A Promise is Forever

by nic

Summary

Qui-Gon and marriage, deliberations on love, angst and an explosion.

Notes

Category: possible angst, romance, drama, first-time (in a sense) [I have trouble classifying things. :) ]


Archive: M_A

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Disclaimer: The characters and universe contained within are the property of George Lucas and his empire.

Notes: This story is *different* from much other Q/O fic. It's very dialogue-heavy in parts and it deals with homophobia. If you don't want to read about our beloved characters on both sides of the issue, avoid this story.
Having said that, "A Promise is Forever" does introduce a 20th century perspective on the Jedi. I make no apologies for this - it's something I wanted to explore. I do apologise for using some contrived situations and coincidences.

Thank you to Eshva who did a wonderful beta job last year. Every suggestion was muchly appreciated and I feel the quality of the story has been improved due to the changes.

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A Promise is Forever

by By Jedi Nic (JediNic@bigfoot.com)

Qui-Gon Jinn stood nervously at the pulpit, wringing his hands together. Before him was a sea of faces, all watching him expectantly and he found himself wondering why; for some strange reason, his mind refused to concentrate on anything. Jedi Master Tel Akuna, renowned spiritual adviser, slowly intoned the words of the bonding that had been passed down over the centuries and the noise was a pleasant distraction to Qui-Gon's ears.

He couldn't quite believe he was here. It gave him an eerie sensation to be taking part in the ancient rites. Qui-Gon glanced over and noticed that Mace Windu, too, was trembling. Hiding a small smile, Qui-Gon again marvelled over the fact that Mace had actually decided to get married. The two had known each other for decades and always, Mace had been adamant that he would never undergo a formal ceremony. He'd declared that he was married to his way of life and no love would ever change his mind.

Of course, everything was so different now. Mace looked resplendent in his best Jedi robes and remembering his own appearance in the mirror, Qui-Gon felt he looked marginally presentable. Obi-Wan had certainly agreed, not saying so with words, but the shy look of adoration was more than enough for Qui-Gon to know. Jedi, so often in formless garments, wore only the best for a wedding.

As he thought of Obi-Wan, a small pang shot through his heart. Obi-Wan would have so loved to
have been a part of this ceremony but Mace didn't want it. Qui-Gon shot a quick glance at the congregation, seeing the calm face of his apprentice in the second row. Obi-Wan didn't often smile - he was a very serious young man - and Qui-Gon couldn't help but wish Obi-Wan would show just a little joy at this occasion.

"Qui-Gon Jinn," intoned Tel Akuna, "are you prepared?"

"Yes Master," he answered her reverently, with the respect the formal ceremony deserved. He turned to face Mace, who held out his hands.

From a pocket of his own voluminous robe, Qui-Gon produced the small jewellery box which contained the ring. Almost worshipfully, he brought it out and held it high. "The symbol of love," he recited, as he had been taught. He quickly met Mace's eyes, seeing a little fear in them, but the fear was overshadowed by love. This was the moment.

The ring flashed in the streaming sunlight for a moment and then Qui-Gon bought it down to Mace's outstretched hands. "May the Force be with you, my friend," he said, and the ring was accepted with a grateful smile. Mace then turned to face Jedi Marisse Tulla, his beautiful bride. Qui-Gon almost breathed a sigh of relief. His part of the ceremony was over and he hadn't done anything to embarrass either himself or his long-time friend. He could now enjoy watching the rest of the wedding.

Marisse's attendant repeated the short ritual Qui-Gon had just completed by passing the bride's ring to her. More serious words were uttered, the rings were exchanged, and then finally, Tel Akuna pronounced the two Jedi bonded now and forever more. Hearing the words brought a memory to Qui-Gon and he smiled wistfully, remembering a time almost forgotten. Many weddings he had seen in his life, but at age forty-one, he did not think he would be given the chance to take part in his own rites. He'd made a decision - and a promise - so long ago.

Marisse and Mace kissed, which brought a joyous round of applause from the typically subdued Jedi along with the other guests. Even Yoda was clapping happily to see his fellow Council member finally married. All knew the match would not hinder Mace in his duties; he would remain the same dour person, but now with a wife to love and be with.

The formal procession from the temple began to assemble itself and Qui-Gon took his place second in line behind the newly married couple. He linked his arm with the attendant Arcadia and together, they followed. The procession did not move very quickly, every person seemed to want to stop and kiss both Mace and Marisse in congratulations, and the embraces did not stop with the new couple. Qui-Gon was hugged and kissed by several exuberant relatives of Marisse's before he reached Obi-Wan.

"Master," the young man said formally, but there was an impish glint in his eyes as he took Qui-Gon's hands and then gave him a quick, innocent kiss on the cheek. "The ceremony went well."

"It did indeed, Padawan," Qui-Gon replied sedately. His eyes locked with Obi-Wan's and a moment of closeness flared between them before the procession forced him to move on.

The celebrations lasted well into the night. Qui-Gon, who had been delegated the role of official welcomer and supporter, was feeling tired as he crept back to his chair at the bridal table. He always knew Mace would follow tradition to the hilt and had been prepared for it, but after an endless evening of speeches and socialising, Qui-Gon was ready to go home.

Yet the guests were still dancing even though the music had slowed substantially. After the bridal
waltz (it had been quite amusing seeing Mace attempt to dance when he obviously had two left feet) and then the wedding party's formal dance, the music had become slightly more upbeat. Qui-Gon had been faced with a string of partners, some were his Jedi colleagues, but most were unattached women from either Mace's or Marisse's families. He hadn't the heart to refuse them, and besides, it was a little comforting to know that at his age, people still found him attractive. Then again, Qui-Gon had a mild suspicion that his Jedi colleagues thought that he should be married off and were using subtle mind tricks to push women in his direction. Ethics were often confusing when it came to matters of emotion.

Obi-Wan, too, had been dancing and of that Qui-Gon was glad. His apprentice knew few people at the reception apart from the members of the Jedi Council, whom Obi-Wan was a little in awe of anyway. Still, Marisse had several young cousins who had made sure Obi-Wan wasn't lonely. Qui-Gon reflected that he had a very attractive young apprentice.

So lost in his thoughts was Qui-Gon that he didn't notice when Obi-Wan sidled up to him, almost surreptitiously, to stand at his side. "Dance with me, Master?" he whispered, his voice low and seductive in Qui-Gon's ear.

A smile crept over Qui-Gon's face, a smile that was too betraying and Qui-Gon was suddenly glad of the dim lighting. "I would be honoured, Obi-Wan," he replied formally and was drawn to his feet by two strong hands. He followed Obi-Wan to a shadowy corner, past the many couples now locked together during what was surely the final set of the evening.

Qui-Gon grasped Obi-Wan's hand in his own, while placing the other gently on his apprentice's waist. Obi-Wan mirrored the motion and soon they were swaying to the soft music, the picture of decorum to any outside observer. They did not look at each other, merely content to dance quietly in the shadows.

"This is nice," Obi-Wan murmured after a while. "I did not know if I would ever get you to myself today."

"Obi-Wan, I am always yours," Qui-Gon replied sincerely. Reaching out with the Force he sensed that no one was remotely interested in them and so he felt free to wrap his arms around his padawan. Obi-Wan sighed contentedly as he leaned into the embrace, resting his head on Qui-Gon's shoulder.

"The bonding ceremony was beautiful, didn't you think?" he asked softly.

"Yes it was," Qui-Gon replied. "Most fitting of two Jedi pledged to each other."

"For life," Obi-Wan finished and Qui-Gon became suddenly worried at the tone he heard in the young man's voice.

"Obi-Wan," he began, intending to warn him, but Obi-Wan paid no attention.

"Have you ever thought about it?"

"About what?" Qui-Gon decided to pretend innocence. But his persistent apprentice would not give up. "About a formal bonding. Between us."

Obi-Wan lifted his head to look at Qui-Gon, the desire and apprehension clear in his eyes. Qui-Gon hated to betray his trust but there was nothing he could do.

"Obi-Wan, I am sorry, but that is a topic I am not comfortable with." Qui-Gon leaned down to gently kiss his padawan's lips, hoping to distract him from the subject. For a while it seemed to be working; Obi-Wan leaned into the soft kiss and then smiled blissfully as it was tenderly broken.
"I know your reservations, master. The Council, our age difference, social acceptance, I have considered these as well. But I ask of you, please, think of it?"

There was no way Qui-Gon could refuse the earnest young face before him. Even with the dim lighting, Qui-Gon could see the love shining from Obi-Wan's eyes. "I will consider it," he conceded and was rewarded with another beautiful smile. It almost broke Qui-Gon's heart, for he was lying to the boy yet again.

"Dance with me, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said as he again pulled Obi-Wan close as the song meandered wistfully through the last few bars, and then ended. A light caress of Obi-Wan's face, a last wistful kiss to his forehead, and the pair reluctantly parted, assuming their expected formal positions as the lights came up and the night drew to a close.

Obi-Wan closed his eyes, feeling the Force surrounding him. If he truly reached, he could actually see the energies, not necessarily as they were but as he interpreted them; streams of pure light wrapping around him. Moving his arms through the ritual positions of a meditation exercise, Obi-Wan felt strong yet calm. He was content, even as he arched in the dance of the Force.

Life had been good to him of late. For years Obi-Wan had loved his master, firstly as a form of hero-worship, then as a dear friend, and now it was something more. He loved Qui-Gon the man in a romantic sense. After trying to hide his feelings for quite some time, it had been both a relief and a reward to admit his love to Qui-Gon, who had returned the sentiment with equal passion. Obi-Wan had never been more surprised in his life to hear the words, "I love you, Obi-Wan," fall from his master's lips.

Since that magical evening several months ago, things had progressed slowly, sedately, as was the way of the Jedi. It was six weeks before they even kissed, and the first had been only the merest brushing of lips. Qui-Gon had preferred to concentrate on the emotional side of their relationship rather than the physical and the pair had spent many hours in dual meditation, reaching out to each other through the Force and allowing the pure stream of connection to elevate them to a higher plane of love.

Their relationship was gradual but Obi-Wan did not mind. Knowing that he was loved was enough and even though he was an active young man driven by the desires that accompanied his age, Obi-Wan had no trouble mastering these through careful manipulation of the Force, which caused Qui-Gon to become all the more proud of him.

Closeness increased by little steps. Qui-Gon had taught Obi-Wan just how erotic, and how passionate, mere kissing could be. Obi-Wan smiled at the memories, knowing that there would be future occurrences of such actions, and someday, they would progress beyond kissing and gentle touching. He looked forward to it, with serenity, of course. Qui-Gon was constantly telling him to appreciate the moment.

And that was what he was supposed to be doing now, Obi-Wan reflected to himself as he outstretched his arms above himself. Concentrate on the moment, feel the ripples of the Force, see them.

He could see the bright centre of himself, pulsing a deep blue highlighted with hints of vibrant purple. Expanding his vision to encompass the white streams of Force light, Obi-Wan could see the warm glow of his master's form in the next room. Serenity was the colour, green and deep, but with a reddish hue of love Obi-Wan knew was directed at him. For long moments Obi-Wan watched Qui-Gon's Force aura while continuing with the meditation.
Suddenly, Obi-Wan noticed a faint ripple in the Force - almost a shadow that seemed to be coming from beyond their room. Obi-Wan reached for it but could find nothing and wondered if he had imagined it, until he sensed Qui-Gon's reaction. Qui-Gon had tensed. More than that, there was a fear emanating from him, but a fear mixed with wonder. Obi-Wan snapped out of meditation and jumped to his feet.

"Master?" he called, hesitantly. Qui-Gon was slow to respond, which caused Obi-Wan to think that perhaps he'd overreacted to something taking place far from here.

"Yes, my Obi-Wan?" Qui-Gon asked as he approached, a gentle smile on his face. If the endearment was intended to distract Obi-Wan, it worked only momentarily. Obi-Wan tried to reach for his master's mind but quickly came across a tight shield. He was about to ask about it when the door chime rang.

Obi-Wan looked at Qui-Gon. "Are you going to answer it?"

Qui-Gon had closed his eyes and again, Obi-Wan received the impression that something was very, very wrong. His heart beating a little faster, Obi-Wan approached the door and opened it while Qui-Gon composed himself.

Expecting to see all manner of terrible things, Obi-Wan was surprised to be presented with the image of a middle-aged woman who was smiling broadly. "Hello," she said simply.

"Good afternoon," Obi-Wan replied with automatic politeness. "Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for-" and then she broke off as Qui-Gon approached. Their eyes met. And pure tension, or energy, crackled between them.

Obi-Wan excused himself to one side, but neither noticed. Qui-Gon and the woman just continued staring and it was an action that Obi-Wan found very disconcerting, frightening, even, because his master was completely blocking him and he had no idea what was going on. Who was this woman? An old lover? A relation, perhaps? Obi-Wan fervently prayed for the latter.

"Bella," Qui-Gon breathed, finally breaking the silence. "I thought you were dead!"

The woman, Bella, smiled warmly as she finally left the haven of the door and hesitantly embraced Qui-Gon. "Oh, it is so good to see you!" she said softly. "I have much to tell you...."

Bella pulled back, as if suddenly remembering that Obi-Wan was in the room and now was not the time for intimate conversation.

Qui-Gon, for his part, still looked stunned. He needed prompting from Bella to remember to introduce Obi-Wan, who had sidled protectively close to his master and placed a possessive hand on his arm. "This is my Ob... ah, my apprentice," Qui-Gon amended at the last moment. "My apprentice, Obi-Wan Kenobi. Obi-Wan, meet Bella."

No other name was given and the omission caused Obi-Wan to become even more concerned. It was bad enough that Qui-Gon was hiding their own relationship, but to hide who Bella truly was? Never had Obi-Wan felt so betrayed by the man he loved. "Master," he began but Qui-Gon quickly interrupted.

"Padawan, Bella and I have much to discuss." It was a clear dismissal and it hurt.

"I shall leave you alone, Master," he said respectfully, but shot Qui-Gon a pain-filled glance. //Who is she?// he asked through their bond as he walked towards the door.
There was no answer until he was outside the exit, about to key it shut. And then came the reluctant, almost sorrowful answer. //My wife.//

His wife! The notion echoed through Obi-Wan's mind a thousand times and there was nothing he could do to shut it off. He felt the most terrible sense of betrayal although part of him recognised that he had no such right to feel this way. Qui-Gon had led a long and full life well before he ever met Obi-Wan and while Obi-Wan did not often like to dwell upon this fact which so obviously highlighted their age differences, nonetheless he now realised he should have asked more questions. Qui-Gon was everything to him and surely he had a right to know more of his master's past?

Qui-Gon was married. Obi-Wan still couldn't quite grasp the fact, nor did he want to accept it. A terrible fear was growing within him, fear over why Qui-Gon had kept this hidden for so long, fear over why Qui-Gon had dismissed him so quickly with Bella's surprise arrival. And fear because Qui-Gon had quite deliberately cut off the natural bond that existed between them - Obi-Wan could not even sense the man's emotions. As his master's Padawan, not to mention love, Obi-Wan felt he should be there to learn the truth.

He paced back and forwards through the Temple gardens, the soothing greens doing nothing to calm his heart. Obi-Wan knew that Qui-Gon was uncomfortable with publicising their relationship and perhaps Bella's arrival would give him an excuse to reduce it back to what it was, before they allowed romantic love to intrude. There would still be love, but of the formal kind, a love appropriate only for a master apprentice pair and no more.

Every fibre in Obi-Wan's body screamed No! at the possibility. It was the last thing he wanted. And so he paced, for hours on end, trying desperately not to think about the inevitable conversation that would soon take place, or the reunion which was happening right now.

Finally, the call came. Qui-Gon's voice was emotionless, more of an instruction than anything else when Obi-Wan heard the words on his comlink. Drawing his cloak tightly around him, Obi-Wan fought the impulse to run through the corridors and maintained a steady pace fitting of a Jedi, but each heartbeat seemed to match his footsteps in an inexorable march towards doom.

When he finally reached the doors to their quarters, Obi-Wan did not want to go in. He paused, staring at the doors, wondering how much longer he would be permitted entry here. They were large quarters, with two bedrooms, but for several months now Obi-Wan had shared Qui-Gon's bed. He did not know if he could go back to sleeping alone.

Qui-Gon barely looked up when his apprentice finally entered the room. The master was sitting close to Bella, and the sight of his hand clasped over the woman's sent a pang through Obi-Wan's heart. What was worse was the amazed smile that tugged at the corners of Qui-Gon's mouth.

"Master?" Obi-Wan began, his voice hesitant.

"Ah, Padawan. Please sit." The tone was so formal, so distant, and Obi-Wan had no choice but to obey as he pulled up a chair to seat himself opposite the reunited couple. He wanted desperately to ask questions but kept his silence until Qui-Gon himself began to speak.

"I am afraid I did not properly introduce you before, Obi-Wan. This is Bella Jinn, my wife." Qui-Gon paused for a moment as another bemused smile crossed his face. "Bella was lost to me many years ago. I did not think I would see her again." It was plain to see that Qui-Gon was delighted to
be reunited with Bella.

Obi-Wan bowed his head in a respectful greeting, grateful for the chance to hide his eyes for a moment. It hurt to look at Qui-Gon, it hurt so much!, and Qui-Gon wasn't even looking back at him to see the obvious pain in his apprentice's eyes. It was a pain Obi-Wan would do his best to hide.

"I am honoured to meet you," and then he hesitated. What to call her? Mrs Jinn? The title sounded awkward.

As if she'd read his mind, which was entirely possible, she said, "Please, call me Bella. I'm sure we'll get to know each other quite well as time goes by - Qui-Gon has explained that you're almost a son to him." There was a tinge of hurt in her words, perhaps she regretted the idea of Qui-Gon's son that was not her own, but Obi-Wan barely noticed this. He was burning with anger over being called a son. A son does not share his father's bed. A son does not love in the way he loved Qui-Gon.

Bella shot a look at Qui-Gon and he seemed to answer some unspoken question. "Obi-Wan, do you mind sleeping on the couch tonight and letting Bella have your room?"

Clever manipulation, Master, Obi-Wan thought bitterly as he answered with a subdued, "Of course." As if he had any choice of refusal.

"We shall later decide where you shall live, Obi-Wan. Bella and I will need to become re-acquainted but rest assured, we will not turn you out on the street."

How could he be so cold, Obi-Wan wondered. He desperately reached out through the Force, trying to reach anything of the man he loved, but was greeted with a thick wall. Fighting the growing ache inside, Obi-Wan forced himself to clamp down on the emotions. If Bella was the least bit Force sensitive, which was highly likely given that Qui-Gon had once promised to share his life with this woman, there was no way Obi-Wan wanted her picking up on his unjustified hatred. He reached desperately for the Force, for serenity, for something to keep him alive during the next few hours of agony. And as for the rest of his life...it was something Obi-Wan didn't even want to contemplate at this stage.

Bella was smiling at him warmly. "I look forward to getting to know you, Obi-Wan. I am sure you will be as great a Jedi as your master someday."

"I shall certainly do my best," replied Obi-Wan, woodenly, wondering just when Qui-Gon would start paying attention to him. Or maybe it was a matter of if. Finally, he decided to take the initiative, to be bold and ask some of the questions that were racing through his mind. The things he most wanted to ask, however, could not be said in Bella's presence. He still owed Qui-Gon the illusion of privacy because he loved the man, even if he had been so callously dropped.

"I am curious, Bella, about your sudden reappearance. Forgive my boldness, but Master Qui-Gon has told me little and..." He was babbling, Obi-Wan realised, and broke off, daring to meet Bella's eyes.

"I suspect Qui-Gon told you nothing at all," Bella said warmly. "He always was such a private person, much as I was. I expect that is why we are so well matched." She gentle brushed her free hand over Qui-Gon's. Obi-Wan purposely did not look at the gesture.

"We were married many years ago, perhaps before you were born." Bella gave him a long, appraising look. "I worked for the Agri Corps - I have some Force insight but I know I am not meant to be a Jedi."
"Bella is naturally gifted in botany," Qui-Gon interrupted. "She can make anything grow marvellously."

"About ten years ago," Bella continued, "I was en route to Minnawe, a planet on the far edge of our galaxy, when the transport ship encountered difficulties. I was fortunate to reach an escape pod before the ship exploded, and my pod was trapped by the gravity of a nearby planet."

Obi-Wan nodded, not really caring about the circumstances. The woman resumed her tale. "However, the pod was damaged upon impact and my communications device destroyed. The planet I had landed upon - I call it Raindor - is not a member of the Republic. Its inhabitants are a simple race, without space travel technology, and they have little contact with others as they are so spatially isolated."

"All this time we thought Bella was dead and she was merely trapped," interjected Qui-Gon again. "I am so sorry, Bella, I should have searched harder...."

She gave him a warm smile and Obi-Wan had the awful feeling that he was intruding on an intensely private moment. Ten years ago he hadn't even known Qui-Gon, the man had been only a name whispered about the Temple. Ten years ago, about the time that Qui-Gon had lost Xanatos to the dark side and gone for a long sojourn away from everything he knew. Obi-Wan now knew, even more so, what a dark time that had been for his master. No wonder he rarely spoke of it.

"Qui-Gon, I do not blame you," Bella said softly. "It was the will of the Force that brought me to Raindor. I was able to do incredible things there, I truly helped people in need. It was an experience I shall never forget. And I held your memory dear for all of that time."

"And now you're here," Obi-Wan suddenly interrupted before the conversation that so clearly excluded him grew even more intense.

"Yes," Bella replied, sounding a little startled, almost as if she'd forgotten Obi-Wan was in the room. "A scouting party landed on the planet to make first contact. They were most surprised to find me there, and naturally offered me passage home. I was sad to leave the dear friends I had made, but I had someone to see." Again, that secret, sidelong smile that made Obi-Wan want to die.

"Couldn't you have called in advance?" Obi-Wan snapped and this time there was no hiding the tone of his voice. "This is a great shock...to both of us."

Qui-Gon shot him a look. "Padawan, that is enough. Do not question Bella's actions."

"I wanted to see him for the first time with my own eyes," explained Bella gently. Again there was that unspoken communication between Qui-Gon and Bella, and then the woman got to her feet.

"I will give you some time alone to discuss this with your apprentice, Qui-Gon."

"Thank you, Bella." It was obvious they both thought Obi-Wan deserved a reprimand, but it was not Bella's place to voice such a concern.

The moment Bella was out of the room and the door closed, Obi-Wan reached across to grasp Qui-Gon's hand. "Why?" he implored, saying everything, saying nothing, with that one question.

Qui-Gon stared at the beautiful man before him, feeling his heart breaking a little more with every
passing second. He loved Obi-Wan without reservation and it pained him deeply to be hurting the younger man in this way. But there was nothing else to be done. He could only hope that Obi-Wan would someday understand.

"I am sorry, Obi-Wan." The apology sounded trite even to his own years.

"Sorry for what, Master? Sorry that you have completely cut me off for the past few hours? Sorry that you have decided to end our relationship without even consulting me? Sorry that you pretended to love me all this time while you were secretly pining away for your wife?"

"Obi-Wan, I never pretended," Qui-Gon said gravely, hoping his apprentice would believe him. "I do love you. I love you more than anything else. But our relationship cannot continue." He sighed, realising he had not yet answered Obi-Wan's question. "I am sorry for not telling you about Bella. It was wrong of me to keep that hidden."

Obi-Wan shot him a look, and there were tears in the blue-green eyes. "I understand, Master, that it was too painful for you to remember."

Another pang shot through Qui-Gon's heart as he realised that Obi-Wan, even in the face of such a betrayal, still knew him and accepted him as he was. More than that, he knew he owed Obi-Wan an explanation.

"You are right. During those months I almost went mad with grief and my failure haunted me. I believed I had failed Xanatos and I knew I had failed my wife. We hadn't been together in months, I recall, for our duties often kept us apart. Our marriage had become nothing more than words spoken many years ago - and do you know what the worst of it was, Obi-Wan?"

"It took three months for me to realise that Bella was missing. Three entire months before I organised a search party and by then the ship's debris was scattered far and wide. There was little trace of anything but that did not stop me searching; I was driven by a maddening sense of guilt."

"It was not your fault, Master," Obi-Wan offered, and Qui-Gon sensed the young man was trying to slip through his mental shields, offering support and comfort.

"I vowed that if I were ever given a second chance, I would make it up to her," Qui-Gon said, his voice low and fervent. "Please understand this, Obi-Wan." He took Obi-Wan's hands in his own, pressing them to his lips in what was probably the last intimate kiss he would ever give this man. "I made a promise, firstly when I married Bella that I would love her until we were parted by death. And I renewed my promise when I lost her, vowing that if we were ever re-united I would treat our marriage with the respect it deserved. I would honour her, be faithful to her, and never abandon her as I once did."

"Master," and Obi-Wan was imploring him, "things have changed. I love you. You love me. How can you throw that away on a promise made years ago?"

Qui-Gon sighed, heavily, painfully. "I believe that a promise is forever, my Obi-Wan."

"That's why you would never commit to a formal bond." Obi-Wan's voice was stunned, hurt, and he pulled his hands free of Qui-Gon's and stared at him with accusations in his eyes.

"I am sorry," Qui-Gon said weakly, knowing the apology would not make any difference. He just prayed that Obi-Wan would accept this as truth and not press him for more. Because there was more to the story, things that Qui-Gon had difficulty even accepting himself.

For every time he thought seriously about his relationship with Obi-Wan, he recalled the things
he’d been taught as a child, and the beliefs he’d held close when he grew up. His home planet had extolled these beliefs to such a point where any other opinion was almost unthinkable, despite its validity. Marriage for humans was between a man and a woman. Intercourse was for purposes of procreation, an act performed in loving communion with one’s wife and the Force.

And both of these beliefs had been severely tested when he realised he loved Obi-Wan in the romantic sense. Qui-Gon still couldn’t throw the convictions away completely - they were a part of him and had been so for all of his life. The entire Order of the Jedi agreed with him to the point of declaring love between the Jedi as something that never needed to progress beyond gentle kisses and touches unless children were desired.

The younger generation, of course, had their own points of view which Obi-Wan was fond of expounding, and Qui-Gon knew that attitudes were always changing. Still, he could not let Obi-Wan know of his feelings, because in truth he disgusted even himself for thinking these things. The beliefs laid an unsubstantiated taint on what Qui-Gon knew was a beautiful relationship between himself and Obi-Wan, and to tell Obi-Wan would be to forever shatter the understanding that had grown between them.

"I am sorry too, Master," Obi-Wan finally replied, an edge to his voice. "I am sorry you’re not strong enough to let go of the past."

"I've been given a second chance to right my failures!" Qui-Gon protested. "I must honour Bella and do what is right. Please, Obi-Wan, tell me that you understand." He wanted desperately for his apprentice to look at him, to see that it pained him deeply to push Obi-Wan away. But there was nothing else to be done.

And suddenly, a wave of compassion and love came flooding along their master apprentice bond. "I - I do understand, Master." Obi-Wan took a deep breath. "I will respect your wishes. I will do as you ask and I shall treat your wife with the honour she is entitled to."

Qui-Gon just stared at Obi-Wan for a moment, wondering how one so young was so capable of such compassion. "Thank you," he said, his voice trembling. "It means so much to me to have your support." And then he was reaching out to Obi-Wan, enfolding the younger man in his arms, tears streaming down his cheeks as they clung to each other desperately in a final goodbye.

"Part of me will always love you," Qui-Gon managed, whispering into Obi-Wan's hair as he gently touched Obi-Wan's cheek, finding answering tears there.

"I will always love you, Qui-Gon," came the heartfelt reply.

"No, don’t," pleaded Qui-Gon softly. "I want you to be happy, I want you to find someone you deserve. Someone your own age, someone who can offer you so much more than I ever could." And as Qui-Gon pictured Obi-Wan with a sweet young lady, a pain stabbed through his heart which he quickly pounced on and tried to dissipate.

"Master, you were more than everything I wanted." And now Obi-Wan's words were softer, more resigned, and he pulled back just a little from the embrace. One hand left Qui-Gon's waist to wipe away his own tears. "I should go."

"You should," echoed Qui-Gon, not wanting to let go. He wanted to preserve this moment, it was the last time he could ever hold Obi-Wan this close. No more slow dancing in the shadows, no more nights wrapped in each other's arms. Nothing but a respectful formality as he completed Obi-Wan's training, and that, perhaps, would be the most difficult part of all: to see Obi-Wan every day while he was forever out of Qui-Gon's reach.
And then he was somehow stepping back, letting go of the one he loved, and saying goodbye.

"I shall find a place to stay with the other padawans," Obi-Wan offered. "Please apologise to your wife for me and tell her - tell her..."

"I will tell her that you have sacrificed your comfort to give us some time to become re-acquainted. Believe me, Obi-Wan, I shall tell her exactly what an honourable man you are." Qui-Gon managed a tiny smile.

"Then..." Stepping towards the door, Obi-Wan shrugged. "Goodbye." There was nothing more to say. Nothing to dissipate the awkward moment.

"Goodbye," Qui-Gon echoed, hating himself for the finality in his words. And Obi-Wan was gone.

It was a beautiful planet, quiet, tranquil, with shades of blue and green which softly filtered through the atmosphere, adding to an overall sense of peace. Upon the beach at the edge of an ocean Qui-Gon walked, his thoughts turned inwards as he reflected upon the past few years of his life.

In a few months, he would take the Trials and perhaps earn the rank of Jedi Knight. Qui-Gon was quietly confident that he would succeed although his master often whacked him with a stick and told him not to be so cocky. These interludes did not bother Qui-Gon, they merely prompted him to be mindful of the Force.

And mindful he was. He could see his future mapped clearly before him - he would pass the Trials and then serve the Council and the galaxy at large as one of their noblest Jedi Knights. He would be free from the emotional entanglements that seemed to plague his peers, and a small sigh escaped Qui-Gon's lips as he remembered the sad tale of his dear friend Par-Suay-Dee. Par had been weeks away from his Trials when he met a young woman on a backwater planet and fell hopelessly in love with her. He never returned to the Jedi.

It was because of the teachings, in part, that passion was not their way. Qui-Gon remembered the excited holo from Par which had shocked him, it seemed his friend had given into lust and expunged his Jedi soul. The Council members had gravely shaken their heads and felt fortunate that Par's tendencies had been revealed before it was too late.

Even more disturbing was the memory of Tarwen who had struck up an intimate friendship with another young man. While disapproval was never explicitly stated, he was ostracised from both the Jedi and parts of society until the relationship was discreetly dissolved.

A flash of light on the reef caught Qui-Gon's attention and he shook his head, trying to rid himself of the memories. He would not be caught in such a trap of love; he was bound to the entire galaxy and there could never be one person to whom he was promised.

He studied the reef, seeing how it swayed softly away from the shore. There was a distinct sense of aliveness emanating from it and Qui-Gon smiled as the sensations washed through him. Connection. The Force.

There was someone out there, walking on the water. He couldn't quite make out the figure but assumed it was a curious tourist enjoying the natural beauties of the reef. For a moment, Qui-Gon was disappointed that his solitude had been intruded upon, but then he realised the figure was far too away to make much difference. Qui-Gon returned his gaze to the ocean, embracing the
It was in that moment he heard the scream. His eyes snapped back to the reef to see the figure half hunched over, and he heard the scream again, realising this time that it wasn't a verbal scream but a mental shout. Without a second thought he threw off his robe and danced across the water to the sunken atoll. There was a creature, something gentle, a natural inhabitant of the reef, who had been hurt and Qui-Gon intended to make its attacker full well of what he or she was doing.

"Leave it be," Qui-Gon announced in his grandest voice as he stood firmly on an outcrop of coral, drawing on the Force just a little to keep his balance. The figure - he couldn't quite decide which species it was, given that it appeared to have viscid green hair - turned and gave a feminine yelp of surprise. She then tumbled over backwards, trying desperately to keep her small specimen jar in the air.

Landing with a resounding splash which managed to drench Qui-Gon, the woman yelled triumphantly when she realised that the jar had not been damaged. Qui-Gon glared, his eyes fixated on the container which appeared to hold not only seaweed, but a harmless sea snake as well.

"You could help me up, seeing that you startled me so," said the woman, who appeared to have landed on a rock so that she was only half submerged. Qui-Gon suppressed a sigh and extended his hand, noting in surprise that green seaweed had tumbled from her head to reveal a much more normal auburn, albeit wet, cascading over her shoulders. There was an impish glint in her brown eyes as she suddenly laughed at herself. "I must look a sight."

"I am sorry for startling you," Qui-Gon said as he pulled the woman to her feet, noting that she was about his age, perhaps a few years older. Yet age meant nothing to the Jedi, and it certainly wouldn't undermine his authority. "However, I must ask you to release the creature that you have captured." Before the woman had a chance to protest, he had skilfully manipulated the jar from her hand and opened the lid. Inside, the small green sea-snake looked up at him with a baleful eye.

"Careful, he's hurt!" the woman protested.

Qui-Gon almost said something rude and sarcastic then, but held his tongue. "I only intend to help the creature." He frowned at the woman. "We must release it. All creatures are part of the living Force and to capture one is-

"You're a Jedi!" she interrupted, enlightenment dawning on her face. "Of course, I should have realised. No one else could have crossed the water like that." She gave him a broad smile and a half-bow. "My name is Bella Adeira."

"Qui-Gon Jinn," he replied, shortly and automatically as he returned the ritual bow. "I must insist that you release this poor creature."

"Oh, I can't do that," Bella instantly protested, snatching back the container.

"And why is that?" responded Qui-Gon, carefully keeping control of his emotions.

Bella reached inside the jar and gently stroked the back of the snake. "The poor little guy is hurt," she said. "I saw him get trapped in the seaweed and when he tried to pull himself free, he got spiked." Another caress and she sighed. "I was going to take him to the rehabilitation center when you showed up."

"You were helping him?"

"Of course I was helping him!" Bella replied. "What else could I have done?"
Qui-Gon just stared into the distance, positive he was becoming red with embarrassment. He focussed on the wafting rivers of seaweed and realised that the afternoon was wearing on. Soon it would be dark, for night fell quickly on this planet.

"I apologise for my haste," Qui-Gon finally admitted, "and I would be honoured if you would allow me to transport you back to shore before the sun sets."

Bella looked at him quizzically. "My raft is just over there...." Her voice trailed off as she looked behind her. "I must have walked further than I thought!" She laughed softly. "I get so caught up with my work sometimes that everything else becomes unimportant. Do you know what that is like?" She fixed him with her intense gaze.

"Yes," Qui-Gon found himself replying, "I do."

Dinner that night turned into a promise to meet again when Bella visited Coruscant in a few weeks. The rest was history.

It was three days before Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon spoke again. Much of those days Qui-Gon had spent in conversation with Bella, getting to know her all over again. The years had changed both of them in many ways and Qui-Gon often found himself struggling for some common ground. Only the day Bella brought home a small yellow creature she'd found lost on a lower level of the city convinced Qui-Gon that perhaps they did have a basis for connection. The creature was annoying, messy, but needy and Bella declared that she wasn't setting it free until it was healthy, no matter what noises it made.

It was enough to drive Qui-Gon mad with frustration until Bella pointed out that he would have done the exact same thing. The emotions, a mixture of old and new, were in constant flux.

Still, they were Jedi, and enfolded in the traditions of the ancient way of life, each was confident that their marriage was once again alive. Destiny had brought them back together and Qui-Gon believed there was a reason for this. And while he did love Bella, dearly, he occasionally wondered if he loved the Bella of old, or the Bella of new.

There was nothing of Bella he did not admire. She was good and kind with a pure heart and not above challenging those she did not agree with. She had the most 'spirited' discussion with Master Yoda one afternoon and the memory caused Qui-Gon to almost groan with embarrassment while admiring her tenacity. But, Qui-Gon had to admit to himself, he felt no passion for her. Which was as it should be, according to the Jedi way. Passion could lead to the dark side, but it was passion which had led him to Obi-Wan...

Qui-Gon cut off the thought as soon as it had arisen. There was no point in agonising over what was the past and what could not be. He hadn't spent ten years mooning over Bella after her loss and he would certainly not do her the disservice of mourning his relationship with Obi-Wan.

Besides, Obi-Wan was far from presumed dead. There was a training to be completed. Qui-Gon's sense of honour bound him to do just that, even if it was under the most awkward of circumstances.

He left a message for Obi-Wan, surprised that his padawan wasn't easily contactable. And then Mace Windu came to visit.

"I am deeply concerned, Qui-Gon," Mace said formally after the greetings had been dispensed
"Your padawan is experiencing much difficulty in accepting the arrival of your wife."

"He came to you?" Qui-Gon was shocked.

Mace shook his head in the negative. "He did not need to come to me. I observed his behaviour in class today, and then afterwards in the gardens. He walked for hours by himself and it was not the walk of an apprentice communing with the Force." Mace's voice took on a darker tone. "It was the walk of a young man who has just had his heart broken."

And oh, how it hurt Qui-Gon to hear that.

"I had long suspected that your apprentice had a crush on you. It was remiss of you not to deal with it," Mace stated. He stared intently at Qui-Gon, who was forced to break the contact.

"Obi-Wan is a young man, given to whims and odd desires," Qui-Gon said by way of explanation.

Mace only frowned even more. "You know the code of the Jedi, Qui-Gon, and you know it forbids inappropriate relationships."

"And what defines inappropriate?" Qui-Gon found himself arguing. "Anything that is not between two Jedi?"

Mace did not answer, but nodded sagely. "Two adult Jedi, prepared for a lifetime commitment," he granted. "I hardly think a mere padawan could know what he wants. Especially when that desire is for someone with whom he could never form a family."

Even though Mace didn't come out and say it, the implication was clearly there. Anger rose within Qui-Gon - how could Mace, recently married, be so hypocritical when it came to love? "Do you intend to start a family with Marisse?"

"No," Mace answered.

"Then it could be said that your relationship is inappropriate!" The outrage in Qui-Gon was now obvious and he prayed that Mace would not suspect the true reason behind it.

"Qui-Gon, are you defending the boy? Surely you know it is your duty to keep him on the path to serenity, as is our way."

"Or it is my duty to keep him celibate or find him a suitable young woman?" Qui-Gon near parroted, quoting the Jedi Master's manual he'd been forced to accept quite some time ago, and read when his feelings for Obi-Wan manifested themselves. "Do not worry, Mace, I have encouraged him in the latter. But it is his choice and his choice alone. No one can dictate the feelings of the heart." His words were vehement and Mace appeared affronted.

"The Force guides us, not our hearts."

"Ah, but the Force lives in our hearts," Qui-Gon countered. "Mace, listen to yourself! Why are we fighting over love? I know you love Marisse despite your words to the contrary. Cannot you accept that everyone experiences this 'failing'?"

Mace sighed heavily. "You are right, my old friend." Suddenly Qui-Gon understood. Mace was the only member of the Jedi Council to be married and, by the implications in Jedi teachings, now considered himself weaker than his peers.

"Love is not something we catalogue, nor can we ignore it," Qui-Gon continued. "Love just is."
And as he said these words, a revelation of sorts came over Qui-Gon. There was nothing wrong or harmful about his love for Obi-Wan. Nothing at all. If, in a universe of billions, two souls had managed to find each other, then why should an ancient creed keep them apart?

And Mace was actually smiling him; perhaps he picked up on Qui-Gon's warm feelings towards love. "Then I am glad that you and Bella have been reunited so that you may experience this love you believe in. And-

"And you believe in it too, although you will not admit it to anyone," Qui-Gon concluded, attempting a light banter so that he would not dwell on what Mace had just said, but it was already too late. Bella did not light up his world in the way Obi-Wan did...

"We have become distracted." Thankfully, Mace interrupted Qui-Gon's all-too-disturbing train of thought. "Qui-Gon, you must go to Obi-Wan and talk to him. Explain to him that a relationship between you can never be, not necessarily because you are his master or a man," he added quickly, seeing the returning glare in Qui-Gon's eyes, "but because you are married to Bella."

"I will do so," Qui-Gon acquiesced. But he didn't think it would have any effect, because that conversation had already been had. There would be no simple resolution to this.

Obi-Wan's heart was beating wildly as he read the message from Qui-Gon - to meet his master in a training room for an evening's instruction in lightsaber drill. Perhaps it wasn't the best lesson to begin with after the self-enforced separation, but at least the nature of the action would preclude verbal interaction. Obi-Wan didn't know if he could handle another heart-to-heart talk with his master, the man he was not supposed to love anymore.

There was no way Obi-Wan could just switch off the emotion. He wanted Qui-Gon more than anything else and to have him so close would be a mixture of rapture and agony. And when his master stepped through the door, Obi-Wan lost his breath for a moment. Qui-Gon looked so real, not the insubstantial man who'd haunted his dreams of late. The towering form, the silky hair, the expressive blue eyes...Obi-Wan swallowed, forcing the emotions deep inside of him.

His feelings had to remain hidden, not only for his own sanity, but for Qui-Gon's happiness as well. Even at this distance, as they watched each other, Obi-Wan knew it pained his master to know that his apprentice was not happy. Qui-Gon would feel guilty as long as Obi-Wan loved him.

"Good evening, Master," he finally managed and bowed respectfully. Qui-Gon started and then returned the greeting, if not the sign of respect.

"We shall begin with the basic drills," Qui-Gon instructed quickly, before Obi-Wan could say anything more. And in all honesty, what could Obi-Wan say that hadn't already been said? They'd been through the arguments even before Bella arrived on the scene - Qui-Gon thought he was too old, and now he had Bella who was the perfect age, with whom Qui-Gon could gracefully grow. No more padawan with somewhat more excitable needs.

All of this flew through Obi-Wan's mind in mere seconds while he retained his outward composure. He ritually ignited his lightsaber and began the ancient dance, trying his utmost to concentrate on the movements and the flow of the Force, and nothing else.

As Obi-Wan continued the drill, he frowned in concentration. When had such simplistic moves become so complex? He was trying his hardest not to think about Qui-Gon but it was so difficult. He missed his master. He missed his love.
And as much as Obi-Wan tried to deny his feelings, he couldn't. He wanted more than anything to do as Qui-Gon requested but his traitorous heart wasn't letting him say goodbye. How could he so easily let go of the one person who was everything to him?

That was why Obi-Wan hadn't yet given up. He knew his own heart and he knew Qui-Gon's. It would just take time for Qui-Gon to come around. Obi-Wan kept telling himself that, because the alternative was unthinkable. Three days of absolute depression and misery were only the beginning.

"Obi-Wan!" It almost sounded as if Qui-Gon were snapping at him. "Where is your focus?"

Pausing with his lightsaber arced before him, Obi-Wan lowered his eyes. "I am sorry, my master." He was sure he saw Qui-Gon wince at the quasi-endearment. "I will begin the drill again."

Yet it seemed as if Qui-Gon sensed his frustration at his inability to perform something so ridiculously simple. "Never mind. Perhaps you would work better with a partner."

Oh, that was dangerous. Obi-Wan shot a look at Qui-Gon, wishing desperately that he knew what the other man was thinking. It would have been a simple matter to reach across their bond but neither had been doing much reaching lately. It wasn't appropriate, given the circumstances. So Obi-Wan could only stare at Qui-Gon and try to judge emotions from his countenance. Unfortunately, Qui-Gon was a master of hiding his feelings from everyone.

Qui-Gon disrobed, ignited his lightsaber and held it up in the classic first pose, which Obi-Wan rapidly mirrored. An unspoken signal and then they began, slashing and parrying, forward and back, a delicate yet deadly dance between them.

Suppressing an impulse to smile, Obi-Wan nonetheless felt a thrill of exhilaration coursing through his body. No matter what anyone said, there was something deeply personal and almost erotic about a lightsaber duel of such precision and intensity. Obi-Wan anticipated Qui-Gon's movements perfectly and likewise, the older man echoed Obi-Wan's own manoeuvres while throwing in the extra flourish or swing designed to confuse.

It never worked. Perhaps Qui-Gon too was having trouble concentrating on the art form of lightsaber battle. As Obi-Wan slashed he realised he felt almost a perverse form of pleasure in attacking Qui-Gon, the man who had so callously rejected him. In his mind, Obi-Wan wasn't only attacking his master, he was attacking Bella and the marriage and everything that had destroyed Obi-Wan's perfect world.

A particularly vicious parry caught Qui-Gon unaware and the Jedi Master stumbled momentarily. It was enough for Obi-Wan to manage to kick him off balance while still thrusting forwards, but Qui-Gon retaliated by way of hooking a foot around Obi-Wan's knee and bringing them both crashing down in a heap.

Obi-Wan lay on top of Qui-Gon, their eyes inches apart, both breathing heavily. It was the only sound in the empty room, the harsh, ragged breathing in unison as they just stared, so close. Close enough for Obi-Wan to be breathing Qui-Gon's exhaled breath. Close enough to kiss him.

Obi-Wan tightened his grip on Qui-Gon's arms, realising that his master was literally pinned beneath him. It was a heady feeling of power, he needed this control, and he needed this contact. He needed to heal the rift.

A wave of lust surged through Obi-Wan and he knew Qui-Gon felt the same thing. How could he not? After the duel Obi-Wan's blood was racing, his heart pounding, his senses on fire. All it would take was one tiny motion to bring his head down and seal the gap between them.
And then, at the very last moment, Qui-Gon turned his head to the side and Obi-Wan's lips grazed soft beard, nothing more. "No!" he burst out, softly, but with frustrated rage.

"Focus, Obi-Wan." Qui-Gon's voice was strained as he adopted the teaching tone. "You have your enemy down. What are you thinking?"

"How much I want to kiss him."

With a rough movement, Qui-Gon suddenly pushed Obi-Wan aside and jumped to his feet. "Enough!" he commanded. "Obi-Wan, we have discussed this matter. It is closed. Do you understand me?"

"No!" Obi-Wan replied hotly, scrambling to his own feet and struggling to regain his composure. "I do not understand. I have struggled with this for the past three days, Master. I cannot accept that you can turn off the feelings of your heart so easily."

"That is not the issue, Padawan. I have spoken of my reasons and I will have you accept them." Qui-Gon frowned. "The issue is your inability to control your emotions. If you cannot then I fear you can no longer be my apprentice."

The harsh words fell home. Obi-Wan stared at Qui-Gon in shock. It was bad enough to lose his love but to lose his master as well? To lose all contact between them? It was more than Obi-Wan could bear.

Swallowing all of his pride and all of his humiliation, Obi-Wan managed, "Then I ask you allow me the dignity of conquering these emotions alone." He stood ramrod straight as Qui-Gon acquiesced, picked up his robe, and left.

Obi-Wan swallowed, hard, trying to force the tears into non-existence. No matter how hard he tried, it still hurt, the rejection hurt beyond belief. And in that moment, Obi-Wan hated Bella with a passion. He wished she had never come back into Qui-Gon's life and destroyed everything that was right and good. He wished she was dead.

As soon as the thought was completed Obi-Wan gasped in horror. This was the Dark Side and the beginnings of corruption, the very thing he'd fought against for his entire life. But wasn't he entitled to be angry? What right did the universe have to give him something so precious and then take it away?

Obi-Wan couldn't look at the empty training room any longer. He needed to be free, he needed to be outside, and once free of the Jedi temple, Obi-Wan ran. He could not stand it anymore, the maelstrom of conflicting emotions, he had to get out, get away, go anywhere where the pain didn't exist anymore. He ran through the entire garden level of the Temple and then back again, all the while tears on his cheeks as he sought to leave the useless passion behind. Each step a desperate attempt to exorcise the love that could never be. Each breath a final goodbye.

And when he could run no more, he sank to the ground and emptied his mind into the Force. The pain would never leave him, he accepted that now, but little by little, it could be mellowed through meditation and the simple act of existence each day.

It was time to move on.

Qui-Gon closed her eyes, sensing his wife was mirroring the motion. He slowly extended his hands, reaching outwards until he touched Bella's palms, forming an arching bridge between
them. Deep breaths were taken, Qui-Gon feeling the familiar tingle of the Force, and he concentrated, reaching for Bella's mind, for a way to re-connect, for a memory of the past.

There. A time all but forgotten, one of a thousand memories of their married life.

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"I have been entrusted a new padawan learner!" was the first thing Qui-Gon said when he walked through the door to their quarters. Bella dropped her reader (the Early Adventures of Yoda obviously weren't been that enthralling even if it had been fictionalised and translated into a publicly acceptable format).

"Qui-Gon, that's wonderful news!" Bella responded. She walked to him and embraced him softly. "Tell me about your young apprentice."

There was pride in Qui-Gon's eyes as he described Xanatos, a promising young man with great talent but with an aura of secrecy. "I hope to draw him out, allow him to embrace our philosophy with his entire being," Qui-Gon finished.

"I am sure you are up to the challenge," Bella replied. She brushed aside an errant strand of hair and Qui-Gon reflected that even though Bella pretended to be a civilised Coruscant citizen, she could not hide her true self. There was an untamed wildness that was only happiest out in the field. Much like Qui-Gon himself.

"I also have news," Bella interrupted his affectionate reverie. "I have been called to Voronia where the Agri Corps is terraforming a poisoned continent."

Qui-Gon took her hands in his and smiled. "I am pleased for you, Bella. They are certainly very fortunate to have your skill." Bella returned the smile.

"I will be away quite some time," she said gently. "Perhaps you will bring your padawan to visit, to see the greater work of the Jedi in action. Not all can be Knights."

"Then I must be one of the lucky ones," Qui-Gon said. "I shall miss you," he added, drawing her close. He moved his mouth to cover hers and the kiss was long but chaste. They did not need passion in their lives, their love was something like a lazy river, slow, peaceful and ever-present.

"I shall miss you too," Bella replied softly after they broke apart. They gazed into each other's eyes, into each other's hearts, for a long moment, before Bella returned to her reading and Qui-Gon began preparations for his new padawan's first lesson.

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The merge of minds dimmed and broke, a sigh the only echo remaining of a time that once was. Bella met Qui-Gon's eyes. "What ever became of Xanatos?" she asked, innocently.

Seven long months passed. The training bond between master and apprentice faltered during those early months, but eventually, both Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan were able to somewhat forget the past and return to a state of friendship. However, their relationship never quite reached the easy camaraderie of the early days, before words of love had been spoken. Qui-Gon no longer shared absolutely everything with his padawan, and Obi-Wan had no particular desire to hear about Bella anyway.

Gradually, Obi-Wan became used to his new life. He even enjoyed it. Living in close quarters...
with other padawans was a lot more fun than Obi-Wan had ever anticipated. It took him back to his childhood days where nights had seemed like an endless party with his friends. Except this was better, because there were no adults about to be mindful of.

Obi-Wan was discovering he had missed a good many things that other teenagers had experienced, and although he was beyond the age for such things now, his friends encouraged him in the new experiences. Experiences like all night parties or club hopping, things that spoke of the basic freedom of living on his own.

Qui-Gon, who had often commented on his pride in Obi-Wan for being such a "responsible young man", would have been quite disappointed had he known. Obi-Wan didn't care. Qui-Gon wasn't paying him much attention anyway beyond the necessary training. And even on missions, which were few and far between (Mace Windu having decided that Qui-Gon needed time at home), the master and apprentice were careful to keep their distance. When assigned a room with only one bed they took turns in sleeping on the floor. For this Obi-Wan was glad, it would have been too painful otherwise to be so close to Qui-Gon yet so far, carefully suppressing every thought lest a stray emotion escape.

For after all this time, Obi-Wan still loved Qui-Gon. By now he knew he always would. The casual dates with young women meant nothing to him other than friendship, the soft goodnight kisses he gave them rarely excited him. One thing his dating did do was give him something to talk with Qui-Gon about.

Bella invited Obi-Wan to dinner every so often. It was always awkward so Obi-Wan generally invented excuses to refuse. However, he was gradually coming to understand Bella and see how like his master she was, from her gentle compassion to her forthright manner. As much as Obi-Wan hated to admit it, they did make a perfect couple. Bella and Qui-Gon were far from identical but they had much in common, and every reminder of that sent Obi-Wan's thoughts spiralling down a path he didn't like to travel.

So he continued to be the best apprentice he could be, executing every directive Qui-Gon gave him with near-flawless precision. Obi-Wan had mastered his emotions well. He could not erase the empty place in his heart but he could certainly control it and give the appearance of a healthy, thriving human being. Perhaps what he was doing was normal, Obi-Wan eventually decided. For how many people truly found their soulmate and were allowed to have them? Most people just settled for someone, or chose the path of celibacy. It was a path Obi-Wan now knew he was destined to walk. To his surprise, Bella invited him in one afternoon and he found their conversation was most enlightening.

"Qui-Gon is worried about you," Bella said once the preambles were over. "He hasn't confided as much in me but I can sense it."

Obi-Wan just stared at her, wondering why she was telling him this.

"I'm worried about you too, Obi-Wan. You seem so serious. Perhaps the path you walk is not for you."

"Which path?" There was no keeping the surprise from his voice.

Bella gently patted his hand. "I was once like you, determined to be a great Jedi Knight. Every moment of my life was focussed on that and I did not realise how unhappy I had become with the
lifestyle."

"I am happy," Obi-Wan protested.

"Are you?" countered Bella. "You pretend to be happy. I recall the night Qui-Gon and I ran into you at the restaurant, you were with that pretty blonde girl, what was her name?"

For the life of him, Obi-Wan could not remember. All he really recalled from that night were Qui-Gon's eyes on him, and wondering if the older man felt jealous.

"Qui-Gon was watching you that night," Bella said surreptitiously, almost as if she was revealing a great secret. "He wants you to be happy too. And we both sensed that you could be very happy with that girl. If you're determined to be a Jedi Knight then perhaps you need someone to share it with?"

Obi-Wan fought hard to swallow his annoyance. "I have chosen my path and it is a path dedicated to the Force," he said evenly. "I do not need other distractions."

Bella's face crumpled. "Obi-Wan, please understand me. Your actions - they're affecting Qui-Gon. He and I...well, it seems that he can't truly be happy unless you are. He's worrying about you."

She paused, taking in a deep breath. "Perhaps you don't understand what it can be like when two Jedi marry. Qui-Gon and I shared the deepest communication and love, which surrounded everything we did. The sharing and companionship brought so much joy."

"So you think Qui-Gon would be happy if I married a nice girl?" Obi-Wan couldn't stop the words tumbling out of his mouth. "What if I wanted to marry a boy instead?"

Bella literally gasped. "Oh Obi-Wan, is that what it is?" She took his hands in his, radiating compassion and sympathy through the point of contact. "Don't worry, I won't hate you. Neither will Qui-Gon. We can help you through this...."

Obi-Wan snatched his hands away, horrified. This was worse than the blatant homophobia exuded by some of the older Coruscant citizens and those from Central planets. To be pitied for following his heart - it repulsed him.

He met Bella's gaze evenly. "I find your opinion outdated. Do not the Jedi teach love and compassion for all beings?"

Bella nodded slowly, but then said, "Obi-Wan, you must think of the teachings. The way of the Jedi order. The history and the beliefs. No matter what lies in your heart you would be condemned by many humanoids, especially here on Coruscant."

Sighing, Obi-Wan knew that nothing he said would change Bella's opinion. He was only glad that his peers were so accepting of any relationship. Perhaps the changing opinions would eventually filter throughout society - already, there was a sense of "anything goes" on the Outer Rim planets - but galactic change would be a long and difficult battle.

"It is not an issue, Bella," Obi-Wan finally relented, shaking his head. "There is no one in my life with whom I could form a lasting relationship. Rest assured that I do not intend to marry a young man, nor do I have any desire to do so."

"Oh." Bella was clearly surprised, but obviously relieved by his words. "Then why the conversation?"

"Because society's views frustrate me," Obi-Wan said, "and I must advocate any changes I believe
"Well then, Obi-Wan, let me warn you to advocate that particular view quietly," Bella cautioned. She released his hands and sat back, blushing just a little. Then she apparently recalled the topic which had begun them on this path. "Perhaps Qui-Gon must learn to accept the fact that you have grown up."

"Pardon?" Obi-Wan did not follow her train of thought.

"Since I have known you, Obi-Wan, you have been a serious young man. Therefore I must assume that your melancholy is your permanent state. There are other Jedi like you who choose the lonely path and they are very much in tune with the Force.

"I think," Bella continued, smiling as she warmed to her own theory, "that Qui-Gon remembers the boy you were and is having trouble losing you. And with my arrival - well, you were suddenly thrust from his life a lot more quickly than you would have been otherwise!"

"That is true," Obi-Wan agreed. The whole conversation was beginning to bore him and increase his dislike of Bella, who apparently thought she could control the universe.

"Well then, we need to teach him this." Bella clapped her hands together. "I know! It's his birthday next week. You and I should throw him a surprise party. And you could get him a gift - something that says to him that even though you've grown up, you will always treasure the special relationship you had."

Oh, if only Bella knew what she was saying and how difficult it would be. As it was, Obi-Wan did not believe that such a gift could exist.

"I'm so glad we got this all cleared up, Obi-Wan," Bella said happily, completely oblivious to his distress. "Tomorrow afternoon we shall go shopping. I need to find Qui-Gon a gift of my own. We can assist each other."

Obi-Wan could find no good reason to refuse, other than the fact that he did not want to go, and he could not tell Bella that. "Tomorrow, then," he reluctantly conceded.

"I had the most interesting conversation with Obi-Wan today," Bella remarked when her husband returned home later that evening. She was gently tending a plant, feeding energy into it and enhancing the green glow of the sickly shrub.

"Oh?" Qui-Gon managed to put a myriad of emotions into that simple word which was as much of a question and a reflection at the same time. He wandered to the kitchen, pouring a drink for both himself and his wife, taking a first careful sip as he returned to the living area.

"He has very liberal views on same-sex relationships," Bella remarked in an offhand way, causing Qui-Gon to almost spit out his juice. "I wonder what they are teaching temple initiates these days."

"Much the same program we went through, I believe," Qui-Gon said when he'd managed to recover his composure. "But you know how young people are - they believe they have the answers to all the problems of the universe and are not afraid to defy tradition."

Bella agreed with Qui-Gon's perception of youth. "I almost admire Obi-Wan for his tenacity. Ah, to be young again and not care of the impression you make."

Qui-Gon shot a look at his wife. "Are you saying he creates a negative impression?"
"Qui-Gon, you know I care for your apprentice. I am concerned for him, that is all. Perhaps you should teach him to be wary of advocating such beliefs."

"I think I should encourage him."

That statement caused Bella to almost drop her own glass of juice all over the hapless plant. "You agree with Obi-Wan's point of view?"

Taking his time in answering, Qui-Gon slowly relaxed back into a chair. "In recent years I have reconsidered my own opinions on a great many teachings. For someone to find love in this galaxy is truly a wondrous thing. Nothing should come between a pair who have pledged themselves to each other."

"Like us," Bella said warmly.

"Like us," Qui-Gon echoed. Bella made her way over to him and squeezed his hand.

"I promised many years ago that I would be with you for all of my life, Qui-Gon Jinn," she whispered. "I am so glad we have this promise between us. I only wish..."

"You only wish what?" For once, Qui-Gon chose not to extrapolate by using their common understanding. He wanted to hear Bella's words for himself.

"I only wish we could recapture the great love we once had."

"I do love you, Bella," Qui-Gon reassured her. He pulled her hand to his lips and gently kissed it.

"But you're not happy."

"Life has changed me, Bella. Life has changed us both. Perhaps I am going through a stage of weariness with this world." He laughed gently, attempting to lighten the moment. "What matters is that we are together."

"Yes, we are together. The Force gave us another chance." Hesitantly, Bella crawled into Qui-Gon's lap and placed her arms around his neck. She kissed him softly and then rested her head against his chest. The Force swirled around the pair, wrapping them in a cocoon of safety and love.

Obi-Wan sensed that Bella was much happier the next afternoon. "I am beginning to break through his walls," she confided. "There were always some things he kept from me but now I'm beginning to understand." She smiled brightly at Obi-Wan. "More than ever I am convinced that this party will be wonderful."

"Yes," Obi-Wan automatically agreed. He took Bella's arm as was proper and escorted her to the transport tube which rapidly took the pair to the shopping district.

The streets were crowded as usual and it wasn't long before Obi-Wan welcomed the relief of entering a store, even if it was the type of establishment he usually avoided. He'd never actually purchased a gift for Qui-Gon before, preferring to give keepsakes he'd created himself.

Inside it seemed just as crowded as the streets, perhaps even more so. There was a dizzying array of items, many of them souvenir type, and Obi-Wan wondered just how did Bella expect to find the perfect gift in a place like this?
He needn't have worried. As often occurs, the tragedy was completely unexpected. Just as the pair approached the centre of the store, there was a violent explosion and the roof came crashing down, and then Obi-Wan knew nothing but darkness.

Qui-Gon tensed. He was in the middle of a briefing with the Jedi Council when he felt the tremor race through the Force and knew instantly that the two most important people in his life were somehow in grave danger. His eyes widened, and he stumbled back, just a little. "Obi-Wan!" he murmured, sending out a reaching tendril.

There was only silence on the other end of their bond. "Bella," he tried, ignoring the worried stares from several Council members. Yoda had closed his eyes, seemingly oblivious to Qui-Gon's personal pain.

"A danger there is," Yoda announced gravely. "Many have died. More may soon, if help them we do not." His wizened face frowned in sorrow. "Unforseen, was this."

"I must go to them," Qui-Gon said. His eyes were asking permission even as his heart told him to run as fast as he could.

"Yes, go, Qui-Gon," granted Yoda. "Save those you can." The small figure swivelled in his chair, mentally selecting those who were capable of the task that lay ahead. "Mace, Saesee, Adi, go to help you must."

"Yes," answered Mace, speaking for all of them. He reached out through the Force and detected the location of the incident. There was a sense of fire, the smell of gas, crumbling buildings, many already dead, but the danger was far from over. Lives hung in the balance.

Without another word, they left the Council chambers, contacting other able Jedi who were in the vicinity and directing them down the levels to the shopping district which had somehow become a haven of death.

No one was able to catch up with Qui-Gon. He summoned all of his strength and leapt off a landing platform, travelling between the levels with a speed and skill that only Jedi could achieve. From one level to the next, a blur of motion few could even catch sight of, almost mad with desperation to reach his friends. An air-taxi missed him by inches. He didn't notice.

And when Qui-Gon finally reached the fringes of the disaster, he could barely detect their presences through the raging pandemonium. Sirens wailed, not doing anyone much good. Beings streamed in the dozens away from the smoking disaster area. And the cries, the cries of the innocent, were almost too much for him to bear.

Qui-Gon had taken two steps forward when he stumbled over the broken body of a young girl who had been trampled over by several. He paused, sending a mental, "I'm sorry," to Obi-Wan and Bella as he reached down and gently lifted the child, carrying her away to safety. It seemed to take forever until he found the first of the arriving rescue workers, and longer still until there was someone willing to take responsibility for the child's care.

Back in again, and Qui-Gon was growing desperate. He could no longer feel either mind and now, Qui-Gon understood that they had been close to the centre of the blast. Buildings were still crumbling, slowly, but the stresses of ruptured neighbours were having an effect.

Qui-Gon shouldered a groaning Wookiee and lifted a young man with his other arm, helping the wounded survivors leave the area. Now more than ever the smell of gas was apparent and Qui-
Gon spared only a second to wonder if it was accidental, or a deliberate sabotage. Not that it mattered at the moment. All that mattered was getting those that lived away from the area as soon as possible.

And in that moment, Qui-Gon wasn't even sure if Obi-Wan and Bella still lived.

Finally! Another Jedi met Qui-Gon on the fringes of the area and took the survivors. Qui-Gon did not even pause to say thank you as he raced back into the area, his heart pounding. He wanted to ignore those he saw on the way but he couldn't. Those who were staggering under their own power (the flow of people had almost stopped by now) he did not feel so guilty for avoiding, but those who lay on the ground, or even worse, those who were trapped - Qui-Gon was bound to help them.

His heart constricted as he pulled a young boy from the rubble. The child was dead. And it was only the first of such gruesome discoveries as Qui-Gon plunged deeper and deeper into the chaos, sensing rather than seeing the bodies of those upon which buildings had crumbled.

Eventually, Qui-Gon realised he was no longer alone. Rescue workers and Jedi alike were combing the ruins cautiously, finding fewer wounded all the time. On the opposite side of the disaster Qui-Gon knew the same thing was happening.

And so he closed his eyes, reached out with the Force, and found nothing, so he concentrated on the earlier implied shout for help he'd received, pinpointing the location and pushing his way through the crumbling walls and fires to find them. It was almost an impossible journey - only the slimmest of tunnels existed and Qui-Gon was constantly twisting his large frame into impossible conformations in an effort to push through the rubble.

It was very dark. It was very quiet, here in the midst of walls that should not exist. Every sound was muffled to a point where it was almost like being underwater, the thickness of the air emphasising the illusion. Hating the need to be cautious, Qui-Gon continued to push onwards, with every moment hoping and praying that Obi-Wan and Bella still lived.

The thought of going on without them was incomprehensible. And Qui-Gon wondered why was it that they had been so close to the blast? Was it fate? Was it a message from the Force telling him that what he'd been doing to them was wrong? Telling him to face his feelings rather than hide behind old promises?

Finally, a flicker of something caught his eye and Qui-Gon whirled. A padawan braid lay innocently on the floor, disappearing into a great slab of metal. "No," Qui-Gon breathed, racing to the wall as fast as he could, hitting his head on another low point in the process. He did not notice. He pushed against the metal wall; a limp arm fell from where it had been wedged. Qui-Gon gathered the hand to his cheek, feeling cold, feeling lifelessness.

And even as the horrid finality crept over his heart, the knowledge that the apprentice was dead, Qui-Gon could not suppress the tiny sigh of relief. Because this wasn't his padawan, it wasn't Obi-Wan. It was someone else; it would be another master mourning that night.

"May you be one with the Force," he whispered ritually, rapidly. He couldn't stay. It was too late for this one.

Again, Qui-Gon resumed his search, despairing every precious second it took him. The ground shifted beneath his knees. Perhaps the whole level would soon collapse onto the one below, and if it did, no one stood a chance of surviving. Qui-Gon sent a quick message through the Force, broadcasting to anyone sensitive to hear it that the next level should be evacuated. Only the dimmest of responses returned saying that it had already been done.
He found nothing. Nothing! Walls lay in every direction, and here and there a fire sparked, disturbing the heavy darkness. Again, he sent out a desperate pulse through the Force, searching for any sign of life.

And this time, he was rewarded.

A gentle hand stroked his cheek and Obi-Wan groaned. His head felt heavy, he was almost suffocating, and he struggled to draw in a breath as a cool hand rested on his forehead, sending what strength it could.

"Qui-Gon?" he managed.

"Bella," came the soft answer.

And then the memories came flooding back to him. Obi-Wan opened his eyes, noticing that everything looked unnaturally red and hazy, then realised that perhaps it wasn't just his vision. The whole place seemed to be on fire. "We have to get out of here," he gasped. He struggled to sit up but it didn't quite work.

"We can't, Obi-Wan," Bella said wearily. It seemed that every word was an effort. "I tried to use the Force but I'm not strong enough, and you're in no condition to try...."

"I'm in no condition?" Obi-Wan replied incredulously as he took a good look at Bella. Like himself, she was pinned underneath the same slab of ex-roof. Somehow it had fallen on the lower halves of their bodies, leaving their heads free. For a moment Obi-Wan almost thanked the blast for throwing them in that direction, for if their upper bodies had been crushed under the monolith, there would be little hope at all.

In fact, it was a miracle Bella had even managed to regain consciousness and tug Obi-Wan back with her. Then again, she had spent her life encouraging plants to grow and respond, so why not people?

He looked directly into her eyes, for the first time, it seemed. "Thank you," he said sincerely, trying to ignore the line of blood that streamed from her temple.

"I had to," she replied, understanding what the acknowledgment was for. "Qui-Gon would never forgive me if I let you die."

Briefly, Obi-Wan's eyes closed. He tried to reach out with the Force, to free them, to reach someone, but a heavy fog had descended on his mind, and then he recognised it as a self-preservation mechanism which was blocking out the pain.

He pushed against it. It was useless for the two of them to be trapped, their lives and all they had worked for would be wasted if they could not get out. And as if to emphasise the point, the ground beneath them shifted slightly and the wall trembled, threatening to crush them completely.

Obi-Wan gasped in pain. Sweat trickled down his face as he fought to even steady the rubble around them.

"Obi-Wan, save your strength," Bella managed, reaching out to take his hand in comfort. "Qui-Gon is coming."

And that statement brought a new pain to Obi-Wan, ever so distant, but still there. "He's in your
mind?"

"He woke me up. He was calling for both of us, Obi-Wan. He's out there. He's searching, he's getting closer." Bella smiled bravely. "We just have to hold on a little longer."

"Oh." There was nothing more Obi-Wan could say.

"Obi-Wan?" Bella's voice was hesitant and she broke the eye contact between them. "Are you in love with Qui-Gon?"

There was no denying it anymore, not here when that secret was so inconsequential. "Yes," Obi-Wan answered. Bella turned away.

"I suspected as much."

Obi-Wan closed his eyes, partially in surprise, partially in resignation. A wave of greyness, of bleak despair, threatened to sweep over him. Now Bella would resent his presence even more and he didn't want that, not when their lives were hanging in the balance. He tried to move again, and it hurt.

"From the very first, there was something about the way you two looked at each other. He would speak to me of all things in his life, the painful truth of Xanatos, his guilt over losing me, but he would rarely speak of you in the true sense. You were his secret." Bella paused to cough, the air was growing stagnant. "I chose to ignore it. I didn't want to believe Qui-Gon was capable of entering such a relationship."

"We never - we never did anything," Obi-Wan confessed, partially to reassure her, but mostly to protect Qui-Gon. The wall shifted further and Bella grimaced in pain.

"He still loves you, you know." The words brought joy to Obi-Wan's heart. Now he could die in peace.

"You're not going to die!" Bella picked up on his thoughts.

"I feel it, Bella," Obi-Wan replied to help her in any way he could, but he could not reach the Force through the screaming pain, and after all of this, he still resented her, because it was Bella Qui-Gon had contacted and it was Bella he was coming to save now.

The knowledge heavy in his mind, Obi-Wan released his hold on life. The fight to stay conscious was too much, and it was best to slip away quietly, now, before the flames consumed him. He wanted to say something to Bella, give her a message for Qui-Gon, but there was nothing he could think of to say.

So he focussed on pure thoughts, on happy thoughts, on his love for Qui-Gon and the wonderful times they had experienced, and feeling the Force surround him, he surrendered.

Moments later, Bella too slipped away into darkness.

The link was gone. "No!" Qui-Gon gasped, short of air as the smoke around him grew thicker. He had been so close! Surely they couldn't die now? He had been able to sense two presences, Bella's the stronger of the two, but Obi-Wan was most definitely alive. Or he had been. Now Qui-Gon could feel neither of them.

But he knew where he was going. It was just a little further, but every movement forward took
him so much time. The narrow crawlspace barely existed as such, it was more of a random opening in amongst the deluge of struts and ceiling. So many buildings decimated so easily.

And finally, he was there. Qui-Gon pressed his hands against the metal, knowing that two people lay beyond it. He summoned all of his strength and he summoned the Force more desperately than he ever had before and it shifted.

Revealing two broken and battered bodies before him.

"Obi-Wan," he gasped before he could stop himself, racing to his padawan's side, grasping one hand, some part of his mind noting the braid lying to the side was soaked in blood. Obi-Wan's face was empty, his eyes closed. He wasn't breathing.

And then Qui-Gon turned to face Bella, who lay just as deathly silent. A quick perusal through the Force revealed she was unconscious and with good reason, the pain of her crushed legs probably being overwhelming.

Obi-Wan, on the other hand, had released himself to the Force. As Qui-Gon realised what his padawan was doing, the ground tipped again and a horrid cracking noise was heard. Flames which were dying into submission surged high again with the fresh supply of oxygen filtering through new cracks.

And Qui-Gon knew that if he was to survive this, not to mention the others, he had to leave now.

The problem being he could only take one of them.

Indecision waged a war across his features. Surely he could take one to safety and quickly retrieve the other? But Qui-Gon knew that was impossible with the crumbling state of the structure, the immense distance to a place beyond this hell, and the narrowness of the tunnel he'd created.

Who to take? Who to leave? How could Qui-Gon possibly make the decision? The rational part of Qui-Gon's mind told him to take the one who had the best chance of living. But there were no guarantees that Obi-Wan would ever wake up, nor was there insurance that Bella could survive. Both had been grievously injured.

A thousand memories raced through Qui-Gon's mind. The first time he'd laid eyes on Bella, a laughing angel. A serious young Obi-Wan trying so desperately to impress a potential master. Exchanging vows on his wedding day. The first time he kissed Obi-Wan. Promising himself to Bella forever. And it all came back to that - his dilemma - "until death do us part". But he could not be responsible for Bella's death! How could he possibly leave her after he'd already abandoned her once? How could he face her death a second time?

Yet how could he leave Obi-Wan, the young man who had his whole future in front of him? The young man willing to accept death so that Qui-Gon and Bella could be happy together; his absence would make everything so much easier.

How was he supposed to choose? It was impossible. And Qui-Gon was all too aware of the precious seconds ticking past.

He pressed a kiss to Obi-Wan's lips, and then to Bella's. "Sleep. Stay strong." He wasn't sure if his words were to both of them or individually, and if the latter were the case, he didn't know to whom each phrase applied.

It was time to go. His heart heavy, Qui-Gon closed his eyes in a silent goodbye as he trusted the Force and listened to his heart. He chose.
And he left.

Never would Qui-Gon forget that desperate race to escape the crumbling structure. Pushing, pulling the limp form through impossible gaps, knowing he was doing even more damage to the fragile body, knowing also that if they didn't get free soon then rather than just one, all three of them would be dead.

And with every movement forward, there was the terrible knowledge and guilt of leaving one behind to die. It was a feeling that would be with him for the rest of his life.

After what seemed hours of battling small spaces, shifting floors, and caustic air, Qui-Gon broke free of the rubble. Holding the form close in his arms he ran as fast as he could manage, sensing through the Force that everything was about to crumble.

The first person he saw was Mace, who literally tugged them both away from the area. "Thank the Force, Qui-Gon. You're the last one. The whole level is about to collapse."

"I have to go back," Qui-Gon gasped, in no condition to do so. He hadn't noticed the deep scratches he'd picked up, nor had he noticed the burns. "...still in there..." He was breathing raggedly but Mace understood him.

"It is too late, Qui-Gon," Mace said gravely. "I grieve for you and your loss."

"No!" Qui-Gon protested. "Go back!"

And then the cracking noise reached a crescendo and the floor gave out, condemning tonnes of rubble to a fall which ended in a most violent crush. A life winked out.

"Let us help you," gentle voices said, barely intruding on Qui-Gon's mind as he stared, shocked, at the smoking hole. Hands tried to pull something from his arms but Qui-Gon refused to give up his precious bundle, holding it closer. He reached into the Force for healing power, something he was almost too exhausted to give, but he'd be damned if he gave up the one he had left. The presence was the only thing that made his choice easier to bear.

He staggered backwards, feeling arms support him, leading him back to the domain of the Jedi and the Healers' wing. The weight in his arms so heavy, so lifeless, and Qui-Gon could only hope he'd made the right decision.

"Hold on," he whispered, pressing a kiss to the soft hair. To lose now would be incomprehensible. "Hold on for me."

A pause.

"I love you."

And the person in his arms breathed.

His first awareness came with the touch. Someone was holding his hand, softly, gently, caressing his fingers with an intimate tenderness. That feeling alone was enough to make Obi-Wan want to remain in this state of quasi-life because he knew the moment he opened his eyes, there was no doubt that pain would assail him.

Unless he was dead. Which was a very real possibility. Here in this dark cocoon he almost felt as
if he were floating, and he most definitely felt loved. Surely these were signs of being one with the Force?

The last thing he remembered was preparing to give up his spirit into the Force, willingly, so that perhaps he could return to visit those he'd left behind. Yet if Obi-Wan concentrated more carefully, besides the pleasurable sensation of having his hand held there was also the feeling of sheets beneath him and the horrid scent of bacta in the air.

Obviously he had lived. But how? Obi-Wan's eyes flew open, hardly daring to hope, and was rewarded with the handsome smiling face of his master who did not try to hide his joy at Obi-Wan's awakening.

"Welcome back to the realm of the living, Obi-Wan," he said and there was a catch in his voice.

Obi-Wan forced his face into a mirroring smile, feeling twinging aches from both the unused and the damaged muscles. He did not dare shift, recalling what a mess his legs had been in the last time he'd seen them, or more correctly, the tops of them. There was no sense in tempting pain.

"I must admit I am glad to be here, Master." He used the title formally, unsure of where he stood with Qui-Gon. He then asked the question that had been tormenting him even before he'd accepted that he was alive. "Bella?"

Sorrow coloured Qui-Gon's eyes. "I could not save you both."

"You chose me?" The revelation caused Obi-Wan's heart to sing before other realities came crashing down. There was so much to consider; perhaps Bella had been beyond saving, or she had asked Qui-Gon to save him, or maybe Qui-Gon felt the call of duty to save his padawan rather than his wife.

He had to know. "Why me? You were supposed to save Bella."

Qui-Gon looked down. "In the end, I was selfish, my Obi-Wan. You were the only one I could ever choose." He grimaced. "It took a tragedy to make me realise that."

"Oh." Obi-Wan stared at their interlaced fingers. He did not know where they would go from here.

"I owe you my deepest apology, Obi-Wan."

"For what?" Obi-Wan was genuinely curious. Was Qui-Gon sorry for saving him? But even as the thought crossed his mind he knew that wasn't true. Qui-Gon may have felt guilty for choosing him over Bella, but he wasn't sorry for it.

Sighing, Qui-Gon admitted, "When Bella returned, I made the wrong choices. I used her reappearance in my life as an excuse to end our relationship. I hid behind a promise."

"Master, you always taught me to hold promises true," Obi-Wan interrupted gently. He was rewarded with a bitter laugh.

"Yes, I suppose I did do that, didn't I? And look where it took me. Obi-Wan, part of me is glad that Bella died." His hands were trembling. "It took the decision away from me. Since she was gone I didn't have to decide to break my promise; I was freed to love whomever I choose."

Obi-Wan could only cling to Qui-Gon's hand, hoping to send peace and assuage the guilt. His master continued. "But there is more than that, Obi-Wan. I - I," and it was a difficult confession, "I was ashamed of our relationship."
It was like a physical blow to Obi-Wan. His own recollection of those days painted them with the rosy glow of perfection, of pure, untainted love. He didn't understand how he could have been so wrong about it all.

"No, it wasn't you," Qui-Gon hastily assured when he saw the dismay cross Obi-Wan's face. "I kept my feelings on the matter well hidden. And for that too I must apologise. I should have trusted you with everything, not just my heart."

"Why ashamed, Master?" Obi-Wan ventured. "Was it my youth, or the fact that we are master and apprentice, or was it my gender?"

"All three of those," Qui-Gon admitted, "with an emphasis on the third. You know the teachings, Obi-Wan, and it was difficult for me to examine them from the correct perspective." Qui-Gon's free hand hesitantly reached out and touched Obi-Wan's cheek. "You have taught me much about love, Padawan, and you have taught me how my beliefs can be wrong."

Staring at Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan was careful to avoid feelings of inadequacy and concentrate on the compliment for what it was. Qui-Gon had just told him he was past the prejudice, albeit in a roundabout way. "Perhaps all of this was meant to happen," Obi-Wan realised. "We trust in the Force to guide us...it may have been necessary. Master, had Bella not returned, would our relationship ever have progressed beyond what it was? Or would we have been forced to hide in the shadows for the rest of our lives?"

"I do not know, Padawan," Qui-Gon replied, the title an endearment. "I sense that you are right about the latter but one can never be sure."

"We can be sure about the future," Obi-Wan boldly ventured. He sent out a mental caress, being too weak to do anything physical, and was rewarded to feel Qui-Gon's shields crumbling.

The smile creeping across Qui-Gon's face suddenly turned serious as he asked, "Will you forgive me?"

The question caused Obi-Wan to pause. He still loved Qui-Gon more than anyone. Yet he had learnt that he could exist on his own, and he had learnt disturbing things about the man he thought he knew so well. Could Obi-Wan be sure that no more unpleasant secrets lurked?

"I will make you a promise, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said. "I tell you now there are no more secrets. You have seen my worst side." He took a breath, looking deep into Obi-Wan's eyes. "I only hope you can forgive me for it. And I promise you that I will keep nothing hidden from you again."

More than anything, Obi-Wan wanted to believe Qui-Gon's words. He was losing himself in the beguiling eyes, hearing words he wanted to hear, but still his heart longed for more, a different kind of vow. "Can you keep that promise?" he asked. "Surely there will be times when the Council requires you to keep things to yourself."

Qui-Gon nodded gravely. "Again, you are correct, my Obi-Wan. How is it that you have so much wisdom?"

"I was taught by the best," Obi-Wan answered. "Master - Qui-Gon," he amended. "I forgive you," and he was rewarded with an overwhelming sense of relief, "but on one condition."

"Anything."

"I need to know, truly and honestly, where we stand."
Qui-Gon chuckled gently. "I had thought that would be obvious by now."

Evidence was not enough. Obi-Wan needed to hear Qui-Gon say it. "Tell me, Master," he asked.

Qui-Gon moved even closer to Obi-Wan's bedside, leaning over so that his face was a short way above the younger man's. He pressed one hand to Obi-Wan's heart. "I love you, my Obi-Wan," he declared. "I wish to spend the rest of my life with you."

"Is that a promise?" Obi-Wan felt compelled enough to ask.

"Yes."

"Then may I promise you the same in return," said Obi-Wan, his smile returning. "I love you, Qui-Gon."

Then Qui-Gon sealed the distance between them with a kiss. It was gentle, soft and sweet, but with a promise of passion that had never before been so intense between them. "I won't make you hide in the shadows any longer," Qui-Gon murmured against the warm mouth. Obi-Wan's response was to intensify the kiss, gently sucking on Qui-Gon's lower lip.

For long minutes they kissed, gently exploring the other's mouth with the delicacy and the desire of a first kiss. Tongues met and merged, breath was exchanged, and all the while, Obi-Wan felt Qui-Gon letting him deeper and deeper into his mind.

It was pure love.

Finally, though, the awkwardness of their positions became apparent and Qui-Gon had to pull away lest he fall on top of his apprentice. Obi-Wan still lacked movement throughout his body even though Qui-Gon had quite sufficiently managed to chase the pain away.

Obi-Wan almost groaned in frustration. "How long until I am healed?" he asked.

"That all depends on your state of mind and your will to get up," Qui-Gon replied, gently teasing.

"Then I feel I shall be up very shortly," Obi-Wan countered, his heart singing as he returned to the banter which had been missing from his life for so long. Finally, everything was as it should be, in fact, it was even better.

"There is a difficult road ahead of us," Qui-Gon cautioned. "There are many who will frown on our relationship and still more who will condemn us."

"We can still be discreet," Obi-Wan said. It took a lot of effort, but he raised his hand to touch Qui-Gon's heart, mirroring the motion executed some time ago. "Qui-Gon, as long as I have you, then nothing else really matters."

"What did I do to deserve you?" Qui-Gon asked, his eyes shining.

"You loved me."

And that, finally, was enough for both of them.

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