

IMPERFECT



written by
Qwae29

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

Author's Note: You asked for it and now you've got it. This is a post JA timeframe story. The story starts with the 24-year-old Obi-Wan found at the conclusion of the story Perfect. While it is not necessary to have read Perfect, it is strongly advised as a lot of things won't make sense without the events of the previous story. Though this is AU, there are some spoilers for events in the Judith Watson Jedi Apprentice series. This story is darker than my usual tales. Be advised.

Also, this story, this chapter particularly, comes with warnings. Feelings of depression and suicidal ideations are presented. If this is a danger or possible trigger for you, I humbly suggest that you skip this chapter.

The Perfect Universe Trilogy
2 of 3

Prologue

(Ten months after the events of Perfect)

Padawan, where are you? That is the question I ask myself every day. It is just one of many. With every breath, every heartbeat, I wonder where you are, what you are doing. I worry if you are safe, if you are happy. I hope you are.

I fear you are not.

Fear.

I have much of that within me, so much so that I let it drive you away from your home. Away from the Jedi. Away from me. And that's precisely what it was... fear. I was afraid that I was not a good master, that I was incapable of being so. My failure with Xanatos the bitter evidence that validated the truth of my concerns. Then I met you and all those old fears came to the fore. I let that fear guide me when I should have focused on guiding you. I was so frightened of failing you that it allowed for no other outcome.

I failed you, Padawan. I knew that the moment I touched your mind, the moment I touched your pain, the moment I saw myself through your eyes...

Pity. Disappointment. That is how you saw me, how you thought I saw you. The truth is I have never seen you that way. Not once. Not ever. But you were right about pity and disappointment being a part of your apprenticeship under me. You thought these two things were your master, but they were not yours. They were mine.

I have permitted pity and disappointment to master me since before you were born. They are, perhaps, the greatest of my failings, though they share good company with my arrogance and stubbornness. Maverick they call me. Rebel. Fool is what I am. I realize now with you gone how poor a Jedi I am, how poor a master, and how poor a man. None of these are mantles I am fit to wear.

But you are. You can still if only you would return, not to me, but to the Temple, to the Jedi.

You are meant to be a great Jedi, my Padawan. Please, I beg you, don't let me take that from you. There is little of me left that I value, but I would gladly surrender it all for your safe return.

I have never given much thought to religion. After seeing so many people, so many planets with each its own religious customs, beliefs, and mores, I have never felt a need to add my own to the great multitude. I had the Force. That was enough, but now... now I find myself praying daily to any gods who may listen. I would serve them all. I would sacrifice

myself upon any number of strange altars. I would praise or curse the divine. I would even submit to the Dark. I would do anything.

Anything...

To give back what I took from you.

Mace and Yoda think I am losing my mind. Perhaps I am. There are days when I sit here staring up at the model galaxy spinning before me and I can almost feel my sanity slipping away, but I cannot bring myself to care.

There is nothing left for me here without your bright presence, without your Light. The galaxy is now such a dark place that the Darkness no longer frightens me.

Perhaps that is what I should fear... I think Mace does. There is something in his eyes when he looks at me that looks like pity. It looks like disappointment. I know that's what

Master Yoda sees in me. It is what I see in myself.

I am so sorry, Padawan. So very, very sorry, but I do not wish for your forgiveness, only for your return. Grant this undeserving, old fool this one last request.

Please.

Come home, Obi-Wan.

Chapter 1: Chasing Spirits

(Two months later.)

The day's Council session had been long and frustrating as most had been of late and Mace found that he was tired, wanting nothing more than to return to his quarters and to recline in his favorite chair with a hot mug of tea. Mace sighed as he moved quietly through the halls of the Temple. Yes, relaxing was exactly what he wanted to do, but the Councilor could not, not yet. He still had one more thing to do.

The Councilor drew in a deep breath as he paused outside the door to familiar quarters. After only a moment's hesitation, he pressed the door chime. The door slid open and Mace stepped inside to find himself in the now expectedly dimly lit and disheveled living space. Data pads and books lay on every surface interspersed among sheets of flimsi and stellar maps. Used plates and cups dotted the tabletops in unwieldy stacks, but most prevalent about the small space were the empty bottles. And they were numerous. From high-end, exotic liquors to cheap ales that could likely strip an engine, bottles of every kind, brand, vintage, and flavor lay strewn about the room, resting where ever they had been carelessly discarded once their contents had been consumed.

Mace then eyed the single resident of the quarters. The Jedi Master sat in his large armchair, his hair a tangled mess on his head, his uniform crumpled and stained, his eyes red and bleary. In his hand sat another large bottle, this one of Corellian whiskey; its contents half gone.

Mace pulled his cloak in close to his body as he sat charily on the clutter-covered couch. Still no word of greeting had been offered him, only a tacit acceptance of his presence.

"Qui-Gon?" Mace finally ventured when several minutes went by without a word from the other master. Qui-Gon brought his slightly lazy focus to bear.

"Hello, Mace," he greeted with a slight nod of his head followed by a swift chug from the tightly held bottle. Mace frowned.

"You're drunk."

"Hardly," Qui-Gon snorted. "But... all things will come in time," he finished with a smile. He lifted the bottle and held it out to the Councilor in invitation. Mace made to decline then paused a moment before reaching out and taking the offered alcohol, but instead of drinking it he placed it by his side and out of the other man's immediate reach. Qui-Gon's gaze narrowed.

"That is very rude."

"But necessary," Mace answered. "Qui-Gon we need to talk."

"No, Mace. You need to talk. I need my bottle back."

"What you are looking for won't be found at the bottom of that bottle."

"What I'm looking for? What I'm looking for cannot be found, doesn't want to be found, at least not by me."

"So this is your solution?" Mace replied as he gestured to the chaos littered around them. "Sitting here in your quarters slowly killing yourself?"

"Would you prefer a more expedient approach?"

"What I would prefer is for you to let me help you."

"I don't need any help. I am perfectly fine."

"Fine?" Mace asked incredulously. "You haven't been on a mission in weeks, Qui-Gon."

"And whose fault is that? I was not the one who decided to place me on inactive status. That was the Council's decision," Qui-Gon responded with a noticeable heat in his tone.

"The Council had no choice given your performance on your previous missions," Mace intoned. Qui-Gon waved the comment off.

"I completed the missions."

"Barely," Mace retorted. "And sometimes only by luck or the gracious attitudes of your hosts. Twice you nearly caused a diplomatic incident and once you were detained for assaulting a civilian."

"That was... a misunderstanding," Qui-Gon mumbled.

"You thought you saw Obi-Wan," Mace declared, his sympathy plainly obvious in his rich baritone.

"I see him everywhere..." Qui-Gon spoke softly, his gaze drifting off to some far away point. "There was a time I thought... I thought I saw him in a crowd. I was sure of it, but when I looked again... he was gone..."

"Qui-Gon..." Mace began with a sigh. "You can't carry on this way. It's too much."

Qui-Gon shook his head and, for the first time since he came in, he looked directly into Mace's eyes.

“You’re wrong. It’s not enough. Not nearly enough.”

“Qui-Gon,” Mace said as he moved to the edge of his seat. “Obi-Wan made his decision, his choice. You can’t keep blaming yourself for this. He,”

“Left because of me! Because of me, Mace!” Qui-Gon yelled, his large eyes and tangled hair giving him the appearance of a wild man. “I am to blame! Me! I failed him...”

“Qui...”

“You didn’t see him, Mace,” Qui-Gon continued, his voice becoming soft and his gaze dropping to the floor. “In his mind... I saw... such despair, such longing... All he ever wanted was to be a knight, to serve the Light, and... to make me proud. And what did I do,” he said with more than a hint of self-deprecation. “I doused that light. I took away that dream all because I was too blind, too ignorant to see how much he was hurting. Hurt that I caused.”

Qui-Gon drew in a shaky breath as he choked back tears. He looked at the Jedi before him.

“I know exactly how he felt, what he felt when he thought of me and my teaching... I saw it... right there in his mind and I am ashamed,” he paused shaking his head and once again lowering his gaze. “I should be punished for what I’ve done, but nothing I do will ever be enough.”

Mace sat quietly for several minutes before speaking and when he did, his voice was soft and calm despite the turmoil of the past few moments.

“Qui-Gon, you mourn the loss of the Jedi Obi-Wan could have been, but what of the Jedi we had? What about you? The Order needs you. Your friends need you. Please, let us help you,” he implored. Mace waited for a response. At first, Qui-Gon said nothing then the longhaired master raised his arm, reaching out. For a moment, Mace thought he was reaching out to him, finally accepting the offer of help, but before Mace could respond the bottle of whiskey he had confiscated flew into the master’s hand. He watched as Qui-Gon leaned back in his seat and took a long, deep draught from his reacquired bottle.

Mace shook his head in disbelief.

“That’s your answer? Just keep drinking?”

“It beats the alternative,” Qui-Gon answered with a shrug.

“Which is?”

“Not drinking,” he replied, punctuating the reply with another gulp of whiskey. Mace sighed disgustedly and rose to his feet.

“I have no intention of staying here and watching you self-destruct.”

“Then leave,” Qui-Gon answered with a gesture to the door. Mace opened his mouth to say something more, but then he shut it. With a sigh and one last shake of his head, he left the dim quarters. Qui-Gon only absently considered his friend’s departure as he continued to drink the potent beverage in his hand. Within a few minutes he realized with dismay he had finished the bottle. He cast his gaze about the room in search of another, but all he saw was the empty collection of his past endeavors towards blind inebriation. He was fairly certain there was a new cask of Fintermillian wine in the cooler, but he lacked the motivation to rise and get it. Instead the master sank deeper into his seat, leaning his head back and closing his eyes. He waited for the blessed numbness that drunkenness was supposed to bring, but the numbness never came. The pain inside him remained and he knew it would never leave.

* * * * *

Some timeless time later, Qui-Gon awoke on the floor of his quarters. His mouth tasted like fetid paste and his limbs felt heavy and sluggish. With great effort the master pushed himself off the floor and rose unsteadily to his feet. A glance out of his balcony doors told him that several hours had passed and night had fallen over Coruscant, though the city-planet never truly went dark. With a wipe to his bleary eyes, Qui-Gon stumbled forwards and opened his balcony doors. He took in the scene around him. Almost impossibly tall buildings dominated the landscape, each a microcosm world, their lit windows like starlight while thousands of beings traversed the skyways, the endless flow of traffic leaving bright swathes of color in its wake. At another time, to another person, the scene might have been beautiful, but for Qui-Gon there was nothing before him except the painful realization that life continued on around him despite his own personal despair.

Somewhere out there was Obi-Wan. Not here. Not on Coruscant, but somewhere in the greater galaxy.

Lost to him.

Lost because of him.

Qui-Gon shook his head and grasped the simple railing that separated the balcony from the infinite space beyond. He closed his eyes and leaned forward slightly, his hair catching in the wind. The air was cold against his skin, the chilling touch playing complement to the icy pangs in his chest.

Without conscious thought he climbed over the rail. His robes caught in the wind now, whipping and snapping about his frame. His fingers wrapped lightly around the

balustrade, his booted heels planted on the ledge. Qui-Gon straightened his arms and leaned forward. He once again closed his eyes as he let his other senses take precedence for the moment. He could feel the vastness below him, knowing that only his steady grip prevented him from being enveloped by that vastness.

It would be so easy.

All he had to do was let go. Let go of the pain, let go of the guilt, the despair, the longing... the rail. Qui-Gon's grip loosened and his body leaned slightly further out as gravity pulled him towards the open air. For a moment he let himself feel. He granted himself permission to examine the wreckage that had been his life. The master looked deep within himself, searching out that place that for over a year he had been trying to mask with missions and spirits.

He was not surprised by what he found.

There was a hole inside him, one that was as expansive and as deep as the vastness before him. It was a wound that he had inflicted upon himself. A wound that worsened each day, festering, weeping, and oozing with the darkness that was the blight on his soul. Qui-Gon knew he was tainted, but now the stain was present for all to see. And the wound ached. Oh, how it ached! It ached and poisoned him with every beat of his heart, every breath of his lungs. The stench of it was etched in his very skin. The darkness ate away at all he was like a virus. No, it was not a virus for he was not the victim here. If anything, he was the virus. He was the one infecting those he had once held closest to him. He was the cancerous rot of the Order and he had already cost the Jedi three lives.

Tahl.

Xanatos.

Obi-Wan.

Qui-Gon eyes clenched tighter at the admission, at the memory of each loss, each casualty that he had caused. His gripped loosened a bit more. As much as the thousand regrets he held over Tahl and Xanatos tore at him, it was the guilt over his failure with Obi-Wan that pained him the most. He had failed him, his padawan, so grievously...

His fingers loosened their hold a bit more.

Gods... Gods, what had he done! Obi-Wan was given to him to train, to raise in the Light, to bring into being the Knight of the Order he was meant to be, but what had he done? He had extinguished that light with more efficiency than any of the dark force users in stories still told in the crèche and researched in the archives. Though Obi-Wan's body still lived, he had surely killed the Jedi that was housed within. Crude matter. That's what had survived his tutelage; the crude matter lived, but the luminous being was gone. Where there should have been confidence, he had instilled insecurities. Where there should have

been faith, he had instilled despair. Where there should have been trust, he had instilled doubt. Where there should have been light, he had instilled darkness.

This was the truth, his truth. He was a master of nothing except misery and devastation. He was not a servant of the Light, he was a harbinger of the Dark and Jedi philosophy was all too clear on what should be done with such miserable and tainted beings.

Qui-Gon flexed his fingers, preparing to let go one last time. Just one last twitch of muscle and his suffering would be over...

Qui-Gon opened his eyes.

It would be over.

No. No, that could not be. He could not accept such an easy escape from his penance. He deserved to suffer. He deserved pain, not freedom. The wrong he inflicted on Obi-Wan demanded it. His continued torment at living was right.

It was justice.

With a sigh, Qui-Gon opened his eyes and climbed back over the railing stumbling forwards in a large, graceless mass. He absently passed through the open double doors of the balcony not bothering to close them as he ambled onwards to the one room in his quarters that had remained sealed for the better part of a year. After only a brief hesitation he palmed the door open and stepped into the darkness.

It was just as he had remembered it, completely unchanged except for its emptiness. The small cell was meticulously neat from the made sleep couch to the overly organized shelves. Only a thin layer of dust betrayed its true nature. On the couch lay the datapad Obi-Wan had been reading in preparation for their departure to Naboo. Beside it lay his traveling cloak, left behind just like his life here all because he believed himself unworthy of the privilege. Qui-Gon moved deeper into the room his hand unthinkingly reaching for the heavy, brown cloak. He took it and raised it to his face, closing his eyes as he breathed in the scent of its owner. It was all that was left of his padawan. The only thing that he had not destroyed. The void in his mind and heart suddenly surged outwards threatening to swallow the master whole. Qui-Gon did not stop it. He allowed the hollow to take hold of him, the very weight of his grief pushing down upon him forcing him to fall on the small couch. He curled into a tight ball, the borrowed cloak clasped tightly to his chest. A deep and mournful wail fought its way out from deep within his body, a haunting presage to the wracking sobs that followed.

The master had never cried, not really, not since he was a very small initiate still heartsick from leaving his family. Certainly he had mourned before, grieved and been soul sick, but never had those hurts passed his lips or their tears reached his eyes. Not like they did now and Qui-Gon was powerless to stop them. He was a man caught in a tempest. His

soul tossed about inside a maelstrom with no hope of safe harbor. He let the storm have him for he was an insubstantial man. There was nothing strong enough to ground him. Not anymore.

No Jedi would behave this way. No Jedi would leave themselves to the mercy of their own corybantic emotions. In between his sick and slobbering sobs the master quailed at that realization. He was not acting like a Jedi because he wasn't a Jedi and that he hadn't been for some time.

In truth, there was only thing left for the master to do, only one option left him.

With a silent shudder he gave up the last of himself. He surrendered that last little piece of the person he once thought he was and offered it up to the emptiness of his existence. He lay there helpless as he felt that bit carried away on the wind leaving him alone in the void.

* * * * *

It was late in the morning when Qui-Gon finally awoke. He was still in his clothes, still holding tightly to Obi-Wan's cloak, but he was clearer now. Clearer and a bit lighter for the release that came before his slumber. The master sat up slowly reluctantly parting with the heavy brown drape in his grip. He slid off the sleep couch and headed to his own bedroom shedding his soiled clothing along the way. Qui-Gon stepped into the fresher opting for water over sonics. He stood under the steaming spray and allowed the more than a day's accumulation of dirt and filth to be washed away. If only all stains could be removed so easily, he mused glumly before resuming his ablutions. Once he was finished in the shower, Qui-Gon stepped out and reached blindly for a towel only to find empty air.

"I don't think you own a clean one at this point."

The presence of another startled Qui-Gon, but he relaxed just as quickly as his mind registered who the uninvited guest was. He moved the wet hair out of his face and opened his eyes to find his friend and Councilor leaning in the doorway.

"A mildly soiled one will be sufficient if it's dry," he replied wryly. Mace took a moment to study the floor around him before choosing a towel that seemed to match the given requirements. He handed it to Qui-Gon who took and began to quickly dry himself off. Mace moved outside of the fresher and back into the common room to wait for him. Qui-Gon, now dry, took a deep breath then stepped in front of the mirror.

It was worse than he had expected.

He knew he had let himself go the past few days...? Had it really only been days? The dark circles under his eyes, the gauntness of his cheeks, and the scraggly length of his beard all confirmed that his inattention had been the stuff of weeks not days. Force, he looked like a wildman or an indigent from Coruscant's lower levels. In his mirrored self Qui-Gon saw nothing of the Jedi that had reflected in that same glass for decades. With an audible sigh, but a firm hold on his resolve, Qui-Gon stared down his doppelgänger.

"You do not belong here," he intoned and then he reached for his clippers. Stroke by stroke he culled the unruly scruff, each pass revealing something more like the self everyone knew. It was several minutes' work before his task was done and his beard once again was styled into his usual custom. He set himself next to the task of detangling his long hair, hair grown longer from neglect. It was painstaking and painful work, but in the end the now slightly damp locks lay smooth and shiny, though not with as brilliant a luster as it once had. Qui-Gon also noted, as he put his brush down, that there were quite a few more streaks of silver running through his chestnut locks or at least more than he remembered having.

Now groomed, the master turned himself to finding clean clothes, not the easiest of tasks given the current state of his bedroom. In the end, he had to settle for some thoroughly rumpled trousers and tunics and a robe with a small splotch of something near the hem. Thankfully, his obi covered the worst of the stain and in mere moments he was fully dressed though admittedly very wrinkled. Qui-Gon moved out of his bedroom and into the common room to find Mace patiently waiting for him on his couch. With a nod to the other master, Qui-Gon headed into the kitchen in search of teacups. After a few minutes searching he found two that did not show signs of use.

"Tea, Mace?"

"Please," the Councilor answered from the other room. Qui-Gon set about his work noting absently at the near normalcy of it all, before that thought was pushed to the back of his mind. There would be time to dwell on that later, if he so chose. Now was the time to move forward, lest he lose his nerve by over thinking. He reentered the small common space carrying two steaming cups. He handed one to Mace as he held his own and sat down in his armchair.

"You look...better," Mace ventured as he glanced at Qui-Gon over the rim of his cup.

"Last night proved very...illuminating," Qui-Gon temporized as he took a sip from his own mug then he looked directly at Mace. "After your exit last night, I didn't expect to see you again."

"I admit when I left I was rather... unsettled," Mace began as he sat his cup down on the low table between them. "However, Master Yoda felt something last night that disturbed him. It disturbed me as well."

Responding to Mace's serious tone and body language, Qui-Gon sat down his cup as well. He leaned back in his seat and interlaced his fingers over his stomach.

"You have something you want to ask me," he intoned. Mace leaned forward.

"Must I ask it?"

"Yes."

"Did you plan to kill yourself last night?"

"To say it was planned, I think, would overstate the matter, but to the point of question, the answer is yes," he replied simply. Mace's mouth hung open in an uncharacteristic display of genuine shock. The Councilor stared for several seconds before shaking his head and turning his gaze to the floor. When he finally looked up again the shock was gone and there was an unmistakable question in his eyes.

"Why?"

"Why what? Why did I almost throw myself off my balcony? Or why didn't I?"

"Both, I suppose."

Qui-Gon closed his eyes as he tried to marshal his conflicting thoughts and emotions into some kind of answer that his friend could understand.

"I just wanted it to end," he finally spoke.

"What to end?"

"Everything. All of it," Qui-Gon replied through still closed lids. "I was just so tired..."

Mace was silent for several moments before speaking again.

"And now?"

"Now," Qui-Gon answered as he opened his eyes and looked at the Jedi seated across from him. "Now I realize that I must go on; that it is not up to me when things shall end. That I am beholden to a greater purpose, one I must see through no matter what."

With what Qui-Gon could only describe as a relieved expression, Mace nodded and relaxed his posture on the couch.

"That... is very good to hear," he finally spoke. Qui-Gon just nodded his head.

"I can assure you that there will not be a repeat of last night," he answered honestly.

“Good,” Mace responded as he picked up his now cool tea and took another sip before replacing it on the table. “What can I do?”

“Do?”

“To help you. You’ve had a breakthrough moment, Qui-Gon, and I don’t want to see you backslide. Tell me what I can do, what we can do to help you?” Mace asked earnestly. Qui-Gon leaned forward and stared his friend in the eye.

“Well, there is one thing…”

“Name it.”

“You could help me…clean up,” Qui-Gon finished with a raised eyebrow. Mace’s face broke out into a rarely seen grin.

“Happily, my friend.”

Chapter 2: Ships in the Night

Stiff from so much time aboard ship, he made his way down the ramp stretching as he walked. His hair, which had long grown out of the padawan cut, caught on the wind and lifted about his neck. He moved the unruly locks out of his immediate vision, tucking the longer strands behind his ears. He then pulled his cloak closer as he secured his ship and made his way out of the spaceport and into the city proper. He had been here twice before, neither time for very long, but he knew where he was headed and how to get there. A public airbus would traverse most of the distance and from where he would debark he could walk the remaining few blocks.

He had done his research and he knew at this hour the person he was looking for would be in the large park near the city's municipal offices in the downtown district taking his midday meal. As he approached the city center the crowds on the walkways steadily grew thicker, but he continued forward with a well-honed grace and economy of movement. The throng of beings began to thin again as he made his way into the park, its lush greenery and blush of vibrant colors washed over him as he was embraced by the arms of the Living Force. It was not often he had found such abundant areas of life within the various megalopolises he had visited alone, during the past year, so he took an extra moment to relish the simple touch the Force offered him before he resumed his trek and headed deeper into the park.

His quarry sat just ahead alone on a bench. His target appeared to be staring off into space with little care or attention given to his surroundings. Still, he chose to approach quietly, coming up behind the man as silent as a shadow.

"Hello, Garen."

"Hello, Obi-Wan."

At that the young man on the bench looked at his visitor. Garen looked much as he remembered; tall, well-muscled, but not bulky, dark brown hair and eyes though his hair was much longer and there was something missing.

"Congratulations, Knight Muln," he offered with a polite dip of his head and a gesture to the empty space on his bench. Absently, Garen raised his hand, fingering the empty space where his padawan braid used to be.

"Yeah, I'm still not quite used to being called that," the knight replied as he took the offered seat.

"You earned it. I'm proud of you, Garen."

“Are you?” Garen asked seriously. A flash of hurt crossed Obi-Wan’s features before he turned his face away and stared into the distance.

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I just thought...you know, with you leaving...”

“I didn’t leave because I hated you or the Jedi.”

“Then why did you leave?” Garen pressed, but still Obi-Wan would not look at him. The answer was a long time coming and when it finally came it was spoken in soft tones.

“It’s personal.”

“Obi,”

“Leave off, Garen,” Obi-Wan bit off harshly as he turned to glare at his friend through a curtain of copper colored bangs. Garen raised his hands in surrender.

“Fine, whatever you say, Obi,” he answered. Both young men fell into silence then, each choosing to focus on the serene, scenic view before them rather than on the thick tension suddenly between them. Garen glanced at the man beside him. Obi-Wan seemed both the same and entirely different to his eyes. His physical appearance hadn’t changed in the year since he left; save he had grown his hair out of the ridiculous padawan’s cut. He looked as fit as ever from what Garen could determine through the rough, but thin fabric of Obi-Wan’s tunic and trousers. What had changed in his friend wasn’t easily seen, but the shift was present nonetheless. There was something very different in the way he sat, the way he held his head, the look in his eye. As much as Garen wished he were imagining it, the change was undeniable. This wasn’t the same Obi-Wan he knew. This man was closed off to everything around him, a part of the world, but apart from it.

“How did you find me?” Obi-Wan finally asked though he kept his attention forwards.

“Master Clee and I had a stopover here several months ago. I saw you then, sitting here in this park, but I didn’t have the time to do anything. Then later, after I was knighted, I came back looking for you,” Garen replied as he leaned back on the bench, his hands clasped and hanging between his legs. “I saw you. You were still sitting alone, on this bench just like before. I wanted to come over to... I don’t know, talk to you, say something...”

“But you didn’t.”

It wasn’t a question, but Garen felt he needed to answer it anyway.

“No,” he replied with a shake of his head. “I didn’t know what to say.”

Obi-Wan turned his attention back to the Jedi at his side, a slight grin on his face.

“Garen Muln at a loss for words. Does this mean Tattoine has finally frozen over?” he teased, but his attempt at levity fell short at the expression on Garen’s face. “What? What is it?”

“You have to come home, Obi,” Garen intoned.

“I told you,” Obi-Wan began, but Garen interrupted him.

“I know, but that’s not what I’m asking. As much as we miss you... I... It doesn't matter. I know you’re not coming back to the Jedi even if you won’t tell me why, but you need to come back to the Temple with me...for Bant.”

“What about her?” Obi-Wan asked as a knot slowly formed in his chest and ice settled in his stomach.

“She’s...dying. She may even be gone already, but...” Garen paused as his eyes grew distant. “But I don’t think so. Not yet,” he said turning his gaze back on his friend. “I’ve been busting ass trying to get back to Coruscant in time to see her, but I knew I had to stop here, to let you know.”

“Bant?” Obi-Wan whispered, the single syllable both a plea and question both. “She’s...” he paused again, unable to finish, the words catching in his throat.

“She was injured badly on a mission... the healers can’t...” Garen blinked against the sting behind his eyes. “She doesn’t have a lot of time...”

“Bant,” Obi-Wan repeated in a whisper. His mind was swirling, his thoughts and emotions were a jumbled mess. He found himself incapable of thinking clearly. He could only feel and what he felt threatened to consume him. He clenched his hands into fists trying to still the tremors racing through his body. His chest suddenly felt tight, his heart was pounding in his ears, his stomach roiled, his muscles twitched and jumped urging him to run.

“Obi,” came a concerned voiced to his left, the single syllable holding so many questions.

Garen watched as Obi-Wan had grown quiet, then pale, then downright shocky. The man looked like he was on the verge of outright panic. Instinctively, Garen reached out and placed a hand on his shoulder. Obi-Wan surged off of the bench.

“I can’t do this. I’m... I’m sorry,” he murmured as he wrapped his arms around himself feeling suddenly very cold. Garen looked at his friend’s trembling back and sighed softly.

“My ship is being refueled. It will be ready in four hours, dock twelve, if you change your mind.”

“I won’t,” Obi-Wan replied quietly as he began to walk away. After a few steps he paused. “Tell her... I’m sorry,” he whispered so softly that only Garen’s Force enhanced hearing allowed him to pick it up. Garen watched as Obi-Wan left the park sadly noting that he never looked back.

* * * * *

Obi-Wan sat absently at his desk. He had returned to the office after leaving the park, but he was there in body only. His thoughts, such as they were, were several light-years away. Garen wanted him to go back, but how could he? When he walked away from the Temple, from the Jedi, he knew it would be forever. He would never come back, could never. That life was over. Those people were lost to him...or at least that’s what he had told himself, but was it true?

Obi-Wan leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes. The chest pain he had felt in the park had abated as had the tremors in his muscles, but now his body was weary. As usual, his panic attack left him exhausted. The attacks were something he had been forced to endure as a result of his last experiences at the Temple. That moment in the Council chambers, Obi-Wan had felt like the box he had so carefully sealed and reinforced over the years suddenly burst open in front of everyone. He had done everything he could to shove the contents of his failure back into the box and out of view, but when his master... when Master Jinn had entered his mind it was as if the box no longer existed, its walls and bindings melting away under the scrutiny of this Master Jedi. Jinn had seen everything then, all the things he had spent a decade hiding, every shred of evidence detailing his inadequacies was laid bare before the man who had suffered the ignominy of being his master. How could he face the man after that? How could he face the Council? The Jedi?

The truth was he couldn’t. He was a failure and a burden. The former he could do nothing about, but the latter he could change. That’s why he had come to Ubar Udnom. A planet with no enemies, no major trade resources, no significant strategic value, nothing that would make it stand out. It was a planet that was extraordinary only by its ordinariness. Here he would make his new start. Here, on an unremarkable planet, he would spend his unremarkable life passing the years toiling in some unremarkable trade until he died. Obi-Wan knew that he would pass through the galaxy leaving it without leaving a mark. There would be no one who would grieve for him. He would die alone and forgotten.

As it should be.

Obi-Wan leaned forward and shut down his console, protecting it with his password before getting up and heading down the narrow corridor between the rows of cubicles until he reached the doors to the small balcony of his work floor. He reached into his

trouser pocket and pulled out a half used deathstick. He knew it was a terrible habit, that the substance inside was addictive and ultimately deadly. He even knew that its use diminished his Force sense making his connection erratic at best and non-existent at worst, but he didn't care. These days it seemed only the potent inhalant could calm him. Meditation certainly didn't work anymore and he had long since given up any attempts.

Obi-Wan took a long drag of his deathstick and blew the slightly blue tinged smoke out into the open air. Could he really go back? It was something he honestly would never usually contemplate, but this wouldn't be for him. It would be for Bant.

Bant.

Obi-Wan took another slow pull from his deathstick. Bant had been his friend since his earliest memories in the crèche at the Jedi Temple. A small smile crept across his lips. While he had been friendly with most everyone at the Temple, Obi-Wan only had a precious few people he truly called friends and he had always felt forced blessed to count Bant amongst them. He frowned. But that was part of the problem wasn't it. He was no longer Force blessed. Sure, he could still sense the Force sometimes, use it somewhat briefly, but if he were honest with himself, he didn't feel like he had the right to it. Bant did. Garen did. All of the friends, the people he left behind did, but not him and to walk the halls of the Temple now, to intrude upon that space seemed sacrilegious, heretical, wrong.

Obi-Wan shook his head and put out his deathstick. He loved Bant. He did, but this was simply something he could not do. He could not go back. He could never go back. Bant would understand. She had too.

Obi-Wan raised his head to the sky, closing his eyes tight against the push of sudden tears.

"Force forgive me."

* * * * *

Garen waited. And waited. And waited. He knew he was really pushing his luck by delaying this long, but he had to give Obi-Wan a chance even if it risked both of them losing their opportunity to see Bant one last time. Garen glanced at his personal chrono and frowned. His eyes searched the landscape before him. Through the large hanger doors he could see the barest outskirts of Udar City. Air cars and buses were constantly traveling in dense traffic lines moving in complex geometric patterns, continuously flexing and shifting like a living thing. A few transports would drift close to his hanger, but none came close enough to settle.

“Master Jedi,” a Ud mechanic called from behind him. “Your ship is ready. If you don’t depart shortly you will miss your clearance window.”

“Of course,” Garen replied shortly, but not unkindly. “Inform your traffic control that I will be departing immediately.”

The Ud mechanic bowed his head in acknowledgement before turning and leaving. Garen scanned the horizon once more. With a quiet sigh, he pulled his gaze away from the trafficscape and raised his hood over his head. He walked over to his ship, pressing the small panel on its under belly that would lower the ramp. He was just about to board when a voice called out, echoing in the large space.

“Garen!”

“Obi-Wan,” Garen yelled as he double timed down the ramp and half way across the bay to meet his friend. Obi-Wan was still dressed in the plain tunic and trousers he had worn when the two were in the park, but this time he also wore a neat, but well-worn spacer’s jacket over his lean frame. The two young men came to a stop in the middle of the hanger. Despite their initial enthusiastic yells, now that they stood face to face both men found themselves at a loss for words. Finally, Garen spoke if only to end the uncomfortable silence between them.

“My departure window is nearly closed. We should get going,” he said. Obi-Wan gave a sharp nod, but said nothing. After a moment’s pause, Garen turned and both men made their way to the small Jedi scout ship. The men climbed the ramp and entered the ship proper, the hatch closing with a hiss behind them. Garen slid easily into the pilot’s chair and began his prelaunch procedures. Obi-Wan eased charily into the co-pilot’s seat leaving Garen to handle the necessaries without interference from him. Within ten minutes, Garen had the small ship lifting off the platform, out the hanger doors, through the planetary traffic, and safely to their jump point.

Obi-Wan watched as his adopted home went from a blue-green sphere dominating his view to a small pin prick of light, only to finally melt and vanish into the streak of stars as they shifted into hyperspace. He stared off into that streaming starscape letting it lull him despite the thick tension of the cockpit. After some unknown time of uncomfortable silence, Garen turned to face him.

“I wasn’t certain you’d come.”

“Neither was I,” Obi-Wan replied still gazing out the window of the cockpit. To his left he could hear Garen shift uncomfortably.

“It’s a thirteen hour flight to Coruscant.”

“I know.”

“So.... should we... I don’t know, talk or something?”

“If you want,” Obi-Wan absently replied as he continued to stare out of the duraglass viewport. Garen sighed heavily and clasped his hands together as he regarded his traveling companion. He opened his mouth to speak then abruptly shut it as he drew in a deep, calming breath.

“Look Obi-Wan, I don’t know why you left and I know you don’t want to talk about it, but we’re going to be in this ship together for most of the day. Do you really want to spend that time pretending things are okay? We’re supposed to be friends,” he finished softly.

“We are friends,” Obi-Wan answered. Garen slammed his fist against the console. The sudden violence of the motion and its accompanying sound was enough to finally pull Obi-Wan’s gaze away from the stars. He turned to face Garen and was treated to a heated glare.

“We’re not friends!” Garen shouted. “We can’t be! Friends talk to each other. Friends confide in each other. Friends don’t sneak out in the middle of the night and disappear without a word!”

“I know,” Obi-Wan replied softly. He lowered his gaze unable to bear the anger and disappointment he saw in Garen’s brown eyes. Garen continued, but this time when he spoke his tone held less fire and was tinged with pain.

“You left us, Obi. Reeft, Bant, me.... You left us and you didn’t even say goodbye. And we didn’t even know why. We still don’t,” he said as he got to his feet and began to pace in the small space of the cockpit. “And we of course didn’t hear anything from you or even Master Qui-Gon. No, no, no. Do you know how we found out that you were gone?” Garen asked as he stopped in front of Obi-Wan.

“Do you?”

“No,” Obi-Wan answered quietly. Garen huffed and resumed his pacing.

“They called us in, all three of us. We were called to the Council Chamber. We had to stand before Master Windu, Master Yoda, and our masters and there they told us that you had left the Order. That’s it. No explanation, no warning, no follow-up. Nothing. You were gone and that was it.”

All of the energy that had fueled Garen’s rant seemed to dissipate with his last statement as his pacing stopped and he slumped back into his pilot’s seat. The knight lowered his head, shaking it in denial of the facts he had uttered. When he looked up again the anger was gone from his eyes leaving only sadness and a desperate need to understand.

“How could you do that to us, Obi? Didn’t you care even a little a bit? Did you even think what losing you would do to us?” he asked, but when Obi-Wan failed to respond Garen felt his anger spark again.

“Answer me dammit it! You owe me at least that much,” he snapped. Slowly he watched blue-gray eyes rise to meet his.

“I’m sorry,” Obi-Wan whispered.

“I don’t want your Force damned apology, Obi! I want an explanation.”

“I... I don’t know what you want me to say...”

“I don’t care! Just say something, anything... anything but I can’t tell you.”

“I...” Obi-Wan started, but suddenly had to stop and swallow around the lump in his throat. “I didn’t want to leave you or Bant or Reeft, but... I couldn’t stay... not after... I just couldn’t. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“Then why did you? What happened that was so horrible that you couldn’t even say goodbye or tell us where you went? Let us know you were even alive?”

Obi-Wan felt himself cower mentally at his friend’s harshly spoken words. He wanted to defend himself, to explain his actions, his reasons, for running, but he could not. There was no way that Garen or any of the others could even begin to fathom the phantoms that had chased him away from the Temple. Phantoms that followed him still. Phantoms he would never, ever be free of except for, maybe, when he died. And yet, Obi-Wan was not sure that even death would finally silence the voices that spoke of his shame.

No, he could not explain it to Garen. It was impossible for Garen to understand, but perhaps there was a piece of his story that would be digestable for the knight. Obi-Wan made his decision within the space of one long, deep breath.

“Master Jinn repudiated me before the Council so he could take Anakin Skywalker as his apprentice,” Obi-Wan intoned as his eyes took on a faraway look. “He dismissed me. I left soon after.”

“What?” Garen sputtered, any traces of his earlier bitterness and frustration entirely displaced by his shock. “Wait, what? I mean... what? What do you mean?”

“Master Jinn repudiated me to take Anakin Skywalker as his padawan learner,” Obi-Wan repeated calmly. These were words he had not spoken often, but everytime Obi-Wan uttered them, he was always surprised at his own calm. This time was no different. Deep down, Obi-Wan knew the words themselves could not harm him, had not harmed him, and yet he still avoided saying them whenever possible. In fact, he had only uttered them twice before. Once to Master Songe and once more before the High Council scant moments before

his leaving. Now he had spoken them again. Twice in as many minutes. Master Jinn repudiated me. The words should have stirred something within him, Obi-Wan knew, but if he allowed that, if he allowed himself to feel anything... anything but calm... He was not certain he could survive it. It was that thought, not the words, that frightened him in a most un-Jedi like way, but that was all right. Afterall, Obi-Wan was no Jedi.

“You mean he recommended you for your trials?”

“No. I was simply...” Obi-Wan paused searching for the right word then with a shrug he finished “dismissed.”

“But,” Garen protested still shaking his head in incredulity. “Master Qui-Gon doesn’t have a padawan.”

“What?” Obi-Wan said, his eyes focusing squarely on the man across from him. “What do you mean? Of course he has a padawan. Anakin,”

“Is not his apprentice,” Garen interrupted. “Skywalker is apprenticed to Master Yoda.”

“Master Yoda?” Obi-Wan repeated. “But... I don’t understand...”

“Obi, after you left Master Qui-Gon stayed in the starmap room. He would just... sit there, meditating I guess. It was months before he went on missions again,” Garen said to his wide-eyed friend. Now, it was Obi-Wan’s turn to shake his head in confusion.

“But... the map room? Why?”

“I think,” Garen spoke softly. “I think he was looking for you.”

“He...” Obi-Wan began, but suddenly he felt that familiar constriction in his chest. He tried to take a deep breath, but couldn’t. There wasn’t enough air. He began to sweat, to tremble. His vision dimmed. Panic gripped him. Distantly, he could hear Garen speaking, but that world was far away, disappearing under the pall of his growing terror. He was shaking violently now, his shoulders rocking back and forth. Someone was shaking him and... yelling. Someone was yelling... yelling his name...

“Obi-Wan! Obi-Wan! Breathe! Obi-Wan!” Garen shouted as he tried to shake his friend out of his frantic state. Blue-gray eyes that seemed almost febrile locked with his. Garen stopped shaking Obi-Wan, but did not release his shoulders, in fact, he only tightened his grip as he stared at his friend.

“Breathe with me, Obi-Wan. Match your breath to mine,” Garen instructed. Obi-Wan stared at him wide-eyed for a moment more before an attempt was made to regulate his breathing. Garen repeated the instructions calmly as he led his friend through an exercise taught to the youngest of Jedi initiates, an exercise used to settle nerves rattled from

nightmares and other imagined frights. It was several minutes before Obi-Wan's breaths matched his own and longer still before the tensed muscles under Garen's hands began to relax.

"That's better," Garen said as he gave one last squeeze to Obi-Wan's shoulders before letting go. Obi-Wan nodded, but said nothing and his face was still a bit too pale for Garen's liking.

"Are you okay?" Garen asked. He knew it was a weak question, but he couldn't think of anything else to say.

"I'm," Obi-Wan started, but the crack in his voice caused him to start again. "I'm fine."

"What caused it?"

"Caused what?" Obi-Wan answered looking down at his short boots.

"The panic attack," Garen replied, but Obi-Wan didn't answer. What could he possibly say that would make sense? Instead he just shrugged and kept his gaze pointed to the floor.

"Obi,"

"I think I should go lay down for a bit," Obi-Wan interrupted. When he didn't get an immediate response, he dared to glance up. He was met with Garen's intense gaze, but the emotion behind it was one Obi-Wan couldn't name. Finally, after several heartbeats under that scrutiny Garen nodded. Neither man spoke as Obi-Wan slowly stood and made his way from the cockpit. The scout ship was small and housed only a tiny room with two shelf like bunks. Obi-Wan stepped inside the quiet quarters and planted himself on the bunk to his left. It wasn't comfortable, but he had slept on worse. And honestly he was so tired it didn't really matter where he lay down, only that he must.

He stretched out on his back, his gaze turned to the ceiling. Rather than focus on the churning emotions inside him, he took to cataloging the small scrapes and dents on the otherwise smooth durasteel finish. Two panic attacks in one day and that was just from facing Garen. Facing just one person. What would happen when he reached Coruscant, when he reached the Temple and he had to face them all? Obi-Wan shuddered. If one Jedi could unbalance him so, then surely his return would destroy him utterly.

Obi-Wan sat up. He reached into his pocket, his hand trembling slightly as he removed the short stub of his most recent deathstick. He ignited it, not caring one whit about the added strain his smoking might put on the air recycling system. He needed the calm that the inhalent brought him. He pulled on it harshly, deeply inhaling its unmistakably toxic fumes. The smoke burned his throat and lungs, his lips stung uncomfortably, but it did not stop him. He drew on the deathstick, exhaling light blue smoke several times only slowing when he began to feel the slight tingle in his mind. That was what he had been waiting for, what he knew would presage a quelling to the static in

his mind and the ice in his gut. Obi-Wan closed his eyes letting his hands drop limply into his lap as he sank deeply into the haze of chemically induced stillness. This was why he had picked up the habit in the first place. It was not the same as meditation. The drugs did not help him reach his center, but when his meditations had first begun to fail it was through the deathsticks that he was at least able to achieve something close to meditation's peace.

Obi-Wan let himself fall back onto the bunk, his eyes still closed. The terror and extreme unease left his mind and body by slow degrees. He could breathe again. He could think again, but in the serene space the assortment of chemicals had gifted him he chose not to. He didn't want to think anymore. Not about where he was, where he was going, what would happen to him once he got there... nothing. He didn't want to think about any of those things and so he didn't. He just kept his eyes closed and breathed.

* * * * *

Obi-Wan awoke in surprise. He hadn't realized he had fallen asleep, but worse, he hadn't realized that he was no longer alone in the small sleeping compartment. He sat up slowly as he watched his friend. Garen was seated on the bunk opposite. His head was down and he was staring at something in his hands that Obi-Wan couldn't make out. When he spoke, he didn't meet Obi-Wan's eyes and his voice was flat and even, almost cold.

"I came to check on you," Garen started, still fingering whatever it was in his hands. "You were asleep, so I was going to come back later, but then I found this."

Garen finally looked up at him as his hand opened. Resting on his palm was the squat butt of his depleted deathstick. Obi-Wan stared at the open hand mortified, but also grateful that Garen had yet to ask him any questions because he knew he would be incapable of speaking at that moment. He couldn't speak, not now, not when he looked into Garen's eyes and saw his worst fears reflected back at him. He saw in Garen's rich brown eyes the same he had spent years seeing in his Master's deep blue ones.

Pity and disappointment.

"Why?" Garen asked, his voice soft and heavy split the silence between them with the ease of a vibro-blade.

"Because I have to," Obi-Wan replied, surprised at the evenness of his voice. Garen stared at him for a moment longer before giving a short nod. He sat the butt on the bunk and rose to his feet without another word. He turned to leave, but a plea halted his steps.

"Don't leave."

Garen did not turn. He did not move in the slightest. Only his words gave notice that Obi-Wan had been heard.

"I won't stay if you're going to,"

"I won't," Obi-Wan interrupted before he could hear those damning words spoken from Garen's lips. "I promise. I won't."

Garen did not reply verbally, but he did turn and take a seat on the empty bunk once more. He looked at Obi-Wan, not expectantly or impatiently, but instead with what Obi-Wan could only describe as a serene resignation. He licked his lips suddenly unsure what he should say now that he called Garen back. He hadn't thought what he would do next. He only knew that he didn't want him to leave. Not like that. Not with that look in his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he started, but Garen shook his head.

"You don't owe me anything."

"Yes, I do," Obi-Wan answered quickly then he hesitated. "Garen..."

"We don't have to talk," Garen intoned, but this time it was Obi-Wan who disagreed.

"I want to tell you... I just," Obi-Wan paused with a sigh. "I don't know if I can make sense. I don't know if you can understand."

Garen nodded seeming to accept that no answers would be forthcoming, but Obi-Wan didn't want to leave things as they were. This was his friend, or at least he used to be. Just like he would come back for Bant, he would try to explain himself for Garen.

"Qui-Gon didn't want me as his padawan," he began and when Garen opened his mouth to object, Obi-Wan held up a hand to silence him. "He didn't want me. From the very beginning he didn't want me and I gave him good reason on more than one occasion to regret his decision to take me on as his apprentice. Even if he didn't take Skywalker as his padawan, it doesn't change the fact that he wanted release from his obligation to train me," Obi-Wan said as he lowered his gaze to his empty hands. "It was hard enough working, training for all those years knowing that I would never measure up, but when the moment actually came... I just couldn't bear to stay there any longer. I should have said something, I know. Goodbye at least, but... it just hurt too much. I couldn't..."

Obi-Wan was saved from his voice cracking behind a choked sob by Garen's interruption.

"Are you certain?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry, Obi," he offered quietly. Obi-Wan looked up at him with a small, but somber smile.

"It's not your fault," he said with a shrug. "Now, you know... you know why I left, why I had to leave, but I am sorry I hurt you. All of you. I didn't mean to do that."

"You already apologized for that."

"And you... accept it?" Obi-Wan asked with a meekness Garen had never seen in him.

"Of course. We're friends, Obi."

* * * * *

The two young men spent their time a bit more companionably after that. They shared a meal of water and ration bars while Garen told him how Bant came to be injured. Garen relayed the story of how Bant and her master, Master Kit Fisto, had traveled to the middle rim planet of Urqu to settle a trade dispute between the major guilds and merchant organizations. To accomplish this, Master Fisto and Bant had separate tasks. The Master would meet with the leaders of each party while the padawan would tour the worker facilities and warehouses. Then disaster struck at one of the plants. There had been an explosion, whether it was caused by accident or sabotage, Garen did not know, but what he was told was that the explosion had caused the release of Xetraflurohydrothalmine – a mostly benign gas to the insectoid species of Urqs, but an extremely toxic one to aquatic species and Bant... Bant was a Mon Calamarian.

A gasp escaped Obi-Wan's mouth too fast for him to stop it. Garen's expression grew more grim, but he continued his retelling.

"The explosion did more than just release the gas. It also damaged several support structures. The whole facility was on the verge of collapse and there were still several Urq workers inside. Left on their own some would make it out, but the injured ones..."

"They would die," Obi-Wan finished. Garen nodded.

"Bant had a choice. She chose to try to save them... at the cost of herself."

Obi-Wan shook his head.

"No. There was never a choice. Not for Bant," he replied. "She could never standby and do nothing when someone needed help."

“That wouldn’t be the Jedi way.”

“That wouldn’t be the Bant way.”

“No. No, it wouldn’t,” Garen said with a rueful smile, but then the smile faded and his expression took on more somber tones. “Master Fisto said she saved six workers before the building collapsed, but the damage to her lungs...”

“Is there really nothing that can be done?” Obi-Wan inquired softly. Garen sighed and scrubbed at his face.

“Honestly, from what I’ve been told she should already be dead. The healers are doing what they can, but... Clee said it would not be long now.”

Obi-Wan nodded and closed his eyes. He had never planned to return to his former life and even if he had ever entertained the notion he knew it would not be a happy homecoming, but this... Obi-Wan had to take a deep breath to consciously steel himself against the tidal wave of emotions, wild, nameless, raw emotions that threatened to drown him. Only years of discipline allowed him to fight the worst of it back. After a few minutes, he opened his eyes and found Garen staring at him. Neither one of them spoke. There were no words that needed to be said. The look in their eyes communicated everything with frightening clarity.

They both knew that even if they returned in time to say goodbye to Bant, somehow, for Obi-Wan it was already too late.

Chapter 3: Unwanted Recognition

Qui-Gon made his way through the quiet corridors of the Jedi Temple with slow, measured steps. To onlookers, whether they were Jedi or not, the stolid gait would have seemed in harmony with the general quality of serenity within the Temple. Jinn, however, felt anything but serene. He was moving ever closer to a destination he earnestly did not want to reach, but he knew he must go. The reason was not for himself. No, there was little, if truly anything, that he could do to unburden his own heart, but perhaps it was not too late for another. Maybe, just maybe, Qui-Gon Jinn could do the right thing, say the right thing, to add to another's peace instead of destroying it.

"Master Jinn," Kit Fisto exclaimed softly. With a short nod he dismissed the padawan healer with whom he had been conversing and turned his full attention to the long haired master.

"Master Fisto," Qui-Gon intoned with a bow. Kit returned the gesture, but the brilliant smile he was known to sport was nowhere to be seen. Though Qui-Gon had secluded himself in his quarters for weeks, he suspected that Kit's smile had been missing for much of that time.

"It is good to see you," Kit said and Qui-Gon could feel the sincerity of his remark through the Force. The master managed a weak smile.

"I have recently come to certain realizations that demanded I change my previous behavior," he answered politely. If the formality of his words offended the Nautolan master, Kit made no show of it. Qui-Gon glanced behind the other Jedi, his eyes darting towards the closed door and back.

"I'm certain she would be happy to receive you," Kit responded as if he were sensing the other man's thoughts. Qui-Gon's brow wrinkled slightly.

"I do not wish to intrude."

"There would be no intrusion. Go in. After days with only her dear old master for conversation, I'm sure she is in desperate need of better company," Kit replied, a glimmer of his old grin seen in the slight lifting of the corners of his thin lips. "Go in," he repeated then with a nod he moved away and down the quiet hall, his head tentacles swaying rhythmically with his gait. Qui-Gon returned his gaze to the door and, after a deep breath, palmed it open.

The room was like any of the other healing rooms in the ward – stark white and sterile – but in this room, the air was different. The humidity was thick and heavy causing Qui-Gon to feel like he had previously been drenched and had not yet fully dried off. Of course the atmospheric alteration was to make the current occupant more comfortable and

all Jedi learned at a young age to adjust their body temperatures to a great number of environments. Therefore, it was only the scant matter of a few seconds before Qui-Gon had acclimated himself to the previously oppressive mugginess of the room. That done, the master's eyes then fell upon the room's sole occupant. Padawan Eerin had always been shorter than many of her fellows, but now she looked positively minuscule, her thin frame seemingly swallowed up by the lightly colored bed clothes of the medical couch. A starkly pale salmon-colored face turned towards him. Dulled, silver eyes soon settled upon him and a whisper of voice broke the quiet of the scene.

"Master Qui-Gon, I knew you would come," came a quiet voice from amidst the swaddle of blankets. Qui-Gon bowed slightly at the soft greeting, but the look in his midnight colored eyes communicated his acknowledgement of the strength the voice still carried.

"Then you are a far wiser Jedi than I have ever been," he began, his low baritone carrying easily through the all too quiet room. "But that is hardly surprising," he finished with a small smile as he came to stand by the side of the medical couch. His smile soon faded as he took in the pale, too dry skin of the young Jedi before dying him. Bant noticed his change in mood and met his somber gaze with a frown.

"Master Qui-Gon?"

"Just Qui-Gon, please," he answered quietly. The padawan did not seem to pick up the subtle undertone of sadness, her thin lips pulling into a soft smile at the offered familiarity.

"I'm glad you came," she whispered as she reached a small, webbed hand out to him. He took it timidly, afraid, on some level, that he would somehow break or further damage the fragile life laid before him. As if sensing his reticence, Bant gave his large hand a squeeze.

"There is no death, remember?"

Qui-Gon looked up at her with a start. Bant held his gaze steadily and Qui-Gon could sense her gentle determination and resignation in the Force around them. She knew precisely what was happening to her body and had accepted it, made peace with it. It was how a Jedi faced death, with courage and serenity and while it caused him no small amount of awe and pride to see it held in someone so young, Bant's strength also shamed him.

"I've been worried about you," she spoke softly. Her whispered words pulled the master out of his own thoughts.

"Me?" the master blurted in surprise. Bant laughed weakly.

"Yes, you. I know it's been hard for you," she replied then she added. "I miss him too."

Qui-Gon closed his eyes tight against the sudden stinging rush of tears. He felt the hand around his tighten once again. She was comforting him. With a sigh, he opened his eyes and found himself looking into slightly clouded, bulbous eyes that held only compassion in their depths. It was a compassion he did not deserve. He wanted to say as much, but he didn't. The words caught in his throat, his recriminations like vicious barbs in the soft tissue.

"It's not your fault, you know."

"If only that were so, Padawan. If only that were so."

"I miss him too, but he left us, remember? He left us."

"No, he didn't," Qui-Gon whispered. Confusion played clearly on Bant's pale brow.

"I don't understand."

"He left me. He left because of me. I... It is... difficult to explain," Qui-Gon said struggling with his words. "Please, don't blame him. Just... trust me when I say your anger in this matter is... misplaced."

"But, I'm not angry with him," Bant whispered her large eyes narrowing slightly as she scrutinized the long haired master. "But you are," she said then she shook her head with sudden understanding. "No, you're angry with yourself."

It wasn't a question and, at that moment, Qui-Gon cursed the young woman's insight. With the same resolve that brought him to this particular room, Qui-Gon answered the unasked question dressed in the simple statement.

"Yes," he intoned hoping, but not believing, he would escape further inquiry. He, of course, was disappointed.

"Why?"

"Obi-Wan left because of me," he replied simply. Though this was the hard truth he lived with, and suffered under, every day of his life, uttering the words never failed to increase the ache that burned as blindingly as it did unceasingly in his soul. He could see the next question in the Mon Cal's eyes, but for once he did not wait for her to voice it.

"I failed him just as," he paused swallowing thickly, "just as surely as I failed Tahl and you. I have cost you your master and your friend and, for that, I am more sorry than you know, but if one day you could forgive me..." his voice trailed off, the words stolen away like dust in a great wind. He lowered his gaze unable and unwilling to look the Jedi in her eyes for fear of what he might find there.

“Is that why you came here? For my forgiveness?” she asked. Qui-Gon didn’t answer. He couldn’t. Though he had asked for her forgiveness he knew he had no right to do so. Silence descended. It lay heavy for several long moments before finally being broken by a tired voice.

“Oh Master Qui-Gon, I can’t forgive you,” Bant said and a remainder of the hope Qui-Gon had still held in his chest crumbled into ash. He made no outwards show of his abject despair save a shallow nod of his head and an inaudible sigh. He turned to leave, still unable to bare her gaze and the condemnation in her eyes.

“Of course. I understand. May the Force be with you, Padawan Eerin,” he offered quickly in parting, but his steps were soon halted.

“No, wait, you don’t understand. What I...” Bant interjected as she attempted to sit up in her bed and reach out for him. The action cost her and she was immediately seized with a wracking, tearing fit of coughs. The machines and monitors around her flared into life in response to her distress.

“Ma- Qu...” Bant continued to protest against her lack of breath. Qui-Gon stood frozen near the doorway, unable to find his feet even when several healers rushed past him to attend to their distraught patient.

“No- forgive- not- me,” she persisted, but already well-meaning healers were gently pushing her weakened frame back against the medical couch and placing a breathing mask over her mouth and gills. Another figure pushed past him, but not before fixing him with an accusing glare. Kit Fisto hurriedly moved to his ailing padawan’s side, his eyes leaving Qui-Gon to settle on Bant with the softness more common to his expression.

Watching Bant struggling to breathe, the healers struggling to aid her, her master struggling to comfort her, Qui-Gon suddenly felt like an outsider, like he was invading a private moment to which he had no right to bear witness. Finally able to move, Qui-Gon turned and left without looking back and with no one noticing his quiet departure.

* * * * *

“This is not a wise course of action.”

“Perhaps, but it is a necessary one. I think we all can admit that I have been a very poor Jedi for the past year,” Qui-Gon paused giving voice to a bitter laugh before sobering and continuing. “More than a year, if we are all honest with one another. If that is to change, this is what must be done.”

Mace leaned back in his Council seat, hands steeped in front of his chest and a heavy frown creasing his brow.

"This is precipitous. Just last night,"

"Last night," Qui-Gon said cutting the Korun Councilor off, "is what has led me to this decision." The tall master closed his eyes and took a deep breath as he reached for his tremulous center. "Last night was perhaps the lowest point I have reached in my life. It was ... worse than ... Xanatos... I know that as a Jedi I should not have sought to end my life," a pause and another deep breath. "But also, as a Jedi, I cannot live as I have been for these many months. I realize this now though admittedly it is a hard truth to face."

Qui-Gon opened his eyes and looked straight into the eyes of his friend.

"But it is a truth that must be faced. I have accepted this. Now you must do the same. I seek the rite of Pravus Sectis."

"So you said, but I cannot believe you are serious."

"I assure you I most certainly am."

"No, absolutely not," Mace responded, his usual smooth baritone laced with ice. "Speak to a soul healer, take a sabbatical, pray, I honestly don't care what you chose except you may not chose this. Whatever it is you're seeking Qui-Gon, expiation, atonement, absolution, whatever... you must find another way."

"I have given this much thought and,"

"Bantha shit!"

"Master Windu," Mundi interrupted smoothly, his calm intonation not hiding the obvious rebuke and warning of the Councilor's outburst. Mace took a moment to close his eyes and center himself. When he opened them, his expression was once again an inscrutable mask, but his eyes still held fire.

"The issue is moot. Sectis is not a request to grant. It is a decision rendered by the Council," Koon spoke, breaking through the uncomfortable silence.

"No," Saesee replied. "While it has been used as such, a liberal interpretation of the old rites would allow for such a request."

"That would be a very liberal interpretation indeed," Koth countered. "But I think it can be agreed upon that this... application is not the intended use."

Many Council members nodded at this point, but two members remained completely still, their expressions betraying none of their thoughts. Qui-Gon sighed mentally. He knew this would not be granted easily, but he hoped...

“Though I agree with Master Windu that this is... ill-timed, I also feel compelled to respect Master Jinn’s entreaty.”

“But this,” Adi spoke, her usually melodic voice heavy with incredulity. “This would be a punishment and Master Jinn has committed no offense that warrants it. This Council cannot in good conscience,”

“NO OFFENSE!” Qui-Gon suddenly burst forth, any calm that had existed within him quickly evaporating. “I’ve committed the worst offense!”

“Your guilt is your own,” Even added gruffly. “Do not try to manipulate the Council into,”

“Enough!”

Yoda’s voice echoed through the chamber, his command punctuated with a strike of his gimer stick. The room was suddenly thrust into silence, no one daring to challenge the clearly irritated Grand Master. Yoda cast his gaze slowly about the room before settling on Qui-Gon. When he spoke again, gone was any trace of anger. Instead, his ears lay flat against his skull and his gravelly voice was as heavy as the lids that fell low over his eyes, weighted by a nearly visible veil of sadness.

“Grant your request, the Council does,” the ancient master intoned. Several of his fellows turned to the tiny master in surprise, but none dared to openly oppose his declaration. Qui-Gon released a breath he had not realized he had been holding and bowed deeply to the master.

“Thank you, Master.”

“Agree with this, I do not,” Yoda spoke suddenly, a slight edge to his tone that surprised all in attendance.

“Master?”

“Rash again, you are. Consequences from this there will be. Consequences that will affect more than just you, hmm?” Yoda replied, accenting his displeasure with a strike of his gimer stick against the cold, stone floor.

“Then... why?” Qui-Gon asked, his expression one of utter befuddlement. At his question, the Grand Master’s expression fell once again.

“Your right, it is,” the ancient master answered simply. “Grant this the Council must, but support this, I cannot.”

Qui-Gon stood silent not knowing what to say. He had gotten the sanction he wanted, but it was truly pyrrhic victory. Deep down he knew, he had always known, that Yoda held

a genuine and deep affection for him, regarding him more like his padawan than his grand-padawan, but Qui-Gon had always secretly feared that one day that affection would reach its limit that the master's patience with his stubbornness would end.

Qui-Gon lowered his head and closed his eyes against the sudden sting of tears. Today, it would seem, he had found the master's limit.

"Thank you, Master," he choked out, forcing the words through a throat far too tight with guilt, shame, and grief. He bowed low before the Council. A nearly inaudible twitter flitted through the body again as the masters noted the uncharacteristic depth of humility demonstrated in his actions. Another time, it might have pained Qui-Gon to see exactly how little the Council thought of him.

Gathering his cloak about him, the tall master prepared to leave when it seemed the customary benediction would not be offered. Before he had taken one step, however, Mace's baritone cut through the silence of the chamber.

"Master Jinn, a moment."

Qui-Gon mentally sighed, but turned to meet the Korun Councilor's gaze.

"Of course, Master Windu," he intoned waiting patiently for the Jedi to speak, but Mace said nothing. He turned briefly to Master Yoda, but the Grand Master's expression gave away nothing. Somewhat disquieted by the ancient master's lack of response, Mace rose from his seat and gestured to the rear chamber doors. Qui-Gon started slightly in surprise, but it was clear that the Councilor required privacy. Whatever it was he wanted to say to Qui-Gon it would be as a knight, master, or friend and not as a council member. The master led his friend out of the Council chamber and into a small ante-room. Mace turned and palmed the door closed behind him. Qui-Gon waited patiently for the man to turn and speak his mind, but the Councilor remained silent, his back to the other master. Qui-Gon waited a few minutes more. Then a few more. Then a few more. After nearly a quarter hour had passed and his precious longanimity was at an end.

"Mace?"

"Don't do this," the Jedi muttered so quietly that Qui-Gon was scarcely certain he heard him at all.

"Mace..." he started, talking to the other man's back. "Please..."

"Please what?" Mace barked as he spun to glare at his friend. "Please let you do this?! It's crazy! It's ridiculous! It's,"

"It's what I want."

It was the softness of the voice that stopped him. Had Qui-Gon railed at him, cursed at him, Sith hells even took a swing at him, he would have expected it and returned it in kind, Jedi serenity be damned, but that quite utterance, the sheer vulnerability found within those four words drained the master of any fight he had in him.

Mace sighed and ran both hands over his smooth head. He closed his eyes and took in several deep breaths before he opened them again.

“Are you certain?” he asked.

“I am,” Qui-Gon answered. Mace did his best to release his frustration into the Force, but he knew there would be long hours of meditation before he could accept this. If he ever would. He stepped forward and, after only a moment of hesitation, pulled the other man close in a crushing embrace. Qui-Gon tensed for only a heartbeat before returning the hug with equal vigor. Finally, both men pulled away and Mace gave him a slight nod.

“May the Force...” he began, but his throat caught keeping him from finishing the benediction. Qui-Gon gave a slight nod and an even slighter smile of understanding then he turned from the Jedi and walked out of the room.

* * * * *

“I was going to come and get you. We will be landing in a few minutes,” Garen spoke over his shoulder as he sensed Obi-Wan step into the small space of the cockpit. The young Jedi’s attention was mainly on the complex weave of traffic before them, but a small part of his focus catalogued the disturbing pallor of his friend’s face. Obi-Wan, for his part, said nothing as he slid into the co-pilot’s seat. After Garen had discovered his friend’s addiction (a fact that still seemed so unreal to him) they had had a long talk. Obi-Wan finally opened up to him, at least a little, and told him a bit of what had caused him to flee the Temple a year earlier. Then Garen told him of Bant, but soon that sad discussion turned into a sharing of pleasant and often embarrassing stories from their shared childhood. It was a good moment in a year marked with too few of them for both young men, but as the hours passed and they drew nearer to Coruscant Obi-Wan began to withdraw again. Garen could feel him distancing himself despite the confining quarters of the ship. Even now, though sitting within an arm’s reach of him, Garen had no real sense of Obi-Wan so hidden was he behind heavy shields.

Garen sighed internally and turned his full attention back to the trafficscape. A heavy silence filled the space making the cockpit more than a touch claustrophobic. On his third calming breath, Garen heard Obi-Wan speak for the first time in hours.

“I can’t do this.”

The words came out in a rush as if suddenly all of the air was knocked out his lungs. Obi-Wan felt the walls of the cabin pushing in around him. His vision was dimming. His heart was racing. It was another panic attack he realized distantly, but the knowledge did nothing to ease the tightness in chest that prevented him from drawing adequate breath.

“Breathe Obi,” came a calm voice to his left. Garen couldn’t remove his hands from the controls, but he reached out instead with the Force and attempted to use it to soothe the other man’s ragged emotions. Obi-Wan could barely feel Garen’s Force pushed reassurances, but the acknowledgment that his friend was trying to reach him helped to give him the space and focus he needed to follow the simple command to breathe.

“That’s it,” Garen said, his hands still on the controls, but his eyes on the pale man to his right. He watched in relief as Obi-Wan began to steady his breath even if he maintained a white knuckle grip on the seat’s armrests.

“Garen,” Obi-Wan spoke breathlessly. He swallowed, gathering more resources to make his voice stronger. “Garen, I don’t think I can do this.”

“You can,” Garen said firmly, but an underlying sense of compassion. “I’ll help you, Obi-Wan, if you’ll let me.”

Obi-Wan raised his gaze and caught the look of Garen’s brown eyes staring back at him. There was no pity there. No disappointment. Just a slightly sorrowful look and a plea to let him in, to let him help. Obi-Wan swallowed harshly again.

“Who... who knows?”

“No one,” Garen replied understanding the question easily. “I haven’t even told Master Cleo. I didn’t want to say anything in case you... in case you wouldn’t come.”

Obi-Wan nodded, not quite trusting himself to speak. Garen accepted his friend’s silence as he adeptly steered the small craft out of the main stream of traffic and began his descent to the Temple. Obi-Wan sat stock-still in his seat as he watched, eyes wide, the spires of the Temple rise into view. He could feel his panic still waiting at the edges of his mind, at the edges of skin waiting to drag him into the dark. He focused on his breathing instead of the soul crushing miasma that crept around him and threatened to drown him as they drew closer to the place that was once his home.

Within only a few minutes, Garen was bringing the ship to rest on one of the smaller landing platforms. He powered the vessel down and released the rear hatch before turning to his companion. Obi-Wan did not look any better, but he was breathing steadily which was a vast improvement from moments earlier. Garen stood, reached for his cloak, but paused before shrugging it on.

“Here,” he said pushing the heavy garment towards the other man. “Unless you want more people to know you’re here.”

Obi-Wan found himself staring at the cloak for several heartbeats before standing and accepting it. He carefully slid on the covering, the material both confusingly yet undeniably both familiar and alien. Garen reached forward and adjusted the cloak on his friend's shoulders.

"You look almost like you," Garen started then abruptly stopped when he saw the pained expression on Obi-Wan's face. "Sorry."

"It's fine," Obi-Wan replied as he pulled the hood up over his head then low over his eyes. "Let's just get this over with before I change my mind and hop the first freighter out of here," he offered with a weak laugh. The attempted levity did little to lighten the mood though both men resolutely decided to ignore the gnawing unease and exited the ship at least looking the part of men at peace with their surroundings. Garen walked at a casual pace, occasionally nodding at friends and masters that passed them in the large halls. Obi-Wan was a silent shadow at his side. Hooded and cowed, he garnered only passing glances from the Jedi moving around him, all of them assenting to the unspoken request to be undisturbed.

The trip to the Halls of Healing was, thankfully, uneventful, no one seeming to notice the failed Jedi trespassing in their sanctum. Garen lead Obi-Wan through the oh-so-familiar entry arch and down a few nondescript corridors before reaching a similarly nondescript door, this trip clearly one he had traveled many times previously. Before Obi-Wan could give that observation further thought, the door slid open and Garen had stepped inside.

"Garen," came a raspy voice, but even its muted tones could not hide the obvious pleasure felt by its owner.

"Bant, Master Kit," Garen replied with a brilliant smile for his friend and dip of his for the master. "I know I still owe you for that debacle on Andros III," Garen began as he winked at his friend, "but I hope that maybe this will make us even."

With these words of introduction, Garen stepped aside and gestured towards the still open door. After a moment's hesitation, a cloaked figure stepped inside. He shifted uncomfortably, his gaze directed squarely at the floor unwilling or unable to break the silence of the room. Bant stared at the figure, her bulbous eyes blinking slowly then suddenly she gasped.

"Obi?"

The name was barely more than a wisp of breath, an audible exhalation, but at the softly spoken question, Kit's already large eyes widened as he gazed at the newcomer. Obi-Wan slid the fabric of the hood off his head, his hands trembling slightly.

"Kenobi!" Kit greeted in surprise, his face erupting in a truly brilliant grin. "I had no idea you were coming back! It's good to see you."

“I ... uh...,” Obi-Wan stumbled. He dropped his gaze from the Master Jedi to stare at the far wall to his left.

“Obi is just visiting, Master Kit,” Garen stepped in smoothly. Kit’s smile dimmed significantly and his eyes narrowed as he quietly seemed to assess the young man still standing the doorway and pointedly not looking at him. The room was then uncomfortably quiet; the awkward tension nearly its own presence in the small room. Bant was the first to break through the oppressive disquietude.

She beckoned him to come to her, reaching out a small webbed hand. Unable to resist that gentle request, Obi-Wan stepped fully into the room and moved to the side of her medical couch. He took her hand and very carefully sat down beside her. Obi-Wan looked at his friend. It had been more than a year since he had seen her last and while her appearance should not have changed significantly in that time, her body had undergone a dramatic decline under the stress of her illness. Her normal shimmering pink hued skin was nearly gray and lacked all of its previous luster. Her webbing, crest, and gills were dry and papery, appearing as if a mere touch would cause the membranes to crack and crumble into dust. Even her eyes were duller, lacking the mischievous sparkle that he had known since their childhood. And now it seemed this wasting disease had taken her voice, her very breath, and more importantly, her laugh, a sound that Obi-Wan had taken for granted until that very moment.

The deep sadness that set anchor in his soul must have been visible in his eyes and she raised a hand to his cheek in a gesture that was tender and reassuring despite her frailty.

“She says you shouldn’t look so sad,” Kit spoke as he brought his gaze from his padawan to Obi-Wan. When the young man looked up at him in confusion, he continued. “The damage to her lungs and throat prevent her from speaking, so I’ve taken to be her voice.”

“Oh,” was all Obi-Wan could think to say. It made sense, after all. The master/padawan bond they shared would allow Kit to do for his apprentice what she, herself, could not. For a moment the pain of his missing bond – a bond that had given him comfort for almost a decade – reared up in his chest and head. It was not nearly as painful as the initial rip he felt when he had forcefully sought to tear the bond from his mind. That pain had almost cost him his sanity. Then again, perhaps he had lost it after all.

“Both of you, come closer,” Kit intoned and Garen stepped beside Obi-Wan at Bant’s medical couch. “I’m so glad you’re both here. I’ve missed us. The only thing that would make this perfect is if Reeft were here.”

“Is he still on that mission on Galiumana?” Garen asked. Though he was looking at Bant it was, of course, Master Kit that answered though the words were hers. Obi-Wan frowned slightly. This manner of communication, though helpful, was extremely disorienting.

“Yes, he wrote me though. My master was kind enough to read it to me,” Kit replied, smiling as he referred to himself in third person.

“So tell me, what gossip did I miss while picking up our wayward friend here,” Garen said with a somewhat non-gentle poke to Obi-Wan’s ribs with his elbow. Master Kit’s grin doubled in size, clearly amused at the response his padawan sent him.

Kit relayed every bit of gossip and Temple goings-on Bant could recall from her numerous visitors and chats with her healers. As the conversation progressed, Obi-Wan found himself relaxing into the camaraderie of the moment. It was odd having Bant’s master present, speaking in his deeper voice the outrageous retorts and observations that were wholly and purely Bant’s. Hours passed in more or less happy companionship despite the circumstances that brought them all together, but all too soon reality dulled the pleasant interval.

“Force! I have to go,” Garen exclaimed rising quickly. “My report to the Council is in ten minutes.”

“Go, it’s all right, Garen,” Kit relayed as Bant gave a small, but genuine smile to her friend. Garen leaned down and lightly kissed her head in both promise and benediction.

“I will be back tomorrow, Bant,” he whispered and Bant nodded. Garen then reached into his trouser pocket and turned to Obi-Wan. “Here,” he said as he handed him a data chip. “This has my quarter assignment and the access code. I will probably return late. Make yourself at home.”

Obi-Wan took the chip with a look of gratitude. He had not even thought where he would sleep and was immensely thankful that Garen would let him stay in his quarters. As if privy to his thoughts, Garen gave Obi-Wan a crooked smile and a squeeze to his shoulder. He then turned and gave a parting bow to Master Kit and was on his way.

“Thank you,” Kit said breaking the silence that had fallen after Garen’s departure. Obi-Wan turned his attention back to the master and then to his friend.

“For what?”

“For coming. For being here.”

Obi-Wan dropped his gaze unable to bear his friend’s scrutiny.

“I should have been here earlier,” he replied softly.

“Yes, you should have, but you are here now and that is what I choose to focus on. I have missed you, Obi.”

Again, it was strange to hear his nickname roll off of Master Kit's lips, a master he honestly barely knew and what little he did know was from brief interactions during his apprenticeship when he would visit Bant or through Bant's storytelling.

"I am not the only one who has missed you."

"I know," Obi-Wan sighed. "Garen and Reeft,"

"No, that's not who I mean. I was referring to your master, Master Qui-Gon," Bant/Kit interrupted. Obi-Wan turned back to her then, his face alive with an emotion she couldn't name.

"He's not my master, Bant. You know that. And despite what you or Garen says, I am sure he doesn't miss me."

"Obi,"

"Drop it, Bant," he interrupted harshly as he stood up and moved to the room's lone window.

"Obi-Wan,"

"Leave off," he snapped spinning around to face both master and padawan. "I didn't come here for him. I came here for you! I'm not a Jedi. I never could be and I never will be. I've accepted that and it's past time you all did too!" he shouted, his hands tightly curled into fists by his sides. Kit glanced at his padawan, focusing on her for several moments

"No," he spoke aloud. For a moment Obi-Wan was confused then he realized that the master must have responded verbally to something Bant had spoken through their bond. Bant's eyes took on a slightly pleading look and her thin lips fell into a slight pout. Master Kit sighed quite audibly then turned his gaze to Obi-Wan.

"Bant would like me to say something to you, but I will not until you calm yourself. Friend or not, I will not have your wild emotions contributing to her condition. Now, you may either calm yourself or leave," the master finished, his tone clearly brooking no argument. Obi-Wan flushed guiltily. The last thing he wanted was to make Bant feel worse and to avoid that he had to take control of his pain and anger. He nodded at the Jedi master then closed his eyes and took in a few deep breaths. When he opened them, moments later, he was not centered, but he was at least in control again. Though Obi-Wan knew that true peace was forever beyond his abilities that did not prevent him from at least projecting it to others. It must have worked as Kit relaxed in his stance somewhat and dipped his head in approval.

"She wants me to tell you that there is one thing she must say regarding Master Jinn, but once she has said it she will not bring him up again," Kit paused here and after only a heartbeat's hesitation Obi-Wan nodded for the master to continue.

“Jinn blames himself for your leaving and has suffered under the guilt. If you are truly at peace with your path then you should seek him out and tell him he is forgiven. Will you think about it?”

Obi-Wan let the question hang in the air for several long seconds before exhaling deeply and then speaking.

“I will think about it.”

“Good,” Kit nodded once. “Now I think you two can have a few more minutes before I must insist that my padawan gets some rest.”

“Thank you, Master Fisto,” Obi-Wan said as he moved back to Bant’s side and in doing so, a few of the shadows in his soul momentarily retreated under the light of Bant’s presence.

* * * * *

After leaving the Healer’s Ward, Obi-Wan retreated, hood raised, to Garen’s quarters. He had stood there awkwardly in the unfamiliar space until Garen found him and sat him down, placing a cup of tea in his hands. When the tea was finished, or in Obi-Wan’s case chilled past wanting and summarily ignored, Garen invited him to join in the refectory, but Obi-Wan of course declined. Garen then left promising to return with latemeal for his guest. In truth, Obi-Wan didn’t care. He was the least bit hungry, but he still accepted Garen’s promise in the spirit in which it was offered. The knight’s departure then left the ex-Jedi once again alone in the strange room, his thoughts the only company and poor company they were. However, before he could get pulled down to deeply into the morass that was his psyche, his brooding was interrupted by the door chime. For a moment Obi-Wan froze, uncertain what he should do. It wasn’t his quarters after all and no one except for Bant, Garen, and Master Fisto even knew where he was. Neither of which would be the person seeking entry at the door now. Which meant it had to be someone for Garen. Well, Garen wasn’t here so maybe if he just stayed quiet the person would give up and go away. Obi-Wan stayed where he sat and waited as the door chimed a second time then a third. The third chime was followed by a long silence and Obi-Wan allowed himself to hope that the person had indeed gone away, but that hope was ground into dust then moment the door slid open and Master Windu’s tall frame stepped inside.

“Kenobi,” his rich baritone called out stunning the younger man out of his frozen stupor. Obi-Wan scrambled to his feet and hastily bowed to the Council member.

“Master Windu,” he replied keeping his eyes averted. He heard rather than saw the door slid closed behind the Councilor, but he still did not look up even when the Jedi stepped directly before him.

“I must admit I am rather surprised to find you here,” the master intoned.

“How did you find me?” Obi-Wan replied finally looking at the Councilor, the accusation in his tone evident despite his efforts to hide it. Mace held up a hand calling for both his calm and his silence.

“No one has betrayed your confidence, Kenobi,” he said then he quirked one eyebrow. “I sensed your arrival during my meditation.”

Obi-Wan’s eyes opened wide at the explanation. He had never even considered that his very Force presence would give him away so lost he had been in the quelling the sheer panic of being visually recognized. How could he be so stupid! Of course people would know. The Council would know and his master... The bottom fell out of his stomach as the realization hit him. If Qui-Gon was in the Temple, he would have felt Obi-Wan’s return as well. Training bond or no, the great Jedi master would recognize the Force signature of his failed apprentice easily and Obi-Wan could do nothing to stop it, his own Force sensing severely compromised by his death stick habits.

The sudden surge of anxiety that burst from the young man before him startled Mace, though his expression remained stolid. However, it was more than the panic he felt that concern him. To Mace’s senses, Obi-Wan’s Force signature seemed...off. The Jedi master probed a little deeper into the Force around the man, but found nothing that could explain the nebulous something that he was feeling.

Mace studied the younger man for a moment. He spoke his next words very carefully.

“I think it would be of great benefit if you would agree to...”

“No!” Obi-Wan screamed then he abruptly clamped his mouth shut, horrified at his own reaction. The Jedi master did not have to speak the name for Obi-Wan to know exactly what the taller man intended. The mere thought of seeing Qui-Gon again filled him with an unimaginable mix of terror and despair. Why would Qui-Gon want to see him? Hadn’t he caused enough disappointment, engendered enough pity already? What purpose would be served in forcing his former master to see how his last apprentice had sunk even lower than before? No, he was a reject. A failure. A fraud. He was a complete discredit to his master’s legacy and he would not disgrace the man further by subjecting him to his presence. After all, he would know that Obi-Wan was here. If he wanted to the master could seek him out. He could...

“No, Master Windu,” Obi-Wan spoke softly. “That would not be wise.”

“Kenobi,” Mace began, but then started again, his voice softening. “Obi-Wan, I know you no longer consider yourself one of us and I have no power to command you to do anything you do not wish...” Mace paused and took a deep breath. “May I speak with you candidly, Obi-Wan? As a friend?”

Obi-Wan regarded the Councilor warily.

“A friend?”

“Yes,” Mace replied. “If that is acceptable to you?”

The deferential tone present in the Councilor’s usual authoritative timber surprised Obi-Wan and it took him moment to register that the Jedi was still awaiting his response.

“Oh, yes, of course... whatever you wish Master Windu.”

“No Obi-Wan, it is whatever you wish and, please, call me Mace.”

“Um... yes, Mas- Mace. Thank you,” Obi-Wan stammered out. His brain seemed to be operating a few seconds behind the conversation. Mace crossed over to the single couch in the small living space of the Knight Muln’s quarters. He pulled his long cloak around him and gracefully took a seat. With a small gesture he beckoned the young man to join him. Charily, Obi-Wan took his seat beside the other man though his movements lacked the grace and ease that had come some easily to him only a year ago.

“Obi-Wan, there are... things that I am not permitted to say, things that should be said to you, but I don’t have the right to speak them. So, I would ask that you listen very carefully to what I do say.”

‘And what I do not,’ was left hanging slightly in the air between them.

“Do you understand, Obi-Wan?”

“Yes, Mas- Yes, Mace,” Obi-Wan answered though, truthfully, he didn’t feel he understood what the master was saying it all. It was almost as if the bald man had suddenly started speaking an ancient form of Shyriiwook. Unaware or unconcerned with the young man’s confusion, Mace took a deep breath and began what to his mind may have been the most important negotiations of his life.

“When someone loses someone close to them, whether through death or simply distance, it can have a profound influence. It can change a person and not often for the better. They will withdraw from others. They will engage in destructive activities. They will blame themselves and embrace a sort of self-penance to redress perceived wrongs and failings.”

It took all of Obi-Wan's self-control to prevent a startled gasp from escaping his lips. How did he know? Was there nothing of his tortured soul that wasn't laid bare before this master? He knew, somehow he knew that Obi-Wan had sought to isolate himself from life, that he was an addict of the worst kind, and that he was guilty of bringing his former master low because he was inadequate as an apprentice. Would all the Jedi know? What every master that gazed down on him see him for the fraud he was? Stars above, he never should have come back here!

Not privy to Obi-Wan's private monologue, Mace continued.

"A person that feels this way, that does these things may also begin to do things he regrets. The regret and shame builds, coloring his choices and causing more regret and shame until he finds himself so far down an unfamiliar road that he believes he can never come back. He may even feel that the Force has abandoned him or found him unworthy and so he turns away from the Code and he turns away from the Force. And when that happens," Mace paused with a heavy sigh, "we all lose."

"I... think I understand," Obi-Wan offered softly. Mace turned to face him then. He needed to see the young man's eyes, he needed to know that he truly understood what the master was trying to tell him. He searched the blue-gray orbs looking for sympathy, concern, even perhaps anger that his master, well former master, had come to this point. But Mace didn't see any of those expected emotions in Obi-Wan's gaze. What he saw he could not recognize, but it concerned him greatly.

"Obi-Wan," Mace began, but Obi-Wan stopped him as he rose to his feet.

"It's alright, Master Windu. What you said was...enlightening. I have much to meditate on," he said as he moved towards the room's main door. Mace hesitated before standing and acknowledging the polite dismissal for what it was. He crossed over to the door and palmed it open, but he turned to look at Obi-Wan before stepping into the hall.

"Please, think on it and reconsider my request before another regret is born," Mace said and then he was gone and Obi-Wan was once again alone in his friend's quarters. He couldn't move, couldn't think, couldn't breathe. Obi-Wan turned slightly, his weight falling heavily on the door behind him, his weight slowing dragging him down to the floor where he collapsed into a ball.

That was how Garen found him.

When Garen returned from the refectory, he entered his rooms and found himself nearly tripping over the form of his friend on the floor pulled tightly into a fetal position. He immediately tossed aside the small box of food he had brought back to the room hoping to entice Obi-Wan to eat something substantial before they retired for the night. Garen dropped to his knees in front of the other man, his hands skimming over the too lean frame looking for some injury or cause for the apparent distress.

“Obi! What’s wrong? What’s the matter?” Garen called out as he tried to get Obi-Wan to uncurl and look at him, but his friend’s eyes were squeezed tightly shut yet not quite preventing the tears that streamed silently down his cheeks.

“Gods, Obi,” Garen exclaimed as he pulled the man close just holding him, rocking, and whispering meaningless words of comfort. Slowly, by inches, the tension that had held the man’s frame so rigid began to relax into Garen’s embrace. Not bothering yet to move from the floor, Garen shifted Obi-Wan in his arms so that he was sitting mostly beside him with Obi-Wan’s head tucked neatly into his shoulder.

“I don’t belong here, Garen. I don’t belong anywhere,” came a whisper from under his chin. Garen didn’t say anything in reply. Instead, he simply sat there holding his friend and imparting what comfort he could. So it was, some hours later, that Obi-Wan awoke disoriented. He was on the couch, tucked neatly under warm blankets and resting on soft pillows. His body was comfortable, but his mind was a wreck. He didn’t know where to even begin to start separating out what he was feeling and he never had the chance as Garen, his hair wild from sleep stepped out of his room and into the common space. Obi-Wan slowly sat up a feeling of dread lacing his stomach. He knew. He knew long before Garen ever said the words.

Bant was dead.

Chapter 4: The Impermanence of Goodbye

The scene that greeted Master Clee Rhara was one she knew would leave an indelible mark on her heart. There stood her former padawan holding another's former padawan – a former padawan who had abandoned the Order a year ago – in a comforting embrace. The master remembered how Obi-Wan looked the last time she saw him. He was a handsome, confident young man with gorgeous eyes and an impish grin, but the young man before her now seemed antithetical to the young man of her memory. To say Obi-Wan looked grief stricken was to say that an ocean looks wet. To Clee's mind, he looked one breath away from hysteria in his distress. His entire body was quaking, his breath coming in stuttered and strained sobbing gasps, and he clutched onto Garen's broad back and shoulders like a man desperate to keep from being pulled into the void. And that was just the visual presence of Obi-Wan Kenobi. In the Force, Clee could feel the gaping, painful rend in his soul Bant's death had created. Emotional pain poured forth from the crumbling dam of his shields and she could sense her former padawan working diligently to help shore up his friend's mental walls. But Garen too was grieving, and the constant exertion of control on both his and Obi-Wan's emotions was exhausting him.

Clee pulled herself away from her observations and stepped closer to the two young men. Obi-Wan appeared unaware of her presence, but Garen's head lifted and glassy eyes turned to her approach. Without a word, Clee stepped to them, pulling them both into her embrace. Garen rested his forehead on hers as he felt Clee's subtle strength supplement his waning reserves. He pushed a wave of gratitude through their mostly dormant bond and was rewarded with a warm breath of understanding and affection. Garen then sensed her attention shift as she too attempted to bolster Obi-Wan's shields. The unexpected presence against his mind caused him to gasp suddenly and a fresh influx of panic flooded the small space.

"It's alright, Obi," Garen whispered. "It's Master Clee. It's alright."

Obi-Wan didn't answer, but both Garen and Clee could feel the terror felt in the Force receded a bit after Garen's soft statement. Several more quiet moments passed as the Master Jedi worked to calm the distraught young man, but her efforts proved only slightly better than those of her former student. The extent of his grief and the instability of his shields were just too much for even the Master. Clee was still considering what to do when part of her awareness noted the sound of the main door sliding open. Through it stepped a familiar presence and Clee sighed softly in relief.

"Mace, we could use a hand," she greeted with a rueful half smile. The Korun Councilor made his way over to the trio and, after a brief moment of assessment, turned to Clee and Garen.

"It's alright. I will take him."

Garen looked at the Councilor then, hope and doubt flashing briefly across his handsome features. Mace's own expression softened minutely and he gave the young knight a nod.

"Go," he spoke simply. With one last squeeze, Garen carefully extricated himself from Obi-Wan's frantic embrace and let himself be led into the single bedroom of his quarters. Once inside, Clee closed the door and turned to her former apprentice.

"Padawan?"

"Master," Garen whispered. "He's hurting so much and he can't control it. I... I tried to help him, but..."

"But you're hurting too."

"Yes," he answered though the admission was little more than a harsh exhalation of air.

"Oh, Starshot," Clee called softly as she drew Garen into her smaller frame. The young man collapsed onto her, giving himself to her care and comfort as he had when he had been her apprentice. The use of her nickname for him was the permission he had been waiting for and he let go. His master held him as he released his anger, his heartbreak, his guilt into the Force. Garen would mourn, but he would heal. He would control his feelings and not let them control him. He would do this because he was a Jedi and it's what Bant would have wanted and expected of him. He knew he would do this, but...

"What is he going to do?" Garen asked after a long silence. Clee shook her head and cupped his cheek, her expression painfully sorrow-laden.

"I honestly don't know, Starshot. I honestly don't know."

* * * * *

Obi-Wan barely had a sense of where he was. Somewhere, in his distant awareness he understood that he was in Garen's rooms. That he was in the Temple. That he was on Coruscant. But to his active mind, the mind that was alternating between whisperings of his unworthiness and railings against the injustice of Bant's death, none of this mattered. He didn't care where he was because inside he was nowhere. That was precisely the feeling inside him. He was nowhere and rapidly becoming no one as everyone he ever cared for silently stole away from him. Part of his mind noted the situation and feeling as funny – that being nowhere and nothing could be so loud between his ears or so painful in his heart. Despite his inner emptiness, his head was awash with noisy emotions, each clamoring for

his attention to better exert their cruel ministrations on his soul. Why couldn't he stop feeling like this? And if he couldn't stop the feelings, why couldn't he at least control his emotions like a Jedi should? Why was he so weak? Always so much less than people needed him to be?

"You are not weak, Obi-Wan, and you are as much a Jedi as I, official title or no."

Obi-Wan suddenly stiffened in Mace's loose embrace. Had he read his thoughts? Obi-Wan quickly checked his shields and found them, not only barely existing, but being supported by the tall council member's own mental efforts. Cheeks already flushed with tears grew redder as he tried to pull free of the Jedi's hold, but Mace simply tightened his grip on the young man.

"There is no need for shame here, Obi-Wan. Your shields are weak, yes, but that's not your fault."

Obi-Wan successfully yanked himself free of the Jedi at his words.

"Not my fault! These are basic shields! Something taught to younglings in the crèche! If I can't even keep those what good am I?" he yelled. Mace studied the young man whose eyes were red rimmed, his face tear stained, his expression open and vulnerable. Mentally, the Korun Councilor sighed. Mace understood all too well Obi-Wan's feelings of not being good enough. After all, he felt that same guilt within himself at not being able to prevent the numerous hurts that led to this padawan's and his master's present pain. And much as he wanted to help fix the desperate rift between the two men, Mace had no idea how to do so. He could only hope, let the Force guide him, and, despite what Yoda might say on the subject, try.

"It is not your fault. When I was assisting your efforts at shielding I saw that they were somehow... damaged. I admit that I am not a skilled enough healer to ascertain how the damage came to be, but I suspect that it is that which prevents you from forming and retaining stronger shields," Mace paused then carefully plunged forwards, "It may also be compromising your ability to control your emotional state."

Obi-Wan heard everything the Councilor said, but his thoughts were fixated on one word and, try as he might, he was unable to wrest his mind from those thoughts.

"Damaged?"

"Yes."

"My mind?" Obi-Wan continued. Again Mace nodded, but this time with an accompanying frown, unsure and ill at ease of where the line of questioning was going. Obi-Wan drew in a deep breath and seemed to gather himself up a bit.

"So... I have brain damage then?" he asked. Mace's frown deepened.

“In the strictest sense of the word, yes.”

“I see,” Obi-Wan nodded in reply then he did something completely unexpected to both men.

Obi-Wan laughed.

At first it was a small chuckle, almost inaudible, but soon it gained strength and speed morphing into an outright guffaw. Mace’s face was locked in an unfamiliar expression of shock. Even as the door to the bedroom opened and a curious pair of Jedi stepped into the living space, Mace was unable to acknowledge them as his eyes were held inexorably to the now very unstable young man. Garen looked first to Master Windu then to his own master and finally to his friend who was now laughing so hard he had to support himself, his hands on his knees.

“Obi?” Garen asked softly as he took a tentative step towards the laughing young man. Closer now, Garen risked placing a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Obi?”

“Garen,” Obi-Wan replied between chuckles. “I have brain damage!” he exclaimed before doubling over once again into a fit of giggles. The young knight shook his head bewildered.

“What?” he stammered ineloquently.

“Brain damage, Garen,” Obi-Wan repeated as he hurriedly swiped tears from his eyes. Obi-Wan pushed himself upright and turned to look at his friend. “After everything else, after Qui-Gon, after Anakin, after Bant... I have brain damage! Can you believe it!”

“Obi,” Garen started, but Obi-Wan continued his usual sober, melancholy now replaced with a manic energy that bordered on full out frenzy.

“Force above,” Obi-Wan barked out between harsh peals of laughter. “I really am useless! I’m useless, Garen! Pathetic even!” he yelled to the audience of stunned Jedi. Obi-Wan wiped the remnants of tears from his mirthless eyes.

“Maybe... maybe Qui-Gon,” he sputtered his laughs morphing quickly into choking sobs, “maybe he will want me now... maybe now I’m pathetic enough for someone to,”

“Enough,” Mace interrupted as he grabbed the gasping young man and pulled him close to his chest. “Enough,” the master repeated softly. Clee blinked and shook her head in a physical effort to disperse her confusion. She pulled her gaze from Obi-Wan and let it linger on Garen for a moment before turning it on the council member.

“Mace?” she asked quietly, the single word carrying a multitude of questions he was disinclined to answer.

“Bant’s service will start soon. You should go. I will see to Obi-Wan,” he intoned. The master’s calm, emotionless baritone shook the young knight out of his silent stupor.

“But Obi... he would want to be there.”

“He can’t go,” Mace answered bluntly, but not unkindly. “His presence would cause a disturbance, worse now for his own unbalanced state. You two go on. I will take care of him and join you when I can.”

Garen’s brow furrowed as he stared at the back of his childhood friend. He didn’t like the idea of leaving Obi-Wan behind, he didn’t agree with it, he really didn’t understand, but he knew it was right. He knew that Mace was right. Not trusting himself to speak, Garen gave a short nod to the council member before turning to his former master. Without a word he reached out for her hand, which she gave him without hesitation, and together the two left the small apartment, leaving one friend to say goodbye to another.

Obi-Wan was oblivious to it all. If someone were to ask him if he knew what it felt like to be so overwhelmed with emotion that you can’t see straight, he would have said yes he knew that feeling. If someone were to ask him if he knew what it felt like to have fear and despair vie for your very breath as pain and regret ate at you from the inside out, he would have said yes he knew that feeling. But if someone were to ask him if there was anything he could feel that would make those previous experiences wilt and wither away under its power, he would have said no. Such a thing would be undeniably, unequivocally, entirely impossible.

Or so he would have said.

Until now.

Mace tightened his embrace slightly as a mournful wail was loosed, howled into the folds of his tunics.

“Easy child,” he murmured, simultaneously rubbing soft circles on Obi-Wan’s back and reinforcing the protective weave he had wound around Obi-Wan’s mind at his first outburst. “Be at peace.”

“H-how?” a weak voice answered from just below his chin. Mace continued his ministrations and, when he spoke, his voice was as soft and gentle as his touch.

“Do you trust me, Obi-Wan? Will you trust me?”

The young man in his arms stiffened and stilled for several long moments before softly exhaling his battered acquiescence.

“Y-yes...”

“Good,” Mace murmured. “I can help you, Obi-Wan, but to do so I must enter your mind.”

“No...” came the whispered protest and the Master Jedi could feel the form in his arms begin to tremble. Mace brought his hands to Obi-Wan’s head, cradling his face between his two large palms and forcing red-rimmed eyes to meet his.

“I won’t delve too deeply, Obi-Wan. You have my word on that. I will not invade your privacy or your thoughts, but you do have to let me in. Trust me, please. I will not harm you.”

Mace waited and when he received no further protests he decided silence was assent. He loosed the cradle of Obi-Wan’s face and guided the auburn topped head to his shoulder, one hand gently carding through the silken locks the other resting lightly on the man’s back. Mace closed his eyes and sank himself deep into his center. He stretched out with his mind and reached for the nearest mind to his. He allowed his presence to brush subtly against the weakly erected shields. With this brief “knock,” he felt Obi-Wan allow him entrance and he moved his presence slowly inside. Once past the threshold, the Master Jedi held himself still, allowing himself no deeper invasion, and began to slowly, painstakingly slowly, rebuild and reinforce the other man’s shields weaving his own Force signature into the delicate webbing. The newly constructed shields would stand up to the typical rigors and stresses of an existence among trained Force users and the “space” of Obi-Wan’s mind was currently stabilized, allowing easier control of his more turbulent emotions. It would be a temporary fix, but it would hold the other mind in good stead for several hours before they began to degrade again. It would take the efforts of a soul healer to correct the underlying damage the master sensed, though what caused the damage in the first place the master was not certain. The injury was old, Mace knew, and, he suspected, dated at least as far back as that fateful day Obi-Wan awoke from his coma and left the Jedi way of life.

Satisfied with the work he’d done, Mace began to pull away from the other man’s mind. When he opened his eyes he did so to the sound of a soft sigh of relief.

“Better?”

“Yes. Thank you,” Obi-Wan replied steadily. He slowly pulled himself up and out of the embrace of the older man. For the first time in far too long, Obi-Wan felt his mind still and at peace. It was the sort of state that had nearly always followed his meditations, but after the... incident, it was one he found he could no longer attain. In fact, he had long since given up the hope of once again feeling this type of easy serenity. The same loss of hope that had led to his dependency on deathsticks to reach any type of calm.

“You seem... much calmer now.”

"I feel much calmer," Obi-Wan was able to intone as he stepped back to a respectful distance from the Master Jedi. "I... apologize for my earlier behavior. I should have," he attempted to continue, but Mace waved off his excuses.

"There is no need, Obi-Wan. You have suffered a traumatic injury, your earlier... difficulties are only symptoms of a wound that needs healing."

"Can it be healed?" Obi-Wan asked in a small voice.

"I believe it can with time and help from those more skilled than I," Mace replied. "How long has it been since you meditated?"

"Meditated?"

"Yes," Mace replied then a corner of his mouth lifted slightly. "I trust you have not forgotten how given the many hours you were assigned after the shower prank you pulled on Padawan Tursc."

"Cyr?" Obi-Wan said, his gaze lost for a moment somewhere back in the memory. A ghost of a smile passed over his face. It was a foreign feeling, but not an unwelcome one. "I haven't thought about Cyr in years."

"It was a fairly memorable event, though I wish some of the initiates would forget it. The legend seems to grow with each new group."

"Sorry," the young man replied though the brief flash in eyes told the master the apology was anything but sincere. Mace hated to break the small moment of levity, but he still had a question that needed an answer.

"How long?" he asked and, as predicted, the smile immediately vanished, leaving so quickly Mace could scarcely believe it had ever been there.

"I've tried, but... I can't," Obi-Wan answered dropping his gaze to his boots.

"Not at all?"

"No, not since..." Obi-Wan started, but the words caught in his throat. Mace nodded in understanding both to the unspoken remnant of the sentence and the reason it was left unsaid.

"You should be able to do so now and I believe it would do you some good," Mace said as he began to move towards the main door. "I don't wish to leave you here alone, but I must make an appearance."

"At Bant's service?"

“Obi-Wan,” Mace began, the one word carrying a slight reproof.

“I know,” he answered with a sigh. “I know... that I can’t... I understand truly, I just...”

“Just what?”

“N-nothing, never mind,” Obi-Wan answered too quickly. He took a deep and settling breath. “I will be fine, Master Windu.”

Mace gave the young man a long, scrutinizing look before speaking.

“I won’t be long,” he said then he stepped out of the apartment and into the hall. Obi-Wan let the door slide closed before releasing a long breath that he honestly hadn’t realized he was holding. It was a bitter sting to know that he could not attend Bant’s pyre service. She was his best friend since his earliest memories in the crèche. She deserved his presence at her memorial, the final ritual passage bestowed on Jedi. But he knew he could not attend. As much as he wanted to, as much as it pained him, it would prove too much – for him and all the Jedi he had left behind. Ironic that because he had never said his goodbyes before he was prevented from saying the most important of those goodbyes now.

Time is wasted when one dwells on what cannot be changed.

The old Jedi mantra spoke in his head, but the voice was not his own. It was a deeper, familiar baritone he heard admonishing his previous morose thoughts. Hearing that voice, even in his mind, seemed to kindle something in the pit of his stomach, making it warm in a very unpleasant manner. Now that he could think clearly, Obi-Wan was forced to acknowledge the need within him. He needed to see him, needed to know if... if everything...

Was what? True?

Obi-Wan shook his head. Of course it was true. It was a truth he lived with every day, the solid, undeniable yet tragic foundation upon which the whole of himself was built. Then why? Why would he need to see that man who had, rightfully, rejected him? The man whom he had only caused a decade of pain and disappointment.

“I should meditate,” he spoke to the empty room, but even as he said the words his feet were already drifting forwards to the door without his conscious thought. “This is a mistake,” he continued, mumbling to himself as he pulled his hood up over his head and down over his features. A sudden jeweled tone broke the near perfect silence of the hall as the great bell sang out three times announcing the beginning of the farewell service. Obi-Wan allowed himself a soft sigh before beginning his ill-conceived trek through the Temple. At least the corridors were empty as most Jedi were either in attendance or remained in whatever room they were occupying at the sound of the bell out of respect. It was, of course, permitted to walk the halls during this sacred time, but unless the business was urgent it was considered poor form. Luckily, Obi-Wan was undisturbed as he made his way

through the windings wings and halls of his once home, his feet guiding his steps automatically towards a confrontation he really didn't want to have.

Or did he?

Obi-Wan came to an abrupt stop in the middle of a wide corridor. Did he really want this? Would Jinn even be here? Perhaps he was at the service or maybe he wasn't even in the Temple at all. Obi-Wan closed his eyes and tried to reach out with his Force sense, looking for that signature he once found as familiar as his own, but his efforts were futile. His constant use of deathsticks converted his attempts into weak, wispy tendrils of intent that faded before the search had even begun.

Damn.

The once Jedi allowed himself several deep breaths before opening his eyes again. He resumed his journey and in no time at all found himself before a familiar door with an unfamiliar feeling. With trembling fingers he touched the nameplate that had boldly announced the Jinn/Kenobi residence for over a decade, but read that no more. Another deep breath, a heartbeat of hesitation, and Kenobi palmed the door open.

* * * * *

The bottle was empty, so he laid it aside with automatic movements. Any grace that had ever been associated with his rangy frame had long since been lost, or at least, abandoned. His actions now were jerky when sober, stumbling after a few drinks and tonight he had had his share of more than a few. The swill the shop owner had peddled as Correllian whiskey fell closer to the family of engine cleaner, but the acerbic brew had done its job. A slightly numb listlessness fell over him as stared dumbly down onto his large, calloused hands. A sudden chill ran through his body as light spilled into his dusky quarters. Qui-Gon Jinn looked up from where he sat slumped in the dingy, creaking armchair. His apprentice... his former apprentice stood just inside the doorway. His visitor gazed down on him with unreadable blue-gray eyes. The older man closed his own and sighed deeply.

"I had hoped you wouldn't find me, that maybe..." he paused, shaking his head. "No matter. You've come to say your piece. Let's have it."

The visitor hovered in the doorway for several seconds before stepping properly into the room. Minutes passed in stony silence. Suddenly unsure, Qui-Gon dared to glance up again into those oh-once-so-familiar eyes.

"You bastard!"

The words were whispered, barely heard, but the venom carried within them easily struck their mark, penetrating the soft flesh of Qui-Gon's heart further weakening the already withered and diseased organ. Unable to hold the visitor's gaze, he dropped his head and closed his eyes once again.

"You promised to raise to me knighthood. You promised to train me, to protect me. You lied to me."

"Yes."

"For years, all I wanted was for you to want me and all I ever got from you was rejection, abandonment, and more lies."

Qui-Gon swallowed thickly, licking suddenly dry lips.

"Yes."

"I'm the one that was wronged. I'm the one that was hurt, yet you wallow here in your hole and hide like a coward."

"Yes."

"What do you have to say for yourself?"

Qui-Gon said nothing, but his visitor seemed content to wait. Qui-Gon didn't take a moment to really consider his answer. He didn't need to ponder what the right words might be to mollify or explain his past acts. He was beyond pride, beyond any hope of understanding. He need only speak the truth in all its damning brilliance. Resigned, he looked up at his visitor.

"Only that you are right in every instance. I am a bastard, a coward, and a fool. I have wronged you in so many ways and on so many occasions that their number is as plentiful as the Force itself. And I... I hurt you," he stammered, a wave of fresh, fiery agony ripping through his chest. "I hurt you so very badly through my distance and carelessness, but it was never my intent. I swear I thought I could be better. I believed I could be a good master to you, but I failed you, my Padawan, I,"

"Don't you dare call me that! You don't have the right to speak that word to me! You forfeited that right when you threw me aside like yesterday's refuse!"

The furious heat of those words seared Qui-Gon's skin like a saber strike. A gasp that could not be stifled fled from his lips and the pain in his chest grew exponentially until he felt he would surely burst at the seams leaving only sundered flesh and splintered bones strewn across the small room like shrapnel from a grenade. He fell out of his chair, his knees crashing to the hard floor adding twin spikes of bright pain to his misery. He

kowtowed, penitent, his head on the floor at the boots of the man before him, his once friend now turned righteous Fury.

“Please,” he pleaded, “please, tell me what you would have me do. I will do anything you ask, suffer anything you want. Please tell me, what more can I give? What can I do to make amends?”

The visitor squatted down to the desperate figure at his feet. When he spoke, his voice was pitched as low as his stance.

“Make amends? Make amends! How do you make amends for crushing a dream? For ruining a life?” the younger man brought his lips close to Qui-Gon’s trembling ear. The false intimacy of the act sent an unwelcomed shiver down Qui-Gon’s spine. “You can never make up for what you’ve done to me, but I will have my retribution from you as you wake every day to your miserable, pathetic life and you will live a very, very long time Qui-Gon Jinn.”

A part of him he didn’t know he still had, some tiny spark of hope hidden deep within the recesses of a guilt-ridden soul, sputtered and died at the cold words whispered cruelly against the shell of his ear.

“Must you haunt me?” he croaked, his voice muffled by his position, husky from the deep well of tears streaming down his face. The visitor stood up, his gilded voice sounding from above the cowering figure.

“I will haunt you every day of your miserable life and every day you will know how much I hate you.”

Qui-Gon fell to his side, falling into fetal position as a low, keening wail erupted from his chest. His breath came in broken, gasping, sloppy sobs as he lay curled on the floor, unable to move, pinned under a crushing weight of hate. It was several minutes before his still whimpering frame was able to lift his head to his visitor, but when he did his eyes only fell on empty space. He was again alone in the small, rented space. The apparition was gone, but Qui-Gon knew he would return, as he had so often since the day the living apprentice disappeared from his life. At first, he was only a fleeting shadow, a wraith in the distance or a face among the crowd. Later, the ghost would appear in his apartment watching him as he sat unable to sleep, staring at him with cold, unyielding eyes. Only recently had the apparition begun to speak to him and every word uttered only further damned him. But Qui-Gon didn’t care. He knew where he was.

He was in hell.

It was his new home.

* * * * *

It was not his old home that was revealed to him as the door slid open. It was a blank canvas, a place upon which someone, or some two, could paint their dreams, drawing memories that could be pulled out and gazed at longingly when nights felt stretched tight with pain and loneliness. Obi-Wan gasped and staggered forwards his left hand automatically reaching for the small table by the door that usually held the datapads for his morning classes. But his hand only met empty air. The reach and miss over balanced him and stumbled further into the empty space. He came to a fumbling stop and simply stood there, staring at the bare walls and pristine carpet. Nothing was left. No mementos. No knickknacks. No keepsakes. No awards. No holos. No dusty tomes or datapads. Not even any furniture. All of it was gone.

Gone.

Qui-Gon Jinn was gone.

Obi-Wan pressed the heels of his palms against his eyes.

“Think Kenobi!” he hissed at himself. “He didn’t just disappear.” Obi-Wan inhaled and exhaled slowly and lowered his hands. “He must have moved,” he spoke into the empty room. But why would he move? This had been the man’s home for decades of his life. Had the memories of his last apprentice’s failure been so strong that he was sent fleeing from his private sanctuary? But even his deep personal guilt for the burden he believed his apprenticeship to have been would not account for this level of... absence.

Obi-Wan wandered absently towards the large bedroom that had been his master’s. He stood in the threshold and closed his eyes. There was nothing of his master’s presence here.

“It’s all gone,” he whispered, his Force sense still sharpened to pick up any trace, any ghostly impression of the great Jedi’s signature. Yet still, he found none. The thought came to Obi-Wan that maybe it was him. Perhaps the deathsticks had already done more damage than he had come to believe, but that thought was dashed almost instantly. Yes, the dangerous habit wreaked havoc with his ability to use the Force, but his ability to sense it, to feel it was as acute as ever. No, his former master’s Force signature was simply gone.

“Erased,” he muttered, pondering what possible reason would someone have to do such a thing. A cleansing like this was rarely, if ever, done and then only in tragic circumstances where the lingering Force presence was too painful for the inhabitant. Like when spouse or child died or when a violent death...

“Force no...” Obi-Wan barely breathed. A hand went to his chest in a poor effort to soothe his rapidly beating heart. He couldn’t be dead, could he? Would he have known? After all, he no longer shared a bond with the man. Obi-Wan himself had seen to that, ripping it from his mind like a cancerous rot leaving only the torn and weeping scars of a

root system in his brain. So how would he know if the man lived? What else could explain this peculiar and thorough absence?

“This is not how I wanted you to find out,” a voice sighed from behind him. Obi-Wan spun around from where he stood in the threshold to his former master’s room. He had never even heard the Jedi enter. How long had he been standing there, entranced by the vast void before him?

“I’m so sorry, Obi-Wan,” Mace’s baritone rang out softly.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Obi-Wan asked, the pain of grief and the stab of betrayal warring for dominance in his eyes. Mace swallowed the heavy sigh before it could pass his lips. He took a few steps closer to the young man, but at that moment he seemed to only see the child that was raised within those walls.

“I was not permitted.” It was a simple answer that both explained everything and nothing. Obi-Wan’s brow wrinkled the immediate question of “why” nearly springing from his lips, but instead he held them tightly shut, preventing that particular interrogatory from escaping. What difference did it make that the Jedi did not feel fit to inform him of... did not inform him. Their reasoning made little difference, but there was something he hoped Mace would tell him. There was something he needed to know.

“How?”

Mace frowned, considering the question.

“How?” he repeated.

“Yes. Tell me,” Obi-Wan paused swallowing thickly. “Tell me how he died. Please.”

Mace was unable to hide his wince at the softly spoken request. Force above! The boy thought Jinn was dead! Mace ran a hand along his smooth head in consternation. This was out of hand. Sith Hells, this was far out of hand long before Kenobi even set foot back on Coruscant! A second hand joined the cranial perambulations of the first. How could he even begin to fix this?

“Master Windu?”

Mace looked up and dropped his hands. He had forgotten that the young man was waiting for an answer. The Councilor let loose a loud sigh of frustration.

“I... I’m sorry, Obi-Wan.”

Obi-Wan didn’t answer. He didn’t trust himself to. Instead, he simply turned back to the face the empty bedroom, arms wrapped tightly around his lean frame.

“I wish I could have said goodbye,” he began in a quiet voice, his back still to the Councilor. “Even after... everything, I would have liked to say goodbye at least.” A sigh. “It seems I’m not meant for goodbyes.”

Mace felt something shift at the young man’s sad words. There was a tingle at the base of his skull and a pit in the well of his stomach. Whether his disquiet was from the Force or his conscience pricking at him, Mace had come to a decision.

Damn Qui-Gon Jinn and damn the whole Jedi Order!

“Obi-Wan,” Mace called out. “There is transport captain, Watk Geej, docked at the main spaceport. His ship is leaving Coruscant today. You need to be on it.”

“What?” Obi-Wan said as he slowly turned around to face the Master Jedi. “You’re... you’re telling me to leave?”

Mace quickly crossed over to the confused and obviously hurt young man. He placed a light hand on his shoulder and held the man’s gaze with a fierce intensity lined with a little sympathy and sadness.

“I can’t explain this to you, Obi-Wan. Not yet. You said once before that you trusted me. Trust me now. Get on that ship and get out of here. Before it’s too late.”

Epilogue

Obi-Wan sat in the cramped quarters of the Etan Des, Captain Geej's transport ship, his mind still spinning from the recent whirlwind of events. Mace had sent him straight to the spaceport, promising to meet him there with his meager belongings. Once the Councilor had arrived, he has spoken briefly and in hushed tones with Geej, at short, green Rodian with glistening eyes. The Captain then returned to preparing his ship and the Master Jedi had led Obi-Wan to the small guest quarters. He placed Obi-Wan's travel sack on a bunk then turned to face him with a rueful smile.

"We haven't much time," he said. "But I can reinforce your mind once more. The effects should last a day, perhaps more if you can meditate. I'm... sorry I can't do more."

Then two then shared a short meditation as the older man made good on his promise. Then the Jedi rose and peered down the bewildered, yet quiet youth.

"I know you have questions, Obi-Wan. I can only tell you that the answers are with you," he said glancing over to forgotten travel sack. He then looked directly at Obi-Wan. "May the Force be with you." Then the Master Jedi left and Obi-Wan was alone in his thoughts.

He had sat motionless for several minutes, hardly noticing the rumbling noise of their takeoff. He eyes were squarely on the unfamiliar object in had found buried under a spare tunic in his bag. It was a box, not very large or ornate, but obviously old from the light patches were the wood had been worn down, shiny and smooth, from frequent handling.

"The answers are with you," Mace had said and presumably he was referring to the contents of this box. Suddenly, Obi-Wan was uncertain whether he wanted answers as his stomach churned and roiled in his gut. No, he wanted to know. He needed to know, if only to stopped the tormenting questions in his heart. Obi-Wan took a slow, deep, centering breath.

And opened the box.

Fin.