taking it on alone." Qui-Gon promised.

Obi-Wan studied Qui-Gon eyes. The serious expression on the young man's face told Qui-Gon he was thinking through the proposal with all the seriousness it deserved. Qui-Gon, however, was struck by how handsome the young man was and how lucky he had been to be given this gift. He would do anything to make Obi-Wan happy.

Obi-Wan nodded once. Qui-Gon sensed his agreement without his having to voice it. Unable to hold back a giant smile, he was happy to see the sides of Obi-Wan's mouth turn upward as well.

So into watching him, Qui-Gon did not pay attention to the small warning in the Force. The flipcake which had been stuck to the ceiling chose that moment to release its grip and fall smack dab on top of his head.

Obi-Wan startled slightly and Qui-Gon jumped back in surprise. They both looked at the ceiling and then back to the flipcake which was now in Qui-Gon's hands having been shaken off.

A chuckle escaped Obi-Wan but was quickly repressed as he tried to maintain a straight face. "I take it that was not from your being distracted, but rather, Anakin's first attempt at cooking flipcakes?"

Qui-Gon could feel Obi-Wan's desperate attempt to keep from laughing, though he was near bursting with delight.

Qui-Gon tossed the flipcake into the sink and shook his hand once to remove the wet batter that had transferred. He couldn't help but smile from Obi-Wan's amusement.

"I can see I will have to revise my decision to assign him cooking chores."

Obi-Wan did laugh then and he came back around to Qui-Gon's side of the counter. Removing a clean wash rag from the drawer, he wet it and helped Qui-Gon clean himself.

"Thankfully it appears the cooked side landed on your hair, but there are stray splashes of batter everywhere."

Qui-Gon stood stock still, batter covered hand held out to the side as Obi-Wan used the cloth to clean his shoulder. He folded it once and reached up to wipe Qui-Gon's hair.

Qui-Gon bowed his head and allowed Obi-Wan to wipe at the batter in his hair. He couldn't stop the wave of attraction that overtook him. The thought of grabbing Obi-Wan's chin with his batter covered hand and kissing him senseless crossed his mind, but he put a lid on it quickly. Hopefully, Obi-wan would not have picked up on it.
But Obi-Wan's hands stilled and Qui-Gon risked looking up. Worried that the young man might have seen it and gotten upset.

He had sort of a deer in the headlights look, and he wasn't looking directly at Qui-Gon. In fact, it he was looking anywhere he could except at Qui-Gon. He gestured to the taller man's head, his eyes glancing briefly at his hair before sliding elsewhere. "It's um...it's not coming out so easily, you should probably go wash it." He took a step aside to allow Qui-Gon access to the fresher and his room.

Shite!

Okay, he had seen it.

"Give me a few moments." Qui-Gon begged, "When I return, we can talk about...about where to go from here."

Obi-Wan smiled shyly and nervously and nodded, trudging back toward the common room.

Qui-Gon went to wash his hair and change his shirt, hoping he hadn't completely ruined everything with a careless thought. And hoping Obi-Wan would be there when he returned.

******************

Obi-Wan was so grateful for the reprieve.

And for his robe! With Qui-Gon's hair being so long, it would take a little time to wash. Surely it would give Obi-Wan enough time to recover from his attraction without Qui-Gon's notice.

At least he hoped he hadn't noticed.

The kriffing man was gorgeous. It had to be a sin to look that good. He'd wanted to run his fingers through Qui-Gon's hair since he met him. And his reaction at being so close to him, in such an intimate moment - well, intimate for him at least - was too much.

He'd probably made the man extremely uncomfortable.

But then again, maybe not. Qui-Gon had been exceptionally understanding of everything else so far. And Obi-Wan was fairly certain he would have known if the man was alarmed in any way.

"Karking hells!" He muttered under his breath, running his hands through his hair.

Finding out Qui-Gon was attracted to women had been a blow. He had tried to accept it the moment he heard it, but it was going to be difficult to push these feelings down.

After having sat on one of the dining chairs for a minute, he realized that he needed to push these thoughts aside and meditate on them later, when he could allow himself to freak out a bit. Maybe he could discuss it with Master Gant.

Obi-Wan rose out of his seat and gathered the supplies to clean the ceiling. He would be able to clear his mind easier by doing domestic work.

He was hopping off of the counter, having just finished when Qui-Gon came back in.

"You didn't have to do that." Qui-Gon said. "I would have cleaned it later."

"It was no bother." Obi-Wan stated, trying not to look at Qui-Gon. His hair was still damp and kark
it all if he didn't look just as gorgeous now.

Don't think about it.

Do NOT think about it.

"Well, I do appreciate it. It was not something to which I was looking forward."

Obi-Wan backed away as Qui-Gon stepped closer. He needed to put the cleaning supplies away, focus on something else.

Distraction was the key.

He could feel Qui-Gon's concern ratcheting up and knew he was failing in hiding his reactions toward the man, which in turn made him nervous.

"Obi-Wan?" Qui-Gon spoke softly and he could tell the man wasn't going to let it go.

"Well then, I assume there really are a number of things we need to discuss if this is going to happen." He placed the soap back in the cabinet below the sinkm before grabbing the folded cloth from the countertop. He shook it out and refolded it. "Did you already have a list? If not, we could-

"Obi-Wan." Qui-Gon took the cloth from his hands and placed it back on the counter. "Please stop this and allow me to apologize."

That caught Obi-Wan off-guard. "Why would you apologize? You haven't done-

Qui-Gon raised a hand to stop him from talking. "Perhaps we should address the bantha in the room, because I am afraid this is going to keep happening and I want us to be honest with each other."

Obi-Wan swallowed nervously, unable to speak or even breathe as there was a tight knot in his throat choking him with dread. He shook his head and somehow forced the words out. "I'm sorry. I...I. can't help it. I-

"Stop." Qui-Gon shook his head. "You've done nothing wrong. The fault is mine."

"Yours?" Obi-Wan had never been so confused. "I hardly think-"

Qui-Gon raised his hand again. "We spoke of this earlier. You have thoughts you do not wish me to sense and as I said, I have some too. And I am sorry you had to experience that just now. I did not want to make you uncomfortable. But it is difficult for me to not feel attracted to you."

Wait. What!

Obi-Wan met Qui-Gon's eyes now, he wanted to speak. He opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out.

"I know I am much too old for you, and I wish I were strong enough to deny having these thoughts and feelings or could find a way to get control of them, but it is proving difficult. And we hardly even know each other. Perhaps in time, these...these desires will pass. But for now, I admit it is a battle to banish them from my mind."

Had Obi-Wan stepped into an alternate universe? Was Qui-Gon truly saying what he thought!?

"I will do my best to gain control of them, but until then I would ask your patience and understanding."
Qui-Gon waited patiently for Obi-Wan to respond. But Obi-Wan didn't even know what to say or how to react, "You mean...you want me?"

Qui-Gon glanced away ashamed, but nodded. "I do." But then he met Obi-Wan's eyes and vowed with such promise in his being that Obi-Wan could not doubt his next words. "But if it is not what you want then please allow me to be whatever you need me to be, Obi-Wan. I will be happy as long as I have a role in your life. Whether it be best friend, brother, mentor..."

But relief was flooding Obi-Wan's mind and soul.

Qui-Gon looked back toward him in surprised confusion, making Obi-Wan smile.

"Qui-Gon, since I have met you there is nothing I desired more than to be in your presence. To see you again. Your...admiration. It is hardly one-sided. I thought you had sensed that in me and I didn’t think...I mean, you like women...so I just assumed...I just thought..." He shook his head, "I thought you sensed my attraction just now and were disappointed."

Qui-Gon moved forward and reached for Obi-Wan's hands, which Obi-Wan offered to him without realizing. He then reached one hand up, placing it gently on Obi-Wan's cheek and moved forward slowly pressing his lips to Obi-Wan's.

Obi-Wan closed his eyes and allowed Qui-Gon to kiss him. His lips were soft, and surprisingly his short beard was as well. Not scratchy as he had expected it would be. The smell of the generic shampoo issued by the temple had never smelled so sweet. But more than the physical sensations, his mind brushed Qui-Gon's and it was as if he was zapped with electricity. A need and desire so strong passed through him that he felt his knees weaken. He clasped at Qui-Gon's tunic to remain standing and Qui-Gon pulled him tighter against him. But Qui-Gon kept the kiss gentle, mostly just brushing his lips against Obi-Wan's own. Qui-Gon nuzzled his cheek against Obi-Wan's. He groaned and then rested his forehead against Obi-Wan's.

"Oh sweet Force. I'm not sure why we were chosen for this, Obi-Wan, but I am so grateful." Qui-Gon whispered.

Obi-Wan shuddered. Being in Qui-Gon's arms was like a drug. He didn't want to leave. He lowered his arms to encircle Qui-Gon's waist and pressed his head against his chest. Qui-Gon's heart was beating as fast as his own. Obi-Wan smiled as the strong arms continued to hold him tightly.

They could have been like that for moments or hours. Being so close to Qui-Gon was the sweetest of intoxications. It was almost as if he had entered a dream state and as long as Qui-Gon continued to hold him, the bubble wouldn't burst.

Qui-Gon chuckled a bit, "We can't stay like this forever." He whispered. "Shall we move to the couch?"

Obi-Wan nodded in agreement but still didn't let go of Qui-Gon for several seconds. When he did, he was a bit embarrassed how desperate he must have seemed.

"Now, now. None of that." Qui-Gon assured. "I think we've both wanted to do that for a long time now. Needed it."

Qui-Gon sat down in the corner of the couch and raised his arm indicating that Obi-Wan could sit close to him. Obi-Wan took the seat and leaned into him, placing one arm behind his back and the other hand on his chest, resting his head against the crook of his shoulder. Qui-Gon brought his arm on Obi-wan's far shoulder and began tracing patterns there with his fingers.
He shouldn't have been surprised when the light touching sent a jolt of desire through him. But he was all the same. He let out a nervous breath, "I've never...I've never done this."

He felt his ears and cheeks flushing with the admission.

"Snuggled?" Qui-Gon teased.

"Well, no. I mean I've...well...I've only ever cared for one other. It was nearly two years ago. And it never went beyond a few kisses and as you say, snuggling."

"Why not?" Qui-Gon smiled.

"Because I could not let it. I actually cared about him enough to desire it. But I would not risk going further when the emotional attachment was strong."

Qui-Gon was quiet for a moment, "So you've never..."

Obi-Wan swallowed his embarrassment, biting the bullet. "Other than the one friend, I have never felt the desire to do so."

Qui-Gon's eyebrows lifted and Obi-Wan struggled to clarify himself with words. "Well, perhaps a basic physical desire, but without the emotional attachment, I never..." Obi-Wan shrugged, "It was not something I really wanted or considered."

Obi-Wan was certain he was red from his toes to the tips of his ears.

"I mean, I am not completely ignorant of what is required. I have seduced quite a few people on various missions, but only when it was needed to get information or lure them away from something. And I never had to do more than deliver a few kisses before I convinced them to follow me. My Master found it all too amusing..."

He could sense Qui-Gon becoming more and more amused as he continued to dig himself deeper and deeper into a pit of embarrassment.

"Yes, I somehow doubt you ever failed in that regard."

Obi-Wan could feel the delight Qui-Gon was feeling as he teased him.

"Oh there were one or two failures." He admitted, bashfully.

He explained how his master claimed his good looks were a strength and a resource that he needed to utilize. Praethorn had one of his lady friends give him lessons on seduction when he turned seventeen. She'd taught him what was important to various races and sexes, all the subtle nuances of body language. It had been one of the most embarrassing, but educational lessons in his life. And he was a quick study, if for no other reason, than to escape the humiliation of the topic.

"That is not something I would have ever considered to teach a padawan." Qui-Gon admitted,

"Though the two of you undertook a lot of unconventional missions. I assume the lessons proved valuable?"

"They came in handy." He looked up briefly and smiled at Qui-Gon. "Pun intended."

Qui-Gon chuckled and they settled into a comfortable silence for a moment as each was lost in his thoughts. Though thoughts was a loose term seeing as Obi-Wan could barely form one. Qui-Gon's fingertips had begun tracing patterns on his arm again and it felt wonderful.
"Obi-Wan." Qui-Gon's soft voice in his ear made him shiver.

"Hmmm." He could barely pay attention again, very much aware of how close Qui-Gon's mouth was to his ear.

Qui-Gon chuckled and his hand stilled, but he rested his chin on top of Obi-Wan's head. "I think...I think that despite how intense this is, it would be best if we took things slowly."

Obi-Wan nodded. "I...I think so too. I've always been sort of curious before and I know it is supposed to feel amazing, but...well...after..." Obi-Wan felt himself tense slightly and he tried to push away the remembered fear and pain Iessel had caused him. He did not want Qui-Gon to sense it, nor did he want to ruin what was happening, "After recent events, I can't say I would want to try it anytime soon."

Obi-Wan hated the thought that the bounty hunter had any influence on what he did with Qui-Gon, but it was the truth and he needed to face it. He sighed heavily, the admission taking a lot out of him.

He felt Qui-Gon's concern spike, "Obi-Wan, that...I apologize that the incident had not even crossed my mind."

"There is no need for you to apologize," Obi-Wan explained, "If anything, I should be apolo-"

"Don't." Qui-Gon sat up a bit, forcing Obi-Wan to readjust his seating and meet his eyes clearly. "I promised you before, that I would be anything you needed in this life...fill whatever role you required. I meant that. Obi-Wan, if you are never ready to take that step, then it will be okay. We will work it out. I just want to make you happy and to be allowed to be near you like this."

Obi-Wan closed his eyes and nodded, feeling relief but also excitement. He looked back at the man and admitted, "I like this too. And with what I feel for you Qui-Gon...it is hard to believe we won't get there. But I do appreciate the idea of going slowly."

Obi-Wan was only slightly surprised as Qui-Gon swooped forward and kissed him, pushing him against the cushion behind him before slowing and gentling the contact.

Obi-Wan met Qui-Gon's eyes and felt the intensity of their connection, the deep need to be with this man forever. He could get lost looking into those eyes. He wanted to get lost in the man's soul.

Force! This was amazing.

Qui-Gon kissed him again, and Obi-Wan opened his eyes a few seconds after to find Qui-Gon had pulled back slightly and was grinning from ear to ear.

"Let's begin then... " He paused, drawing his hands slowly up Obi-Wan's sides, before resting them on the back of the couch on either side of his head. He leaned in close to Obi-Wan's ear nibbling and licking briefly before he whispered, "...by putting in a request for a three bedroom apartment."

An embarrassing sound left Obi-Wan's throat, a groan of need and desire, but he could tell Qui-Gon liked hearing it.

"I'm not so certain that I wouldn't just agree to whatever you say right now." Obi-Wan answered breathlessly, "But that sounds like a good start."

And with that the two of them began to discuss their immediate future between gentle caresses and kisses.
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

Sorry it's been so long. Changes in RL and a bit of writers block got me behind. Onward, I go.

Obi-Wan batted away the mental inquiry from Qui-Gon. He'd tried to simply ignore it up to this point. But it had become so distracting and he just wanted some quiet! Was that so much to ask? He regretted it immediately. He felt like he'd just kicked a baby voorpak.

He sighed in frustration.

On the way to meet with Bail, he began to feel it again. The same sensation that he'd had before the Sith had been murdered. It was a foreshadowing of something dangerous to come. And it was seldom wrong. Master Yoda had said it came from his strong connection with the cosmic force and that he should appreciate the warnings.

And he did. He appreciated the Force letting him know that all hell would soon break loose. It was just the anticipation and anxiety it caused tended to drive him mad with worry. The feelings could last anywhere from an hour to weeks and sometimes they faded with time, but they had been fairly accurate of late.

It didn't help that he had woken three times last night suffering panic attacks from nightmares he couldn't even recall. His attempts to return to sleep had left him more drained than when he went to bed. He was grateful that he had not yet moved into the shared quarters with Qui-Gon and Anakin or he may have woken them both. With help from Master Yoda, he had learned to shield his dreams to keep from disturbing Anakin through their bond. But there was no shielding from Qui-Gon. After having woken him a third time, even while wings away and floors apart, Obi-Wan decided to give up on sleep and simply meditate.

The sensation of danger looming, coupled with his lack of sleep, never made for a good combination. It had him jumping at shadows and had been a detriment to his social dealings. And Qui-Gon's constant 'nagging' in his head for the past two hours hadn't helped either.

He just needed a moment to meditate, to sort through what had happened with Bail, acknowledge his feelings and deal with it. But with the looming sensation of danger and Qui-Gon's constant concern in his mind, it didn't feel like he was going to get the time he needed.

He'd commed Master Gant and requested an unscheduled session upon his return to the Temple. Hopefully, the mind healer could help him reach some sort of calm before dinner tonight. Qui-Gon and he had a dinner date planned with Anakin. One where they planned to officially ask the boy to become their padawan as the Council had agreed with their request. Obi-Wan had been pleasantly surprised when Qui-Gon suggested they have dinner at Dex's. It appeared that Qui-Gon was also good friends with the Besalisk.

Now, he was debating whether they should even leave the Temple what with the warning the Force was sending him. But he also didn't want to ruin a happy occasion, because he couldn't pull himself together after the disaster of a lunch with Bail.
He sighed as he went through Security to enter the Temple. Seeing the guards made him slightly wary after the incident with the Zabrak. He worried the Temple was a lot more vulnerable than anyone suspected, especially since the possibilities of a traitor now existed.

At least the Senate seemed to be taking the recent events seriously. He’d been pleased to see the additional security put into place to protect the building and its workers. Even Bail’s entourage had grown by several guards since his last visit.

Kriff, that meeting really had gone badly.

After clearing security, Obi-Wan had made his way to Bail’s office and was greeted by his personal secretary.

"Obi-Wan." She stood quickly and moved around the desk, reaching out to take his hands. "I am so relieved you are safe. Welcome home."

Obi-Wan raised her hands, brushing a light kiss upon her knuckles, "Simira, you look as beautiful as ever."

"Thank you." She smiled sweetly. "The Senator is on a conference call, but he should be finished in the next few minutes. Please make yourself comfortable." She gestured to the sofa and chairs in the reception area.

He observed the three security guards in the corners watching him. One seemed overly suspicious of him. Obi-Wan made a mental note to stay aware of the guard during the visit, but in the same breath he berated himself for being overly paranoid.

The fourth guard, Bail Organa’s most trusted bodyguard, stepped forward and shook Obi-Wan’s hand before pulling him in for a brief hug,

"Bors," Obi-Wan spoke his name fondly, a genuine smile gracing his features. "Has your wife had the baby?"

The guard smiled wide, "Two weeks ago. She is so tiny, I feel like I am going to break her every time I hold her."

Obi-Wan could believe it, as Bors was a very large, very muscular man. To say the man could be intimidating was an understatement.

"Can I get you anything to eat or drink while you wait?" Simira inquired politely.

"No, but I appreciate the offer. Thank you." He declined.

"Let me know if you change your mind." She smiled and made her way back to her desk.

Obi-Wan acknowledged the other guards with a polite nod and selected the most defensible chair from the door, keeping the high strung guard in his line of sight.

Bors sat down across from him. "The senator has not been himself for a while now. Your disappearance and the recent threats have taken a toll. You may find him a bit off-putting."

That was code for ‘Bail is being mean as hell.’

"Recent threats?" Obi-Wan inquired.

"I am sure he will explain in greater detail, I just wanted to give you the heads up. You always
seemed to be able to handle him better than anyone, but you deserved to know what you were walking into." Bors shrugged.

'Grumpy Bail." Obi-Wan acknowledged. "Got it. Anything else of which I should be made aware?"

"He was worried about you." Bors examined Obi-Wan more closely, "We all were. And it would appear rightfully so. You look like crap."

"You always flatter me so." Obi-Wan smiled, making light of it.

"At least he plans on feeding you well." Bors smiled, "I'd have preferred for him to stay here, but he insisted on brunch at Eggsie's. My team has already secured the area and is watching it closely."

"I'd noticed the increase in protection. More to do with these new threats?"

"I think you will find that most of the senators have increased their protection since what happened to Senator Yarua and her family."

Obi-Wan swallowed quickly, looking away as the memory of the young wookies swam to the surface. Their screams and pleas-

"The rumor mill is rampant with conspiracy theories right now. And most of them don't even know about the information you recovered from Iessel." 

"I see." Obi-Wan's voice had gone a bit scratchy and he coughed to clear the lump that had formed in his throat as his skin began to burn with phantom pain.

Inhale, exhale. Deep slow breaths.

Bors studied him too intently. And Obi-Wan found he could not meet the man's eyes.

He needed to get over this already!

"Here." Bors said suddenly, startling Obi-Wan as he pulled a pad from his back pocket. He fiddled with it for a few seconds before handing it over.

Obi-Wan had been expecting to see something security related. Threat assessments, possible suspects and the like.

He was relieved to see a picture of Bors' giant hands holding a tiny baby.

"Told you she was small." He said.

"She's perfect." Obi-Wan stated, while flicking through the photos almost mindlessly. He was more than grateful for the distraction, but still unable to concentrate fully on the moment. "Name?"

"After her mother's mom, Cadence Alora." Bors smiled. He had the look of a proud father, completely besotted with the tiny life that was about to change his whole reality.

"She already has you wrapped around her little finger." Obi-Wan felt his voice becoming stronger, less shaky.

"She does." He agreed.

The door to Bail's office swooshed open. Obi-Wan handed the pad to Bors as they both stood. Bail walked quickly over making no secret of examining Obi-Wan head to toe. "You look like crap."
Was there an echo?

Obi-Wan sighed, "That seems to be everyone's favorite greeting of late."

"Come on." He gestured toward his office, allowing Obi-Wan to proceed him, while resting a hand on the small of his back.

"Your ride will be here in less than ten minutes, boss." Bors advised.

"Thank you, Bors."

No sooner had the door closed behind Bail, did Obi-Wan find himself enveloped in a full embrace. He allowed his hands to encircle the other man as well, resting his forehead against the man's chest.

"You really do look like hell." Bail said, chin resting on top of Obi-Wan's head, his arms continued to hold him tightly, "Tell me what you need."

A small, nervous laugh escaped Obi-Wan, "A bit of air, perhaps."

Bail loosened his hold and Obi-wan stepped back slightly meeting the man's concerned eyes. But the man stepped forward into his personal space again and took Obi-Wan's hands in his own.

"I promise you I am fine." Obi-Wan gave a reassuring hand squeeze and forced a smile, while meeting Bail's eyes.

"Doubtful." Bail scoffed. He nodded toward the comfortable chairs next to the coffee table before releasing Obi-Wan's hands and moving past him. The man grabbed a tray from the larger meeting table and carried it over, before pouring Obi-Wan a cup of tea.

Obi-wan was touched. "You have tea? I was under the impression that you did not particularly care for it?"

"I got it for you, nerf herder!" Bail smiled as Obi-Wan realized there was only one cup.

"You didn't have to do that." He replied, touched by the sentiment.

"Well, truth be told, I bought it for myself as well." He shrugged, seeming torn about something, nervous. "Not to drink, but...well, sometimes...it's just nice to smell a cup. Reminds me of you."

Obi-Wan felt his body stiffen at the comment. He could sense Bail's whirlwind of emotions. Fear, relief, desperation, and love. Obi-Wan could not meet the man's gaze and looked away, swallowing nervously. He took a moment to strengthen his shields so as not to be effected by the strong emotions. Not everyone was as easy to read as Bail, but they shared a special friendship.

He would normally have been more self-aware and not have displayed such physical reaction. But Bail's admission caught him off guard, and he was already off his game.

Of course, Bail realized the words had made him uncomfortable. He was a skilled diplomat, trained to read body language and unspoken reactions. The senator stood with a sigh making his way over to the bar where he began pouring a drink for himself.

Obi-Wan knew he had hurt the man's feelings by not responding to the admission. But they had agreed, there could never be anything between them.

Two years ago, he and his master had been assigned to protect and assist Senator Organa on a mission to a small planet in the outer rim. Gnoshum was a world that was rich in Ionite, and several
disreputable businesses had illegally begun mining operations. Gnoshum was not as technologically advanced as the average Republic planet. They were finding it difficult to prevent their world from being plundered. Seeking the protection of the Republic, they applied for membership. Bail had been a bit reckless in uncovering a caste system on the planet, as well as an illegal slave trade which the Gnoshum government had somehow failed to note on their application. A sudden, skilfully organized uprising had occurred a day after their arrival. Bail and Obi-Wan had been cut off from Bors and Master Praethorn. It had been a harrowing, two week long adventure, but it had been the start of a wonderful friendship.

While he considered himself an average padawan, he'd never felt incredibly attracted to any one individual as some of his acquaintances had. He knew he preferred males, but besides gender, he did not have any preference as to what he desired in a sexual partner. He simply hadn't been that interested in or concerned about it. Until, Bail Organa.

Obi-Wan had found himself incredibly drawn to Bail. He was good looking, charming and compassionate. He was a dedicated senator with a strong work ethic. He lived his values and was always willing to laugh at himself and own up to his mistakes. There was very little not to like. He was surprised when Bail had insisted they maintain contact after the mission concluded.

Much to Obi-Wan's surprise, Bail had spoken of his relationship with Breha. It had been a marriage of state for political reasons. They had grown to love one another and although they were good partners and would eventually have children together, Breha was not opposed to his being discreet with others, nor was she averse to inviting others into their relationship. Obi-Wan had been stunned, wondering why in the Sith Hells the man was telling him such things. He was still racking his brain for an explanation up until the moment that Bail leaned forward and captured his lips in the most amazing kiss.

Well...the second most amazing now.

The kiss had not occurred until several months after their mission had been completed. Obi-Wan had been much too shocked to react properly. By the time he knew what was happening, he was lost in the feel of Bail's lips and hands. Things had escalated quickly and Obi-Wan had turned to putty in the other man's hands. It wasn't until Bail started to remove their clothing that Obi-Wan began to show his nerves. Bail had sensed it right away. Obi-Wan had been reluctant to explain his lack of sexual experience, but finally admitted it. Bail had absolutely refused to take it further at that point, insisting that they go forward slowly to make sure it was what Obi-Wan desired. Obi-Wan had initially been swept away by the passion and pleasure, but once reigned in, he became frightened by the intensity of his feelings. Bail had made the right call in waiting. And in so doing, Obi-Wan's respect had only grown for the man.

The decision to wait had allowed Obi-Wan the time to weigh his choices and discuss the situation with his master. Unfortunately for Bail, Obi-Wan had decided not to pursue the physical relationship.

His master had never claimed to be the perfect Jedi. He did not partake of physical pleasure often, but he had not been celibate. On the rare instances when Illeus had indulged himself, the women he chose were always ones he respected. He always connected with them on a personal level, but only slept with them if he was not likely to encounter them again.

There was one woman on Praxis they would visit whenever possible. Ennalise. She was in charge of an orphanage. Obi-Wan and Master Praethorn would visit the orphanage every so often, bringing a donation and gifts for the children. When Obi-Wan asked why his master had never been with Ennalise, his master had smiled. "Because she is the only one that would tempt me to leave the Order. It would be too easy to fall in love with her and not care one wit about anything else."
His master did have wonderful taste. She was an amazing woman, beautiful and selfless. It reminded Obi-Wan that he needed to contact her and let her know of his master's passing. If there was anyone Illeus Praethorn had loved, it was her. She deserved to know that.

After telling his master what had happened with Bail, the man smiled, "I was wondering how long it would be before he tried something." Illeus told Obi-Wan that ultimately it was Obi-Wan's decision. He was the only one that could determine what sort of Jedi he would be and what limitations he would need to place on himself. It had been a very mature talk. One in which Obi-Wan realized Bail was his Ennalise. The feelings and the friendship were too deep for him to risk a physical relationship. He could only afford to offer the man his friendship.

He'd met with Bail a week later. The senator had been much more understanding than he anticipated. Sad and utterly disappointed, but determined to keep in touch and maintain the close friendship they had developed.

They continued to have their weekly lunch dates whenever Obi-Wan was on planet and they would still flirt occasionally, keeping it light and joking, but Bail had never pressured him for more. He'd never intentionally made him uncomfortable by putting his feelings out there again.

Until now.

Though not a direct admission, the comment about the tea had been too intimate. Too real. And it struck the cord of guilt he carried for not being what Bail needed him to be.

Add to the fact that he was going to have to tell Bail about Qui-Gon, well...his anxiety was quickly rising. He had no desire to hurt his friend further.

He had run through a multitude of scenarios as to how to break the news, and he still didn't have a solid plan. Bail had been so understanding and self-sacrificing, but there had been moments when Obi-Wan sensed the man's jealousy when others were making him their prime focus or flirting with him. In a way, Obi-Wan treasured those moments even as he wished Bail did not have to feel them. Knowing that someone cared so much about him...well, it had mattered. A great deal.

"I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable." Bail said returning with his drink.

Should he tell him now, about Qui-Gon and Anakin? He didn't want this whole lunch date to be tainted with jealousy or upset. And it didn't feel like the right moment to break the news.

"It's fine, Bail. I understand."

He smiled and Obi-Wan could see how nervous the man had become. "I just...it was hell waiting to hear if you had made it or not. The reports were...well, you were..." He swallowed and despite the additional shielding, Obi-Wan could feel just how worried the man had been. "And then finding out Illeus had been killed and you were hurt." The intensity of his emotions felt as if Bail was reliving the situation even now. "And then you got home and I still didn't hear from you. The Sith was killed and you were still over there. Just miles away in the Temple where I could do NOTHING to protect you. And I couldn't ask any information further than what they were offering without seeming too involved."

Obi-Wan looked down more ashamed than ever. He knew all of this. He should have contacted him sooner. He can't imagine what it would have been like. "I apologize. I was unable to send word sooner."

"Sooner! You've been back for weeks." Bail accused.
Obi-Wan could feel Bail's disappointment and hurt. Which was actually a lot harder to take than the anger.

"I wasn't in a good place." He explained. "I had a lot to work through-"

"That's what friends are for, Obi-Wan." Bail accused. "I want to be there for you in those times."

"Bail, please." Obi-Wan swallowed, closing his eyes. "I do understand and I am very grateful for what you are offering. But please believe me when I say I was not ready for outside contact. I have explained to you the close tie between the Force and a Jedi's emotions. I wasn't ready."

"Not even for a com call it would seem." Bailed huffed with what he felt was justified anger.

"EXACTLY!" Obi-Wan raised his voice, feeling fed up with defending himself. "Not EVEN for a DAMNED com call!" Obi-Wan glared with accusation, breathing hard. But he stopped himself just as quickly upon seeing the shock on Bail's face. Then he spoke in almost a whisper, his anger quickly deflated, "You have to understand. You know what happened to me. I know you do. You sit on the Intelligence Committee. You are privy to all the details that others might not be aware. After all of that, I really don't need a guilt trip for failing to call you."

Obi-Wan closed his eyes, taking a second to uncurl his fists and breathe deeply and evenly. When he looked at Bail, the man seemed horrified.

"But I did get your message after I returned." He explained. "And while I wasn't ready to speak with anyone. Hearing your voice gave me strength and reminded me of what is good in this galaxy. Knowing you were there for me, it mattered. Even if you were not what I needed at the moment."

Bail had moved back to him and taken a seat beside him. Obi-wan sensed his regret and concern.

"I'm sorry. What I just said was selfish." Bail spoke quietly. "I didn't mean to cause you further pain. We decided it was to remain friendship and we've managed to do that for two years, but then this happened...and...I don't think I have ever been more scared in my entire life. Scared that even what little I was allowed to have of you, was at risk. It makes you rethink decisions and...and...examine regrets. I was too caught up in my own feelings. Forgive me, my friend. I overstepped."

"There is nothing to forgive." Obi-Wan sighed, tearing up slightly. "You've been so understanding of my 'limitations.' I am just thankful that you continue to put up with me. I value our friendship. You are one of the most important people in my life."

The two smiled fondly at one another and Bail reached up to wipe a tear away and rest his hand against Obi-Wan's cheek.

"I don't think I have ever seen you cry." He seemed sad. "I am sorry, my friend. About everything that happened to you. And Illeus."

"Thank you." Obi-Wan whispered, breath catching only slightly as the grief spiked. Bail reached down and took Obi-Wan's hand, giving a gentle squeeze as Obi-Wan had done earlier.

"I never told you before, but he came to see me after we...well, after we kissed that first time."

Obi-Wan was surprised!

"He never told me that. What did he say to you?"

"He explained the situation...quite clearly, actually. He warned me that you would never be mine. He
promised not to influence your opinion of me, that the choice would be yours. But he already knew that you would choose the Jedi over me. And that you would never allow yourself to be what we both wanted. He was so certain of it. He warned me not to fall into the trap of thinking one day you would change your mind, told me to come to grips with the fact that friendship was all I would get out of this," Bail sighed. "I am an idiot for not listening to the man. He knew you better than I ever would."

Obi-Wan was troubled by Bail's statement. "I didn't realize you still had hope. Had I known, I would never have allowed you to think-"

"Stop." Bail raised his hand. "This is in no way your fault. It's just something I can't manage to get past. You have made your intentions known from the beginning. And I understand them." He explained, "Unfortunately, I can't help but love you. You'll always hold a special place in my heart, Obi-Wan. Even if all we can be is friends."

Bail's com chirped and Bors let him know that the transport was ready and waiting.

As they rose to exit, Bail changed the topic. "I suppose I should be congratulating you on passing your trials. How did they go, Knight Kenobi? You were always worried about what you might face."

Obi-Wan winced slightly before explaining, "Occasionally a Jedi will be judged on his performance should a mission be challenging enough. They informed me I had no need to undergo any further trials after my return."

Bail raised his eyebrows but tilted his head in thought. "Well, kriff! But they got that right, at least. Your last mission was more difficult than anything they could have cooked up."

"You won't hear me arguing." He agreed.

They had just entered the common area when the door to the hallway opened at the same time and Senator - no, Chancellor - Palpatine entered, glancing first at Simira, but then noting the two of them as they approached.

Obi-Wan delivered a formal bow.

"Chancellor, I was not expecting you." Bail greeted, "Please allow me to introduce you to Knight Obi-Wan Kenobi."

Recognition flashed in the Chancellor's eyes, "Ah yes. Congratulations on your recent knighthood, young man."

"Thank you, Chancellor." Obi-Wan dipped his head.

"What brings you by today, Chancellor?" Bail inquired. "Obi-Wan and I were headed out for lunch, but if there is something you need..."

"Oh, dear me, no. I wouldn't dream of keeping you from your...date. It was nothing work-related. I was simply passing by your office and thought to inquire how the move went."

Obi-Wan worried briefly at the Chancellor's pause. How would this man know anything of Bail and his friendship. And the man's slight pause upon using the word date had been intentional. Of that Obi-Wan was certain.

"Without a hitch." Bail responded. "Though Breha was not pleased."
The chancellor sighed in sympathy, "I do not envy you in the slightest for having to share the news."

"She saw the necessity. But it did not spare my ears the curses sending me to the nine hells and back." Bail admitted.

"She is a fiery one." Palpatine smiled his agreement. He then turned to Obi-Wan, who suddenly felt very uncomfortable with the chancellor's complete attention focussed on him. The wary paranoia he'd begun to feel on the way to the Senate Building increased.

"We have you to thank for discovering that information." The chancellor tilted his head toward Obi-Wan. "Had you not thought to collect Barrick Iessel's property prior to leaving Tatooine, we would have lost valuable intelligence."

Obi-Wan was normally quick enough to put two and two together, but he was honestly at a loss. "I am unaware of that which you are speaking. I'm afraid Bail has not yet informed me of anything involving his wife or threats posed to Alderaan. Nor did I see anything in the data that should have caused alarm. And I have been over the information several times."

"I'll fill you in at lunch." Bail waved off Obi-Wan's concern.

The chancellor continued, "I should also like to express my appreciation for your assistance in saving my Queen, young man. Had it not been for the valiant efforts of Master Jinn and yourself, that evil creature may have been able to capture her and my planet might still be enslaved by the Trade Federation."

"I did very little in that regard, Chancellor. Master Jinn and those that returned with him to Naboo are much more deserving of your recognition."

Obi-Wan had never been one to receive compliments well. Though appreciative of the recognition, the individual attention embarrassed him. Having Palpatine lavish praise upon him was exceptionally uncomfortable. Especially considering he was not alone in his efforts, nor was he the one that sacrificed the most.

"Ah, but you were the one that fought the Zabrak allowing Queen Amidala to escape in the first place. And the one who dealt the final blow from what I hear. I have to admit I am surprised that you saved his life. I confess I would not have thought to keep him alive for questioning, nor would I have thought it possible."

Obi-Wan swallowed, any sense of appearing unaffected at this point was not going to work. He simply nodded, keeping quiet, feeling his anxiety begin to build and the start of a cold sweat for some reason.

"Have they come any closer to finding the Sith's killer?" Palpatine's voice seemed distant and deeper to Obi-Wan and it appeared as heat waves rippled between the Chancellor and himself, causing the image of the man to ripple.

His eyes and ears were playing tricks on him.

Stress. Another panic attack?

He knew he was supposed to answer. He felt that he may have been slightly slower than usual to respond.

"Not that I am aware." He managed to say, but couldn't tell if his voice reflected his disturbed state. "I am not a part of the investigation." He thought he may have sounded normal, even though he felt
far from it.

The Chancellor nodded, seemingly ignorant of the effect the line of questioning was having on Obi-Wan. For that, at least Obi-Wan was grateful. He could, however, feel Bail sneaking worried glances at him.

"I find it extremely worrisome that the killer appeared to have used a lightsaber and may have taken the Jedi guard by surprise." Palpatine commented.

Obi-wan simply stood there, offering no further comment. The silence was uncomfortable, but he was uncertain of what had been reported outside of the Temple. Therefore, he did not wish to confirm or deny anything the chancellor was saying.

"But I must say, you have recovered remarkably well. And I am glad to see you up and about, though I would not have thought it possible, having seen the injuries you suffered, not only from the lightsaber battle, but from those caused by the bounty hunter."

Obi-Wan swallowed once more, trying to find his voice. "Much to the credit of our healers, Chancellor." He bowed his head again, ashamed that his voice had developed a slight tremor.

"Yes, they are quite skilled." The chancellor agreed.

Bail placed a reassuring hand to the small of Obi-Wan's back and it flooded him with relief.

"Well, chancellor, I hate to rush you out, but we have a reservation at Eggsie's."

"Ah. Yes." Palpatine smiled, putting his hands together in delight. "That is one chef you do not want to upset by being late." The man grinned pleasantly while addressing Bail, "But the food is so superior that it is worth all of the demands he places on his customers."

He turned once more to Obi-Wan, "Queen Amidala is expected to be on Coruscant in three days to provide testimony to the Senate. It would be an honor if you and Master Jinn would agree to dine with us one evening. She has made mention that she would like to express her appreciation for the rescue."

"That is not necessary." Obi-Wan replied, feeling his senses begin to return to a somewhat normal perception. "We were just doing what we were trained to-"

"Nonsense." The Chancellor spoke over him, not allowing him to say no. "If she could, I am certain we would invite all of the Jedi who returned to Naboo. Unfortunately, what with the political atmosphere being what it is, that is not likely to happen anytime soon." The man's facial expression took on a disturbed appearance. "I want you to know that despite the murder of the Zabrak, my faith in the Jedi is not weakened. I do not subscribe to, nor condone, these foolish whispers of the Jedi Order going rogue." He scoffed, "Although your decision to go to Naboo benefited my people and I, it has not helped the public's opinion of your Order, nor the Senate's. So in an effort to appear unbiased, I'm afraid it would not be particularly appropriate to invite all those who aided us."

Bail spoke up then. "Obi-Wan has been recovering, Chancellor. He may not be aware of the current political situation." He then explained to Obi-Wan. "The public, especially the Senators themselves, were not happy with the Order's choice to take action on Naboo prior to Senate approval. It has caused a lot of tension and suspicion."

"Ah." Obi-Wan allowed himself to appear confused, even though he was well aware of the political climate.
"Unfortunately," Bail continued, "Rumors have been popping up implying that force users, perhaps even members of the Jedi Order, may be manipulating senators and taking part in the political maneuverings of the Republic in order to put themselves in a position of power to cripple or usurp the government."

Obi-wan kept his opinion to himself, still wary of the Chancellor, "I see."

Although they both appeared to be waiting for his thoughts, he was not aware what they wanted him to say, "I am certain the Jedi will seek to ensure the public of our willingness to serve and protect them." That seemed neutral enough.

"That would be welcome." The chancellor smiled. "Well," The chancellor tilted his head and clasped his hands. "I didn't mean to hold you from your plans. Please allow me to express my gratitude once more, Knight Kenobi. Please let Master Jinn know of the invitation. You will see him, correct? I heard that the two of you are to be partners from now on?"

The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end at the Chancellor's comment. Something urged him to continue with caution. He could feel Bail's eyes on him as well at the mention of this new information.

"I will be certain to relay the information."

"Then I look forward to seeing you again soon." He smiled. "Feel free to bring the young boy you are training as well. Queen Amidala was quite taken with him during their short time together. It was wonderful to make your acquaintance."

Obi-Wan nodded and bowed once more, "Chancellor."

As if that encounter alone had not been enough to unsettle him, the rest of the lunch with Bail only went downhill from there.

Bail was overly concerned, recognizing immediately that Obi-Wan was far from fine. Obi-Wan had convinced him to stop hovering and changed the subject to inquire about the "move" and what it had to do with Breha.

It ended up that there was a map of a tunnel system on the pads he had brought back. The tunnels would not have been recognized by anyone else. They ran underground beneath the royal palace on Alderaan. There was also some encoded data which ended up to be the guards schedules, alarm codes and some personal information on their employees. The information was from a few months back, but it had been accurate at the time, which caused considerable worry. Figuring that the royal palace may have been compromised, Bail had insisted that Breha move to a new location. She had not been pleased, but did see reason after several minutes of arguing and ranting.

"We moved her to the Mountain Palace for the time being."

Obi-Wan's thoughts always ran ahead. And Bail could see he was deep in thought.

"What is it?" He probed.

"Nothing...a random, stupid thought." Obi-Wan admitted.

"Oh please! You are incapable of stupid thoughts."

Obi-Wan hesitated. "I think this is just a sign of my post traumatic stress. Or maybe it's all this conspiracy stuff working it's way into my brain. I don't know...but I always try and think a few steps
ahead. I had a stray thought that perhaps they wanted the information found, and that they may have included this information to precipitate the move to a new location. But it was a ridiculous notion. It would make no sense as they were not intending for the information to be found. There was too much damning evidence on the pads. I tend to overthink at times. You know this."

Bail breathed deeply, considering it. "Still, paranoia tends to keep one alive."

"Or qualifies one as mentally ill." Obi-Wan replied, rubbing his brow. "Honestly Bail, I do not believe there is reason to worry that it went that far. It's just my...situation causing me to read further into things than I would like."

"There was quite a bit of information on those pads." Bail agreed. "I must agree whoever hired Iessel would not have appreciated the info being handed over. But your thought worries me all the same, dammit!"

Obi-Wan smiled sympathetically. "Neither of us are strangers to being fed false intel."

Bail still looked concerned. "It was just a thought, my friend. My gut says you've made the right move."

"Your gut or the force?" He asked.

"Both." Obi-Wan offered a weak smile.

"Good enough for me then." Bail returned the smile.

The food had arrived and Bail started to look uncomfortable about something.

"Just ask whatever it is you need to ask me. You know there is no need to sugar coat." Obi-Wan told him.

"Do you think there is any credibility to the idea that the Jedi are tampering with the Senate."

Obi-Wan froze briefly, before taking one more bite while considering his thoughts.

"My Order is the same as it has been for hundreds of years. Our purpose is to serve, not rule. That tenement will not change." He stated. "However, the appearance of a Sith is disturbing. The Sith seek power and chaos. They are fed by emotions such as fear and hatred. If there is a Sith operating from the shadows, what better way to stir up tensions than to have people begin to fear us by sowing seeds of doubt and mistrust. It is not the Jedi you must fear, but the Sith who are seeking to undermine us."

"Who do you think killed the zabrak?"

"I don't know." Obi-Wan admitted. "But it was a lightsaber that killed him. Whether it is a Jedi who may have turned to the darkside or a Sith who snuck into the Temple...neither situation is comforting. "To know we have been compromised..."

Bail nodded in agreement. "You and I both know that the Senate has been suffering for some time. It becomes more difficult to prove the misdeeds and corruption, and so many simply turn a blind eye. Any politician recently accused of corruption may now have an out, claiming they were framed or coerced to do things, or to resign, or to vote a certain way. How long could this have been happening, Obi-Wan? How far could this reach?"

"I have no answers for you, Bail." Obi-Wan answered, "We just learned the Sith have been
operating in the shadows for over a millenia. Who's to say what they have managed to do without our knowing. But I feel like we are very far behind, perhaps too late, in catching on to the threat they pose."

It is clear that Bail was disturbed. And Obi-Wan's lack of answers had not reassured him.

"I want you to know, Obi-Wan, that I have absolute trust in you. Even if I begin to doubt anything else, I will always trust you to tell me the truth of the matter. We have to work together in this. It may not always serve to be open with all the details. We may need some back channels. You or I may need information from one another that has not been made available to the Jedi or the Senate. But I am convinced that if we do not work together the Republic will be the worse for it."

Obi-Wan agreed. "I will not keep secrets from the Council, Bail. But I feel you are correct. There will be a need for unofficial channels in discovering just how deep this will effect the Republic. But I fear our friendship...has not gone unnoticed, so if the information is too sensitive, we must use caution."

"Agreed." He nodded. "Now, tell me about this new partner the chancellor mentioned. Is he trustworthy?"

Obi-Wan stopped chewing. Swallowed past a lump. "I...um, we met on Tatooine. His name is Qui-Gon Jinn. I would trust him with my life."

"Qui-Gon Jinn." Bail seemed to consider for a moment. "Tall and persuasive, very well spoken, and long, gorgeous hair?"

Obi-Wan nodded, "You have met him?"

"Briefly, at a summit on Alderaan." Bail confirmed. "He was impressive. An outstanding diplomat." Bail fiddled with his napkin. "Not that I am complaining - very much the opposite, I am glad someone will be watching your back out there - but aren't new Knights supposed to go solo for some time?"

"That would be the normal course of a Jedi Knight. However, when I met Master Jinn on Tatooine..." Obi-wan had a hard time meeting Bail's eyes, "A force bond developed."

"A Force bond?" He inquired.

"A force bond occurs when two individuals are tied together with the Force spontaneously upon meeting. It is not a conscious bond. Neither party chooses it, it simply springs into existence. They are very rare. Most believe they are a blessing from the force."

Bail's eyebrows rose. "And that means you are to be partners from now on?"

Obi-Wan nodded, "Simply put, yes."

Bail picked up on his avoidance of answering, "Simply put. Why don't you explain it to me a bit more in depth?"

Bail's eyes glanced at Obi-Wan's hands, which were clenched nervously on the tabletop. Obi-Wan sighed, hiding his hands below the table and replying, "Force bonds can be incredibly...intimate."

Bail's brow was drawn and had Obi-Wan not been able to sense the anger radiating from the man, it was clearly visible.
"I see." He stated. "Please go on." He waved a hand to continue.

This wasn't going too well. But Obi-wan continued anyway. "The members of the Force bond effectively become one. Some are so close that thoughts can be heard while on the other side of a planet or even in the same system of planets and strong emotions may be felt from greater distances. It has been several decades since the last recorded Force Bond and that was between two telepathic races."

"So, reading between the lines here," Bail seemed uncomfortable. "Partners seems to be an understatement. It sounds a bit more like you are describing soul mates."

Obi-Wan swallowed nervously. "Some have described force bonds in such a manner."

"Is yours?" Bail asked.

"It is likely." Obi-Wan admitted quietly.

Bail sat back suddenly, "You can't be serious?"

"This is not something I chose." Obi-Wan defended himself.

"But you aren't exactly objecting here. I can see you are smitten just in the way you looked when we were discussing him earlier."

Obi-Wan remained quiet. He couldn't exactly deny it. "It feels right." He shrugged, "In a way that nothing else in the galaxy ever has."

"We felt right." Bail answered.

Obi-Wan blushed, "We did." He admitted, "But not like this."

"Are you already fucking him then?" The words and the spike of jealousy and anger seemed to surprise Bail as much as it did Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan was so shocked by the question he couldn't even respond. He didn't know what to feel.

"You haven't." Bail said confidently, "But you want to."

Obi-Wan couldn't believe he was pushing this. He found he couldn't meet Bail's eyes. He knew the man would be upset, but he really hadn't believed it would turn so ugly so fast.

He sat nervously, looking everywhere but toward the man. He could sense Bail taking the time to regroup as well. He could feel the man's shame and regret already.

"I thought attachments were forbidden." He sighed with resignation.

"There are some exceptions." Obi-Wan explained. "I understand you are upset. And as I said, I didn't choose for this to happen. It just did. My life is tied to his now, whether I want it or not."

"But you do want it." Bail explained. "And that...it hurts." He took another moment before speaking again. "I apologize for the anger and jealousy. I had no right to act the way I did, say the things I said. It's...this was a bit sudden and I confess, I need some time to...adapt and consider it from your point of view. I..."

"There is nothing to forgive, Bail. I have hurt you. And I wish I could have prevented it."
Another uncomfortable silence crept up on them before Bail finally cleared his throat. "As long as you're happy, that's...that's all I can ask for." He stated. "I find my appetite has left me and I have a lot of work to catch up on." He stood.

"Bail, there is no need to-"

"Please, Obi-Wan." He raised his hands in a warning of sorts. "There is a need. I need to leave before I say or do more to hurt you, things that I would regret. I just...I need some time."

Obi-Wan nodded and backed a step away, lowering his head in submission. "I'm sorry."

"Me too." Bail echoed. "Bors will stay and ensure you have a way home."

"Not necessary." Obi-Wan shook his head. "I do not want you unprotected. I will get a cab."

Bail sighed, but nodded his agreement. He had walked a few feet away before halting and turning back. "Stay safe, Obi-Wan. I will call you soon. May the Force be with you."

Something in him loosened at the words. Their friendship would survive and for that he was grateful. But he hated that he was causing his friend pain, however indirectly that may be.

So now, having now made it through Temple security, he found himself outside of Master Gant's office. He felt as if he should be able to deal with all of this on his own, but he wasn't going to let his pride hold him back from a quicker recovery. At least he hoped it would be quicker.

The mind healer met him at the door with a sympathetic look as he ushered Obi-Wan inside to the smell of freshly brewed tea.

"What brings you by so suddenly, Knight Kenobi."

"Oh just the usual." He answered sarcastically, "Guilt at not being what a friend needs me to be, a force-bonded partner trying my patience with his abundant concern, mild to moderate panic attacks, and an ever present sense of danger looming."

"Oh, well then, you'll be in and out of here in just a few minutes," Master Gant chuckled dryly.

"I do apologize for the sudden request."

"Nonsense. It's part of the job. Besides, I had nothing pressing that couldn't be set aside." The older man smiled, "Come now, have a sip of tea and tell me what's happened before we get started."

Obi-Wan took a deep breath and followed Master Gant to the table. He was determined to get through this. He had to get better. He would get better. For the sake of Anakin and Qui-Gon. And for himself.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!