

**FATHER
AND
SON**



Declaration

I thank Chiara and Jean Genie for the beta-reading of the original Italian fiction and Mari Skyrin-Sarker for the beta-reading of English translation.

The names Yimot, Athor, Dovim and Theremon are from the cool novel “Nightfall” by Asimov and Silverberg. But in this story they have no connection with the characters, plots and places of the book. They are just an homage.

Chapter 1

The dawn didn't shine yet upon Coruscant skyscrapers. Anakin sat to look at the dark sky, dotted even at that impossible hour by the coming and going of city traffic and by thousands of artificial lights. Sometimes that everlasting movement bothered him and he longed for the calm Tatooine nights. Yet he shouldn't have to complain, since his rooms were one of the few ones to own an outside window. A privilege few other Masters could boast, and evidence of the high position he had reached inside the Jedi Order.

The door-handle noise at his right side woke him up from his thoughts and his glance turned to Luke, who was coming out from his room. The Padawan bowed slightly to greet him.

Anakin quickly inspected him: his uniform was in order, his gait controlled, his mind focused by his morning meditation. He wasn't able to blame him for anything, even if he had wished to: his child was faultless as always, thanks to Master Yoda's teachings.

He beckoned Luke to sit next to him and he was immediately obeyed. But he noted with amusement that the boy had shown a curious expression at the unusual order.

His son would have been amazed, if he had known their true relationship!

He longed to reveal it to him, but on the other hand before he could, he needed to have the boy's whole loyalty, even against the Code, if necessary. The stake was his continuance inside the Order, the fame and the power he gained thirteen years before, piercing Palpatine with his lightsaber in front of a bewildered Master Windu. That act was understood by everybody as the fulfillment of the prophecy, and then his career received every honour.

"Do you remember what today is?" he asked him.

Luke thought a moment, then nodded: "It's been one year since I became your Padawan."

Gratified, Anakin smiled and gave him a small box wrapped in a green paper.

His son took it with amazement and turned it up and down, as if he wanted to examine it.

"It's a gift," his Master explained.

"I thought they were forbidden," the Padawan uneasily pointed out, "Master Yoda always says we can't own anything of our own."

Anakin shrugged. "That's why you must keep it a secret."

Luke flushed clearly at that, but anyway he began to cautiously open the paper. His eyes grew wide, when at last he found an unusual

golden pendant, picturing a small crown and, continuing to look at it, he said: "It's seems to be really worthy."

"It belonged to one I cared much about," his Master explained cryptically.

His Padawan nodded absent-mindedly while he studied the object intensely, till he was wholly absorbed by contemplation. His eyes got dilated and his forehead frowned as if he was trying to see something, then he woke up. He blinked twice, as if he came back to reality from a dream.

Bewildered by his son's reaction, Anakin asked himself if it hadn't been a mistake to give him that. Luke had never known his mother; could he possibly feel her presence in her pendant so many years after her death?

"I, I..." Eventually the Padawan began to babble, "I think it's a great honour to have received such a gift. I don't know what to say."

"Take it... and swear to keep it hidden," Anakin added quickly. A smile escaped him, when his son nodded with his glance still on the pendant. He tapped the boy on the shoulder to gain his attention and his big blue eyes looked at him. "Now we must breakfast or we will be late for the training," he urged him.

The gymnasium, where Anakin had booked their square for that morning, was the wider of the Temple: it was divided into fifteen delimited spaces and was always furnished with

every new odd stuffs for the simulated lightsaber fightings. So he always tried to corner his turn there, fixing the training dates with absurdly wide anticipations.

He buckled tightly his safety armour around his chest and his belly to make it to adhere at to his bust, while the room was crowding with relaxed speed. He greeted Plo Koon and his young Padawan who walked beside him to reach their square and he heard at his shoulders Luke, who didn't seem to like that place as much as him, to murmur unwillingly a kind of "Good morning." Not caring too much about his apprentice's unusual rudeness, he put on the safety helmet, lifting its darkened visor.

He switched his low-frequency saber on, inducing his son to do the same, and with a teaching tone he began: "Today, I'm going to teach you how to parry a blow to the heart."

"Everybody say it's very difficult," his Padawan immediately objected, doubtful and almost worried.

Anakin shrugged. "If it was easy, I wouldn't need to teach you it." Since his boy's expression didn't change, he tried to encourage him: "Before we use just the Force, we'll begin slowly with our visors up."

Not entirely persuaded, Luke nodded, assuming the basic position with his saber point to his opponent's throat.

His Master did the same before instructing him: “Now, come slowly to me, targeting my heart.”

The Padawan went ahead, pushed his sword in the middle of his opponent’s armour quietly, but relentlessly, turning his right wrist for some degrees so that the point went a bit to the left, where it could have pierced easily under the sternum, if he had been holding an ordinary fighting frequency laser. But, before his sword brushed his Master’s armour, his Master made his blade circle and with an annoying frizzing, hit the enemy point, parrying the assault. Then he replayed the movement slower in the empty air for his pupil’s benefit.

“Now, try it,” Anakin urged, regaining the start position.

Luke nodded, getting on guard. When his Master neared his saber point, he diverted it with his own one.

“You circled in the opposite direction,” the Jedi underlined.

“Ah... yes!” his boy agreed, seeing again in his mind what he had just done.

They tried several times, but one in three, the blade circled in the opposite direction. Anakin grew impatient and decided it was time to rebuke him: “You are inattentive!”

“No, I’m not!” his Padawan denied, getting defensive, “I’m trying. It’s just a little difficult!”

“Is it difficult to circle in a clockwise direction, than in a counterclockwise one?” Anakin scolded him with acid causticity. “And when do you *try* the exercises since? Do or do not...” and he let suspended the well-known saying.

“Sorry, Master” was the only answer.

“Let’s see if at fighting speed you can focus more,” the Jedi almost challenged him, lowering his visor and wholly opening himself at the Force to supply at the temporary blindness. First he felt Luke who focused as well, then he became aware of the other twenty-eight people in the room, everyone immersed in his training and in his effort.

He got focused again on his training and he took the guard position. Without checking if his apprentice was ready, he went ahead to hit him. As his saber was parried uncoordinatedly and approximately, he felt clearly his boy’s amazement to be caught so unawares.

“Slow,” Anakin just noted and fast he assumed again the starting position, repeating the exercise.

“You turn again in the wrong direction.” was the next reproof, followed by an infinite series of “You struck when I was too far away,” “Late,” “Too stronger,” “Too weak,” “Keep your left hand central,” “Don’t anticipate my move,” gaining slow but important improvements.

After the nth replay, he heard Luke gasp and felt his tiredness. But he didn't want to bestow a break: one day his child might not fight a lenient Master, but a resolute enemy.

He attacked again at his best. This time there was neither the smallest deviation to his saber trajectory and he heard his laser split on his Padawan's armour, who would have fallen dead if that had been a real duel.

Anakin nervously yelled at him: "Are you sleeping?!" He felt some dozen eyes turn toward them and he chewed his lip, mentally cursing his lack of control. "On guard!" he added, trying to sound more conciliating this time.

He felt Luke hesitate, before hearing his voice in his mind. *But everybody is looking at us!*

The Master didn't want to favour such shyness and, without bringing himself to answer, he let flow a pretentious indifference perception.

I can't keep concentration: I feel uncomfortable, his Padawan went on, plainly ignoring the silent message.

When you'll have to face a Sith, will you ask him to look for a suitable place before fighting?, he answered him caustically.

Luke appeared ashamed of his request and assumed the guard position.

Anakin plunged again, receiving only a slow and weak parry. Amazed, he deeply probed

his son's feelings, finding his mind more focused on people around them than on their duel. *This was really insufferable! And he had just scolded him!*

He decided to make the young insubordinate understand he would never let go such vitally important matter and at the same time to give him a break. So he switched his lightsaber off and took his helmet off.

Luke raised his visor, looking at him inquiringly.

"I don't waste my time. If you don't *want* to concentrate, the training is over," the Master explained dryly.

"I'll try... *do* better," his Padawan corrected immediately.

Anakin shook his head, putting all his indignation in the answer: "We'll see, but another day. Now, I want you to go to the library to finish your research homework."

The Jedi was waiting for any objection, but his boy just lowered his mortified glance, bowed slightly and, trying to keep control of his broken voice, just answered: "As you wish, my Master". Then he left fast, followed by other people's inquisitive eyes.

Nervous because of both his son and onlookers, Anakin called through the Force three remotes from the apparatus shelf and switched them on. Lasers rained down on him, but he parried every shot, letting his annoyance

lead his hand against the shining tracks. After few minutes, he was vexed also by that exercise; it was too easy for his skills. He lifted his hand and the remotes stopped their attack, then they filed back to their shelf as he took his armour off and left as fast as his Padawan had.

Chapter 2

What Anakin hated most the few times he lived a tension with Luke was the sense of guilt he felt after punishing the child in some way, although if that day he was sure to have acted for the best. If his child had rebelled like he had used to at his age, maybe it would be different. But every time, his boy just bowed his head, letting him without a point for his indignation.

It was hours since the gymnasium occurrence and he began to feel tired by the distance he had forced. He couldn't help but wonder what Luke's feelings were. Several times he kept himself from probing him through the Force. But the image of his expression taunted him: he was aware of how strongly his son wished to become a model Jedi and, also if he had never told him openly, how he was proud to be the Chosen One's Padawan, whom he actually worshiped like most boys did after Profecy fulfillment. That public humiliation had surely burst him more than a sabre touch on his arm.

Anakin sighed and, deciding he had gotten his point across after so many hours, went to the library. When he arrived, he began to walk the long passages between shelves, but he couldn't find his child. *Might he possibly be at the cantina?* He instinctively looked at one of clocks on the walls. He closed his eyes and

dipped into the Force. But recognizing Luke's presence among the other hundred potent ones who crowded the Temple and not knowing where to focus wasn't easy at all. He opened more his perceptions until his focus channelled onto a well-known presence: he astonishingly found that his child was much higher than the library, he was in the Council Tower.

As he neared, he could define better and better his position, finally able to locate him inside the cosmic planetarium. He went into the large room. The darkness was lit up by the Galaxy projection, that circled idly around the core stars. In spite of its light he couldn't see anyone, yet he felt his Padawan's presence.

"Luke," he called.

A small movement in a corner attracted his attention. His son was sitting on the floor, his arms held his knees tightly to his chest with his chin on them.

Anakin faced him. He crossed his arms and after a few moments for a well-pondered silence, he asked him: "Is that your way for doing your homework?" However he was more puzzled than annoyed.

Luke raised his eyes to meet the Jedi's. "Sorry, Master."

"Sorry, Master'?!" Anakin repeated incredulously, "Is that all?"

His Padawan bowed his glance again and Anakin guessed with great surprise to see

through the half-dark his boy's eyes filling with tears. His child's behaviour was too unusual and maybe it was more useful to understand what upset him than to lecture over and over. After a brief consideration, he seated near him, asking idly himself if other Masters have such scruples too or that was just a side effect of his being a father. Watching the holo projection, finally he asked with a conciliatory tone: "So, do you want to tell me what you're doing here?"

"I went to the library," his boy began and added quickly, "...I swear. But, after an hour Yimot and his friends arrived, too..."

"Yimot... Yimot...", Anakin repeated, trying to remember who he was, "Plo Koon's pupil?"

Luke nodded and then went on: "And as usual they mocked me."

"Does it happen often?"

His apprentice nodded again and, after some moments, he went on: "They say I'm always in your way, I'm no good for holding a lightsaber and that's why you never take me to the missions with you. Today, they've said..." His voice faltered as he was trying to keep control on his lump. "...they've said this morning everybody saw how much you regret to have chosen me as your Padawan."

At that, Anakin burnt with anger: "How do they dare? What do they know?"

He saw Luke's wide open eyes looked at him in surprise: "Isn't it true?"

"Of course it isn't!" his Master cried indignantly. Then, a doubt crossed his mind: "Don't you believe that?"

"I... don't know what I think. You never take me with you," his boy answered, pretending he was diligently watching the galactic map.

"You could ask me why rather than draw your conclusions," the Jedi underlined.

His apprentice didn't cross his glance yet and held his legs more tightly to his chest. "I was afraid to learn the truth."

Anakin was left speechless. He tried to understand Luke's point of view. More or less awarely, he based his love on their relationship, he took it for granted, given their real bond. But his son, wholly unaware of the situation, saw himself just like any usual Padawan, who had to prove something to deserve attention from his Master and who got always take back without explanations. "I think you're a very good fighter for your age. That's why sometimes as this morning I try to push you at the top."

"Then why do you never take me with you?" his Padawan asked.

The Jedi sighed. "You're very young. I don't want to risk your safety before you're ready."

"But other Padawans as old as me follow their Masters yet," Luke objected.

“Maybe I care more for your health than other Masters do for their apprentices’.” Anakin began to feel uncomfortable; they were reaching a taboo subject.

After a short thoughtful break, his boy shook his head. “Why?”

Enough was enough. His Master shrugged and stood up. A sudden idea crossed his mind: that would have cheer Luke up, reassuring him about his skills, and make envious those who dared to mock him.

“I bet there’s something no other Padawan as old as you has ever done yet,” he mysteriously said to his son, at last gaining all his attention.

After half an hour, they were leaving Coruscant atmosphere, flying a training ship.

Luke was more thrilled than ever before in his life. “Are you really going to make me to fly?” he carried on crying out.

His Master just nodded and smiled, remembering how he himself had felt when he was just a Padawan and could lay his hands upon any ship. He settled the ship, steadying it along a safe course, then he began to teach his son: “All right, put your hands on the control stick in front of you.”

Now that the great moment was here, Luke hesitated for a while. Then he did as he had been told.

Anakin took away his hands from his own controls. "Now, turn softly to right."

His boy abruptly moved his hands, the ship cornered too harshly for the speed they were flying and for a very long second she seemed to slip away.

"Slow!" the Jedi cried, before to hold fast back his own stick, adjusting softly their course. When they were new in a balanced situation, he finally sighed: he had never imagined before someone could frighten him, when it came to flying. He felt a little sorry for Obi-Wan, understanding suddenly what his previous Master had endured because of him. But maybe just that memory kept him from an hypocritical lecture and he just underlined: "Controls are very, very sensitive."

"Too much," Luke agreed with a bit of alarm under his quite tone.

"When you learn, they'll allow you to perform very keen manoeuvres," Anakin explained encourangingly. "Now, try again more softly."

This time the performance was excellent. At the beginning, the Master made his boy repeat some basic exercises and then let him do some turns at will. With badly hidden fatherly pride, he delighted at his son's learning speed and the natural gift he showed. Without any instruction, his Padawan had quickly plunged into the Force, flying the ship like an extension of his body.

In the space, they forgot the sense of time and when they landed back at the hangar of the Temple, the sun was setting.

Luke came down from the ship frisking and, thrilled, carried on repeating all the manoeuvres he had performed as though his Master hadn't been there and needed those reports.

Not at all annoyed, Anakin smiled at such excitement, while he watched some works around a ship for troop-transport. Among people that went and came, his glance crossed two eyes that looked alertly at him and Luke. It was Master Yoda. Among so many people, he was the last one he wished to see, the last one who would understand exceptions to rules.

Skywalker noticed his chin was tight and his stretched ears down, clear signs of disapproval. He thought better to ignore that show and went on as if nothing had happened.

Chapter 3

Anakin walked on Meditation Balconies, watching the Coruscant skyline absentmindedly. The more he was present at Council meetings, the more he believed it was useless to convene them. *Such irony thinking how much he had wished he had been part of it!* But after many years he was really tired of speeches to decide nothing and he thought the Jedi Order had the same problem as the Republic: too many words, no facts.

That morning the meeting had been quite surreal. Revered Masters talked over and over about how it was necessary to research where the last Separatists were refuged and how it was difficult to find them, because they had made no moves in ten years. Everybody had agreed, but no one had proposed a remedy. When he had eventually been allowed to speak, he had suggested to very carefully comb the Galaxy with probes and questionings. Everybody had agreed in that they could reach the goal, but then they had brought out the usual excuses not to act, babbling about civil rights, the “no interference” right of Systems and other thousand too abstract ideas for his solid mind. So they finished deciding nothing again and he began to feel really tired and disappointed.

That was a typical day he was tempted to run away. He dawdled imagining himself reclaiming his child, withdrawing the considerable inheritance his wife had left him from his secret account and going away. *But to where?*

He woke up from his daydream when he heard tapping behind him. He turned and, lowering his glance, saw Master Yoda trying to attract his attention by beating his stick on the floor. He didn't find it difficult to understand what he wanted to argue about, but he pretended he did and let the troll to begin.

“At fifteen years old the flight training should start.”

For a short while Anakin thought to answer him by leaving, but then he put aside that absurd idea and prepared for the dressing down. “My Padawan proved to be very smart yesterday during the training,” he justified himself.

“Not very important this is. Neither there he should be,” Yoda stated.

“Master, when I began to fly, I was much younger than Luke is.”

The troll pondered just a moment. His eyes shined like a blade as he looked at the Jedi. “unfortunately under unusual circumstances your childhood occurred.” His tone was almost disgusted.

Anakin became incredulous, when he understood what he heard. *Unusual circumstances! Living with his mother had been an “unusual circumstance”?! Nine hundred years inside the Temple caused insanities.* He couldn't bring himself to answer to such absurdity.

“Stop immediately lessons in flight you must,” Yoda relentlessly went on.

“But now Luke'll get very disappointed,” the Jedi underlined.

The troll shook his head and pointed his stick accusatorily at Anakin: “Here to have fun Padawans are not. I heard your pupil too much you spoil. Want believe that I did not.”

The Jedi strongly resented this. “What do you mean?”

Yoda didn't wait to be asked twice: “Him too much you shield. To his mind too often you listen.”

Anakin thought for a while, admitting the Master had some points, even if under a lot of exaggeration. “I just want Luke to be happy,” he tried to explain openly.

“To make happy your apprentice be your goal must not,” the troll stated.

The Jedi didn't know what to reply without revealing his secret. He weakly answered: “The outcome looks good to me.”

But Yoda didn't agree: “Told I am very absent-minded your Padawan is.”

Anakin darkened; it was just unfair! “Are you also told he’s very good with his lightsaber?” he asked more angrily than he meant.

The Troll’s ears lowered imperceptibly as his chin tensed. “Yes. His natural skills thank we must, I guess.”

The Jedi turned his glance to the skyline. Criticism, criticism and just criticism. *Couldn’t this creature utter anything else?* How much he had liked understanding why he always raged against him.

He sighed to himself in relief when his com-link rang, relieving him of answering for the moment. He brought it to his lips: “Hallo?!”

“Master Skywalker,” Windu’s voice resounded enough loud to be heard even by Yoda, “You should come to the library.” His tone was plainly tense.

“Any trouble?” An indefinite bad feeling took Anakin without a real reason.

“Let’s say your Padawan must give us a lot of explanations,” was the cryptic answer.

“I’m coming,” the Jedi assured, feeling more than a little uncomfortable in front of Yoda, who without surprise volunteered *very kindly* to follow him.

In spite of library spaciousness, the two Masters easily located the knot of five, six kids near one of the tables of the first room. The small group was unbelievably quiet, even for a crowd of disciplined Padawans. The cause was

Master Windu, who towered above them with a longer face than usual.

When Skywalker and Yoda's presence was sensed, the circle naturally opened and apprentices set out on two side, right and left, to receive the newcomers.

Anakin couldn't help but notice the other Padawans' Masters weren't there... and they seemed not to be waited. However next to the korun, Luke's small, tense and pale frame told who was in for it. Anakin, his father more than his Master, felt sorry for him even before knowing the count.

The black Jedi greeted first the older one: "Master Yoda." Then, with affected politeness, he bowed to him too: "Master Skywalker. Thank for your promptness." He pointed to Plo Koon's pupil: "Yimot, say again what you told me."

Anakin started and understood the previous day he had underestimated Luke's words, interpreting as mere slanders what likely were displays of a hidden war among Padawans. It happened more often than the Jedi Order liked acknowledging. Pride and no outbursts allowed by the Code transformed apprenticeship into an endless competition for the only goals those kids knew: pleasing Masters and being thought as a model of virtue.

As he gloomy pondered this, he opened to the Force to try to understand what that apprentice, who was in conflict with his child twice in two days, disguised beyond his gentle

appearance. But he found amazingly strong defenses for a fourteen-year-old boy and he couldn't discreetly break them. So he just caught a dark satisfaction and, more deeply, a dull envy. *Envy for what?*

"I came here to research information about Nomi Sunrider for my history homework," meanwhile Yimot was saying, after an ostentatious step ahead, "when I saw Luke pulled out that pendant from his tunic."

Just then Anakin noticed Windu had kept his fist closed until now. He opened it to confirm the boy's words, showing Padmé's small crown, and suddenly everything was explained.

In fact, Yimot went on: "Jedi can't own such objects, so I understood it was stolen." His face filled with hypocritical scruples. "I know such violation has immediately to report to a Master."

"Well you did," Yoda agreed and the boy slightly smiled because of the head of the Order's praise and bowing quickly he went back to his place.

Anakin wasn't able to decide which of the two he would have like better spitting in face and noted he needed to have a good chat with Plo Koon in private as soon as possible.

"What explanation does young Luke give?" Yoda inquired, not ready to bring in a verdict, since he hadn't been consulted.

“He found it in the street, but he can’t specify either where or how,” Windu answered instead of the boy, whom no one had actually addressed.

“Don’t you really remember where you found it?” Anakin pressed Luke.

“You don’t truly believe this tale, do you?” Windu looked incredulously at him.

Anakin shrugged in the most innocent way he could. “Why not? You didn’t probe his mind.” *Or you knew the truth is quite different.*

“Maybe we must,” Yoda underlined.

Anakin got startled and tried to gain more time to arrange any excuse with his son. “Shouldn’t we discuss in more private place and without... audience?” he disdainfully pointed the small group of apprentices and the more and more numerous crowd that watched from far to see why Padawan’s matter required the three most famous Jedi’s care.

“Why? Anyway know soon everybody will,” Yoda rejected his suggestion.

Anakin understood the excuse of a fortuitous finding was just untenable. He looked for a while at his unhappy son, angrily asking to himself how he had come to this. But this was a matter then they would talk in private. Now the problem was arriving to that then. He gave up and tried for a new strategy: Luke was a very young Padawan, his liabilities were still limited...

“Luke,” he called him with much more sympathy than could be expected, “Luke, is it true that you stole it?”

For the very first time, his boy lifted his glance and his Master saw incredulity and betrayal.

“Is it true that you stole it?” Anakin repeated, trying to communicate trust through his straight glance. Using the Force he urged him to answer in the affirmative with the needed discretion, so that the perception would be felt just by the interested party.

His Padawan understood. He scarcely audibly whispered: “Yes... Yes, I did.” Then he bowed his head again and buried his face in his hands because of the shame for a crime he had never committed.

Yoda’s features hardened in stress as he incredulously looked at Luke. Then he beat his stick on the floor several times to impose again silence in the room, where now disapproving words were echoing. “Tomorrow, during the meeting, Council will sentence your lot.”

No, things weren’t supposed to finish up like that! They couldn’t be so hard with a boy!... Or could they? Anakin suddenly understood his mistake. “Master Yoda, I am his Master, I am going to settle the matter.”

“This is too serious to be settled without the Council,” Windu stated.

“I’m going to punish him severely,” Anakin almost pleaded, not knowing what then he would have to invent to pretend he had really done it.

But neither Yoda nor Windu were impressed. “The only suitable punishment for stealing is expulsion,” the korun Master was saying, as the other one nodded in agreement.

Anakin incredulously shook his head, without knowing if because of his naivety or is interlocutors’ harshness. “Luke is just a Padawan!” he protested.

“Matter it does not,” Yoda answered without losing his composure.

It looked like everything was clear and they had just to wait the next day for the conviction. Onlookers’ interest was fading yet.

“It was me!” Anakin almost yelled so that everybody could hear it as well. “I gave it to him as a present!” he confirmed again, for a moment enjoying the two *infallible* Masters’ disbelief.

Unsure, Windu looked darkly at him, then at his son. “Is it true, Luke?”

The apprentice nodded.

“A theft just confessed you have,” Yoda stated.

“Would you have let your Padawan take the blame?” a more astonished Mace added, addressing Anakin now.

Anakin shrugged. *What to say? "I thought you were milder"?*

Glances Windu and Yoda were exchanging showed meaningfully they didn't know what to believe. In silence, they took a decision, since the korun Master declared solemnly: "Among so many lies," he underlined his disgust, "the only way to know the truth is a fast mind probe". And he turned to Luke.

The boy began to tremble slowly, but without more words submissively lowered his defenses.

The two Masters overbearingly overrun his mind. But Anakin felt many other presences rushed at his Padawan. The door to his privacy was open and almost all those present thought they were allowed to look curiously inside.

After few seconds, Skywalker was the only Jedi in the room who wasn't inside his child's mind. Disgusted, Anakin closed himself to the Force, but anyway he could understand the pain that made his boy sob scalding tears and see in his wide open eyes the horror for being pierced into his deep soul by strangers. He hardened his jaw and clenched his fist, trying to keep under control his growing anger; anger with his apprentice for his lack of discretion, anger with the amused audience, anger with the two oldest Masters' harshness, but above all anger with himself because he hadn't escaped that trap and because he wasn't able now to stop them from violating his son under his own eyes.

After few minutes lasted forever, the search was over, the murmur in the room was growing again. Some people left, enough entertained by the amusement in Luke's mind.

The boy painfully lifted his defenses again and embraced himself, looking for a lonely consolation and protection, as two silent trickles still flowed down his eyes.

Windu and Yoda exchanged meaningfully glances. In the scene seen and re-seen in his child's soul, Anakin knew there were at least four serious violations to Jedi Code by his own part. The two old ones had surely counted more.

"Tomorrow, talk about this the Council will," the troll announced him.

The interested party just nodded and slightly bowed to greet the two tormentors.

The crowd quickly thinned out, commenting. The fact would have surely keep busy Jedi for the coming weeks. Now that the war was over, they had to entertain themselves somehow.

When an apparent normal was back in the room, Anakin went next to Luke, who was still in shock and didn't move. He bent to embrace his son, stroking his head, regardless if someone would then run down he was too protecting.

Suddenly his boy was so disarmed. Anakin felt as he was holding again in his arms the defenseless baby thirteen years before he

had taken care for few days, before unwillingly leaving him as a foundling at the high columns in the Temple hall.

“I’m sorry,” was all he could whisper him. Then he leant his arm on his shoulders, hugging him like a hen hugs its chick under its wing and brought him out.

The fresh air of Temple gardens helped his Padawan to regain himself. But for a while they walked without destination, without uttering a word. When they reached the small lake, they sat down on a bench. Anakin opened back to the Force and carefully tried to check his son’s condition. As soon as he sensed Luke’s presence, he felt it withdraw in fright like someone would withdraw a wounded aching limb from a stranger’s touch.

“Ssh! Quiet! I’m doing nothing,” the Master whispered.

His Padawan weakly nodded. His eyes stopped and, for a while, stared at wave swinging, then he recollected his strength to speak with a guilty tone: “Forgive me, Master.”

Anakin didn’t want to act pitiless scolding him in any way. “Don’t worry about apologies. Just take it as a hard lesson.”

His boy gulped. “But what are they going to do tomorrow at the Council?”

“Don’t worry,” his Master reassured him. “It’s less serious than it looks like.” He lift his right arm, leaning it on the back of the bench,

and set comfortably in an attitude that conveyed more confidence than he actually felt. But after all he was the Chosen One and he knew in Luke's mind Chosen Ones were omnipotent.

And in fact his son nodded. Then he surprisingly went on: "I hid the pendant well. I didn't mean to disobey you, and I went to the library just to do my homework about Palpatine's life."

Anakin listened silently. He cared neither for explanations or knowing why his Padawan hadn't kept their secret. Nothing had happened at the library could justify the violence inflicted on his boy.

But it was evidently important that not asked confession for his apprentice, because as he told words came out, flowing like a river in flood: "...I kept in mind what happened yesterday and I wanted to focus just on my homework without looking who was or wasn't in the room. I opened the disc about treaties and while I was searching through the files, I noticed a picture where the Chancellor and Naboo Queen shook their hands. The Queen wore a pendant just like the one you gave me..."

Anakin's attention unintentionally awakened, as remembers were storming inside him: *For you. As token of my love to return your japor. I wish you owned it. It's a memento of the time we met: that symbol is used just by Queens.*

Luke unwarily went on: "...I read the caption, but it just told: *The Queen of Naboo, Padmé Amidala, and the Chancellor, Cos Palpatine, signed the Athor Treaty.*"

Suddenly, the Jedi abruptly stopped him: "Repeat?!"

Caught unawares, his boy hesitated for a while, before he was able to reload the tape of his own speech. "*The Queen of Naboo, Padmé Amidala, and the Chancellor, Cos Palpatine, signed the Athor Treaty.*"

Last time I used it was when I accorded on Chancellor usufruct of an unihabitated small planet where he can peacefully retire when he needed.

An idea struck Anakin. *No, not an idea , an intuition.*

"...Then, without thinking, I pulled out mine to compare them," Luke was saying. At this point, he paused, sighed and went on: "And Yimot saw me."

But his Master didn't hear him anymore, his mind running else where. *Was it possible? Had it ever been right under their very nose?*

When he finally got aware of the silence, Anakin saw Luke looking at him.

"Do you feel better, now?" he quickly asked his son.

His boy, a bit amazed at the fast change in the tone, nodded.

Without further explanations, the Jedi stood up and, after patting once his son on his shoulder, he just told him: "Very well! I set you free for the rest of the day." Then he mysteriously added: "Sorry, but I must urgently check something." He turned and walk long the path that leaded inside the Temple. After few steps, he stopped and, turning quickly back to his Padawan still seated on the bench he reassured him: "And don't worry too much about tomorrow: my feelings tell me I'll be able to advance important arguments." Then he was gone in a twinkle.

Chapter 4

The artificial hot wind of warming engines crisped Anakin's head and puffed out his cloak. The Temple hangar was at its most unrest since ten years. The three Republic assault ships were almost ready as the last troopers sailed and technicians checked last details.

"But other Padawans are coming." Luke was whining to him, almost yelling to be heard over the deafening roll of ships.

"I told you I don't want you to go," his Master confirmed the first decision, as he impatiently watched the advancement of preparations. Soon he had to reach Obi-Wan, who was waiting near the second ship, to check the flight laps for the last time.

He saw his disappointed son sighing, lowering his glance to look at the small group of Padawans, who waited for instructions to sail with their Masters. Some of them were watching them with amused curiosity.

"It isn't fair!" Luke broke out at last.

Anakin hesitated at the unexpected rebellion, then he calmly answered: "I-Do-Not-Ca-re." He articulated clearly those words, so that they sounded final and added: "Now, go away!"

Luke nodded slightly, keeping his glance low and chewing his lip angrily to control his annoyance. "May the Force be with you, Master," he whispered, as he huffily went away. Not far away some Padawan was openly laughing now.

To the hell! Anakin thought, turning to the ship where Obi-Wan was waiting for him. *He wouldn't risk Luke's neck, just because all the other Masters were fool enough to risk their apprentices'!*

He walked beyond the ship under his command, thinking of the amazing turn of events. They had been so occupied by running after Separatist leaders here and there that no one had thought mere office work would give them the conclusive clue. Yet it had happened. When the previous week Luke had uttered the name of Athor, everything had logically unraveled in Anakin's mind.

Athor was an almost unknown small planet in the Outer Rim with very few dry lands covered by a wonderful tropical flora and inhabited just by a primitive race. It had been accorded on Palpatine as usufruct, but no one had thought to lay claim to the estate after his death or recalled it after the Mustafar battle, when the last leaders of the Confederacy of Independent Systems escaped to the Republic Army's attack.

The pictures sent by spy probes in the last days showed how the Separatist leaders had set

well in those nine years. The naive but comfortable buildings bathed in the green palms holograms had projected to the puzzled Jedi, weren't much inferior to the sumptuous houses of Coruscant. After so many years, the old war lords had to feel safe, and they enjoyed a comfortable lodging in a nice landscape, after directly or indirectly causing millions of deaths around the Galaxy.

At that, Anakin's artificial hand tightened into a fist. *How much he wished he had been able to clench his iron fingers around Nute Gunray and his gang's necks, watching the disgusting green faces grew pale, while their frightened eyes asked for the pity they didn't give their victims and their flabby bodies would pass away bowing in front of him!*

Suddenly scared by his own dream, he banished the idea and quickly reached Obi-Wan not to ask himself where that wish of hate and power came from.

General Kenobi, all taken by maps, saw him just now. But he knew him too well not to notice something bothered his ex-apprentice.

"Everything all right?" he asked him with a Master's yet apprehensive tone.

Anakin nodded, but he knew his wrinkled forehead told different and tried to justify himself: "I just hope this time we'll succeed."

Obi-Wan looked at him for a while. His own eyes grew sad and tired, as he stroked his

beard. "I hope so too," he finally admitted. Then, his face enlightened again with the calm peace of the mature Jedi knight, the peace Anakin thought he would really never have.

Kenobi paternally stretched out an arm on his shoulder, inducing him near the map. "If we stick to plans, we'll really be able to raid this time," he persuadably declared, "We just must not act non-coordinately, making the same mistake we did at Mustafar."

"We don't fail this time," Anakin resolutely confirmed. "Can I see the last settlements?"

"You're welcome." Obi-Wan smiled and pressed some buttons on the map projector to show a boundless sequence of numbers figuring the fixed course. His ex-apprentice began to study them, totally dipping himself into the data.

After ten hours, Anakin was lying on his uncomfortable hammock in his cabin on board of the assault ship *Nemesis*. There were several more hours to go before leaving hyperspace and he knew he had better sleep a while before the battle. But he wasn't kept awake by either the usual anxiety preceding an important mission or the thrill of the victory he foresaw near and sure. He felt a terrifying something moving inside him, but he couldn't understand what.

He obliged himself to keep quiet and he began a deep meditation in the dark of his room, just focusing on his breath rhythm. Deep in the

Force, absorbed just by himself, he felt his mind relax and his limbs finally become numb, until he lost every awareness and fell asleep.

Luke's familiar face soon took his dreams.

"Master, Master,..." he called whispering, but with some urgency in his voice.

Anakin was too busy to pay him the proper attention, till a painful shout made him to turn towards his son and, shocked, he saw his trembling boy hold his hands, soiled with blood, on a wide wound on his abdomen.

The Jedi woke up with a start, sitting on his bed. He tried to breathe and to slow the mad rhythm of his heart, as his body was still moistening of thousand chilly drops of sweat.

"Luke," was all he could whisper.

No, by the Force, Luke couldn't die, too!

He buried his face into his true hand and he cried like a small child. For a crazy moment he almost wished it had already happened, so he wouldn't go through months of distressful nightmares yet again and the unendurable pain of separation. Then he breathed deeply and stood up. What he was wishing was totally irrational. Nothing had happened yet, so he could still change it. *But could he really?*

He wore his tunic to go on the pilot bridge. They hadn't been far from the end of hyperspace. Soon he would be able to call Coruscant and ask someone to keep a close eye on his Padawan till he would be back.

It wasn't a big plan, but there wasn't more he could do while his vision didn't show him the nature of the danger. He closed his eyes, focusing to recall the painful image to look for a useful clue. With his attention to visualizing his child's features, he suddenly felt his sign in the Force. Not the memory of his sign, but his real presence.

He opened his eyes as his anguish increased more. He dressed in a rush and run to the ware compartment. Luke's presence became stronger and stronger every meter he walked and he asked himself how he hadn't noticed him before. Now his vision was frighteningly near, since the real danger of the battle loomed over his son's life.

Terrified, he opened the hold hatch, turned on the long dazzling neon lamps and, enraged at his Padawan's recklessness, he yelled: "Luke, come out!"

But no answer came from the darkness of containers filling most of the compartment. Yet he felt his child's presence hidden among the army equipment.

"Luke, do you think I can't feel you?" he said, more and more angry, while he couldn't forget the image of his boy wounded to death.

After some other moment of silence, he heard some little noises, then from behind a container his Padawan came out, approaching falteringly.

Anakin had never been so mad at him and, when Luke was just in front of him, all he could do was hiss “Are you insane?” before dealing him a loud slap. His son’s cheek quickly reddened from the blow and he regretfully realized he hadn’t softened the impact of his iron fingers on Luke’s face.

But his boy didn’t utter a moan and just bowed his head, his eyes filling with tears.

The Jedi’s anger reduced, making way for something worse: anguish. “Have you a clue of just what kind of danger you’ve put yourself in?” he asked.

“I’m sorry,” his Padawan whispered.

Anakin shook his head. *He didn’t*, he thought.

Time pressed since they were near to the target and he had to find a way to keep Luke from running some even worse risk. “Follow me,” he just ordered.

They walked the corridors in silence among the indifferent troopers, used to see Jedi apprentices in war zones. The Master took long steps, not caring of his Padawan’s difficulty in following him, or the curiosity and fear his boy openly cast into the Force. He didn’t want to waste time with explanations and discussions.

They passed several conveyance compartments, troopers’ quarters, the emergency room, then they reached the prison. The Jedi entered the first block they came up to

and he gestured for Luke to go into one of the cells, totally empty save for a small, hard bed.

Obviously astonished, his Padawan wavered, shifting his glance from the prison to his Master. “Are you arresting me?” the incredulous boy finally asked blinking.

Anakin shook his head. “I’m just making sure you won’t take some other initiatives,” he explained.

“Couldn’t you lock me in your room?” his Padawan conciliatorily proposed.

The Master crossed his arms. “Giving you more opportunities to escape?”

“No, I won’t. It’s just... Please! I swear I won’t disobey you again,” Luke pleaded with such a harmless look that the Jedi almost gave up.

But inside him the feeling of danger still worked. He pointed at the cell interior, ordering: “Now!”

Luke grimaced at the disappointment, but he resignedly went into the small cell without further arguments.

His father slid the door and fingered his secret password to lock it, as if he had just imprisoned some dangerous criminal. He still felt worried, but at least he had kept his son from venturing into the firing-line.

Chapter 5

Anakin had just fingered his password, when a sudden strong jerk of the ship made him almost lose his balance. Before he could consciously elaborate his amazement, his comlink rang.

“Sir, we’ve left hyperspace,” someone croaked on the other side.

“I’m coming,” he answered without pointing out that wasn’t a usual deceleration.

He turned just a while to the cell, asking himself if Luke had been able to keep his balance. Probably he had been sat down and, if he hadn’t, he had just gained a bruise on his knee. He shrugged and walked to the pilot bridge.

He reached the bridge as the ship was shaking again, this time clearly struck by a laser shot. When the hatch opened, he first noticed the battle had begun and, more surprisingly, the huge outline of Athor filled half of the window.

“What happened?” he asked as he walked toward the ship’s Captain.

“As soon as we left hyperspace, we found ready defences,” the breathless officer answered, before shouting new orders to his subordinates.

Bewildered, Anakin quickly analyzed the flight datas, checking one of the record

datapads. As he read, his face darkened. He approached the men and incredulously looked at him. Used to the pliable clones who always obeyed, he had never thought the new officers, recruited among the civil population to strengthen the now permanent Republic army, could decide themselves.

When the Captain became aware of him, the Jedi disdainfully threw on his chest the pad, that almost fell because of the man's slow reflex. "You left the hyperspace too near the planet," he accused.

"I did to catch them by surprise..." the officer apologized.

Anakin withered him with a glance and dryly hissed: "Stupid!"

The bridge held silent for the tense embarrassment. The Captain put a finger inside his collar to widen it, as if he couldn't suddenly breathe, while his face became more and more upset.

A new shot shook the ship, attracting again everybody's attention to more important matters. Anakin walked past the man, who seemed to regain his breath, to go to the communication device.

"Master Kenobi, Master Windu, it's Skywalker," he called, "We are under attack. I repeat. We are under attack."

"Anakin, why are you so low?" Obi-Wan's voice asked.

“My Captain’s private initiative, while I was busy... in other matters,” the Jedi vaguely answered, giving one last grim look at his officer.

“They are much more ready than our probes told,” Mace cut in.

“Or our probes weren’t discreet as we thought,” Kenobi stated.

“Anyway, now all the plans we did are useless,” Anakin noted without further preamble. “At this point, we are the lower ship and so we’ll land.”

“You can’t under all that fire,” the korun Master pointed out.

Anakin turned one moment to look at their plight out of the great window. “We can if you leave your position and cover us from your higher altitude.”

“We’d give them several ways to escape on the hemisphere,” Obi-Wan objected.

“Master Kenobi, if we land with the Jedi in our ships, leaving in orbit just the soldiers, we’ll be able to stop Separatists’ escape on the land,” Windu’s voice said.

There was a moment of hesitation on the other side, then Kenobi agreed: “I can’t see other solutions. We’ll bring our fighters alongside Skywalker’s ship.”

“All right, I’m going to order the land...” the Jedi confirmed.

“Anakin,” Obi-Wan recalled him with urgency, “be careful.”

The Jedi amusedly shook his head and he smiled for the first time since he had woke up. “Don’t worry, Master.”

He walked back to the high officers and order the Captain: “Make the ship land in the central strip and prepare the troopers for the attack.”

The officer opened his eyes wide: “Under this fire?”

Anakin’s glance hardened. “Don’t fail me again,” he threateningly answered, pointing his forefinger to him.

Slowly the Captain nodded and turned to order his subordinates.

As soon as the plan of landing was clear also to their opponents, the fire intensified. The ship tossed over and over, while the shields began to falter and explosions on the external structure could be heard.

On the pilot bridge orders and reports were yelled faster and faster to the crew on the edge.

Then help eventually came from the higher ships and their plight became less uncertain. After few minutes they would land and Anakin left the main bridge to approach the gangway, where clones were yet waiting in ordered lines. Few last moments and they would face death again.

But there was more this time. The distressful thought the Jedi couldn't put aside: Luke was in war zone, even if he was shielded by the massive ship.

A dull sound and an abrupt swinging of the floor announced the landing and clones prepared their blasters. Anakin unhooked his sword and turned it on. The hatch opened, vomiting out troopers into a hell of fire and lasers. He went out too, parrying easily the random blows with his sabre and, leaving the troopers to their own target of occupying the Separatist's residential area, he reached the starfighters. Obi-Wan, Windu, Plo Koon, Shaak Ti, Ki-Adi-Mundi and their apprentices were coming out: on the whole they were six Jedi and five Padawan, the Jedi Council's show-down, whereas the only way to leave the planet was that spaceport. And, in fact, in short time the troopers took the small village around it.

Commander Codi's voice croaked from the com-link: "The Separatist leaders have barricaded themselves inside the east building and ask to negotiate the terms of surrender."

"No negotiation," Anakin answered on impulse.

But Windu immediately superseded him: "No, Codi, wait."

Skywalker inquiringly turned to Mace.

"At this point they are in a trap," Obi-Wan stated, "we can avoid more bloodshed."

“Should we even listen to them?” Anakin incredulously asked.

“We must arrest them, not sentence them,” Shaak-Ti agreed.

“That’s all nonsense!” the Chosen-One remonstrated.

But Windu had yet grabbed the com-link from his hands. “Tell them that Master Kenobi, Master Skywalker and I are coming, but there will be several other Jedi staying to look at the situation.”

Annoyed, Anakin joined the just self-designated delegation without further arguments. They went up the steep stairs, encircled by some strange green palms that would be beautiful if they had been admired in other circumstances. An entire platoon of clones aimed blasters at a narrow arch arcade. On the floor, three troopers’ corpses were lying, over the arches several Separatist snipers’ presences. A tense deathlike silence welcomed the Jedi.

Being careful not to lean under the arcade at all, Commander Codi shouted inside: “The negotiators are here.”

“All right, they are allowed to come in,” a hollow voice answered among arches.

The three Jedi Masters turned on their sabres and, totally opened to the Force, went in showing caution but resolution as well, just to make clear to their opponents, who aimed at

them, they feared no one. They walked several dozens of meters before they reached a big door that opened as soon as they stepped in front of it.

They went into a wide room, where a small group of leaders of the Confederacy of Independent Systems was waiting. Besides Nute Gunray and his secretary, Rune Haako, of Trade Federation, Anakin recognized the leader of Techno Union, Wat Tambor, and the President of the Commerce Guild, Shu Mai. The other guys had to be part of the Intergalactic Banking Clan. They were apparently defended just by two Neimoidian guards with blasters. Not a great threat for Windu and Kenobi who turned off their sabres as soon as the door at their back closed... without hooking them.

After some moments of hesitation, Anakin did the same.

The Viceroy was almost pink for fear: everybody knew he was scared at most by Jedi, and everybody knew this hadn't stopped him from waging war against the whole Order.

When he began to speak, his trembling voice disgusted Anakin. "Masters, we are ready to surrender immediately, if you assure us we'll be fairly tried by a Court with some Neimoidian members."

"The Republic always tries fairly..." Obi-Wan began.

Almost, Anakin silently rectified, thinking to Palpatine's death.

"You'll rent the lawyers you think more qualified," the negotiator went on, "but it isn't within our power to assure anything about the Court members."

"You can surely contact Coruscant." Gunray's slippery hands vaguely gestured to the com-links.

Kenobi glanced at Windu to decide how much rope to give the Neimoidian, while Anakin surpassed him with some steps, approaching the humanoid. The guards aimed their blasters keener at him.

The Jedi pretended not to notice and threateningly spoke to Viceroy: "I don't think you are in position to make claims."

"Anakin..." Mace sternly cut him, but before he could go on a deafening boom violently bang in the spaceport, followed by the outdoor noise of new rising fire and falling metal.

A very deep pain burst in Anakin's mind and he felt inside him Luke's terrified cry, his upset face like in his vision and his frightened eyes bewilderedly looked at the blood streaming out of his abdomen.

Suddenly, he understood his ship was treacherously attacked and, out of control, he walked the few steps to the Viceroy, turned on

his sabre and yelling “Bastard!” pierced him more quickly than he himself knew.

Too slow in their reflexes, the guards shot after the execution and they crossed Kenobi and Windu’s ready sabres. Other fire began to run from over, while the com-link croaked a new ship had popped out from the other side of planet.

In that mess, Anakin’s only thought was Luke’s agonizing pain and his wounded child couldn’t look for help because he had been locked up... by him. *By the Force, what had he done?*

Back the door the other Jedi eventually came to help. All together they slowly went forward among laser bolts to reach the Separatist leaders who were escaping out the door on the other side of the room. All, but not Anakin, who turned to come back the spaceport.

“Where are you going?” Obi-Wan yelled, still focusing on parrying shots.

“I must save Luke. He’s on the ship,” he explained in an hurry.

“I thought you left him at home,” Kenobi pointed out, almost shouting to be heard over the blasters’ noise.

“It’s a long story,” Anakin answered several steps behind.

“The mission is more important than everything,” Windu reminded him.

But Anakin shook his head: he felt his apprentice's strengths weakening more and more.

"You can't go," Obi-Wan pressed, "I'm aware how much you care for Luke, but the mission must be first."

A lecture! Kenobi was lecturing him while they were being shot and his child might bleed to death. Disgusted, the Jedi carried on going back.

Windu went after him and held his arm: "Skywalker, it's an order!"

On the edge, Anakin freed himself and angrily yelled: "You won't stop me from saving my son!" And to make it clearer, he put his blue sabre between them. Then, shocked, he understood what he had just done and said. He saw the korun Master was more bewildered than him and unable to react. He ran out to the port. None of Jedi followed him: *their mission was the most important thing.*

Skywalker cleared a way, parrying the blows that now were almost casually shot and reached his ship. The worry for his son's life kept him busy, making him to forget what was going to happened to him after his revelation.

He ran corridors, trying to find a way through the crowd, as he pushed and avoided the soldiers who confusedly went here and there. He reached the empty prisons and went to Luke's cell. Now he was enough near to savour

his child's pain with so much violence that he felt, as if he himself was wounded. He fingered his password, but he mistook it because of his hurry. The computer informed him of his error with annoying slowness before giving him the second chance. Anakin forced himself to get calm, took a breath and then more lucidly tried again, as exhaustion and stress condensed thousands of sweat drops on his face.

The door opened. He went in, threw himself to his child who was lying in a corner, awake, but weak. Even if he had felt Luke's predicament, the vision of the blood-stained tunic from abdomen to thigh upset him. Near his Padawan there was a blood-covered sharp piece of plate blew out from the wall.

His boy turned to him and weakly smiled.

Anakin felt his forehead, then carefully tore away part of the tunic to better check the wound. Among Luke's moaning, he cleaned the skin as much as he could until he found a thirty-centimeter-large cut. It was so deep that a small part of viscera had slightly came out.

The Jedi turned his glance away for horror and forced himself to be strong, stronger than he had ever been before during his long career. Then his wet eyes looked back at the wound and he put his hand on it, trying to infuse all his Force. The blood flow slowed down, but that wasn't enough to stop the hemorrhage.

“We have to go immediately to the emergency room,” he said to Luke.

“I took out the piece,” his child weakly answered, glancing shortly the plate next to him, “but I can’t walk.”

“Don’t worry,” Anakin whispered and lifted him in his arms as gently as he was able in order to avoid the discharge of other viscera. Luke moaned at the movement, but his father ignored him and ran out, trying not to shake him too much.

In spite the emergency room was just next there, reaching it seemed to take a very long time. Every step, every casual touch with a trooper that walked in the opposite direction, his Padawan started and writhed. The Master used half of his attention for walk and half for trying a meditation that would show his boy how relieve the pain through the Force.

When at last they reached their destination, they found nothing but a heap of ruins.

Anakin fingered his password near the door, but no droid showed. With his child still in his arms, he passed over a knocked-down shelf and walked to the other side of the room to check which treatments were still working. He gently laid Luke on a cot, dusty because of the ruins, and he came back to the board, requiring any help. But controls of the whole sector had blown up.

“I’m cold,” his boy whispered.

The Jedi went next to him again. “You are bleeding a lot,” he admitted.

Luke nodded, frightened by the sudden understanding of what was really going on.

His father turned to the ground. He bowed to rummage amongs many unknown objects and he found some gauzes, cotton wool and adhesive bandage. The broken packagings weren’t surely sterilized anymore, but he was aware if he hadn’t been able to tampon, he would never have the change to worry for infections. He came back at the small bed and began to press hard the cut, while he put on it all the sheets of gauze he had, trying not to care for his boy’s pleas to stop. But, as soon as a new sheet touch the wound, it immediately drenched with blood.

When he finished the last useless package, he desperately withdrew his arms and bumped against is own lightsaber hanging from his belt. He looked at it for a while: that would cauterize the wound and the shorn viscera would be bypassed in a following surgical operation.

Indecision made his heart to beat violently in his chest, but he couldn’t think any other solution: Luke’s life was at stake. He unhooked his lightsaber and turned it on.

“I’m sorry, I can do nothing, but this. Hold anything you find,” he whispered his son

who was looking at him in horror, grasping scaredly the metal frame of his bed.

Without ceremony, Anakin put his left hand on his Padawan's chest, trying to immobilize him as most as possible and dipped into the Force to act fast and precisely. A second later, he plunged his blade into his boy's center and quickly circled it inside the inner of the wound, ignoring Luke's cry of pain and the smell of burnt flesh.

When everything was over, he turned his sword off, turned and vomited on the floor. He cleaned his face using his blood-stained wide sleeve. He breathed, came back to his son, now silent in his exhaustion, and stroke his hear, while he checked his work. Uncontrollable tears dimmed his eyes, but hemorrhage had stopped, leaving place at the wide cauterization.

"Now I have enough time to look for a doctor," he encouraged him, almost pleading forgiveness.

But Luke didn't answer.

More frightened, Anakin patted his cheek, trying to keep him awake. He suddenly became aware if his son died he would never know about their true relationship. He went nearer, shaking softly him.

"Luke, Luke," he called. "Stay with me, Luke. I have to tell you something. Luke, you aren't just my Padawan, Luke, I... I am your father." He shook him again. "Do you

understand? Luke, you have to survive! Do it for me... for your father," he pressed and he thought he saw a spark of understanding in his boy's eyes before exhaustion definitively won him over and he fainted.

Anakin held him back in his arms. Praying silently, he ran out of the ship. In the spaceport, he hesitated for a while to examine his chances. There was surely a medical emergency room in the village, but finding it in the middle of the battle would take time and, thinking the inhabitants were all alien, he couldn't be sure thke droids' databases had files about human beings. He saw Obi-Wan's new X-Wing. Maybe he was able to lie Luke's small frame in the small place behind the seat during the short fly to one of the two ships in orbit.

The second option sounded more rational. He ran towards the starfighter and easily persuaded the astromecanic droid that recognized him as Obi-Wan's trusted friend. Instead laying his boy without hurting him on the floor was harder and he had to call the Force for help. Without wasting more time, he took off and quickly gained height. But when he left the planet atmosphere, he understood the space battle was raging worse than the land one. He lifted his shields up and he flew into the middle of it. Avoiding blasters, changing trajectory and firing would probably take a lot of his precious time, before he would be able to reach one of the ships.

He probed his son's health, feeling him weaker and weaker, while he barely avoided a blow to his right engine. Before trying a diverting tactics, he started a search on the small map on board for nearby Systems. He chased an enemy starfighter and fired, just when the computer viewed the search results.

Anakin ran his eyes on the list, until they caught something that finally seemed to be interesting. He left the battle zone, careful not to be chased.

Polis Massa was a good chance. He confirmed to read more datas. *Polis Massa, small mineral settlement in the Outer Rim. Coordinates: sector gamma, 124, 134, 567.* That was all, but Anakin didn't need more. A community of any kind had surely a medical emergency repart and the place was really near, he would arrive there in less than half an hour if he jumped soon in hyperspace. Anyway less time than landing inside one of their ships under the enemy fire would take.

He drove his fighter to the proper direction and he started the calculus of the hyperspace trajector. But the automatic procedure was slow and time pressed. He stopped it, breathed deeply and, dipping totally into the Force, he got in trance, fingering intuitively the trajector numbers. When he finished, he pressed start.

It was folly, even for a Jedi Knight, even for a very short distance without important obstacle. Any small error meant sure death.

The astrodroid asked him to confirm, after enumerating him the dangers they were going to meet with. *As if he hadn't known yet!*

But he liked better the idea of blowing up with Luke in that desperate attempt to save him than sitting and watching him to die. So, he closed his eyes, looking for the Faith in what the Force made him to write on the computer and then pressed the confirmation button.

Stars endlessly stretched as they left the nightmare of Athor.

Chapter 6

Anakin had been sitting in front the interplanetary communication system of the medical center of Polis Massa since half an hour ago. Out the wide window in front of him he saw just the starry sky and two smaller asteroids of the collection.

He breathed and finally pressed the call button before the useful time to contact the Temple in Coruscant would be over. Some *bip* to tune the channel in, then Obi-Wan's disturbed hologram appeared.

Kenobi looked first at him amazedly, then with a tense joy.

"Anakin, where are you?" was all he was able to utter.

"At Polis Massa near Athor. There is a good medical center," Skywalker answered.

Obi-Wan gazed seriously at him. "Is Luke all right?"

Although he showed no sign, Anakin was really grateful his ex-Master's first care was for his son. "Yes. He was badly wounded and he was in deep coma for four days, but now he's all right. In the medics' opinion, he should recover consciousness very soon."

"I'm pleased," Obi-Wan said and he even sounded true.

“The Separatists?” Anakin asked, carrying on avoiding the real question.

“They got arrested,” the other one answered. “The Court is waiting for lawyers and a couple of juries from Nemoidia to start their trial.”

Anakin snorted, half cursing, half smiling bitterly. Then he chose to face straightly his fate. “And will I have a lawyer from Tatooine?” he failed to trifle.

Obi-Wan bitterly shook his head. “You know the Jedi Council doesn’t work like the Courts.” He hesitated, but at his ex-Padawan’s lack of reaction, he went on. “After this whole week, we’ve thought you’d never come back.”

Anakin looked away. It was hard to utter the words, although Obi-Wan knew yet what he was feeling: the more you were famed, the more you would be ill-famed. “I will be covered with shame,” he whispered.

Kenobi’s eyes filled with compassion and he looked furtively around. When he looked back toward the transmitter, his attitude was unusually conspiratorial and his voice nothing more than a sigh: “It’s still an hard time for the Republic: it isn’t useful to the Jedi that their most famous champion get dishonourably expelled... If you come back soon, maybe I can soften the Council’s sentence.”

Skywalker shook his head. "Soften? Will I end up a negotiator in some forgotten place for the rest of my life?"

Kenobi's face suddenly hardened. "What are you waiting for, after thirteen years of lies?"

It was neither the Master or the General who was speaking, but the hurt friend and Anakin felt deeply touched. He looked away. "Seventeen," he corrected. His confession made him to feel better and gave him strength for the next step: "In few days Luke will be able to endure the fly and then I will come back to Coruscant."

Kenobi seemed to be a bit amazed. "Anakin, I'm your friend. You know you can always trust me," he declared after a short moment.

Skywalker nodded thanks before turning off the communication system. He heavily heartedly stood up and the resolution to face his punishment was fading yet. *But it didn't matter what was going to happen, he told himself at last. The only thing that mattered was he had really saved the one he loved.* Thinking to Luke, something echoed in him and he felt his boy's presence at its clearest since last week. Forgetting what was awaiting him on Coruscant, he felt joyful: his son was awake.

He went in the room where his child was being taken care of and he found him looking around doubtfully. He went nearer. "How are you?"

“Tired, but all right,” his boy whispered.

“You are still weak,” Anakin agreed, as he took a seat next to him.

“Where are we?” his still bewildered Padawan asked.

“In an hospital not far from Athor,” the father answered.

Luke thought, his eyes looked far as he tried to see again the happenings that had put him in that bed. “The battle against the Separatists,” he murmured to himself as long as he stopped. He got uncomfortable and, without looking at his Master, he said, shaking slightly his head: “You were right to leave me always at the Temple. I thought I was ready, but...”

Anakin shrugged. “You behaved very recklessly, but maybe you wouldn’t have been hurt if I hadn’t locked you up,” he accomodatingly conceded.

“Master...,” Luke began, but then his attention was caught. He searched Anakin’s glance and doubtfully corrected: “Fa...?!”

His father nodded smiling.

“...ther,” Luke ended. After a moment to really absorb the information, he shook his head. “How is it possible?”

Anakin wasn’t surprised by the expected question. “Your mother and I were deeply in love and so we secretly married. After some years she got pregnant, but...”

Anakin stood up and crossed his arms. He walked uncomfortably, turning his back to his boy. His dark cloak brushed the floor here and there a couple of times, before he could voice a pain he had had to hide for more than a decade.

“Your birth was easy. Everything seemed to be all right. But when it was your twin sister’s turn, something went wrong and they both died.”

Anakin lost himself in thoughts that had gnawed him many times: doubts found their way into him, whispering him: “What if...?”

What if had Darth Sidious had really had the power to save Padmé? What if had he killed Windu, instead of Palpatine? What if, at last, had he himself been the real culprit of his wife's death, having chosen the Jedi Order rather than his family?

Tortured by this hell that by then was part of his daily life, he almost forgot his son, still waiting for answers, until he heard his voice: “Who was my mother?”

He woke up from his useless mourning. He turned back to Luke and answered: “Padmé Amidala, before Queen, then Senator of Naboo.”

His boy just nodded, knowing because of his history lessons whom they were talking about.

The Jedi wondered. He had expected more questions about the mother, but maybe

Luke was still trying to wholly absorb those information that upset his world. “Anyway, I didn’t know what to do alone with a baby. I couldn’t just go into the Temple rocking my child in my arms.”

At this point, he hesitated on how to go on, then with a sigh he decided he would never resort to subterfuges again. “I thought even giving you up in adoption. It was the only way to give you a true family,” he hurried to add, studying his boy’s face, but he didn’t show any sign he was resentful and carried on diligently listening. “But I understood that wasn’t fair, because somehow or other I was your true family, although I couldn’t tell anyone. So I checked your midichlorian count. It was exceptionally high, almost as much as mine. So I left you in front of the Temple. I knew they would suddenly enlist you among younglings and then I would be able to have you back as my Padawan, when you would be old enough. Like it was.”

Luke pondered those words. Then he asked: “Why didn’t you tell me before?”

Anakin slightly smiled. “I would have told you soon. I just wanted to be sure you wouldn’t reveal it.”

His son incredulously looked at him and with a gravity that almost frightened him answered: “I would never do that.” And hidden behind the tone he could hear the same feeling

of betrayal Obi-Wan showed more openly half an hour before.

Uncomfortable, Anakin turned away again, looking for a way to explain the doubts that had gnawed him in the last year.

"Luke Skywalker," he heard his son say and he turned wondering.

"Luke Skywalker," his boy said again. "WOW! Sounds well," he told smiling. "Surely better than Luke (*unknown*)," he laughed at last, looking happily at his father.

Anakin relievedly nodded.

"The only unfortunate thing is I can't boast it around," he sighed with pretended sadness. "Could you imagine Yimot's face? He's already dying for envy because the Chosen One took me as his Padawan, instead of him. Think if he knew the truth!" he maliciously smiled at his fancy. "Do you think in the future we will be free to publicly admit our relationship?"

Anakin hesitated. He didn't want to break the moment so soon, but in few days they will face the scandal in front of the Council and his boy had to know what they were going to meet with. "Well, Luke, when I came back to the ship to rescue you, I had an argument with the other Jedi, because I was forgetting the mission and in the heat of the moment I let the truth slip."

Luke shockedly looked at him, but Anakin went on: "Just now they are starting a disciplinary inquiry against me."

Chapter 7

After five days, Luke was anxiously tormenting the sheeve of his tunic in the corridor in front of the Jedi Council room.

Some meters next to him, Anakin, more on edge than him, walked here and there. He had tread that short path so many times that he was surprised he hadn't digged a ditch yet. The Jedi couldn't understand why the Council took so many time to decide. During the interview, they had asked him few questions and he had answered quickly and frankly. Surprisingly they had not required the rough, but the usual mind probe. Everything had let him to think they had sentenced him before he had landed on the planet. Everything... but they had been discussing ever since then.

He looked at his son behind his back. He couldn't help but ask what his boy would do, if he got expelled. In the previous days, he had seen him very thoughtful, but they hadn't spoken about this topic. The Jedi was all too aware that, for all his life, Luke had been conditioned to think attachment was a fault and the just Jedi Order deserved its members' faithfulness. More than everything else, now Anakin feared to know where his Padawan's trust really lied.

The door opened. Shaak Ti tensely gestured for them to go in. With their heads bowed, they orderly presented themselves in the middle of the circle, first the Master and a few steps behind his apprentice, as was appropriate.

All the seats were taken, but Chosen One was feeling his stomach twist with the same shyness he had had as a boy when he faced those strict eyes. Without hesitating, he went in front of Yoda, true god of the Temple, and Windu, his prophet, at his left.

“Skywalker,” the korun Master momentarily began like a judge who was going to sentence, “the violation of celibacy rule deserves expulsion. But in this hard times for the democratic Institutions, we must also care for some public order matters Master Kenobi pointed out.” He grimly looked at Obi-Wan who couldn’t keep his usual composure fully imperturbable and Anakin understood his ex-Master had gone far to help him. “So we decided,” Windu went on, “you are going to end your career in the seclusion on Dovim, where you’ll be able to meditate peacefully on the unifying Force.”

Anakin mentally sighed in relief. Prospect to be imprisoned for the rest of his life on a more desolated planet than Tatooine wasn’t exactly amusing, but at least he and Luke would have a common life and it didn’t sounded too bad, after everything they had gone through.

But before he could thank him, the korun went on: "About your apprentice, he would be reassign to Master Theremon to help him in his diplomatic service. You both are bound to keep your secret, of course."

Stunned, Anakin couldn't believe what he had heard. He would end on Dovim and Luke with Theremon on the other side of Galaxy. It simply meant he would never see his son again.

They were gesturing for them to leave when Anakin raised his voice: "You haven't the right to part me from my son."

"Your Padawan," Yoda rectified over the tense silence with his eyes thin like a blade.

"Were you waiting for a promotion?" Plo Koon added at his right.

Feeling more surrendered by enemies than ever before, Anakin turned to face him, but his words of defiance were meant for all those presents: "Rather than this, I leave the Order with him."

Did Luke agree? That didn't really matter: he was just a child, he wasn't able to decide independently. He would eventually persuade him it was the best thing to do.

"It's your right to leave the Order, of course." This was Windu again. Anakin turned to him. "But Luke is still underage and the ward of the Jedi Order. He isn't coming with you."

The Chosen One shook his head. "But I am his father!" he yelled. Then he quickly

glanced at his son who powerlessly watched all those adults to quarrel his fate neither addressing him one little word.

“Anakin...,” Obi-Wan kindly interposed, totally aware he was the only one Anakin would listen to.

But this time Skywalker didn’t want to listen. He suddenly turned: “No! They...,” he nodded, “...do not care for Luke at all. They part him from me just on principle, not asking themselves what is better for him.”

“So sure you are to know what the better for him is?” Yoda asked.

Anakin didn’t answer; he couldn’t. No, he neither knew what was better for Luke nor what he wished, but he knew he would let no one take him away from him. He turned for the exit and, laying an arm on his child’s shoulders, began to drag him.

The boy’s faltering eyes searched for the Masters’ reaction. That came soon. At Skywalker’s unprecedented audacity of defying the Council’s orders in front of everybody, Windu suddenly stood up, taking few steps further, and talked to the boy: “Luke, come here.”

The Padawan hesitatingly stopped.

“Everybody thinks you aren’t in any way to blame for this situation,” he went on, “and you still have duties towards the Order.”

Luke frowned and, freeing himself from his father's weak grasp, he came back in the middle of the room.

Anakin's jaw tightened. "I am your father," he claimed with a choked voice.

His boy's eyes quickly ran from one Jedi to another, as both towered over him. At last he bowed his head, watching a detail of the wide mosaic. "I... I want to live with my father," he whispered.

Anakin triumphantly stretched out an hand to him.

But before he could touch it, Windu grasped the boy's arm, telling him: "Nevertheless your guardian is still the Jedi Order."

"Leave him," Anakin darkly summoned.

Windu tightened the hold.

"Leave him," the Jedi said again, as all his stress, anger and fear canalized through his left arm and his hand so violently that with a whole awareness a blue lightning burst out of his fingers, striking the korun Master and making him to fall back.

Suddenly all the lightsabers in the room turned on and the tense silence was broken by the humming of every colour blades.

Stunned by what he neither knew he was able to do, Anakin carefully turned on his saber, too. He stretched out his arm to Luke who was still in front of him and tightly held his boy's

shoulder who meekly let him move him back. On guard, he drew back towards the exit, ready if necessary to fight against the whole Council.

When he was almost on the door, several Masters came closer to him. But Kenobi yelled: "For the Force's sake, would you duel inside the Temple?!"

In the moment of inattention that followed, Anakin went out, pushing forcedly out also his boy, and when he was a bit off and noted the Masters' unwillingness to follow him not to stir up a war inside the building, he turned off his sabre, holding it ready to use, and he ran out followed by his son.

He ran like the wind, crossing corridors, pushing puzzled, but still unaware Jedi casually walking his path. He went down the Council Tower, passed the ziggurat below and the high columns.

No one had ordered to stop them and they went on. Then away through the crowded streets of Coruscant, where nothing seemed to be weird for the imperturbable passer-by. They carried on running for a long path for the fear someone could change his mind, until Anakin tiredly stopped in a small minor street. Leaning forward, he struggled to breathe, as the sweat poured into his eyes and his lungs ached because of effort.

When he could straighten himself up again, he turned to Luke. His child leant against

a wall. More exhausted than him, his boy seated, holding his not fully healed wound.

Anakin went near him, and bowing quickly checked him, without luckly finding blood. He put an hand on his shoulder and infused a bit of Force inside his child who obviously relaxed. He watched him with more love and pride than ever before.

But Luke was too lost to see that. He began to tremble slightly and, confused, looking around.

“What are we going to do now?” he whispered and just then the father understood how hard was for his son to leave the Temple, that had been all his world.

Anakin softly shook him: “Whatever we want. We are free now.”

“Free?!”, his boy repeated, as if he was afraid to contemplate the freedom.

“Luke,” his father called him, trying to give spirit and trust to his bewildered look, “life went on also out the Temple.”

His child nodded. “But will we use the Force no more?” he anguishedly asked.

Anakin lowered more to look into his eyes. “The Force isn’t the Jedi Order’s exclusive property. The Force is everywhere. And when you need it, you can always find it inside you,” he ended touching his boy’s chest with his forefinger.

Luke's look followed his father's finger, as his thoughts plainly focused inside him. Then, more convinced, he nodded again and smiled.

Anakin quickly ruffled his head and stood up. He stretched out an arm to help his boy to stand up too and incited: "Let's look for a transport to leave Coruscant."

Luke held the father's tempting hand and, putting his weight on his aching feet again with some effort, he began to curiously watch that universe totally new to him.

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Anakin never turned to the Dark Side. But Padmé and Leia died during the childbirth. So, he brought Luke to the Temple, hiding his true identity and choosing him as his padawan.



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