



# PERFECT

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.*

**The Perfect Universe Trilogy**  
**1 of 3**

~PERFECT~

## Prologue

Most people would think it started at Bandomeer. Most people would be wrong. The reasons went further back than that fateful trip. They went back before Bruck, as far back as his tenth nameday, but he didn't start building until Melida/Daan. It wasn't until after Cerasi died, after the Jedi returned to the tiny war-torn planet, after his master, Qui-Gon Jinn, accepted him back, that the box came to be. On that day he renewed his vows of loyalty and obedience to his master and he made a promise to himself. He promised he would never give Qui-Gon Jinn a reason to doubt him again. Never. He knew he was getting yet another chance at becoming a knight. A chance he did not deserve, but he would make himself deserving. He would become worthy. He would turn his master's pity into pride he only needed time. He would do whatever it took, whatever was asked of him both without question and without fail. He owed this man, this master of the Order and the Force that much. So, he would take his feelings and his failures and tuck them away, place them into the box, out of sight so that he could be what he needed to be. He would allow his master to craft him into a proper Jedi and, in return, he would give him the padawan he deserved.

A perfect padawan.

## Chapter 1: The Dance of Sincerity

“Again.”

Obi-Wan’s muscles trembled as he stepped back into position eleven of the kata. He took a deep breath and began the moves demanded by this stage of the routine, each position more strenuous than the last. Requiring a high degree of both strength and flexibility The Dance of Sincerity was usually only taught to senior padawans, but his master believed he was ready and Obi-Wan was determined not to disappoint him.

He had just stepped forward into a deep lunge for move sixteen when his master’s rumbling baritone stilled his movements.

“Hold!” Qui-Gon said as he walked slowly around Obi-Wan’s frozen figure. The stance was deep and low and Obi-Wan’s thighs were aching horribly, but he gathered the Force around him and held himself steady refusing to allowing the trembling in his legs that his body seemed intent on producing. Qui-Gon stood before him and folded his hands into the large sleeves of his cloak.

“You’ve overextended yourself leaving an opening in your defense and,” he said with a gentle push to Obi-Wan’s left shoulder that sent him tumbling down gracelessly to the mat. “And you are off balance- an easily exploitable weakness in combat.”

Obi-Wan rose from the mat stiffly and assumed the eleventh position again. His master opened his mouth to say something, but then shut it without offering anything further. He stepped back away from the mat, a clear gesture for his apprentice to continue with the exercise. Obi-Wan began again moving slowly through the next five moves only to be stopped again at the sixteenth stance.

“Enough,” Qui-Gon ordered with a wave of his hand. “We will continue this tomorrow.”

“Master, I can do this.”

“Of course you can and you will, Padawan, but you are exhausted. Little more can be accomplished in such a state. You will be better served by rest and return to this tomorrow,” his master intoned. Obi-Wan remained frozen in his lunge, but his eyes were on his master’s when he spoke.

“I’m not that tired. I can go awhile longer. I can go until I get it.”

“Obi-Wan,”

“I can, Master.”

“Enough!” Qui-Gon nearly yelled causing Obi-Wan to flinch involuntarily. Resigned to his master’s will, he lifted himself from his stance, his muscles screaming the entire way. He deactivated his lightsaber and replaced it to its position on the left side of his belt. He then put his hands by his sides and dropped his chin to his chest.

“I’m sorry, Master,” he offered in soft, respectful tones. Qui-Gon sighed and placed a heavy hand on the youth’s shoulder.

“It is one thing to push your limits, Padawan, but it’s an entirely different matter to ignore them completely. You are exhausted,” he said. When Obi-Wan looked up at him wanting to object, his master held up a silencing hand. “You are, Obi-Wan. You only waste energy and effort to deny it. Do you have any assignments that must be completed tonight?”

Obi-Wan’s brow furrowed as he mentally catalogued all of his work from his myriad of classes and research projects. In every class he was ahead of the timetable set for the various turn-ins, but he was hoping to get in some extra work on his hyperspace calculations as mathematics wasn’t really his strong suit and it would not do for the padawan of Master Qui-Gon Jinn to be less than perfect in any of his classes.

“Nothing that must be, no, but I was hoping to get more practice with,”

“No,” his master interrupted. “Not tonight. Tonight, after lastmeal, I want you to relax. Enjoy time with your friends, swim in the lake, crash on the couch with a cheap holovid, but whatever you do, relax.”

For a moment the expression on Obi-Wan’s face looked like one of horror, but before his master could comment on it, it disappeared replaced by his student’s usual mask of serenity.

“Yes, Master,” he answered with a short bow. Qui-Gon eyed his apprentice for several moments before sighing and patting him on the shoulder.

“Go get cleaned up. I will meet you in our quarters shortly.”

“Yes, Master,” Obi-Wan repeated. He then picked up his towel and his pack holding his change of clothes and headed off to the showers the shadow of his failure following closely behind.

As he peeled off his sweat heavy workout clothes, Obi-Wan could feel what was certainly his master’s disappointment settle on his skin like a layer of sludge; blocking off his pores and choking his body. Qui-Gon had put his faith in him, his belief that he was capable of learning this advance kata and Obi-Wan had rewarded that faith with incompetence, with ineptitude, with his ever constant unworthiness. He sighed as he stepped under the showers cool spray and allowed the water to pound his aching and strained muscles. He took several deep breaths under the falling waters. He pulled together every piece of disappointment, every bite of shame, every fragment of failure and rolled it

together, tucking each into itself before placing it into the box with it's kin—the growing mass of failures from his time as an initiate through his last two plus years with Qui-Gon. He pushed these new emotions down into the box and sealed it before checking the strong barriers he had placed around it so no one else might accidentally discover the vast majesty of reasons he should never have been given another chance to be a Jedi. No. As long as they didn't know he had time to prove himself.

Now physically and emotionally clean, Obi-Wan stepped out of the showers and quickly dressed. He hurried down the halls as fast as Jedi decorum would allow in a rush to get to his quarters and begin to prepare a fitting meal for his master. It was a padawan's duty to do such things and, though Qui-Gon had never insisted upon it, Obi-Wan had. A perfect padawan would do no less.

It didn't take long before Obi-Wan had pieced together a respectable dinner for his master. Some grilled Gargthenian guinea fowl and sautéed vegetables with a suitably old Alderaanian wine were waiting for him when Qui-Gon stepped into their suite. He nodded in greeting to his apprentice as Obi-Wan pulled out a chair for him to sit.

"This was unnecessary, Padawan. I thought I told you tonight was for your rest. We could have easily ordered something from the refectory," his master said even as he took his seat. Obi-Wan reached over and began to pour his master some wine.

"You told me I was to relax after lastmeal," he replied quite seriously despite his master's previous tone. "Besides, Master, it is my duty as your padawan to attend these small needs for you in gratitude for my training. I will not fail in my responsibility," he finished as he scooped sizeable portions onto his master's plate. He laid the plate before him and gave him a slight bow before returning to his own seat to prepare himself a plate. Qui-Gon stared at his apprentice wanting desperately to say something to lift the heaviness that always seemed to surround the boy, but he hadn't the words and he knew a direct argument on the matter of traditional padawan duties was a lost cause. Obi-Wan had decided this was something he was going to do for his master and there was little Qui-Gon could do or say against it short of ordering the teen to stop. Instead, the master settled for a mental sigh even as he gifted his apprentice with a pleasant and thankful smile and began to eat his food.

The pair enjoyed their meal in comfortable silence and it was not long before Obi-Wan was standing to collect their plates and prepare them for the sanitizer. It was only after he had cleaned up from their meal and was turning to leave the kitchen and enter the common room that Qui-Gon blocked his path with his over large and intimidating frame.

"What are your plans, Padawan?"

"I was going to see if an acquaintance of mine was available to spend some time with me, Master," he answered carefully. If his master suspected anything more to his words, he didn't voice it. Instead the tall man stepped aside allowing him to pass into the common

area unimpeded. Obi-Wan paused briefly by the main door to grab his cloak as he heard his master call out behind him.

“Do not concern yourself with your curfew tonight, Obi-Wan. Enjoy yourself,” his master said as he arranged his long body comfortably on the couch before activating the data reader in his hand.

“Yes, Master. Thank you, Master,” Obi-Wan replied then he quickly ducked out of their quarters before he had to answer other questions. He had never lied to his master. Not once and he had no plans to start now. Padawans owed nothing less than complete honesty to their masters. It was part of their vow and, in truth, Obi-Wan had not lied at all about his plans for the night, but he knew he was skirting a very dangerous line and he had no wish to cross it. Better to leave quickly and avoid his master’s interrogatories altogether.

His feet carried him absently through the vast and winding corridors of the Temple. Though most of the Temple’s residents would still be up, and its more nocturnal species beginning to rise, the halls were fairly empty as most Jedi had returned to their quarters or the quarters of others for solitude or socializing respectively. For this, Obi-Wan was grateful as he made it to his destination unobserved by curious onlookers. The apprentice stopped outside the door to a specific apartment, hesitating for only a moment before activating the door chime. After only a few seconds the door slide open revealing the figure of the Korun master who was also the Head of the Jedi Order.

“Padawan Kenobi.”

“Master Windu,” Obi-Wan said with a deep bow. Mace cocked his head to the side and crossed his arms over his chest.

“What can I do for you, Padawan?” the master asked, his tone not welcoming or dismissive, merely inquisitive. For a moment, Obi-Wan contemplated that perhaps this course of action was a mistake, but then he felt the pull of today’s failure tugging at him. He took a moment and placed that feeling in his box before answering the Councilor standing before him.

“I’ve come to ask a favor of you, Master,” he replied. Mace said nothing only stepped to one side and gestured for Obi-Wan to enter his quarters. Windu had a master’s quarters just like his own master’s, but Windu’s common room was more sparsely decorated. Only a scant few items graced the shelves around the room and the furniture spoke more of utilitarian purposes than comfort. Still, Obi-Wan tried to at least look comfortable as he sat down on the edge of the couch. Windu took a seat across from him in one of two arm chairs, his pose much like the one he adopts during Council sessions; his fingers steeped in front of his chin.

“What do you need, Obi-Wan?” the Councilor asked. Obi-Wan took a deep breath. He had come this far there was no point in backing out now.

“I’ve been working on The Dance of Sincerity kata, but I’m having trouble with the middle section. I was hoping you would be willing to help me with it,” he answered. A frown crossed Mace’s features and he was silent for several moments before once again addressing the teen seated quietly on his couch.

“I would think such a difficulty would be brought to your master,” the Councilor replied evenly. Obi-Wan nodded then offered a wry smile.

“Oh, believe me, he knows of my difficulty. That’s why I came to you, Master Windu. I was hoping, with your help, I could finally complete this kata and surprise my master with it,” he responded hopefully, but Mace still seemed hesitant.

“The twelfth kata is a very difficult one to master and is usually not taught to junior padawans, Obi-Wan. It may be better not to rush this.”

“I know, Master Windu, I do, but Master Qui-Gon... He chose this for me because he believes I can do it now. I don’t want to disappoint him.”

“I doubt you could, Obi-Wan. Since your probation you have been an exemplary padawan. If this kata takes a bit longer to learn no one would think any less of you including Qui-Gon.”

“Please, Master Windu,” Obi-Wan begged when he saw his other entreaties failing. “This is important to me.”

Mace clenched his jaw and sat in silence seemingly debating his course of action in his head. It was several uncomfortable minutes before he spoke again. He placed both his hands on the armrests of his seat and regarded Obi-Wan carefully.

“Very well, Obi-Wan. I will assist you. When did you have in mind?” he asked then sighed when Obi-Wan’s sheepish expression told him everything he needed to know. “Perhaps Qui-Gon should have you meditate on the value of patience instead of working on advanced katas,” he said dryly as he rose from his seat. Obi-Wan stood to join him.

“Thank you, Master Windu.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” Mace answered with a small smirk. “You’ll find that I’m even a more exacting instructor than your master.”

“Then you are precisely what I need, Master Windu. I want this kata to be perfect.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Mace Windu apparently wasn't one to exaggerate. If Obi-Wan had thought training under Qui-Gon's meticulous scrutiny was bad, practicing under Windu was simply an exercise in masochism, but the torture paid off. By the time they finished it was just after final hour, but he had finally mastered the middle of the kata and could now perform the entire routine with a graceful ease. After thanking Master Windu and bidding him a goodnight, Obi-Wan settled into one of the Temple's empty gardens ostensibly to meditate, but really to let his clothing and his body dry from the sweat he had worked up practicing with Mace. He doubted his master was still awake, but it would not do to walk into their quarters looking like he had done what his master had intimated, though not explicitly prohibited, him from doing.

Once he was satisfactorily dry, Obi-Wan returned to his quarters, palmed the door open, and quietly stepped inside. Immediately, he was grateful of his choice to air out before coming home. His master was indeed awake still, but in meditation on his cushion near the doors to their shared balcony. Obi-Wan was not entirely certain that his presence had been noted until he opened his bedroom door and a familiar baritone cut through the silence of the common room.

"I trust you enjoyed your evening, Padawan?" Qui-Gon said as he rose to his feet, stretching slightly. Obi-Wan turned and bowed to his master.

"Yes, Master. I am very pleased," he said and then he glanced at his bedroom door and back to his master. "And very tired as well," he added. It was a true statement and one that he hoped would forestall any further questions about exactly how he spent his free time. Thankfully, it had the desired effect as his master graced him with a small smile and a nod.

"Rest well, Padawan. I'll see you in the morning."

"Goodnight, Master."

\* \* \* \* \*

Obi-Wan was still exhausted when the alarm he set on his desk chrono woke him the next morning. It was less than an hour before dawn and though he himself had never been a natural early riser, his master was. His master always rose with the sun, so Obi-Wan had relegated himself to rising even earlier, always foregoing his own morning ablutions to head straight to the kitchen. After all, firstmeal would not make itself and his master's needs came first. His needs could and would wait until his duty was properly attended.

Over their few years together, Obi-Wan had perfected his morning schedule and timing to the point where he was just pouring tea into his master's favorite cup when the tall man stepped out of his bedroom and into the common area wearing only his sleep pants and an old tunic.

“Morning, Padawan,” he spoke as he entered the kitchen and had a steaming mug of his favorite strong, dark tea pressed into his hands by his apprentice.

“Good morning, Master,” Obi-Wan replied as he lifted the tray of fruit, cheese, and sweet breads he had prepared. He followed his master out of the kitchenette and to the small meal table at the edge of their common space. His master sat down in his usual chair as Obi-Wan placed the simple platter on the table.

“Did you sleep well?”

“Yes, Master,” he answered honestly. He had slept well enough, he just hadn’t slept anywhere near long enough. In truth, Obi-Wan could not remember the day when last he had awoken feeling well rested and refreshed, but a little fatigue was a small price to pay when viewed in light of his ultimate goal. Admittedly, at the moment his aching muscles resented his dedication.

Once he had ensured that his master’s needs were met, Obi-Wan turned to go back to his own room; the thought of a hot shower calling like a siren’s song to his weary body.

“Are you not going to eat, Padawan?” his master asked. Obi-Wan’s stomach lurched uncomfortably at the thought. During his session with Master Windu he had fallen awkwardly on his right arm driving his own, thankfully deactivated, saber hilt into his side. Though he had escaped a rather fatal and embarrassing impalement, he had not escaped a particularly large and painful bruise erupting across a greater third of his torso. He should have probably reported to the Healer’s Ward, but this was something he knew he should be able to take care of himself. He simply hadn’t had the energy to trance down in healing. Besides, the injury was a result of his own clumsiness; a poignant reminder of his not to distant “Oafy-Wan” days as an initiate. No, the fault was his own as were the consequences.

“No, Master. I’m not very hungry at the moment,” he answered. Qui-Gon silently studied his apprentice for several moments, his eyes filled with obvious concern.

“Padawan, are you feeling alright? You look a little peaked.”

“Yes, Master. I’m fine,” he answered. Qui-Gon appeared unconvinced so he added, “Master, I assure you, I am well.”

His master’s gaze lingered over him appraisingly for several seconds more before he settled back in his chair and resumed his meal.

“Very well,” he said finally. Obi-Wan released a quiet breath that he hadn’t realized he had been holding as he turned once again to his room only to be stopped once again from advancing toward it.

“But you will eat something,” his master stated. Obi-Wan could tell by the tone of his master’s voice that this was non-negotiable. Careful not to let his discomfort show, he made

his way back to the table and took his seat. His master had already cleared his own plate and now reloaded and passed it on to his less than enthusiastic apprentice.

“Eat,” he commanded. Obi-Wan took the offered plate with a nod and set to the mindless task of eating, painfully cognizant of his master’s continued scrutiny.

“Obi-Wan.”

“Yes, Master,” he said pausing between bites. Qui-Gon opened his mouth to say something then promptly closed it again. He continued his quiet assessment of the teen eating mechanically in front of him before finally speaking.

“When is your last morning class?”

“I’ll be done with my morning classes by tenth hour, Master.”

“Very well. Meet me in salle three at tenth hour. We will continue your work on the twelfth kata.”

“Yes, Master,” Obi-Wan replied as he finished his plate and subtly presented it to his master for approval. Qui-Gon nodded and gave a jerk of his chin, a clear indication that Obi-Wan was now free to leave the table and continue with his morning routine, but the teen didn’t leave immediately. Instead he gathered the remnants of their meal, saving what he could, discarding the rest, then cleansing the dishes to be placed in the sanitizer. His kitchen duties complete, he took a moment to refresh his master’s tea before disappearing quietly into his room to prepare for the rest of the day.

\* \* \* \* \*

“You’re early,” Qui-Gon remarked as he stepped into the private training salle. Obi-Wan didn’t think the statement required a response so he didn’t give one. Instead he merely nodded at the observation. His master approached the mat where he stood awaiting direction.

“You’ve already warmed up?”

“Yes, Master.”

“Then let’s begin. Assume the first position,” his master ordered and Obi-Wan moved quickly to obey, sinking solidly into the kata’s opening stance and awaiting his instruction to begin. He glided through the first fifteen positions easily then, unlike before, he continued into the next seven moves with a hard-won grace, finishing all thirty-two moves

flawlessly. When he completed the kata, he turned to his master scarcely able to conceal his nervous expectations. Qui-Gon, for his part, said nothing; his expression as inscrutable as ever.

“Again,” his master finally spoke. Obi-Wan preformed the dance again and again until his muscles fairly screamed from the effort. Just as he finished the final move on his fourth repetition he felt the weight of a hand on his shoulder. He looked up to see his master’s face, a pleased expression resting comfortably on the leonine features.

“Well done, Padawan. I daresay you have exceeded my expectations for today and all it took was a bit of rest.”

“Yes, Master,” his apprentice readily agreed though there was an impish quality to the boy’s smile that he couldn’t quite place.

“We still have a bit of time left. How about an open spar?”

“Of course, Master,” Obi-Wan answered careful to keep a smile on his face. Normally, he would have loved an opportunity to spar with his master, but he was just so blasted tired and sore already. On top of that he was having trouble catching his breath. He said nothing though, as he watched his master shed his cloak, tabard, robe, and outer tunic. Obi-Wan himself took a few deep breaths mentally pushing away any thoughts of his fatigue or discomfort. A Jedi attended to the moment at hand regardless of ailment or injury and so would he. He fell back into a ready stance and, with a nod from his master, the two Jedi began to dance.

\* \* \* \* \*

“May I join you?”

“Of course. Have a seat,” Mace answered warmly as he made space for his fellow master. Qui-Gon sat down with his tray across from his friend and Councilor who seemed to be regarding him with a curious expression.

“Something on your mind, Mace?” he asked as he took a moment to blow across his soup before ladling a spoonful to his mouth.

“I was just wondering if you had a chance to work with your padawan today,” the chestnut skinned Jedi replied. Qui-Gon sat his spoon back in his bowl, one eyebrow quirked in suspicion.

“I have,” he answered slowly.

“And?”

“And what?”

“How did it go?”

“It went very well, but I suspect, somehow, you already knew that.”

“I didn’t know, but I had hoped,” Mace responded with the smile he reserved for his close friends; his characteristic scowl more useful for terrorizing wayward initiates, padawans, and the occasional knight.

“Care to enlighten me?” Qui-Gon asked as he leaned back in his seat, his face alight with amused curiosity.

“Obi-Wan expressed he was having difficulty with the new kata you assigned him. He requested a bit of tutoring.”

Qui-Gon shook his head, but a small smile still found his lips.

“I should have known. I appreciate your willingness to help, Mace, but it was unnecessary. Obi-Wan is often,” here he paused searching for the right word, “over eager to master a new lesson or to get my approval.”

“As are most padawans,” Mace countered. Qui-Gon gave a curt nod.

“True. I just sometimes wish...” he stopped with a heavy sigh and a rueful grin. “Honestly, I don’t know what I wish. I couldn’t ask for a better padawan.”

“He is a good student,” Mace agreed. “And clever too. How I let him talk me into working with him so late into the night I’ll never know. I take it the bruise healed well?”

“Bruise?” Qui-Gon repeated sitting down his cup of tea. Mace’s brow immediately furrowed at the question.

“Last night he fell badly. I was certain it would become a nasty bruise so I suggested a trip to the healers would not be out of order. I take it he didn’t go?”

“If he had visited the ward I would have been notified,” Qui-Gon answered automatically. His brows knitted in consternation as he leaned forward across the narrow table. “You worked with him last night?”

“Yes. Why? Was there some reason I shouldn’t have?” Mace inquired. Qui-Gon sighed running a weary hand over his suddenly equally weary features in patent exasperation.

“I had given him the night off in free time. He was supposed to use the time to enjoy himself and relax.”

“I guess an intense workout session would hardly qualify.”

“Well, under the right circumstances, perhaps,” Qui-Gon said with a short lived smile, but all too soon his worried frown returned. “But he was already exhausted before you worked with him. He’s running himself into the ground and either he’s too naïve or too foolish to realize it.”

“Either way, it’s a cause for concern, Qui-Gon,” Mace replied, his expression serious.

“I know,” Qui-Gon agreed as he stood up from the table his tray in hand. “I think it’s time I had a little talk with my apprentice.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Qui-Gon was waiting for him the moment he stepped out of his class; his master’s tall frame easily discernible among the throng of passing padawans exiting the classroom. His master stood there, his hands tucked into the sleeves of his cloak, his face completely unreadable. Obi-Wan couldn’t help but feel a note of trepidation as he approached the intimidating Jedi.

“Obi-Wan.”

“Master?”

“Come,” his master intoned turning on his heel. Obi-Wan fell into step behind and slightly to the right of him; a padawan’s proper place. All during the long walk he wanted to ask his master whether he was in trouble or had otherwise displeased him in some way, but in all the ways that mattered the answers to those unspoken questions were as obvious as it was disheartening. His master was indeed displeased with him, but Obi-Wan was left to guess as to why. There were so many things he felt within himself that would disappoint his master that he had no idea as to which one of his myriad flaws had finally been discovered. When Qui-Gon led him to the Healer’s Ward his confusion only deepened, but still he dared not speak until his master directed him to do so, which his master never did not even when he brought him to a small examination room and silently pointed to the empty medical couch. Obi-Wan walked over to the bed hesitantly a questioning look dominating his features despite his attempt otherwise. Finally, he found he could wait no longer.

“Master, why are we here?” he asked softly. Qui-Gon gazed at him from behind that emotionless Jedi mask.

“You do not know?” he replied coolly. Obi-Wan shook his head and, faster than thought, Qui-Gon stepped to his side and none too gently pressed into his bruised and battered torso drawing an involuntary hiss of pain from his apprentice. Qui-Gon stepped back from his apprentice once more, the same flat expression on his face. Obi-Wan swallowed thickly as he tried to regain his composure through the still throbbing pain in his side.

“Master, I can explain,” he started, but Qui-Gon held up his hand and Obi-Wan immediately fell into obedient silence. After several strained and quiet minutes the ward’s chief healer entered the room.

“Master Jinn. Padawan Kenobi,” the Mirialan healer greeted warmly as he acknowledge the other Jedi. However, a momentary glance at both members of the pair informed the master healer that there was more injury in this room than whatever had been brought before him to heal.

“Ah, so... what has brought us here today?” the healer asked glancing from master to apprentice and back again. Qui-Gon tightened his jaw and sent a piercing glare at his padawan who received the message loud and clear. Slowly the young Jedi peeled away his cloak, robe, and tunics giving the healer an unfettered view of his spectacular bruising.

“My that is bad,” the Mirialan muttered as he lightly drew his fingers across the discolored skin. His hands paused on a particularly dark patch of discoloration roughly in the shape of a circle just shy of the padawan’s floating ribs. “How did this occur?”

“Training accident,” Obi-Wan murmured. The healer glanced at the boy incredulously then returned to his visual inspection.

“Training accident seems to be quite the understatement, Padawan. This looks to me like the impression of a saber hilt.”

“I-I...,” Obi-Wan started, “fell on my saber arm.”

Qui-Gon’s eyes widened then narrowed as he digested this bit of information. Not even Mace had told him the specifics of his padawan’s injury. The master healer clicked his tongue under his breath at the boy’s confirmation of his theory.

“Well, thank the Force the blade was deactivated, hmm? Or your master would be short one padawan,” he said then paused and closed his eyes examining the injury now with the Force. He opened his eyes only a moment or two later.

“Hmm,” the healer mused to himself. He then looked to the padawan. “Let me guess, more tired than usual, unexplained shortness of breath, maybe even some dizziness or

weakness?" he asked. Obi-Wan dared a glance to his master before answering the healer's inquiry with a sheepish nod.

"Thought so. In addition to the obvious contusions you have a cracked rib and you managed to perforate your spleen. The symptoms I mentioned are the result of a slow bleed in your abdomen," the healer stated then he directed his gaze to the boy's master. "Master Jinn, you should really have brought your padawan to us sooner. Because it is a slow bleed the delay isn't that bad, but it easily could have been."

"I understand, Master Songe. It will not happen again," Qui-Gon answered calmly. Obi-Wan's eyes widened almost comically.

"No! This wasn't my master's fault. I," he started frantically, but his master cut him off.

"Silence, Padawan," he interrupted the authoritative weight of his voice catching Obi-Wan almost as if he had been physically struck. Qui-Gon turned his attention back to Songe who had remained quiet during the brief exchange.

"Bacta?" Qui-Gon asked. The healer shook his head, a thoughtful look on his face.

"No, I don't think a dip in the tank is necessary, but I recommend only light exercises for the next three to five days while this fully heals, otherwise any work I do now will be for naught."

"He will abide your instruction, Master Songe," Qui-Gon intoned. The tone of his voice sending an unwanted chill down Obi-Wan's spine. His master noted the reaction, but his expression softened little. "Proceed."

\* \* \* \* \*

The trip back to thier quarters was a quiet one. Neither master nor apprentice had spoken since Qui-Gon gave consent for his padawan to receive treatment for his injuries. Once Master Songe had finished healing Obi-Wan's ribs and torso, the pair had quietly exited the healing halls without another word; master stoically leading the way while his padawan followed diffidently behind. When they finally reached their apartment, Qui-Gon stepped inside removing his cloak and immediately settled into his armchair. Obi-Wan stood motionless for several seconds just inside the door waiting for his master to speak. When he didn't, Obi-Wan decided that it was time for him to act and perhaps salvage something of this wreck of their relationship.

Obi-Wan stood directly in front of his seated master. When Qui-Gon lifted his eyes to meet his apprentice's gaze, the boy immediately dropped to his knees, his head pressed to the floor in an expression of formal contrition.

"Master," Obi-Wan began, his voice slightly muffled by his position. "Please forgive me. I have disobeyed you, hidden things from you, and broken your trust. I have acted in a manner unbecoming both as your padawan and as a Jedi. I have dishonored you and your teachings. I humbly beg for your forgiveness and I willingly submit myself to any punishment or censure you see fit," he finished without raising his head. Above him, Obi-Wan could hear the sound of his master's breathing, but nothing else. For many minutes, neither Jedi moved then finally Qui-Gon scrubbed his face and beard and released an exasperated sigh.

"Get up, Obi-Wan. Get up and go sit on the couch. We need to talk," his master stated evenly. When the boy made no motion to follow his instruction he began again this time more firmly. "I have no desire to speak with the top of your head. If you require my forgiveness before you will obey my instruction then fine, you have it. I forgive you, Obi-Wan. Now, get up and take a seat on the couch."

Obi-Wan slowly pulled himself off of the floor. It wasn't exactly the acceptance he had hoped for when he offered his master the formal apology, but as it was he was probably just one wrong step away from being repudiated entirely so who was he to complain. He stood up silently and made his way to the couch, taking a seat near his master, but not so close as to be within reaching distance. He kept his gaze down and focused on his boots. It was easier than facing whatever it was that his master felt towards him and seeing that feeling reflected in those midnight blue eyes.

"Obi-Wan, you have lied to me," Qui-Gon began, pausing when Obi-Wan lifted his head as if to object. He continued without letting the boy speak. "You have lied to me if not directly that certainly in spirit," the master amended. The boy once again dropped his head unable or unwilling to argue.

"Either circumstance concerns me deeply. I am very disappointed with you, Obi-Wan."

And there it was. His master was disappointed in him. Well, of course he was. He had lied to the man despite the rationalizations he had told himself to ease his conscience. He had lied and concealed things, he had acted in direct contradiction to his master's express wishes for him, and, worse yet, he involved another master, a Councilor, in his wrong doing.

"I want you to do something for me, Obi-Wan, and in this you must obey me. I will ask you questions. You will answer them, honestly. No lies, no evasion, no clever word play or double meanings. Failure to do so will carry grave consequences. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Master," the boy replied his attention still focused on the floor. Qui-Gon felt a stir of frustration at the teen's avoidance of eye contact, but decided that was a battle he did not want to wage at this point.

“How do you feel?” he asked. Obi-Wan’s brow immediately wrinkled. This was not the type of question he had expected his master to lead with. He bit at his bottom lip for a moment knowing that he made his master a promise to answer honestly and simply, but finding it hard to do so.

“Ashamed. Guilty.”

“And physically?”

“I-I... My side still hurts, though not as bad as before. I’m... still... sore pretty much everywhere and... I’m tired.”

“Have you been sleeping well?”

“Yes, Master, but I usually don’t sleep very long. I-I... sometimes work on getting ahead in my courses after... after you think I’m sleeping.”

“You actively deceive me,” his master spoke coolly. Obi-Wan lifted his head and turned to his master to argue despite the cold gaze he met in those blue eyes.

“No, Master.”

“You led me to believe you were sleeping when you were not. You did this on purpose and on more than one occasion,” he replied, his logic infallible. Obi-Wan visibly deflated; his weak self-rationalizations falling short in the face of unadulterated reality.

“Yes, Master,” he conceded. His master merely nodded.

“Master Windu told me that you finished your work with him shortly after final hour, yet you did not return until sometime much later. Where were you?”

“I-I was in the Temple gardens.”

“Why?”

“I was waiting to dry off so you wouldn’t... you wouldn’t know what I had been doing.”

“Another active deception.”

“Yes, Master.”

“Have you approached other masters for instruction?”

“No, Master. Only this once. Only Master Windu.”

“You hid your injury from me. Why?”

“I...,” Obi-Wan faltered. He took a deep breath and began again. He could do this. “I didn’t want to worry you or disappoint you because of my clumsiness,” he answered. Hearing the boy’s answer made Qui-Gon’s frustration rear its head again, but outwardly the master remained as distant and expressionless as ever.

“Have there been other injuries you have hidden from me?”

“Just one. I twisted my ankle on Garin IV, but I didn’t tell you. I just used my spare sash to tie it up so you wouldn’t see me limp,” the boy answered softly. So far, every answer was proving to be a stab in the master’s chest. There was so much that he had missed, so much that the boy had deliberately hidden from him. His mind kept drifting to another apprentice who had hidden things from him... No. This was different. Obi-Wan was not Xanatos. Where Xanatos concealed to manipulate, Obi-Wan concealed out of insecurity. He would have to remember that. This child wasn’t dark, just terribly uncertain.

“Bring me your class schedule,” Qui-Gon intoned. His apprentice looked at him, his expression quizzical, but the master was in no mood to explain or equivocate. “Now,” he added and the boy jumped to his feet to retrieve the appropriate data reader. He handed it to his master and resumed his silence on the couch. Qui-Gon scrolled through the boy’s class list and repressed another sigh.

“Obi-Wan, this would be a heavy load for a senior padawan not on active mission status,” he said shaking his head. “You will drop four of these classes immediately.”

“But that’s more than half!” Obi-Wan yelled, but a sudden glare from his master quelled any further outbursts or protests.

“You may choose which ones to drop or I will. Are you currently engaged in any additional projects?”

“Yes, Master.”

“How many?” Qui-Gon questioned, almost afraid to ask.

“Five,” Obi-Wan answered and the master muttered something under his breath that, to the boy’s ears, sounded distinctly like a particularly vile Huttese curse.

“You will drop all but one. Choose which you will keep and inform the appropriate masters of the rest,” the master said as he handed the boy the reader. Obi-Wan took it silently, but sullenly.

“Also, we shall reduce your training time by half and I shall request that we be taken off active status for the next two tendays.”

“But, Master!” Obi-Wan yelled jumping to his feet. “The Jedi need you! The Republic needs you! You can’t stop taking missions because of me!” he cried as he fell once more into a formal penitent’s bow. Qui-Gon slid out of his chair and grasped the boy’s shoulders, pulling him up, and placing him back on the couch. He knelt in front of his student, but Obi-Wan stubbornly refused to meet his gaze.

“Obi-Wan. Obi-Wan, look at me,” the master requested his voice warmer than it had been all afternoon. Slowly, hesitantly, blue-gray eyes rose to meet his dark blues. “This is only a temporary break for both of us, Obi-Wan. There are other Jedi who can serve in our absence.”

“No other Jedi can replace you, Master,” the boy resolutely argued. Despite his frustration, Qui-Gon couldn’t help but smile in the face of such blatant and innocent hero worship.

“I’m flattered you think so, but I’m afraid that’s far from true, my very biased apprentice,” he said as he cupped the boy’s chin in one of his large hands to guarantee he kept the boy’s attention. “I have failed you, Obi-Wan,” he started, but the boy began to shake his head in defiance.

“Never, Master.”

“Yes, Padawan, I have. I have been inattentive to your needs and granted you more freedom than you were prepared for. I am not angry with you,” he said and when the boy attempted to pull away he gently guided his focus back to his master’s face. “I am not, but this dishonesty must stop, Obi-Wan. You must be honest with me in all things even if you fear disappointing me. Will you do this?”

“Yes, Master,” Obi-Wan replied his voice scarcely above a whisper. Qui-Gon took his hand from the teen’s chin and instead gave the slender shoulder before him a reassuring squeeze.

“Go. We will talk more on this after lastmeal. For now, I want you to take a nap. No arguments. Go,” he said and Obi-Wan did exactly that. He raised from the couch without another word and journeyed to his room closing the door behind and settling down on his narrow bed. He pulled his knees into his chest and began to gather the fragments of emotions tied to everything his master had revealed today. He pulled them apart stripping the facts of his behavior from the emotion it evoked within him and placing each one of the unwanted feelings in his box. The process lasted over an hour such was the grievous extent of his failure, but finally, when it was all done, he obeyed his master’s wishes and drifted into restful sleep.

## Chapter 2: Memorial

Everything that could have gone wrong did go wrong, in the most spectacular fashion and with most tragic of consequences. The master and apprentice had gone to New Apsolon to rescue a fellow Jedi Master who had disappeared several days earlier. It should have been a straight forward search and rescue mission, but it wasn't. First of all, it wasn't even a mission really. Master Jinn had taken it upon himself, against the Council's express wishes, to go in search of the missing Jedi. Why? Because the missing master was Tahl Uvain, Qui-Gon's best friend and, as Obi-Wan would realize far too late, the love of his master's life. So, the master and padawan pair journeyed to New Apsolon to find the woman who held his master's heart and find her they did, but they found her far too late.

That was Obi-Wan's fault.

He had slowed his master down and the delay stole any chance Tahl had of surviving her kidnapping. In the end, Tahl succumbed to her injuries.

She died because of Obi-Wan and both he and his master knew it.

Qui-Gon said nothing the entire trip back to Coruscant. He saved all his attention, all his caring for the body that lay in a stasis capsule in the craft's small hold. Obi-Wan, for his part, attended to piloting the shuttle and staying out of his master's way. There was nothing he could say, nothing he could do to ever fix this, to ever make it right. His only consolation was the deep and persistent pain in his side; the physical reminder of his ineptitude.

During their pursuit of Master Uvain and her abductor, the two Jedi were caught in a blaster fight with the terrorist organization known as the Absolutes. Obi-Wan had gotten careless, allowed himself to be distracted and in doing so missed an easily deflectable shot. The blast had struck him on his left side and sent him to the ground curling in upon himself in white hot agony. Qui-Gon continued to deflect blasts protecting them both until finally all of the attackers lay dead. He didn't rush to his apprentice's side. Instead he stared off into the distance in the direction Tahl had been taken asking a single question of his padawan without looking back at him.

"Can you go on?" he asked. The words were simple. The tone was emotionless and yet within it Obi-Wan could read a wealth of pain, fear, and anger. He would not add to his master's pain if he could help it.

"Go on without me," he said. "I will be alright, Master." From where Obi-Wan lay he could see his master's frame tense seemingly torn between staying with him and following after his love. It is a decision he couldn't make, so his apprentice made it for him.

"Go! I will only slow you down. Master Tahl needs you!" he said knowing full well that those words would spur his master into action like no others would. With the briefest

of nods, Qui-Gon left him running ahead to save the woman that they could both feel drifting ever closer to becoming one with the Force. There had been so little time... and Obi-Wan's injury had wasted much of it.

Even after his master's hasty departure, he tried to make himself useful. Tahl needed his master, that was certainly true, but he wanted to be there in case his master needed him and he would be no good to anyone laying on the ground clutching at his abdomen. Obi-Wan pushed himself into a sitting position and pulled his hand away from his wound. It was covered in blood... as were his tunics and much of the ground where he had fallen. So much blood. Too much. Somewhere deep in his mind it registered that if he didn't do something he would bleed out completely guaranteeing the return of one dead Jedi to Coruscant if not two. He had to somehow staunch the flow of blood, but the wound was so large, at least two hand spans and he had no medical supplies on him at all.

An idea formed in his head, a grizzly one and Obi-Wan grimaced at the prospect even as he carefully removed his robe and tunics. Bare from the chest up, he reached for his lightsaber. He dialed down the length until the blade is a nub of light used for close work and cutting. He closed his eyes and took several deep and centering breaths. He had to be strong. He had to do this. After only a few quiet moments, he opened his eyes and placed the saber to his side.

And screamed.

He screamed louder and longer than he ever had in his life, but his hand never faltered. He drew the saber's edge across the entirety of the wound, instantly cauterizing the mangled flesh and stopping the bleeding. When, at last, he traced the last edge of the injury, he deactivated the blade and passed out.

He awoke a few minutes later. A mix of endorphins and blood loss helped to dull the pain, but every movement still was a roaring flame of pure agony. Yet, he got to his feet, shredded and tied his under tunic around his torso, and put back on his outer tunic and robes. Obi-Wan adjusted his lightsaber back to its standard length before he clipped it onto his belt and began the slow, stumbling walk to his master's side.

By the time he reached his master, the terrorist facility was in shambles, the leader had escaped, and Tahl was hanging limply in Qui-Gon's arms as he carried her to a speeder he commandeered from the compound. His master looked up briefly at his approach, but gave him no further acknowledgement. Instead, he climbed into the front seat of the speeder waiting only a second longer than necessary for his padawan to do the same before racing back to the city to find healers for his love.

It would prove in vain.

Tahl passed into the Force not long after they reached the medical facility. His master had spent those last moments alone with her as Obi-Wan had no desire to intrude. When next he saw his master, the cold anger in the man's eyes had startled him. His every

movement, every muscle, every subtle susurrations was etched in grief, but his eyes... they only held anger; anger at the one who had taken his love and anger at the one who caused her death. Obi-Wan knew that those were two separate people because even through his master's quiet mourning he could feel the blame and resentment his master held for him in his every glance or fleeting touch. Qui-Gon blamed Obi-Wan for Tahl's death, which was only right as Obi-Wan blamed himself too.

When they returned to Coruscant none of the Jedi that waited for them on the platform gave any notice to the padawan that lingered far behind his master. They were all too focused on the tall silent man and the long capsule that floated quietly by his side. The group then walked with him, escorting the grieving master and their lost comrade inside the Temple.

Obi-Wan did not go with them. He stood at the bottom of the ship's ramp waiting until they were out of sight. Forgotten, it was easy for him to slip to an adjacent hanger and over to a landing platform. From there he hailed an air taxi, instructing its droid driver to take him to Coruscant Memorial One. Delivered to his destination, Obi-Wan paid his fare and clambered out of the taxi. His movements were sluggish and it was getting increasingly difficult to command his body. By the time he reached the hospital's main doors, his world was tilting violently and it was a struggle to stay upright as he walked to the main desk. A human female with dark purple hair and large black eyes regarded him curiously as he fought the fact that his eyes were telling him that there were two of everything, including the pretty receptionist who was staring at him.

"Healer please," he muttered, surprised at the weakness of his own voice. "Been shot. Need a healer," he repeated, but before the purple haired woman could answer, Obi-Wan felt his knees finally give up the battle to support him and he crashed down to the floor with a quiet moan. Suddenly, he was aware of many voices at his side, but his vision was too blurry to make out any individuals. Through the fog of his diminishing awareness he heard what he presumed to be healers assessing his condition.

"Looks like a blaster wound, but look at this burn! Did he do that himself?" one voice said.

"I don't know, but look at this," said another.

"Is that a...?" the first voice asked.

"Lightsaber? Oh yeah, we've got ourselves a Jedi," the second answered.

"Why would he come here? We should contact their Temple," the first voice spoke again.

"No," he finally said calling upon all of his waning strength to voice this most important of objections. If they contacted the Temple his entire purpose in coming here would be for nothing. "No... Temple... no Jedi... don't call... please," he rasped. Obi-Wan

wasn't at all sure he was heard, but it was now out of his control as his world went numb and utterly black.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mace relaxed into his armchair and closed his eyes. It had been a long day. It had begun with the most unproductive of Council meetings as the wizened group argued over the impact of the growing influence of the Trade Federation like crèchlings over the last bit of candy. There had been five hours of arguing, in fact, and still no sense of resolution. Mace had been forced to table the issue for debate at another time and whenever that time proved to be, the Councilor knew he was not looking forward to it.

Then came the short transmission from the Jinn/Kenobi team. Though not nearly an official or even approved mission, the Council had expected Master Jinn to give them a report at the conclusion of the mission if not updates throughout. Instead, they received a short communiqué from his padawan, Kenobi, just before their ship was to enter hyperspace for their return home. The message stated simply that Master Uvain had passed into the Force and they were returning with her body. End transmission.

Mace, himself, wasn't close to Tahl, but he was close to Qui-Gon and he knew of the deep affection and camaraderie the two Jedi had for one another. Tahl's death would hit his friend hard. Knowing this, Mace and a few others, had waited for the team to land. One did not have to be a Force sensitive to feel the deep sadness radiating off his friend as Qui-Gon made his way down the ship's ramp, Tahl's stasis capsule by his side. Without thought, his fellow Jedi gathered around the grieving master and escorted him inside the Temple and to the Healer's Ward where Tahl's body would be kept and prepared for her pyre. Mace was marginally aware of Kenobi's presence dawdling far behind them, but he felt no strong emotions pouring off the boy so he concluded that the boy's hesitation was out of concern and respect for his master.

Mace sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose in a vain attempt to stave off a headache threatening to form between his eyes. The memorial service would be tomorrow at dusk and he was not looking forward to it. He hated attending such events though his former master, Master Yoda, would remind him that it was only crude matter burning on the pyre, but crude matter or not he hated any time the Jedi lost one of their own.

Just before he lost himself in that rather depressing train of thought, he heard the quiet, but insistent beep of his desk comm. He stood up and crossed over to the desk where he took a seat and activated the panel. A middle-aged Twi'lek with pale yellow skin and chocolate colored markings appeared on the screen before him.

"Director Escolar? This is a surprise, but not an unpleasant one."

“Director Escolar? Since when have we resorted to such formality between us, Jedi High Councilor Windu?” the Twi’lek asked. Mace smothered a wince.

“Point taken. How are you, Ari?” he replied. He was greeted with a wide and toothy grin from his companion.

“I’m well. Things here at Memorial One are hectic, but that, in itself, is not unusual,” she cryptically answered. Mace frowned.

“But something has happened that is unusual,” he concluded. Ari nodded.

“Yes, and quite frankly, Mace, I don’t know what to do.”

“I will help if I can.”

“I know,” she said smiling again. “That’s why I commed you. Mace, I have a patient here... a Jedi.”

“A Jedi?” he repeated. “Who?”

“I don’t know. He... he didn’t give us a name. In fact, the only thing he did tell us before he passed out from shock was that he’d been shot and that we were not to contact the Temple or any Jedi,” she replied. Mace did not like the sound of that at all. Strange enough that a Jedi on Coruscant would seek medical attention at a civilian hospital rather than the Temple, but to do so with the express intent that no Jedi should be involved was supremely disquieting. More surprising yet was the fact that Ari had gone against her patient’s specific wishes and contacted the Jedi anyway. Mace had known Ari Escolar from when she was still studying medicine and the healing arts at University and one thing she would never do is intrude upon the requests of her charges even if they went against her own leanings or desires. That she did so now spoke volumes to the Jedi master.

“And yet you contacted me,” he said finally. Ari sighed.

“And yet I contacted you.”

“Ari?”

“I don’t know a lot about what Jedi do and why they do it, but one thing I know for certain is that I can recognize a learner’s braid when I see one.”

“Your patient’s a padawan?” Mace exclaimed.

“Yes, and a junior one if I were to guess his age. That means that, well legally, the Order or his master is his recognized guardian. I... am required to inform you of his condition, despite his objections,” she answered and Mace nodded understanding her situation and personal dilemma completely.

"I'm on my way," he gave in response as he began to rise from the desk, but a sudden motion from Ari made him pause.

"Macey," she said reverting to her more casual nickname for him; a term of intimacy and endearment she had not used in a long time.

"What?" he asked sitting back down in his chair.

"The boy... the padawan... his injuries are... severe... You should bring a healer with you," she replied, her voice a little softer than before. Mace responded with a grim nod before ending the communication, grabbing his cloak, and heading out the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

"One day you're going to tell me how you Jedi manage to get through traffic so damn fast," Ari said by way of greeting as the two Jedi masters met her in the large lobby of the hospital. Mace raised an eyebrow.

"Proper focus, the Force, and a governmental traffic override," he answered with a smirk. Ari responded with a half-smile of her own before her eyes fell to the unfamiliar master beside him. Mace gave a half turn and gestured to the Mirialan who stood patiently at his right.

"Director Escolar, this is Master Healer Ar Songe. Songe, this is Memorial One's Director Ariat'la Escolar."

"Director Escolar," Songe said with a bow of his head. Ari returned his greeting with a small bow of her own.

"Master Songe," she replied. Mace then turned his attention back to her, his frown returning.

"The padawan?"

"Yes," she answered, her demeanor suddenly all business and somber. "This way," she said as she led the Jedi down several hallways, up two lifts, and into a section of the hospital that was near blinding in its sterile whiteness.

"This is our intensive care ward," she offered by way of explanation. "I told you his injuries were quite bad."

“What are his injuries exactly?” Songe asked as the trio pushed through a set of double doors.

“He had a large blaster wound on his left side reaching from his lower ribs to just above his pelvis and stretching over fourteen centimeters across at the widest. The wound appeared to be at least a day old.”

“A day?” Songe repeated shaking his head. “That’s not possible.”

“Why not?” Mace asked not following the healer’s line of thought.

“A wound that size from an energy weapon would have caused such catastrophic damage the injured party would have died from blood loss or infection if he went that long without treatment,” he intoned succinctly. Ari nodded and continued with her explanation.

“Normally, yes, but this injured party chose to cauterize the wound himself. Based on the scarring, I’m guessing he did it with his lightsaber.”

“Gods above,” Songe whispered. Mace felt the same way, but said nothing. The pain the padawan must have endured to complete such a task... But that realization only strengthened the one question that had formed in the back of his mind the moment Ari first informed him of the situation. Where was this boy’s master?

No one had been reported missing within the Temple and Mace knew of every team the Temple had out in the field and none of them, to his knowledge, had a missing master and padawan who would likely have been within a day’s travel of the planet. Nothing about this made any sense.

“Cauterizing the wound held off the immediate danger of a bleed out, but there was still a great deal of internal damage as well as some internal bleeding. Liver and kidney,” she answered before Songe could get the question out. Then she continued with her report. “By the time he reached us, the wound was infected and his body was in the beginning stages of severe sepsis and organ dysfunction; namely his heart, lungs, and kidneys,” she said as she led them to a section that required a key card and her hand print to enter. The small group stepped into a clean room and allowed the microdusters to pass over them eliminating any potentially harmful organisms that could be passed on to the sensitive patients ahead.

“In surgery, we were able to repair the damage to his liver, but his left kidney had to be removed entirely and even though the surgery was largely successful he had to be resuscitated on the table... twice,” she finished as the cleaning unit completed its cycle and the doors ahead of them opened. Past those doors, Mace could see a half dozen clear glass rooms each holding a single patient and a vast array of mechanical devices and monitors keeping track of the most minute fluctuations of each patient’s bio functions. Ari directed them to the second room on their right where an adolescent boy lay unconscious in a

medical bed. Mace gasped and came to stop so abruptly that Songe, who had been following behind, nearly collided with him.

“Kenobi,” he muttered collecting himself and resuming his walk to the boy’s bedside.

“As in Jinn’s Kenobi?” Songe asked as he went straight to the bank of monitors, scrutinizing each readout before moving on to another. “I thought Obi-Wan returned with Jinn,” the healer stated as he studied yet another monitor, this one’s information causing his brow to wrinkle. He didn’t see Mace’s nod, but it didn’t matter.

“He did,” Mace answered. “I was there when they landed. I knew he was lagging behind, but I had no idea... Why wouldn’t Qui-Gon say anything?”

“Maybe he didn’t know?” Ari offered innocently. If it were possible, Mace’s frown deepened.

“Of course he’d know. He had to,” he said flatly. Songe ‘tsked’ at a particular piece of data then turned to his two companions.

“He might not if he were too distracted by his own grief.”

“Too distracted to notice his padawan was dying from a blaster wound?” Mace retorted incredulously. Songe shrugged lightly as he placed his hands on Obi-Wan’s head and chest.

“Well, Kenobi obviously was concealing his injury to some extent and Qui-Gon was carrying the body of his best friend of the last 40 or so years,” the healer answered then he closed his eyes and sank deeply into the Force to continue his examination. Ari stepped closer to Mace wanting to continue the conversation, but not wanting to distract or disrupt the Jedi healer from whatever task he was performing.

“You know this child’s master?”

“Yes. He is actually one of my close friends which is why...”

“Why what?” she pressed. Mace sighed and rubbed both hands over his smooth head.

“I don’t know. Sith hells! Everything about this situation is karked up!” he growled. Ari attempted to stifle a giggle, but failed miserably.

“What is so funny?” Mace asked, his face utterly serious. Ari was still smiling, but she at least contained any further laughter.

“Sorry, I just... well, I always found it so cute when you curse.”

"I am not nor have I ever done anything that would be considered cute," Mace answered in a low voice. Before Ari could make a proper biting rebuttal, Songe emerged from his Force study. He looked up at Mace, an unpleasant weight present in his gaze.

"We need to take him back to the Temple. He is still in great danger," he said. Mace turned to Ari who immediately held up a hand forestalling his request.

"Take him. I'm not about to squabble over who's got the better healers. Hell, if I were injured I'd rather be treated at your Temple than here. It's not that we're not good. It's just that you guys are better."

"Yes, but we cheat," Songe said with a smile. Ari found herself laughing again.

"You do at that," she said. "But no, take him. I'll handle any paperwork. He belongs with you anyway." She looked at Songe her expression once again serious. "Is he stable enough for transit?"

"I can keep him stable for the trip," the healer answered. "Emergency car?" he asked looking to the Councilor. Mace gave the idea a few seconds thought before he shook his head.

"No. Something is... off about this whole situation. I would rather not draw unnecessary attention to our return until we know exactly what is going on. Unless you think the EC is needed we will take our speeder."

"The speeder will be fine so long as you drive. I will be busy keeping our young friend here alive."

\* \* \* \* \*

The ceremony was simple, solemn, and short, just as a Jedi service should be. Several dozen Jedi stood by, cloaked and hooded, listening as Yoda intoned the ritual words and then it was time. Qui-Gon stepped forward, torch in hand, and hesitated. He knew the eyes of his fellow Jedi were upon him. He knew and didn't care. It seemed all he once cared for lay before him cold, unmoving, and forever lost. The ache in his chest returned, the pain causing his outstretched hand to tremble. A smaller, webbed hand touched his, steadying it. Qui-Gon glanced down to the shorter Jedi beside him who's large, dark, and bulbous eyes shone brightly with unshed tears much like his own.

"Together," she said softly and the old master nodded. He wanted to echo her words, to offer the same comfort she had extended to him, but any attempt at speech caught painfully in his throat unable to pass the ever-present lump or the swollen, heavy tongue.

Despite his muteness, the two hands moved forward together. The torch touched the pyre and immediately the flames caught, rising and spreading quickly, fiery fingers reaching earnestly toward the sky engulfing the beautiful form that once housed and even more beautiful spirit.

Everyone present watched as the pyre was enveloped. Some lingered only a few silent moments before quietly taking their leave. Others hovered a bit longer to pay their respects, but soon only a handful of Jedi remained. Bant never moved from Qui-Gon's side and when she spoke again her voice was as soft as a whisper, as if anything louder threatened to shatter the sacredness of the time and place in which they stood.

"I thought Obi would have come to see her," she said. Qui-Gon didn't answer. Truthfully, he barely registered what the padawan had spoken. He couldn't pull himself away from the pyre burning in front of him. His world, the galaxy of his existence, was limited to the small stretch of wood and the body being consumed by flame upon it. As such, the master was unaware when Yoda came to Bant's side, whispered some words of comfort in her ear, and led her away from her master's memorial. Neither did he notice that, with their departure, only he and Mace remained in the large funeral hall.

Mace moved to stand beside him, still hooded, still silent. Together the two masters stood watching until the entire pyre was rendered to ash, the flame's work now complete. Only a few embers remained as tufts of smoke rose and wafted heavily in the air of the chamber. Qui-Gon's gaze was still directed before him though his eyes were glazed and unseeing like a blind man staring off into the nothingness stretched endlessly before him.

"Qui-Gon?" Mace spoke turning slightly to face his friend.

"I told her I loved her, right before she was taken... I told her and she told me she loved me too," he answered without shifting his gaze. "I loved her, Mace."

"Then I'm glad she knew," Mace replied still studying his friend closely. "That she had that love with her in the end."

"Yes," he said angrily, his voice dipping low into almost a growl. "But only in the end. If I could have gotten there sooner... if I hadn't had to stop for... I may have been able to save her if I had been alone."

Mace could not believe what he thought he heard. Surely he was mistaken. Surely Qui-Gon had not implied what he thought he had implied... and yet...

"You blame Obi-Wan for her death," Mace said. It wasn't a question. Qui-Gon took a deep breath trying to dispel the shudder Mace's words sent through him.

"I know that it's not his fault, but... Mace, part of me..." he answered his voice trailing off not speaking the words that didn't need to be spoken. Mace closed his eyes. This would explain much of Kenobi's behavior. If the boy thought his master blamed him, if he blamed

himself for the death of another Jedi, another Jedi his master loved... Mace cursed under his breath. So stupid and stubborn the pair of them!

"Qui-Gon, where is your padawan?" Mace asked calmly. He needed to assess exactly how bad this rift between them had gotten.

"My padawan?" Qui-Gon repeated distantly. A set of wrinkles creased his forehead as a frown appeared on his face. "I... don't know."

"Shouldn't you know, though?" Mace pushed gently. Qui-Gon's mouth drew into a tight line.

"I'm sure he's fine. I would know otherwise."

"No, Qui-Gon," Mace answered very slowly. "I don't think you would."

Finally, the master turned to his friend and Councilor, his eyes narrowed in both annoyance and suspicion.

"What are you saying, Mace?" he growled. Mace locked his gaze with his friend, resolved to see this through.

"Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan was injured on your mission," Mace responded. Qui-Gon turned back to the cooling pyre, waving Mace's concern away with a flick of one hand.

"A scratch," he said. "A scratch that cost me... that cost far too much."

"It was not a scratch, Qui-Gon. Your padawan nearly died."

"You exaggerate."

"I do not," Mace retorted. Qui-Gon turned once again, but this time his face was alight with anger.

"You do not know what you are talking about. You were not there."

"You're right, I wasn't. Fine then, check the bond. Prove me wrong," Mace challenged.

"I have no need," Qui-Gon replied.

"Because you fear it."

"I fear nothing. It serves no purpose."

"Check the damn bond, Qui-Gon," Mace yelled, his composure rapidly slipping away in the face of his friend's willful obstinacy.

“Fine,” Qui-Gon snapped. He eyes went slightly out of focus and as he directed his attention inward. “I... I can’t tell exactly where he is, but I sense no danger. He’s probably just sleeping.”

“He’s unconscious.”

“How would you know that?” Qui-Gon asked, his irritation only giving way slightly to curiosity. Mace sighed heavily.

“Because I’ve been sitting with him in the Healing Ward for most of the day, Qui-Gon. I didn’t think he should be alone. When I finally left for the service, he was still in bacta.”

“Bacta?” Qui-Gon repeated, his anger quickly dissipating to be replaced by confusion and no small amount of fear. “Your serious.”

“Yes,” Mace replied stepping forward and placing a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Qui-Gon, I think... I think Obi-Wan feels responsible for Tahl’s death and in some misplaced sense of duty and penance he hid the severity of his injury from you. He was unwilling to tell you and you were unwilling to hear him even if he had.” Mace paused to gauge his friend’s reaction. When Qui-Gon said nothing, he decided to continue.

“When you disembarked, he didn’t come inside the Temple. Instead he went to Memorial One to seek treatment.”

“Memorial One, but... why?”

“He didn’t want you to know he was hurt. I... suspect he felt he wasn’t worthy of Jedi care,” Mace answered evenly. Qui-Gon closed his eyes for several seconds. When he opened them he glanced once more at the cold, ash covered pyre then he turned to meet his friend’s gaze.

“Take me to him.”

\* \* \* \* \*

His padawan. Dead. It could have happened so easily. Had almost happened several times from what the healers told him. If he had to bare losing Tahl and Obi-Wan... No. No, he had not lost them both. His padawan was still here, still living.

Qui-Gon closed his eyes against the sight that lay before him. Yes, his padawan lived, but were it not for the many machines closely monitoring his life functions, Qui-Gon could have believed the boy was just as dead as Tahl. Obi-Wan lay on a medical bed, swaddle in

blankets, attached to too many sensors and tubes to count, his bruised eyes tightly shut, a mask over his mouth and nose helping to strengthen his shallow respiration. The boy was so pale... so cold... so still...

How could he have been so blind, so single minded in both his rage and his grief that he had forgotten that a living boy needed him? Qui-Gon opened his eyes and took the small cool hand of his padawan in his own and felt ashamed.

This was his fault.

He had been given the visions of Tahl's death, but had not acted on them soon enough and when his own actions brought about what he had foreseen... he took his anger out on a boy, a boy who had followed his master on this mission of folly out of pure love and loyalty. And how had he returned the youth's faithfulness? By spurning him. By rejecting him to the point that he no longer felt entitled to the care that would save his life. Oh, how he had failed this boy...

Qui-Gon squeezed them limp hand held between his own.

"Can you ever forgive me, Padawan?"

\* \* \* \* \*

The boy slept for five days without stirring and in that time his master never left his side save to use the refresher or to sit by the small room's single window in meditation. Thus it was an utter shock when Qui-Gon arose from his morning meditation to discover the single bed was empty and his padawan was nowhere to be found. The master jumped to his feet and immediately checked the bond, but instead of finding the quite static of an unconscious mind that he had felt for the past few days, he only met with a wall. The youth was so heavily shielded that his master could only get a vague sense of him through the Force, but a vague sense was enough to find him so the master grabbed his cloak and burst from the room in a Force enhanced rush.

He ran through the halls of the Temple, heedless of the stares and disapproving glares of his fellows. He didn't care. He had no time to care. He had already been too late to help one he cared about, he wasn't about to be too late for another. Qui-Gon followed the wispy trail of Obi-Wan's Force aura until it guided him to a room he had hoped not to set foot in for some time to come. There in the center of the funeral chamber by an empty pyre sat the pale, huddled figure of his apprentice. The boy was still dressed in the light tunic and pants of the healing ward, pieces of tape and sensor tags still hanging haphazardly from different points on his exposed skin. Qui-Gon was just about to approach the boy when a soft and familiar dulcet voiced pierced the quiet of the chamber.

"I know I should have come earlier, but... even if I could have, I don't think I would have belonged here with everyone else... You deserved to be surrounded by people who loved you and tried to help save you, not someone who cost you everything," he spoke softly, his breath hitching as a sob escaped his chest. "I-I... didn't mean to, Tahl. I didn't plan to... I'm so sorry. I'm so so sorry. I hope you can forgive me... I know..." he paused swallowing thickly. "I know that Bant and Qui-Gon never will... that I never will and... if you or the Force need to punish someone, punish me. Allow them some comfort in this. They've done nothing wrong... I'm the one who's wrong so punish me. I won't complain. I'll never complain." He was yelling now. "It should've been me not you. I should have been the one to die... not you... you were... you are... wanted... Oh gods, oh Force... what have I done..."

His master had heard enough. He rushed to the boy's side gathered him up in his arms and pulled him in tightly to his chest in a desperate embrace despite the teen's weak protests.

"Sssh. Hush, padawan, it's alright. It's alright."

"No, nothing's alright," Obi-Wan rasped between violent sobs. "It's my fault. It's all my fault..."

"No, padawan, no. This is not your fault. It never was," his master whispered in the boy's ear. With a sudden blast of strength, the boy managed to pull back from his master though he was unable to free himself from his embrace.

"How can you say that! I killed her! I'm a murderer!" he yelled. Qui-Gon's grip on him tightened, but he refrained from pulling the boy back into his body.

"You are no murderer, Obi-Wan. Only one person did this and it wasn't you."

"Then I'm his accomplice," he argued. "If it weren't for me, you would have gotten to her sooner. You could have saved her master, you! You know I'm right. You know you blame me too..." he finished his voice disappearing into the still air around them. Qui-Gon took a deep breath.

"You're right, Obi-Wan, I did blame you," he said and watched as the teen's chin dropped to his chest as his body tried to fold in on itself, but his master still held him and would not let him retreat.

"I blamed you, but I was wrong to do so. I was... so angry... but the person I was truly angry with was myself, but instead of facing that anger, I lashed out at you. That was wrong of me and ill-befitting as your master," the master said as he studied his apprentice. Obi-Wan raised his head and looked at the pyre in front of him.

"It should have been me. She should be here and I should be there," he muttered. At this, Qui-Gon gripped his shoulders with nearly bruising strength as he snapped the boy toward him, forcing the child to face him and not the pyre.

“Padawan, you will look at me and you will listen,” he ordered. Obi-Wan obeyed, his eyes wide and glassy. Qui-Gon continued using his master’s tone. “What happened to Tahl on New Apsolon was the will of the Force and though it saddens me deeply to lose her... had it been you... it would have destroyed me, Padawan. You must know that.”

“Why?” Obi-Wan asked genuinely perplexed. “Why would you want me? You... you loved her.”

“I did,” Qui-Gon answered swallowing thickly. “But I love you too, Obi-Wan. You are my padawan, my responsibility. I can’t keep you from danger, though I wish that I could. Danger is part of the life we’ve chosen, part of being a Jedi, but that doesn’t mean I’m ready or willing to EVER lose you... and I almost did because you broke your promise to me.”

“I did?”

“You promised to never hide an injury from me again,” Qui-Gon answered. Obi-Wan ducked his head.

“You needed to find Tahl. I didn’t want to slow you down or have you worry just because I did something stupid.”

“You only made a mistake, Obi-Wan. A mistake that everyone in this Order has made and will make again. No one is perfect,” the master said and suddenly the boy flinched under his hands. Qui-Gon’s eyes narrowed, but he continued.

“I can understand why you underplayed your injury to send me ahead, but why after? Why did you not tell me on the ship or go to the healers at the Temple?”

“You were with Tahl, I didn’t want... and... and if it was my fault...”

“You were using your wound to punish yourself,” Qui-Gon concluded with a sigh. “Oh, Obi-Wan...” he said as he pulled the boy back to him in a fierce embrace. “I almost lost you because you wouldn’t come to me, because you felt you couldn’t come to me... If I had lost both Tahl and you...,” the master paused as a quiet sob escaped him. “Obi-Wan please, never do this to me again... my heart would not survive it,” he whispered and in his arms he felt the boy finally return his embrace although weakly.

“I’m sorry, Master. I won’t do it again. I promise,” he said and he meant it. Obi-Wan never wanted his master to feel the way the man felt now, especially if he were the cause. He would do everything in his power to prevent it from now until the day he was repudiated or knighted. He’d tell his master of all his injuries and make sure he was never killed to save his master from the pain and loneliness of mourning him. He would put his own doubts and fears into the box and push it down deep within himself, deeper than he ever had before. He would do this and more for his master, but he would never, ever forgive himself for what he’d done.

He would never forgive himself for killing Tahl.

### Chapter 3: Out of Sight

“He is the Chosen One! You must see it!” Qui-Gon nearly yelled in his ardor. The Council, implacable as ever, chose to ignore the outburst. Yoda closed his eyes, stretching his senses along the currents of the Unifying Force. When he opened them again they bore the same sad uncertainty that Obi-Wan had come to expect when discussions turned to the child that his master rescued from slavery on Tatooine.

“Hmmm. Clouded, this boy’s future is,” the Grand Master intoned, but Obi-Wan thought he could detect the slightest trace of sadness in the master’s gravelly voice. Qui-Gon, however, noticed no such thing, his frustration at the Council’s reticence nearly its own presence in the chamber. He stepped forward and placed his hands upon the boy’s slender shoulders.

“I will train him, then. I take Anakin as my Padawan Learner.”

Obi-Wan was not aware that time could actually stop. Yes, he had experienced the rapid pace of minutes when he was enjoying time with friends or sparring with his master. He too had conversely felt the slowed moments of action in dangerous situations when seconds mattered and lives often hung in the balance, but this... sensation... was unlike any he had every experienced before. For when his master spoke those few simple words, time stopped its passage and lost all its meaning. Existence froze as did something in Obi-Wan’s chest.

“An apprentice, you have, Qui-Gon. Impossible, to take on a second,” Yoda answered, his brow wrinkled in what a few close members of the Council could easily recognize as annoyance. Master Windu was one such person.

“The Code forbids it,” the Head of the Order added, but Qui-Gon was not to be so easily deterred.

“Obi-Wan is ready...” he said pausing just a moment as if he expected his padawan to suddenly speak even though such a thing would have been a terrible breach of etiquette. When his padawan remained silent, the master continued. “He is headstrong and he has much to learn about the Living Force, but he is capable. There is little more he will learn from me,” he finished looking to Yoda for some recognition of his request, but the Grand Master wasn’t looking at Qui-Gon. Instead, his gimlet gaze was fixed on the silent and slightly pale figure standing to the right and slightly behind Qui-Gon.

“Something you have to say, Padawan, hmmm?” Yoda asked, but Obi-Wan remained silent, his gaze a blank stare into nothing. Master Windu leaned forward in his seat, the beginnings of concern creeping over his stern expression.

“Padawan?” the Councilor called. Immediately disquieted by his padawan’s continued muteness, Qui-Gon turned to his apprentice simultaneously reaching for their training bond. It was only the result of that brief inspection that the master was able to act in time to catch the young man when his knees buckled and his eyes rolled back in his head.

“Obi-Wan!” his master yelled as he cradled his apprentice in his arms. By the time the two settled on the floor, Obi-Wan was already in the grips of a massive seizure. Qui-Gon held on to him tightly, partly to keep the man from hurting himself, mostly because he felt helpless to do anything more. Somewhere in the background he heard Mace call for a healer and Adi gently guide Anakin away, but Qui-Gon was mostly oblivious to his surroundings. His focus was on the unconscious young man shaking uncontrollably in his arms.

\* \* \* \* \*

Somewhere deep inside Obi-Wan felt that things were right. Time had lost its meaning, it seemed only appropriate that his world should do the same.

\* \* \* \* \*

Obi-Wan was hardly surprised when he awoke to find himself in the Healer’s Ward. Most of his more spectacular failures always ended here and this recent failure was his most spectacular yet. Indeed, this particular disaster was the culmination of his lifetime of ineptitude, its result so profound, so damning he wonders why his body bothered to wake at all.

He told him no on Coruscant.

He told him no on the Monument.

He told him no on Bandomeer.

And yet Obi-Wan had persisted and guilted the esteemed master into taking a padawan he didn’t want three times over. To reward the master’s graciousness, Obi-Wan betrayed him and his duty in favor of people he had just met, people he thought were his friends, but only betrayed him in the end. Betrayed him or died because of him.

Yet, out of duty, the master took him back only to have Obi-Wan kill his best friend, fellow Jedi, and love of his life.

And still the master continued to train him for what reasons Obi-Wan didn't know. Honor, perhaps. His master had promised to raise him to knighthood and his master was an honorable man. So, why should he be surprised when his master fulfilled that promise and moved to escape the burdensome yoke that was Obi-Wan Kenobi, the yoke that had been slowly choking his master for twelve years?

His master, no... Master Jinn had a greater destiny than to remain forever saddled to a Jedi apprentice who, at best, was merely capable and, at worst, was a bumbling idiot and murderer. No, he had the Chosen One to look after now. Even as his world collapsed into ruin around him, Obi-Wan had cause to smile. His master finally had an apprentice worthy of his tutelage.

Unfortunately, the small smile did not go unnoticed.

"Padawan?"

Obi-Wan opened his eyes to find himself staring into the deep blue eyes of his master. No. Not his master. This was Anakin's master. The Chosen One's master just as it should be. Despite his certainty of the rightness of this fact, Obi-Wan felt an ache of disappointment. Without conscious thought he took that pain and went to place it in his box...

"Obi-Wan!" Qui-Gon yelled as he cradled the face of his padawan between his large, rough hands holding the young man as another seizure took hold of his body. Almost instantly, a healer appeared at Obi-Wan's bedside studying the various readouts before placing a single hand on the young Jedi's chest and closing his eyes. After a tense few moments, the seizure passed and Obi-Wan's body was still once more, though now he was wet with sweat and his breathing was slightly labored.

"What happened?" Songe asked as he moved his hand from Obi-Wan's chest to his forehead. Qui-Gon released his hold on his apprentice's face to clasp a clammy hand instead.

"I don't know. He awoke and he was smiling. I called to him and then he was seizing again," the master answered. Songe removed his hand with a sigh of frustration.

"I don't understand it. I can find nothing wrong with him."

"There has to be something," Qui-Gon reasoned. "Perhaps,"

"Uhhhh..." came a low groan from beneath the two masters. Songe immediately replaced the hand on his head, not removing it until Obi-Wan opened his eyes.

“Obi-Wan,” the master healer called out and slowly the disoriented apprentice’s gaze drifted over to settle on the Mirialan healer. Songe smiled warmly at his patient. “How are you feeling, Obi-Wan?”

“Ughhh,” he tried to speak, but his tongue felt too thick and his throat seemed to be laced with sand paper. As Obi-Wan pushed himself into a somewhat seated position, Songe carefully brought a cup of cool water to his lips and Obi-Wan drank down a few greedy gulps before pulling away. The healer placed the water on a table behind him and turned back to Obi-Wan.

“Better?” he asked and Obi-Wan nodded.

“Yes, thank you,” he said. His voice was still too gravelly for his tastes, but at least the sand paper was gone. Songe smiled at him again.

“So, tell me how do you feel?”

“Tired.”

“Well, that’s certainly understandable. Any pain?” the healer asked and Obi-Wan shook his head.

“What happened?”

“A few questions first,” Songe countered and again Obi-Wan nodded. “First off, can you tell me where you are?”

“Healer’s Ward in the Temple on Coruscant,” Obi-Wan answered and now it was Songe who nodded.

“Good and who am I?”

“Ar Songe, Master Healer.”

“And who is this?” the healer said gesturing to the figure to his left. Obi-Wan turned his head and swallowed thickly before he answered.

“That is Master Jinn.”

Qui-Gon frowned slightly at the formal address his padawan used to identify him, but he said nothing, willing to allow the healer to finish his assessment.

“Well, it seems your brain isn’t too fried,” the healer replied with a wink at Obi-Wan, but his attempt at humor did nothing to relieve the sudden tension in the Force.

“What happened?” Obi-Wan asked again as he turned his gaze back to the master healer.

“You suffered a generalized tonic-clonic seizure in the Council chambers and another one just moments ago.”

“The Council chambers...” Obi-Wan repeated absently. He turned his gaze back to Qui-Gon who still stared at him worriedly. “Where is Anakin?”

“Anakin?” the master responded, surprised at the inquiry. “Anakin is in the crèche spending time with some of his agetates.”

“You should be with him.”

“I am sure Anakin is fine. I am far more concerned about you at the moment,” Qui-Gon replied. Obi-Wan shook his head.

“You no longer have that obligation,” he answered, his voice calm and even.

“Obligation?” Qui-Gon repeated quite dumbfounded. “Obi-Wan, what are you talking about?”

Before the younger Jedi could answer, Songe cleared his throat.

“I will be back to check on you later, Obi-Wan. Master Jinn,” Songe said by way of parting then he quickly exited the room leaving the two Jedi in relative privacy. Qui-Gon was about to repeat his question when Obi-Wan spoke first.

“Master Jinn please, I do not wish to occupy anymore of your time. Go be with your padawan.”

“Obi-Wan, what are you... I am with my padawan,” the master exclaimed in exasperation. Obi-Wan’s brow wrinkled. Was this some last trial, some parting punishment before he was sent on his merry way? Was he required to say it? Must he voice the culmination of his failures aloud before he was released?

“No, Master Jinn, I am not your padawan,” he intoned thinking that, perhaps, he could at least get this last moment right and accept his repudiation as the Jedi he would never become.

“Obi-Wan,” the master began, his frustration evident in his tone. Apparently, Obi-Wan still managed to fail at this as well. Qui-Gon took a deep breath and began again. “Obi-Wan, you are my padawan until the day you complete your trials and become a knight.”

“I will not be taking my trials, Master Jinn. We both know that.”

"I know no such thing," Qui-Gon snapped angrily. "You will take your trials, Obi-Wan, and you will become a Jedi Knight."

"No, Master Jinn. I will not," he answered softly. Qui-Gon stood there silently for several moments, his mouth hanging slightly open in shock. Finally, the master shut his mouth and pulled himself back to his center. There was a reasonable explanation to this, of course. The young man was ill, suffering from some yet unknown malady and it was affecting his thinking. Yes, that was it. That had to be it. His calm mostly restored, Qui-Gon looked upon his apprentice who was still sitting mutely in the medical bed.

"You are still unwell. We will discuss this at a later time," he stated as he turned toward the door. As the master was leaving he heard the softy spoken reply.

"As you wish, Master Jinn."

\* \* \* \* \*

Qui-Gon was unsure where to go after he left the Healing Halls of the Temple. The master felt... disturbed, unsettled. His encounter with his padawan had disquieted him severely and he knew not what to do about it. Without thought the master let his feet guide him absently down the large, ornate corridors of the Temple and in short order Qui-Gon found himself standing outside the crèche. It was still early in the evening and most of the initiates were in the dining hall enjoying their latemeal. The long-haired master was about to turn to leave for the refectory, but then he sensed the approach of a familiar Jedi and instead chose to wait.

"Looking for me?" he asked once the Jedi was within earshot without him having to yell. Mace cocked his head to the side.

"Actually, I came to check on the boy," the Korun Councilor answered. Qui-Gon bristled with newfound irritation.

"The boy has a name," he replied harshly.

"I am aware of that," Mace responded, his voice equally irritated. For a moment, both masters stood silent each taking a breath or two to reign in their increasingly volatile emotions. Once both had restored their calm, Mace spoke again.

"How is Obi-Wan?" he asked. Qui-Gon could sense his friend's genuine concern and the acknowledgment chased any lingering vestiges of ire out of his body. He gestured to a nearby alcove housing a single bench. He took a seat on it and Mace quietly joined him.

“He suffered another seizure shortly after he awoke in the ward. At the moment he is... confused,” he answered with a heavy sigh. Mace turned to him with an openly worried expression.

“There is damage to his mind?”

“No, I don’t think so, but...”

“But what?” the Councilor pressed. Qui-Gon clasped his large hands together in front of him, his shoulders hunching inward ever so slightly. When he answered he looked straight ahead into the hallway.

“He insists that he is not my padawan anymore.”

“Ah,” Mace said as his posture visibly relaxed. Qui-Gon frowned, perplexed by his friend’s reaction to what should have been a distressing statement.

“Ah? That’s all you have to say?”

“What would you have me say, Qui-Gon?” Mace replied still sounding too calm, too cavalier for Qui-Gon’s tastes. The Councilor saw his friend’s expression and shook his head. “Of course, he is still your apprentice, but I can understand why he might feel otherwise.”

“Then explain it to me because I sure as Sith don’t,” Qui-Gon retorted, his earlier irritation returning quickly. The master’s sudden shift in tone did not go unnoticed.

“Qui-Gon Jinn, you cannot be that daft,” Mace stated, his expression as stern as it was in the Council chamber. “You took another padawan in front of him or should I say you attempted to do so.”

Qui-Gon shook his head.

“That’s not what happened, Mace. I recommended Obi-Wan for his trials and once he completes them I will have Anakin as my Padawan Learner.”

“Perhaps that was your intent, Qui-Gon, but that is not what you said in those chambers.”

“I said,” Qui-Gon started, but Mace interrupted him.

“You said that you take Anakin as your padawan learner and only after Master Yoda’s rebuke did you think to present Obi-Wan for his trials,” the Councilor replied. Qui-Gon sat quietly for a moment, both reviewing his words to the Council and marshalling his next argument. Again he shook his head at his friend.

“Obi-Wan knew what I meant,” he said finally. Mace gave him an uncharacteristic and fairly derisive snort.

“Did he? Or did he see his master of over a decade toss him aside for another?”

“I would never toss Obi-Wan aside for anyone and I resent the implication that I did,” Qui-Gon answered, his voice so low it was nearly a growl. “I was simply... the Council wasn’t listening, none of you were being reasonable. The Force had decreed that this boy be trained. I only did what I felt I had to do to ensure the Will of the Force was followed,” he argued, but even as he spoke the words his mind continued to replay the scene from minutes earlier and the look of cold, distant desolation in his padawan’s eyes. A look he had attributed to his disorientation and illness, but now...

“Do you really think... Would he really think I would simply abandon him?” he asked, his voice now scarcely that of a whisper. Mace shook his head at his friend and placed a heavy hand on the master’s shoulder.

“I don’t know, my friend. That is a question you must ask him.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Obi-Wan Kenobi reclined in his medical bed and was struck by the realization that he was tired. Physically, emotionally, mentally, hell even spiritually he was twelve years exhausted, but that was okay. He only had to endure a short while longer and then... Well, he didn’t know, but whatever happened after it wouldn’t matter. Not anymore.

“A credit for your thoughts?”

“Hmm?” Obi-Wan answered as he pulled himself away from his thoughts and focused on the Mirialan in front of his bed. “Hello, Master Songe.”

“And how are we feeling, Padawan Kenobi,” Ar replied matching his patient’s formal address, but as he stepped to the side of the bed he saw his patient shaking his head.

“No, not Padawan Kenobi.”

“Ah, well, well... Congratulations, Knight Kenobi,” Ar said with a smile as he glanced at some of the various readouts detailing the bio-functions of the young Jedi. Again, the Jedi shook his head.

“No, just Kenobi,” he answered and Ar turned to his patient, his expression one of unmistakable confusion.

"I don't understand," the healer said. Obi-Wan moved his gaze away from the worried healer choosing to focus on the empty air in front of him instead. When he spoke, his voice was as detached as he stare.

"I've been repudiated, Master Songe. Master Jinn has taken a new padawan."

"Taken a new padawan before you've taken your trials?" Ar exclaimed the disbelief in his voice echoing in the Force. Obi-Wan found himself shrugging lightly. Ar stepped closer to his patient's side.

"I don't believe it."

"It is the truth," Obi-Wan intoned his gaze still far away. Ar found his temper flaring, his anger focused on the man who had caused this young man pain despite the cool exterior that Obi-Wan was projecting to disguise the obvious hurt.

"I never knew Jinn was such a heartless bastard," the healer ground out. Suddenly, he had all of Obi-Wan's attention and unsurprisingly the fire in the young man's eyes was blazing hot. The healer was surprised, however, to find himself the target of the Jedi's ire and not his former master.

"You will not speak that way about Master Jinn in my presence," Obi-Wan snapped. Though still taken aback, the healer recovered quickly.

"If what you say is true, Obi-Wan, that man is undeserving of your loyalty."

"It is not Master Jinn's fault that his destiny is greater than raising a...," Obi-Wan paused, his initial vehemence faltering. Ar reached out and lightly touched the young man's hand.

"Raising a what, Obi-Wan?"

"Nevermind, it no longer matters," he said as he snatched his hand away and pulled his knees to his chest. Understanding soon dawned on the healer forcing him to take a deep breath before he spoke again.

"Is this what was taking place in the Council chamber when you collapsed?" he asked. Obi-Wan nodded his head and Ar thought he heard a mumbled affirmative. "That might explain much," Ar said aloud, but mostly to himself. Obi-Wan's eyes shot up subjecting the healer once again to the man's intense glare.

"One has nothing to do with the other," he stated, his words clipped and icy. Ar stepped back and crossed his arms over his chest.

"I'm not so certain, Obi-Wan. Emotionally traumatic experiences can often manifest into psychosomatic symptoms. The seizure you suffered on the heels of Jinn's abandonment,"

"I WAS NOT ABANDONED!" Obi-Wan yelled effectively startling the master healer out of his explanation. "I was... I am unworthy of becoming a knight and Master Jinn's work is too important... to... waste... on..." Obi-Wan said his voice trailing off and slurring as he began to fall to his side. The young Jedi would have certainly fallen out of the medical bed if Ar had not been there to catch him. The healer lay the young man's body out on the bed as best he could as another seizure took hold. This one was much shorter lived than the previous two and once it was over, Obi-Wan fell into near perfect stillness. Ar glanced around at the bank of monitors. He reached out with the Force only to verify what the readouts had already told him.

With a sigh, the healer tucked his patient neatly in the bed then summoned one of the junior healers to assist him in securing more leads and lines to the unconscious form between them. Ar was just finishing the nutrient IV when Masters Jinn and Windu entered the small room. Ar gave his assistant a quick dismissive nod sending the boy out of the room and leaving the three masters alone with his patient. Ar could feel himself bristle in Jinn's presence, so he decided to finish installing the IV before speaking, using the extra time to tamp down his anger. When he turned to face the two Jedi his characteristic calm had returned.

"How is he?" Jinn asked and just like that Ar's calm evaporated like fog under a midday sun.

"Is it true?" the healer asked. Qui-Gon looked at the Mirialan's thunderous expression and found himself, at first, surprised then confused at the healer's obvious anger towards him. It took only a moment, however, for him to realize the cause. Qui-Gon turned his attention back to his sleeping apprentice, one finger softly tracing the line of the young man's jaw.

"Your anger towards me is misplaced, Master Songe. This is simply... a misunderstanding."

"And just how, precisely, does one misunderstand that he is no longer your padawan?"

"Ar," Mace said warningly as he stepped to the foot of Obi-Wan's bed placing himself somewhat between the two masters. "I think our concern right now should be on Kenobi's health and not his status," the Councilor said. Ar snorted.

"I'm not sure the two are not related, Master Windu," the healer replied. Mace's frown immediately deepened, but it was Qui-Gon who spoke next.

"What do you mean?"

“I mean,” Ar started as he actively squashed his annoyance and eased back into his healer demeanor, “I do not believe it to be a coincidence that Obi-Wan had his first episode while being repudiated,” the healer said pausing at the glare from Qui-Gon. “Fine, while he believed he was being repudiated,” Ar amended. “Then a second episode while he was speaking with Master Jinn and a third just now as he was speaking of Master Jinn.”

“You think the seizures are psychosomatic,” Mace stated more than asked. Ar nodded. Qui-Gon stroked Obi-Wan’s cheek lightly, the affection in the gesture evident even to the still mildly irate healer.

“I need to speak with him. May I wake him?” the master asked.

“No,” the healer answered flatly. Mace sighed and opened his mouth to speak, but Ar’s raised hands silenced him. “That is to say that he cannot be awakened. Obi-Wan Kenobi is in a coma.”

## Chapter 4: Out of Mind

“Unacceptable.”

“Qui-Gon, be reasonable.”

“You ask me to stand here and do nothing! How is that reasonable?” Qui-Gon shouted as he stopped his pacing in exasperation. Mace’s frown deepened as he regarded his friend, but Yoda remained silent sitting on a small cushion in his quarters, his expression as inscrutable as ever. Only the slight droop of his ears betrayed any of the ancient master’s sorrow for the situation.

“We only ask that you consider what is best for Obi-Wan,” Mace answered calmly.

“A quick recovery is what is best for him,” Qui-Gon countered effortlessly.

“No matter the cost?” the Korun Councilor retorted. The long-haired master’s eyes narrowed angrily.

“What are you implying, Mace?” he asked, the ire in his voice unmistakable. The Councilor took a deep calming breath before answering. He spoke in measured tones considering his words carefully.

“I am implying that the reason Obi-Wan is in this state is because you often act and speak without considering the consequences to others.”

“I would never hurt him...” Qui-Gon started, but Mace would have none of it; his own frustration finally getting the best of him.

“But you have, Qui-Gon... For the love of the Force, how can you not see that?” he yelled. The heat of Qui-Gon’s gaze fell abruptly replaced by a deep look of despair and self-loathing.

“I only wanted... I...” the master stammered, but again he was interrupted.

“Exactly, Qui-Gon... you wanted, you needed... but this shouldn’t be about you should it?” Mace finished. Qui-Gon hung his head. His body seemed preternaturally still. Several moments of silence passed before he spoke again and when he did his voice was small and uncharacteristically timid.

“So I am to do nothing while he suffers?” he asked. Mace shook his head. His own anger quickly drained away by his compassion.

“We never said that.”

“Then what?” Qui-Gon asked a spark of hope in eyes.

“We need to move cautiously. We have no idea what we are truly dealing with.”

“But how can we know? Only Obi-Wan can answer that.”

“Then answers from him we must get,” Yoda suddenly intoned. Mace turned to the elder Jedi with a quizzical expression.

“Master, Obi-Wan is in no condition to...”

“Speak he cannot. Into his mind one must go.”

“To enter the mind of a patient in a coma... Master Yoda, it is too dangerous, both to Obi-Wan and to whomever goes in after him.”

“Let me,” Qui-Gon said, his tone calm, but still shadowed.

“What?” Mace exclaimed, but before he could continue Qui-Gon turned to him, his eyes pleading.

“Let me go. Please...”

“Qui-Gon...”

“The boy’s master he is,” Yoda interrupted. “Already a bond they have. Easier it would be for both, know that you do.”

“Yes, but...” Mace started hesitantly turning from Yoda to Qui-Gon and then to Yoda again. “Forgive me, but if Qui-Gon is the reason Obi-Wan is... as he is... is it wise that he be the one to go into the boy’s mind?” he asked Yoda, but it was Qui-Gon who answered.

“For that reason alone I should be the one. I...,” he paused swallowing heavily, “caused this... allow me a chance to fix it... please...” Qui-Gon stopped. He took a deep breath and looked at both Councilors squarely. “What happens after... I will leave to the Council’s discretion,” he finished. Yoda nodded his head slowly as he pushed himself off of his tiny cushion and began to head to the main door of his quarters.

“Decided it is. Qui-Gon into the padawan’s mind will go.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“I must reiterate that I object to this entire procedure. It is exceedingly reckless and dangerous to both master and padawan. Why the Council would approve such a thing in

the first place is beyond my comprehension!" Ar snapped, his Force aura vibrating with barely suppressed indignation. Yoda grunted as he settled himself in a chair in the small healing room with some difficulty. The wizened master then turned his gaze to the Master Healer standing before him.

"Understand your concerns the Council does, but proceed in this we shall."

"Master Yoda, please I implore you," Ar began again, but a sharp glare from the miniature master quelled any further entreaty the healer might have had. With an audible sigh, Ar Songe turned to the man that stood beside his patient's bed.

"You understand that there is no way of predicting what you will encounter in his mind."

"I do," Qui-Gon answered calmly, his eyes meeting the healer's squarely, but Ar was not so easily assuaged.

"Nor will anyone be much assistance to you or Obi-Wan should something go wrong."

"I understand the risks."

"If you fail in this, we may lose you both," Ar added. Qui-Gon brought his gaze down to his apprentice, his expression softening, his eyes tinged with sadness.

"If I don't try, we are both already lost," the master answered softly. Ar shook his head, his thin shoulders slumping slightly in defeat.

"Then may the Force be with us, because reason certainly is not."

\* \* \* \* \*

Qui-Gon was standing outside of the Temple, but that... couldn't be right. He had been in the medical ward with Master Yoda and Master Songe. He was preparing to enter his padawan's troubled mind. Was that where he was? Inside Obi-Wan's mind? Qui-Gon walked up the steps leading inside the "Temple." As he approached he could see two Temple Guards standing beside a desk manned by a single knight just inside the main entrance. He slowly walked up to the desk. Immediately, the sentries took up flanking positions at his side. Qui-Gon stopped his advance in an attempt to show himself in a non-threatening light, after all, this wasn't actually the Jedi Temple, but merely a construct of his padawan's mind. The knight at the desk looked up at the unexpected visitor, his large bulbous eyes blinking repeatedly before he spoke.

“You are not supposed to be here,” the old Mon Calamarian knight intoned as he stared at the long-haired master. Qui-Gon gave a shallow bow.

“I am here to find someone. Obi-Wan Kenobi. Do you know where he is?” the master asked and suddenly he was seized on either side by the guards. The Mon Cal knight had pulled his own saber, the tip of which hovered mere centimeters away from Qui-Gon’s throat.

“What business do you have with that one?” the knight demanded. Qui-Gon held his calm despite the precariousness of his situation. He met the dark eyes of the knight before him as he spoke in his typically serene tones.

“It is important that I speak with him,” he answered, but the knight was unimpressed.

“Leave this place. Now!”

“Not until I have spoken with Obi-Wan.”

“You will leave!” the knight hissed, his saber moving so close to the master’s skin he could feel the short hairs of his beard begin to sizzle.

“Stand down,” a familiar yet strangely unfamiliar tenor voice called out. Qui-Gon carefully shifted his eyes, but not his head to see the newcomer as he approached his welcoming committee. This new person was human, male, a Jedi, and also incredibly familiar. From his long auburn hair and matching beard, to his blue-grey eyes, and dulcet voice... Qui-Gon felt he knew this man and yet...

“He doesn’t belong here,” the knight repeated though he never took his eyes off the long-haired master. The Jedi smiled and placed a hand on the knight’s arm, gently directing him to deactivate his lightsaber.

“Stand down. We know this one,” the new Jedi replied and the Mon Cal knight lowered his saber from Qui-Gon’s throat disengaging it in the process. As the weapon was lowered the two guards also released their hold on the master and stepped away from him. The young auburn-haired Jedi smiled at the master and gestured towards the interior of the Temple.

“Would you walk with me?” he asked, his tone cultured and lilting. Qui-Gon nodded, stepping around the desk and its glaring knight, to join the other Jedi at his side. The two then began to walk into the Temple proper. As they passed under the large ornate archways the other Jedi tucked his hands into the sleeves of his cloak and began to speak.

“I apologize for that. As you can imagine we don’t get many visitors here,” the man said. Qui-Gon nodded his head in understanding and tucked his own hands into his sleeves as they walked. They traveled down the many wide corridors of the Temple sedately and in

companionable silence as Qui-Gon took in his surroundings; surroundings that he was intimately acquainted with as he had known them all his life. This “mind” Temple was like the real Temple in every way. No detail was lost in this recreation and the master felt himself comforted by it. Finally, he felt the need to speak.

“You said before that you knew me.”

“Yes,” the man answered, but he said no more. Qui-Gon waited a moment hoping that the other man was simply gathering his thoughts, but soon he realized that nothing further was going to be offered, so the master dove in again.

“Who are you?” he asked. The young man stopped his perambulation, turned to him and smiled.

“I am Obi-Wan Kenobi, Jedi Knight.”

“Obi-Wan?” Qui-Gon repeated both in shock and, yet somehow, in relieved expectation. “But you are,”

“Older, yes and knighted,” Obi-Wan replied. “Think of me as the knight he believed he would become.”

“He?” Qui-Gon asked now utterly confused; a state in which the master rarely found himself. “He who?”

“Your padawan.”

“But aren’t you...” Qui-Gon started, but Obi-Wan raised a hand and looked around. He spied an alcove not far from them and gestured towards it. The master moved to the small window seat and sat down. Obi-Wan joined him a moment later and proceeded with his explanation.

“I am merely one aspect of the one you know as your padawan. I am Obi-Wan’s dreams, his aspirations, the culmination of his work and goals.”

“Then you can help me, help him reach his goals,” Qui-Gon stated, but the knight shook his head, a somber expression on his face, a deep sadness treading in his ocean colored eyes.

“I... cannot.”

“Why?”

“I am not the one who... is in control here.”

“Then who is?” the master asked and the knight sighed heavily.

“You may not be ready to meet him. It will be hard for you... both of you.”

“I don’t care. I will do whatever it takes to help him.”

“He will not want your help. He will attempt to stop you, perhaps even hurt you,” the knight responded and for a single heartbeat Qui-Gon was afraid, but the fear was quickly discarded as it would do him no good here. He was here for one purpose and one purpose only; to save his padawan. Nothing else mattered, not even his life.

“It doesn’t matter. I must do this,” the master answered and the knight could see the resolve in those dark, midnight blue eyes. The knight nodded and stood.

“Very well, Master, but please do not doubt the power he wields here. He is who you must convince.”

“And who is he?” Qui-Gon inquired as he too rose to his feet.

“Obi-Wan.”

“What? I don’t understand.”

“It is Obi-Wan you must convince, Master Qui-Gon, not your padawan and not a knight, but an initiate whom no one wanted.”

“Are you saying that this... everything that has happened is because of what he felt as a child?”

“I am saying that all this is, is that child. Do not underestimate him, Master,” the knight Obi-Wan pleaded. Qui-Gon still did not completely understand what this Obi-Wan was trying to tell him, but he knew it was a warning and treated it as such. He nodded to the troubled knight.

“I understand. Please, take me to him.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The two Jedi walked the empty halls of the “Temple” in contemplative silence; Knight Kenobi leading, Master Jinn following absently behind adrift in his own ponderings. So lost he was that the master nearly ran into the young knight before him when the guide stopped abruptly.

“Hmmm.”

“Something wrong?”

"This is not where I expected us to be," the knight answered distractedly, his hand resting underneath his bearded chin. Qui-Gon took a moment to survey his surroundings. He had known that they had been traveling down the main dormitory wing, ostensibly their destination the initiate's quarters. However, as the long-haired master glanced around he noted they were decidedly not near the initiate quarters, but instead were deeply within the training halls right outside of training salle three. Qui-Gon turned to his guide.

"I thought we were going to the dormitories."

"Apparently not," the knight answered. Though the younger man's tone was pleasant, Qui-Gon felt a surge of irritation from the dismissive response. His padawan was in trouble. He did not have time for idle games and he said as much.

"You said you could take me to him, to Obi-Wan."

"I did," the knight responded serenely. Too damn serenely in Qui-Gon's opinion.

"Then do so," the master snapped harshly. As if he just noticed the change in the master's tone, the knight blinked suddenly then gave the older man an apologetic smile.

"My apologies, Master Jinn. I am taking you to him, but that doesn't mean I know where he is, only the way to him. It is... difficult to explain," he said. Qui-Gon took a moment to consider the man's odd statement, his own frustration bleeding off a bit as he did so.

"It's like you're following... a bond?"

"Well, not precisely, but as an analogy it is essentially accurate. Which means," the young knight said as he turned back to the closed door. "The path to him,"

"Lies through that door," the master completed, turning his attention to the closed portal as well. Without further discussion, Qui-Gon palmed open the door and stepped inside. Immediately he was greeted by a familiar face, the first one he'd seen since arriving in this strange place.

"Hello, old friend."

"Mace?" Qui-Gon stumbled out genuinely perplexed. "What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you," the Korun Councilor answered with a wide smile. "I need a sparring partner."

"I," Qui-Gon began prepared to deliver a polite refusal when the reason for the declination suddenly escaped him. The master frowned momentarily, feeling as if there were something he was forgetting, something... or someone maybe? However, the more the master concentrated the more the "something" slipped from his grasp until it was nothing

more than a distant niggling in his mind. With a dismissive shrug, Qui-Gon removed his cloak and unhooked his lightsaber. Mace's smile grew even larger as he settled into a position opposite Qui-Gon on the mat. The long-haired master gestured to the sandy haired knight. When the knight stepped up he held out his cloak for the younger man to take.

"If you would," Qui-Gon said offering the cloak to the man for safe keeping. The blue-grey eyes of the knight stared at the master intently.

"Master Jinn, perhaps this is not the best time for this," the unknown knight spoke. Qui-Gon's eyes widened in surprise.

"Nonsense," the master answered smoothly. "Now is the perfect time. I have no pressing matters at the moment."

The knight opened his mouth to speak further then abruptly closed it deciding otherwise. Instead he gave a short bow to the master and returned to the edge of the mat. Qui-Gon glanced at his partner with a mischievous grin as he lit his saber.

"Shall we?" he asked and the two masters began dancing. Columns of green and violet whirled and slashed throughout the small space, traveling nearly faster than the eye could see leaving only arcing, blurry swatches of color in their wake. With each pass, the Councilor's smile grew until he was plainly beaming with enthusiasm. Qui-Gon felt his own spirit lift in the face of such joy.

"You should smile more often, my friend," the long haired master said as he deftly parried the other master's strike. "It suits you better than your usual scowl."

"My scowl," Mace retorted as he lunged only to have his opponent flip over his head and land a couple of meters behind him, "is a highly developed tool of the Force used to ensure that focus in the Order is centered on the needs of the Republic."

Qui-Gon chuckled as Mace blocked a series of his strikes with ease.

"You mean you use it to scare other Jedi back in line!" he laughed, Mace joining in. Qui-Gon shook his head still smiling. "You know my padawan always said that your frown could..." he began, but found himself trailing off as something in his mind suddenly itched at the thought of his padawan.

"Come on, old man," Mace taunted, but Qui-Gon was having none of it. He held his hand up, palm out towards his friend.

"Hold," he said as he deactivated his lightsaber. He frowned in concentration as he tried to understand what he was feeling. He was thinking of his padawan... His padawan... of Obi-Wan.

“What’s the matter?” Mace inquired as he stepped closer to his friend, also deactivating his saber.

“My padawan...” Qui-Gon answered unable to say more as his brain still seemed to be churning through the muck of his feelings and vague niggings. Mace clasped a hand on his shoulder.

“Oh, do not concern yourself over that. You don’t have a padawan, Qui-Gon. So you see, there is nothing to worry about! Now,” the Korun Councilor said with a slap on the other man’s back. “Let’s get back to our match. Say, best two out of three?”

Qui-Gon stared at his friend, for a moment, unable to speak. What had Mace said?

“I... I do have a padawan, Mace. I have Obi-Wan. He...” Qui-Gon stuttered. He turned and saw the familiar knight standing to the side of the mat. Immediately, the fuzz in his mind cleared. He turned back to the visage of his long time friend and agemate.

“No, I do have a padawan, Mace and he is in trouble. I cannot stay,” he stated calmly. Suddenly, Mace grabbed his arm holding his wrist in a painful grip.

“I must insist, Qui-Gon,” the Councilor hissed. Qui-Gon quickly executed a rolling hand movement and extricated himself from the other man’s hold.

“You are not real. You are a distraction. I will find my padawan!” the long-haired master responded, his voice deep and growling with his determination. Without further response or explanation, the image of Mace Windu quickly disappeared leaving the knight and master alone in the training salle. The knight approached the master holding out his cloak for him. Qui-Gon slipped the heavy garment back on and regarded the older version of Obi-Wan somberly.

“Why didn’t you say something?” he asked his knighted padawan. Knight Kenobi gave the master a sad expression, but his words were simply intoned carrying none of the grief held in his eyes.

“I am only your guide here. I may not interfere,” he answered. If the knight thought the master would be angry, he was surprised to see only a genuine acceptance of his role in the master’s regard.

“I suppose there will be more attempts to stop me then?”

“I believe so, yes,” the knight responded. “These are likely his defense mechanisms to keep you from getting too close.”

“Too close to him,” Qui-Gon added with a heavy sigh. He closed his eyes for a moment as he sought his center. When he opened them again, Kenobi could see the gleam of determination staring back at him.

“Let’s continue,” the master said and then the pair walked back to the salle door, sliding it open, but instead of stepping out into the main corridor of the training hall, the Jedi found themselves in the funeral hall. The room was filled to capacity with hooded figures... Jedi, though Qui-Gon could see none of their faces. Slowly, the master brought his eyes up to the body lying on the pyre. That face he could see.

“No...” he said, the denial barely a whisper on his lips. Quietly the hooded figures faded into nothingness leaving only the two travelers and the still figure in the room. Qui-Gon turned to his guide a question in his eyes, but before he could speak it a sudden movement caught his eye. On the unlit pyre, the still figure was... moving. The Jedi rose from the platform, gracefully sliding off the side landing quietly on bare feet before taking the short few steps to stand before him. A hand reached out and gently cupped the master’s face. Qui-Gon closed his eyes, his whole-body trembling under the touch.

“Qui...” the familiar honeyed voice whispered. It was too much. Far too much. Qui-Gon’s eyes tightened further shut even as he held onto his resolve with two hands.

“No...” he repeated, but the apparition did not go away. Instead, he felt two arms slide along his waist wrapping themselves around his lean torso as the warm and familiar weight of a head rested on his chest. Qui-Gon wanted to return the embrace, but he could not. He could only stand there, stock still, partly willing the creature away, partly hoping it would never leave. Finally, the master was forced to open his eyes and gaze upon the lovely face of his misery.

“Tahl...”

“Qui...”

“This can’t... You’re... dead...”

“There is no death, Qui,” Tahl answered. She pulled back from the master slightly as she raised her eyes to look at him. Eyes that should have been sightless, Qui-Gon knew, but nevertheless regarded him with a sense of pure, unguarded love. “Do you remember what we said to each other that day on New Apsolon?”

“Of course,” Qui-Gon replied haltingly. “We... pledged ourselves to one another... We said that we would be together... always...”

“Yes, my love,” Tahl whispered.

“But...” he continued. “You died. You left me.”

“Never, dear heart. Here we can be together... All you need do is stay,” she said. Tahl raised herself on her toes and gently pressed her lips against his. The touch was feather soft at first, but soon Qui-Gon found himself unwittingly deepening the gentle kiss; infusing it with all the passion he had hoped to show her in life. He knew it was wrong. That she was

dead and lost to him and yet... she was here. Kissing him. The kiss their last meeting only hinted at was now happening and it was wonderful. He lost himself in her embrace, his arms finally closing in around her lithe, firm, and supple body, pulling her in closer to him, willing them both to melt into one another. Finally, they both separated, needing to breathe. More than that, Qui-Gon needed to think. He had a duty to perform. He had to save his padawan... but Tahl was here... in his arms and the prospect was tempting. Too much so.

“My padawan...” he gasped still breathless from the wealth of emotion cradled between them. Tahl placed a cupped hand on his cheek and stared lovingly into his dark, midnight blue eyes.

“Sshh. You need not worry about him now. Just... be here... with me, Qui.”

“I... Tahl, he needs me,” he answered and suddenly he saw a flash of anger in those green and gold striped eyes.

“He is the reason we were separated, Qui-Gon. Would you really choose him over me?” she hissed. With her words the spell over Qui-Gon was broken. He pulled her hands away from his body, cradling them within his larger, more calloused ones.

“Obi-Wan did not cause your death. Tahl... the real Tahl, my Tahl would not blame him for it, nor would she ever ask me to choose between them,” Qui-Gon answered sadly. The master closed his eyes and let go of her hands even as he spoke the words that let her go from his heart. “You are not my Tahl.”

When he opened his eyes she was gone and the pain of her loss hit him anew. His heart wretched agonizingly as he stared into the empty space that so recently held the form of his beloved. Kenobi placed a hand on his shoulder prepared to offer words of comfort when the sound of slow clapping broke the silence of the moment.

“I must say I am impressed,” an unwelcome and familiar cultured voice called from up above. Qui-Gon raised his eyes to see the unmistakable person of his former apprentice lounging languidly on the once empty pyre.

“Xanatos.”

“Master,” the dark haired young man answered. Qui-Gon sighed wearily.

“I have no want of any further games or distractions, Xanatos. You are not real. You are dead. Leave me be.”

Xanatos opened his mouth to respond, but before he could his smirk transformed into scowl. “The troll is here,” he muttered in disgust just as Qui-Gon felt a presence low at his side. The master turned to find himself looking into the gimlet eyes of the Grand Master of the Jedi Order.

“Master Yoda? What are you doing here?”

“Here I am not. In the Healer’s Ward, I am as are you. In grave danger you are. Come I have to bring you back,” the diminutive master intoned. Qui-Gon reflexively knelt before the ancient master, concern radiating from his very being.

“What has happened?”

“Your padawan’s vitals, dropping they are. His Force aura weakening. Stay in his mind you cannot or lose you both we will,” Yoda explained his large, expressive ears dipping considerably in his sorrow. Qui-Gon took a deep breath before speaking.

“Master, I cannot leave him,” he replied softly. The older master stomped his stick against the floor, the resulting clack echoing in the large chamber.

“Leave him you must. Learner he is. Master you are. Afford to lose you the Order cannot.”

“But surely,” Qui-Gon began only to be cut off by the sound of a gimer stick striking the floor.

“Unimportant he is. Needed you are. Return to us now, you will!” the small master demanded so forcefully that it caused Qui-Gon to flinch involuntarily. The younger master rose to his full height looking down upon the smaller Jedi.

“Obi-Wan is important. I will not return,” he spoke, defiance rolling off him in waves. With a mild “hrumph,” the Grand Master vanished leaving the three younger men alone in the hall. Qui-Gon turned his gaze back on the image of his former apprentice.

“You know I truly thought you would fall for that one. You always had a soft spot for the old troll,” Xanatos smirked.

“I grow tired of these distractions.”

“Distractions?” the once Jedi echoed as he hopped down from the raised pyre. “Are you calling me a distraction?”

“You attempt to keep me from finding him,” Qui-Gon all but growled in response. Xanatos leaned against the platform casually.

“Are you certain of that, Master? Have you ever stopped to consider that he,” he said indicating Kenobi “is the greatest distraction? After all, what kind of guide doesn’t know where he’s going?”

The question caused Qui-Gon to pause in thought for a moment, but only a moment. Sparing a quick glance to his padawan-knight, he then turned his full attention back to Xanatos.

"I trust him. I do not trust you," Qui-Gon answered as he turned away from the fallen Jedi and began to head out of the room, Kenobi in step at his side.

"How dare you turn your back on me!" Xanatos snarled. Qui-Gon stopped in his stride as he spoke.

"There is nothing more between us, Xanatos. It's over," he intoned as he began walking again. The image of Xanatos vanished, but the master did not see it. He simply left the room, never looking back.

\* \* \* \* \*

"May I ask you a question, Master Jinn?" Kenobi asked as the two traversed the quiet halls.

"Of course."

"Why did you not believe him? I mean... I am thankful that you didn't, but you did not even seem to consider that Xanatos could have been telling the truth about me. Why?" the knight asked. Qui-Gon remained silent for a moment before answering.

"You told me when I first arrived here that you were a construct of my padawan's mind, an image of the knight he hoped he would become. The knight I know he would be would never be used to serve such a destructive purpose and besides..." the master paused as he turned to look at the young knight. "When this is over and my Obi-Wan is returned to me, it is my hope that we will meet again, my Knight."

Construct or not, real or not, the knight's face flushed under such unabashed praise. Self-consciously, he dipped his head under the compliment.

"I hope for that as well, Master," he replied softly then he stopped in front of a closed door which Qui-Gon immediately recognized.

"Our quarters," he said looking at the door then back at the knight. "Is he...?"

"Yes, he is inside. I am sure of it, but... he is not alone."

"More distractions?"

"I doubt it," Kenobi answered thoughtfully. "I suspect something different awaits you inside." The knight sighed. "I wish I could be of more help."

"You have been a great help indeed, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon replied before returning his attention to the door. "But this is something I must face on my own."

The master took a deep centering breath then palmed the door open and stepped into the familiar quarters. What he found caused him to gasp despite himself. Before him he saw... himself sitting in his favorite chair and another... him kneeling in apparent meditation by the balcony doors. The seated "him" rose quietly to his feet, his arms crossed over his chest, a stern glare in his eyes.

"You should not have come here," the first other Qui-Gon growled.

"Still, he is here now. The question is what is to be done about it," Qui-Gon Two answered, his eyes still closed in meditation, his expression as serene as Qui-Gon One's was in irritation.

"Who... What are you?" the real Qui-Gon spoke.

"We are his Master," the two others answered in unison.

"I don't understand."

"You don't need to understand," Qui-Gon One barked. "You only need to leave. The boy is not your concern."

"He is my padawan."

"He never should have been," One retorted sharply. "He is too weak to be a Jedi."

"Perhaps," interrupted Two. "But he is our padawan now and we must do our best in light of his weakness. Our duty demands it," he finished ruefully.

"The boy is a perpetual disappointment, but now are finally free of him. Our duty is to the future of the Jedi, to our new padawan, Anakin," One countered. Two opened his eyes and shook his head.

"It is unfortunate that we have raised his hopes so, but yes... we must now see to our new padawan," Two replied. Qui-Gon felt his hands shake in barely restrained fury.

"I will not abandon him for Anakin or the Council or the Order or for the whole damn Force! I am his master and he is my padawan and I will see him! Now!" he yelled. Suddenly, the door to his padawan's room slid open, but unlike before the apparitions did not vanish. Qui-Gon noted the difference, but paid it no mind as he crossed warily between

the two Qui-Gon's and entered the small bedroom. Kenobi did not follow. The door closed silently behind him and the master found himself, finally, alone with his padawan.

As the knight had warned him, this Obi-Wan was younger than his present self. Perhaps only twelve or thirteen standard. He sat on his bed, his back against the head board, his knees pulled into his chest, his arms wrapped protectively around himself. Qui-Gon approached him carefully as if he were nearing a frightened animal. The boy looked up at him, his blue-grey eyes wide and full of tears.

"Please... go away," Obi-Wan whispered. Qui-Gon sat down on the edge of the bed, but was careful to move no closer.

"I've come to take you home, Padawan," the master said softly, but the boy shook his head.

"No... No one wants me."

"I want you, Obi-Wan. I want you very much."

"No you don't. You only want me out of pity. I'm not supposed to be a Jedi. I'm just a disappointment," the boy stated matter-of-factly. It was then that the master realized the significance of his previous encounter. Pity and disappointment. Those were the other two masters. Qui-Gon closed his eyes as understanding hit him. He took a quiet moment to breathe through the stinging pain and guilt that washed over him.

"Is that how you think I see you, Padawan?" he said his eyes still closed. "Oh, how I've wronged you, my Padawan. I have truly failed you."

"You... You could never fail me, Master," Obi-Wan answered vehemently. "It's my fault. I'm the unworthy one! I never should have asked,"

"No!" Qui-Gon interrupted his eyes flashing open. "You are worthy, Obi-Wan. You are meant to be a great Jedi. The fault is mine for not telling you more often... For not telling you what a great joy you are in my life. You are my Light, Obi-Wan."

"But,"

"No, but. It is the truth. A truth I should have shared with you long before this. Do you believe me?" the master asked gently. Obi-Wan bit his lip and looked away from the kind eyes regarding him.

"Do you?"

"I... I want to..." the boy answered meekly. Qui-Gon placed a finger under the boy's chin pulling his gaze back to him.

“Tell me then what doubts are still holding you back. Show me,” he asked and then...

The box opened.

\* \* \* \* \*

“He’s waking,” a voice said from what seemed to be some great distance. Qui-Gon struggled to open eyes that seemed to have heavy weights attached to their lids. It was like he was emerging from a deep pit, bits of consciousness filtering in as he approached the light of the surface world. Finally, he was able to open his eyes.

“It is good to see you, my friend. We thought that we had lost you,” a familiar baritone emanating from his left said. Qui-Gon followed the sound and after several blinks managed to turn the blurry image into that of Mace Windu.

“Wha...” he rasped, his throat feeling as if he had spent the last week swallowing sand. A swift movement to his right caught his attention as he turned to find the orange eyes of Master Songe regarding him thoughtfully as he offered a glass of water for him to drink. Qui-Gon sipped from the proffered cup gratefully before leaning back onto his pillows, weary from the minor exertion. Songe held the master’s gaze for a moment longer.

“How do you feel, Qui-Gon?”

“Tired,” the long-haired master answered truthfully. “What happened?” he asked. He watched as the healer and Councilor shared a significant glance before Mace turned to him to speak.

“What do you remember?”

“I...” Qui-Gon started as he searched his mind for the appropriate recollections. His eyes widened in fear and he surged up griping Mace’s hand.

“Obi-Wan!” he yelled. Mace grabbed hold of the hand holding him attempting to ease the painfully hard grip.

“He is... well, Qui-Gon,” Mace answered carefully. Qui-Gon relaxed his vice like hold.

“Then... it worked? He is awake?” he asked. It was Songe who answered.

“Yes, it worked. You were able to pull him out of his coma, but somehow you suffered a major backlash of his emotions and memories. It sent you into psychic shock. Do you have any memory of that?” Songe inquired his tone having none of the ire of their last conversation, but also none of the warmth the healer usually employed. Qui-Gon closed his eyes, his head dropping to his chest.

"I asked him to show me his doubt... To tell me why he could not believe that I wanted him as a padawan. I... wasn't ready... I didn't expect..."

"What? What did he show you? What did you sense?" Mace asked.

"Grief. Despair. Shame. Pain. Such pain," Qui-Gon whimpered slightly as he looked up to his friend. "He's been hiding such pain and... I never knew. I'm his master and I never knew, Mace."

"Oh, Qui-Gon..." the Councilor whispered not knowing what to say to ease his friend's pain.

"Where is he, Mace? I need... I need to see him. I need to tell him..."

"I'm afraid that's not possible..."

"What? Why? You said it worked, that he recovered!"

"Yes, he recovered," Songe answered hesitantly. "But... you have been unconscious for four days, Master Jinn."

"Four days..." Qui-Gon repeated. He turned his attention back to Mace. "Please, let me see him," the master pleaded. Mace felt a small part of his own heart break to see the desperation and anguish in the other master's eyes.

"Qui, Obi-Wan resigned from the Order. We asked him not to, we asked him to at least stay until you recovered, but... He's gone, Qui-Gon."

"Where?" he whispered.

"We... don't know. He didn't tell us. I am so sorry, Qui."

Qui-Gon closed his eyes the full weight of his despair crushing against his soul. He felt strangely hollow, empty. The once vibrant light in his mind that was their training bond lay dark, dormant, a withered and discarded carapace from another time.

He was once again alone.

Obi-Wan was gone.

## **Epilogue**

Several weeks later...

Qui-Gon once again settled into a meditation pose underneath the vast collection of holographic stars and planets above him. He did as he had done for weeks now silently gazing at the wide, slow moving representation of the galaxy. Only one dared disturb the broken-hearted master who kept his quiet vigil in the star map room and even he, wizened Jedi that he was, was unable to penetrate the deep, abiding sorrow that filled the younger master's being. So, his Jedi brothers and sisters let him be, hoping that in time the master would find some peace, find some solace... But Qui-Gon wasn't looking for peace. He wasn't looking for solace. He was looking for only one thing. He was looking for Obi-Wan.

Every day he came here and meditated hoping that the Force would show him where he could find his lost padawan. Every day he uttered the same prayer, now a somber mantra.

"Force please, guide me to him. I beg you... help me find my padawan."

Every day he asked this of the Force and every day the Force answered with silence. The Force had abandoned him, offering him no answers and each day the master found himself believing more and more that it never would.

**Fin.**