



Sand had drifted through the seals, sifting like salt over the rough floor. Smiling faintly, Luke rose, stretched from toes to fingertips and reached for the brush.

Carefully, starting with the very furthest corner of the small house, Luke got down on his knees and brushed the small piles of tawny powder towards the door. He wondered what his students would say if they saw it. Was it undignified? Beneath him? Surely the great Jedi Master should not be shovelling sand with his hands like the meanest slave on Tatoine?

But it was good - good honest work. The pressure on knees and back, the scrape and *sssh* of tiny grains across the packed floor were a reaffirmation of the immediacy of life. *Call it a meditation*, he thought, not entirely ironically.

The door hissed open and he swept the sand across the threshold with a satisfied flourish. Night air ruffled his hair, metallic with dryness and cold as the far off stars. He stood, traced the stone lintel with his one remaining hand and breathed in, oddly sad.

How many years, he wondered, had Ben stood here, watching the small tracks in the dust, looking out at the hostile galaxy overhead, shielding Luke's life as if it were a single votive candle against the darkness.

"Oh, Ben, why did you leave?" He wasn't sure if he spoke to the man or the ghost - both were equally gone from him now. "I don't know how to do this..."

In his head, Ben had carried the knowledge of 25 millennia of Jedi tradition. Tested answers to the questions that racked Luke's academy now. Answers Luke's students might have to waste lifetimes rediscovering.

"I know you had to make me a warrior first. But *afterwards*, when I really needed you, why did you leave?"

It was bone-chillingly cold, and the light of the open door would attract sandpeople. He turned away from the sharpness and went inside.

After several retreats here Ben's presence had begun to fade even from the house, to be replaced by Luke's own. That scuff on the table was from his lightsabre. The blackened mark over the cooker was where 3PO had shorted out, trying to communicate with the air conditioner. That hollow beneath the pallet...

That hollow...

There was something in it.

He went on hyper-alert, all senses focused, reaching out to the Force. Had someone been here, during the day? *No. I would have *smelled* it!*

The little wink of opal in the darkness under his bed. What was it? An Imperial bomb? A bug? The spike of betrayal was keen. Had this final sacred sanctuary too been breached and violated? It was not.... *Fair?*

He caught himself and laughed. Then, kneeling, he formed the thought of himself simply reaching into the hole and closing his gloved fingers around the shimmering thing.

He expected either the red anxiety of danger, or neutrality, reassurance. Not the wave of sheer joy that came.

A present! A gift! Something of Ben's, long hidden, long forgotten. He pulled it out eagerly and was irritated at his mechanical hand, because it didn't tremble.

It lay against the black leather like a huge unfacetted gem, nacreous and mysterious in the house's prosaic light. "Aah...Force!"

Ben! Why didn't you tell me you had a holocron!

Ben had buried it. Entombed it in the ground, like his past. The thought clutched at Luke's throat, like a cry of pain heard across years of silence.

He took the miracle into the kitchen and set tea to brewing; afraid now, that it might be empty or broken.

Fear is the mind killer, but it was good not to be entirely serene. Putting the cube down on the table he brushed it with his bare fingers, focused, and said "Show me the final record."

He had been half hoping, half expecting that it would be Ben himself, but it was not.

The image was life-sized, coloured like life, but translucent and edged in light like a Force-ghost. A big human, tall, wearing a robe like Ben's, over loose, sand-coloured tunics and loose brown trousers. The robe fell in classical lines from the folded arms, bringing to mind images of ancient mystics; holy men and warriors.

Even the clothes have lessons to teach me, Luke thought ruefully as he glanced at his own military black. This man was dressed like Ben, but Luke looked *like an Imperial moff*. *Like Vader....*

He would have to think about that. Why had he instinctively clothed himself like a soldier, as though his proper place was at the head of an army?

The image lifted its chin, shifted its illusory weight comfortably and watched him, waiting. Presumably, Luke thought, it could not initiate a conversation - it was, after all, only a recording. Still the small movement surprised him, like a sign of life on a barren moon.

With the clothes, the resemblance to Ben ended. The old man, and Yoda too, had carried, with their age, a sense of faint fragility that Luke had learned to associate with - how had his mentor put it - "More civilised times." But there was none of that here; only a treelike solidity, a relaxed awareness and calm, smooth power that could only be described as 'Forceful'.

The eyes that watched Luke's face were tranquil as the dawn sky, seemingly content to wait infinitely for Luke to speak.

It was a strange face on which to find serenity. A face which nature had made harsh - all sharp planes and bones, with a grizzled beard and the broken nose of a fist fighter. It seemed a fitting contradiction that all this hardness should be topped with a fall of long hair the colour of silvered oak.

The steady regard was beginning to unnerve Luke. It was too much like meeting a person. He felt that further silence would be rude. "Who are you?"

"I *was* Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn." Perhaps he had imagined the stress on the word 'was', since it was now speaking as formally as a hologram should; "Padawan to Dooku, Master of Perpetuity Oser, Xanatos of Telos, and Obi-Wan Kenobi."

Obi-Wan. The name sounded so natural from the tall man, reminding Luke sharply that he had never learned to even think of Ben by his true name. This was Ben's teacher?

The image was looking at its sleeves; studying the slight flicker there with what seemed like mild curiosity.

For a moment Luke knew a sense of rightness like the suns rising. How he had wanted this - the knowledge that had been cut down so cruelly under Vader's blade, leaving Luke's new Jedi orphaned from their past. But the contradiction nagged at him, until he had to say it. "Obi-Wan told me that Yoda was his teacher. He never mentioned you."

The face lifted and narrowed, and the eye-colour seemed to modulate subtly. An effect of the hologram, or an accurate representation of how this man really looked when he was hurt? "Yoda taught him - as he taught all the initiates. But I was his Master."

How strange.

As if to distract itself, the image was now reaching out, passing its insubstantial hands through the walls. It rested one in the boiling kettle, frowning slightly. The sight made Luke feel odd, in a way he had never imagined the absence of pain could.

It caught him looking and turned with a small, wintery smile. "If I clasp my hands I feel...the memory of touch. But this.... I don't feel anything at all."

"You're a hologram." *And you've obviously never been accessed before*, Luke thought, with a prickle of something dark. Not a warning; a kind of delicacy that didn't seem appropriate in dealing with a machine. *Ben's teacher. And Ben buried it. He never spoke to it once.*

"I know. I'm trying to find out what that means."

"You're recorded information; you're supposed to answer my questions."

But still Luke wondered, thinking of his student Nichos. Slowly dying of an incurable disease, Nichos had been gradually moved into a wholly mechanical body. The result had not known itself whether it was a duplicate or the original, human or droid, alive or dead. How much information did it take to replicate the spirit?

"I would be a very inaccurate copy if I only did what I was supposed to do."

Humour? It was nice to know that even in the legendary past a Jedi Master was allowed a small joke at his own expense. Luke got up, turned the lights down to half power. Full strength made the image too ghostlike for comfort.

This was not going as smoothly as he had hoped. He had been sure he held the past firmly in his gloved palm, to be used as he pleased. He had not expected it to come with its own agenda.

But this is how it is. Focus on what is, not on your wishes. He moved to get the kettle; "Do you mind? It's a bit weird."

The large hand withdrew, tucked itself inside a long sleeve. "You know who I was. Who are you?"

It was taking the initiative now. He should feel... He didn't know what to feel, only curious. "Jedi Master," *Can I call myself that? ...Who's going to stop me?* "Luke Skywalker."

Now he found himself on the receiving end of some careful scrutiny, and the flash of a smile like that of a different man - roguish, undignified. "Skywalker? Any relation of Anakin?"

Luke's prosthetic hand tightened, folding the metal of the handle into finger-shaped curves. To hear his father's name spoken with such carefree fondness!

Ice and darkness chilled the edges of his vision. He saw again the black figure, the rasp of mechanical breath, the sword like sharpened rage. He heard Leia trying not to sob; 'He tortured me! And you tell me he was my *father!*' The ravaged, ruined face that had turned to him for redemption when it felt the grip of death....

"I'm his son."

The hologram could not possibly have sensed that rush of evil and bereavement, but perhaps it read Luke's face, because its smile faltered and the shadowed eyes narrowed. "Tell me."

Luke poured the tea and settled onto the bench. Honey and *truguu* thorn filled the room with tart sweetness. *It's supposed to be answering me,* he thought, without ire. *But I suppose it can't, until it's established the context of my questions.*

Was that all the apparent curiosity was? A drive for coherence, which would make its answers more apt? Could it be nothing more than part of the programming?

Well, perhaps putting the past into some kind of story would be good. Seeing what it looked like when told to someone utterly uninvolved might help him clarify it himself. He began to tell the image about growing up under the Imperial threat. About the holocausts and disappearances, the engineered plagues, and the terror which, even on Tatooine, stalked every word and thought.

He reached the firefight in the bright sky, from which the droids had fallen like comets; portents of destiny. A pause, and he glanced the rough face - it showed regret, sympathy, but none of the indignation for which he had hoped. *Doesn't this make you angry?* And he couldn't decide if what he saw was the perfection of Jedi discipline, or simply a result of it not being quite human.

In the break the hologram knelt; a fluid, practised movement so simple and so appropriate that for a moment Luke didn't register what had happened.

Wait! It shouldn't be able to do that. For human communication the image had to move its face and hands, but to change the whole body conformation...?

His glare was in time to catch the flicker of satisfaction that just lifted one corner of its mouth.

"How did you...?"

"I modulated the input going through the projector."

"Yes, but how?"

It thought a while, then shrugged; "The control codes of this thing are patterns of energy, and so am I. It...felt possible."

Someone had placed into the holocron a program that replicated the wisdom and personality of a Jedi of old. A mind trained to master both itself and its environment. Was it so surprising that it was now exceeding its parameters?

Luke rubbed his gloved hand, feeling the metallic bones, the fine articulation of wires under synth-skin. He thought of Vader...Anakin... 'More machine than man'. But man enough to repent. Man enough to destroy the Emperor, in order to save his son.

"You're not giving me your full attention are you?" he said, caustically, trying not to be unnerved.

"Are you giving me yours?"

And of course, he wasn't. Some part of him was on alert, listening to the rumours of movement outside the door, monitoring the heat signature of the generator and the reassuring thrum of the coms terminal. Another was appreciating the tea - green acidic flavour, the fact that it had gone slightly too cold.

*It's testing its surroundings *subconsciously*? Can a hologram have a subconscious?*

"Well, this is where the real story starts..."

He told it about Princess Leia's message; seeking out Ben here in the hermitage in which he had spent the greater part of his lonely life; about the deaths of Vader and Yoda and Palpatine. When he had done, it was late. He could sense the great blaze of the Galactic Core rising in the barren sky outside; could picture it slicking all the dunes to the colour of snow.

Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn had bent his insubstantial head, and was studying the empty hands that rested powerless in his lap. He was silent for a long time.

Luke went to reheat the tea. It was oversteeped and bitter, like his memories. What would be the man's response to a story like that? Did it touch him at all?

He was unprepared for the look of desolation that was raised to his gaze. "Obi-Wan encouraged you to kill your own father, out of revenge?"

What a bizarre thing to focus on! Anger rushed to fill the space left by incredulity. It wasn't this man's place to criticize Ben! "I didn't *know* he was my father."

"Exactly. He deceived you and used you, Luke, and he encouraged you to act through motives of hatred. Oh Force! Did I teach him so little?" It bent its head again and pushed both hands into its hair, as though curling up over physical pain. "How many apprentices must I lose before I learn?"

Disbelief and sympathy drove Luke to his knees in front of the kneeling man. He wanted to shake him, but knew that his hands would pass straight through the air. "If it wasn't for Ben the Empire would never have fallen. The galaxy would still be in slavery. What he did, he did to save us all. You should be proud."

The image straightened, its expression full of sorrow. "I don't mourn for what he did, only how."

One of the long hands fell, and the fingers of the other rested gently on the bend of his broken nose, as if to ease a phantom ache. "And Anakin, how did he fall?"

Whether it was grief, or only the electronic mimicry of grief, Luke didn't like seeing it in his guest. "I don't know. Ben - Obi-Wan - wouldn't speak of it. It must have been too painful."

Another pause, and the head bowed again. "Yes." Whole histories of eloquence in one syllable.

The galaxy moved slightly over their heads. Far off the warbling roar of a krayt dragon boomed and sucked against the rocks.

"How he must have hated me," said Qui-Gon at last.

An overwhelmingly personal reaction, Luke thought, surprised and somewhat reassured. *Just like me. No matter how hard I try, I can't help thinking of my friends first.*

"Why should Obi-Wan hate you?" he asked, though it fitted everything well.

"Because I was the one who found Ani. I forced Obi-Wan to take him on."

A wry look, and a recovery; "They told me the boy was dangerous. Obi-Wan, Yoda, all of them, and still I blackmailed my Padawan into training him."

Jolt to the stomach, like the first glimpse of the Death Star. *Your fault! It was your fault! And you have the gall to be angry with Ben for *lying*?*

"Blackmail?" Could a Jedi exist with that level of hypocrisy?

Yet the near-transparent eyes were full of self denigrating humour. "You could call it that. It was my dying request."

Luke had an overwhelming memory of the swamps of Dagobah. Closeness and swelter, Yoda's ears drooping as he told the ancient Master that he *must* go to Han and Leia, even if the galaxy was lost as a result. *I made the same decision. I favoured the individuals over the whole.... I don't have the right to condemn him.*

Yoda had given him the impression that he was inadequate because he could not forgo the personal. Yet here was a tale of Old Republic Jedi making requests and decisions which changed history, and doing it out of ...love?

"No wonder he felt personally betrayed when you were wrong."

He had to pace, had to move. Oh gods, the anguish Ben must have gone through! And all alone!

Luke opened the door, shivered as the night scent curled in. The familiar view looked sinister in starlight; the cliffs twisting, like men in nightmares struggling with the sheets. Mottled silver shapes fled from his gaze, running toward the canyon where the X-wing rested.

He turned automatically, ran back inside for the macro-binoculars, and passed through what felt like a wash of faint sunshine.

Somehow - though it should not have been possible - the hologram had come to stand by the door. It was now looking down at its body - through which Luke had walked - with an expression of pleasure and amusement. "I felt that!"

"What?!" Luke was beginning to find it both awe inspiring and slightly spooky, the way this personality was overstepping its bounds. *You're a hologram. Behave like one!*

"I felt the electrical impulses of your nerves."

If he felt them, it was safe to assume he could learn to manipulate them. In the right body he could live again. *Like Callista.* Luke thought, *But I wouldn't wish her despair on anyone...*

He shook his head and went out to scan the canyons. No danger; only a flock of wild eopies displaced by the dragon and now finding their way home.

"What makes you think I was wrong?" Now it had come outside, stood glimmering in the darkness. The night wind, which splashed Luke's smarting face with driven sand, did not billow its cloak, and the long hair lay still on its shoulders, straight as a fall of water.

Luke didn't really want to talk to it any more. No - who was he fooling? This was no more an 'it' than he was.

"What do you mean? Of course you were wrong. Didn't you hear what I said? What Anakin did?"

"I heard that he defeated the last Sith Lord, and wiped their evil out of the universe forever."

Casually, without effort or malice, this man was overwhelming him, the way Ben had. The way Yoda had. But he wasn't a callow teenager any more, and he wasn't going to take it.

"He destroyed the Jedi!"

"Did he? And yet here you are."

"Yes, here I am. I trained under Yoda for less than a year, and with that I am expected to rebuild an Order which evolved into perfection over twenty five thousand years? I don't know *anything*, and I don't have anyone to guide me. I'm lost, Master Jinn. *That* is what your mistake cost. *That* is why you're wrong!"

He hadn't ranted at anyone so furiously since Uncle Owen had died, and it felt very satisfying. An unexpected luxury - to put down the mantle of being the only Jedi Master in the universe, and just be Luke for a while.

"It's a big task." Qui-Gon received his accusation with a simplicity which might have been either arrogance or humility, tilted his head back to smile at the stars. "But you're not abandoned. You're not alone. You have the Force."

"Fine!" Luke's black shirt was not suited to the desert, and the cold was another goad to anger, "Fine. I have a tool that I don't know how to use to do a task that I don't know how to do."

He plunged back into the house - unwilling to shiver in front of the older man. The physical comfort of warmth and humidity soothed him into calm, just as he caught the flash of fury that hardened every line of Jinn's hewed-stone face.

"A tool? Is that what they taught you?" He had reached out as if to seize Luke by the shoulder, spin him around, and was now glowering at his useless limbs in disappointment.

For the first time, Luke wondered what it was like for him; waking out of his death, to find himself imprisoned, encoded. Unable to touch either the Force or the physical world. *Oh gods...!*

Maybe Ben had never accessed the hologram to spare him that. To let him go, cleanly. Maybe it wasn't hate after all.

"They taught me that if I mastered myself I could use the Force for good."

"But not that the Force would use you."

"No." What a strange and *creepy* idea. An image recurred to him; an old and dear memory. Training on the deck of the Millennium Falcon, with Han and Ben watching. "You mean it controls my actions?" he had asked, with that same distaste. "Yes, but it also obeys your commands." Ben had said, smiling. Then Ben and Yoda had taught him all about the second and nothing about the first. Even in memory he hadn't noticed.

"That must be why they were destroyed," Qui-Gon sighed, his mouth compressed with sadness, "Because they had learned to prefer their will to the will of the Force."

An unthinkable thing to say. *You're mad*, Luke struggled silently with the horror of the idea. *You're just making excuses for your failure, because you can't bear to look it in the face!*

It would have sounded so much more plausible if he hadn't actually met the man.

"Are you telling me the Force *wanted* thirty five years of terror for the whole galaxy?"

"No. But I'm telling you it might have been better than the alternative. Imagine; ten thousand Jedi, each one doing the will of the Council. And the Council growing closer and closer to an increasingly corrupt Senate. How long before the Order became the greatest instrument of oppression in history? A far worse threat than the Sith. I watched it beginning to happen, Luke."

The image put a hand on his shoulder, and he felt the faint touch of warmth. "But now that threat has been wiped out, and you can begin again, new."

Luke had what he wanted; a past. And it was telling him to leave it alone and go forward. It made a bleak kind of sense. *But I still don't know what to do.*

"Will you guide me?"

"Me?" A small snort of laughter, "My efforts as a teacher seem to have had limited success. But I can show you how to hear the Force."

"How do I know the Force's will is better than mine?" Luke felt that he judged now between this man and his two beloved teachers. It felt vaguely disloyal to ask the question at all.

"Didn't you ever wonder why we were called a religion? Why we trained in a Temple, not an Academy? It's because the Jedi way is a way of faith. We have faith that the Force knows best."

Luke glanced at the chrono, though he could feel the pressure of sunlight at the edge of the world. The night was almost over and he was deeply tired.

Qui-Gon rose and walked into the com unit; into the tangle of crystals and fibres which beamed data from one side of the galaxy to the other. His face went blank, but joyous, the way Yoda had looked when he lifted Luke's ship from the clinging mud and weed of the lake.

Luke imagined the invisible, faster than light, track of information across space: the web of thought connecting every inhabited planet. Was that all available to this being of energy? How daunting it must be, to be faced with all those choices, all those possibilities of terrible error.

"Qui-Gon. What happens if I just switch you off?"

What should have been a threat was received almost as an endearment - with a grin.
"Try."

He sent the command on a pulse of Force; "End record." But there was not even a flicker in the image.

Qui-Gon gave him a look of smug challenge that made him want to laugh out loud. "You let the jinn out of the lamp, Luke. He's not going back in."

"Hutt's spit!" *I quite like him!* Luke thought, oddly relieved. "Did they really *allow* you? ...to make such terrible jokes? To be who you are? This strange and defiant personality did not fit in at all with what he had imagined.

"Allowed, but strongly discouraged," it said, happily.

Having invaded the electronics of the house, Qui-Gon now made the door open and went outside to watch the suns rise.

There were no clouds, only a shimmer like grey satin across the whole sky, paling through infinite degrees into blue flame. Then a slice of ferocious light across the

horizon; the swirl of scent and sand; colour like poured gold; and heat, sterilising and cleaning the new day.

"And after you've shown me how to hear the will of the Force," Luke joined the ghost-frail smudge of a figure, companionably, "What are you going to do then?"

"So many possibilities." Qui-Gon canted his head to smile down on him, "No rules, and a myriad of new ways to serve. It'll be quite an adventure."

The man was dead. And old enough to be his grandfather. And eager for the future.

It wasn't the lesson I hoped for, Luke thought, shading his eyes as the second sun seared fusion-bright into the dawn, But I suppose it will do.