

## ~ABRADE~

The three days it took to travel back to Coruscant were some of the longest and quietest of Qui-Gon's life. He resisted the urge to bite back the sigh that sought escape from his lips. Instead, he allowed it, its soft press of air the only sound in the room. There were times when the master craved a silence as complete as this one after a long mission. The quiet facilitated reflection, introspection, and the eventual acceptance of things that could not be changed. But now... now the lack of sound was oppressive; the space around and within him felt empty and very, very lonely. He wasn't alone of course, but it often felt that way of late.

Obi-Wan had not spoken since that long night the two spent hiding from rebels in an abandoned warehouse on Xjasso'pia. It was the events of that disastrous mission that had led to the uncomfortable silence of their flight.

His Padawan had killed. That it was in self-defense did little to soothe the boy's battered spirit.

Qui-Gon planted both hands on the sole counter of the ship's small galley. He leaned in heavily, his eyes closed, his head resting chin to chest. Every Jedi was responsible for ending the life of another sentient at some point during their lifetime of service. It was both inevitable and regrettable. However, the Jedi in question was usually far older than thirteen standard.

Qui-Gon shook his head and opened his eyes. He stood up straight and reached for the small water pot that sat in a heating niche to his right. The master easily moved through the motions of brewing two cups of tea. It was a task he could accomplish in his sleep and undoubtedly had on occasion. He used the last of the Chandrilan herb tea from the ship's stores. It was not a tea he favored, but the dark purple brew was known for its calming properties. Preparations complete, Qui-Gon gathered both cups and placed it on a small tray where he had also placed some sweet biscuits. He then took the tray with all its contents and headed to the small cabin directly across the short hallway. He pressed the side panel and the door slid open with a quiet hiss. He stepped inside the cramped cabin, allowing the door to close behind him.

His Padawan did not look at him. He did not stir from his position seated on the edge of the room's sole sleep couch. Truthfully, the master had not expected any kind of greeting, but he had hoped...

Qui-Gon sat down on the sleep couch, placing the tray of food and tea between him and his apprentice. Obi-Wan still had not looked at him. The boy simply stared at his own small, pale hands as they rested on his lap. The hands, at least, were clean as were the robes the boy now wore, but Qui-Gon knew that Obi-Wan still *saw* the stains; even if they were no longer physically present.

"I've brought you some tea and those sweet biscuits you like," Qui-Gon offered gently. He picked up one of the tea bowls and held it out for the boy to take. "Padawan," Qui-Gon called out, deliberately using his 'masterly' tone. As expected, Obi-Wan's eyes immediately rose from his hands and met his master's gaze.

"Drink your tea." Though spoken as an order, Qui-Gon's tone was calm and comfortable. Obi-Wan looked down at the cup being offered to him as if seeing it for the first time. He glanced back up at his master and then with overly careful movements accepted the hot beverage, cradling the bowl in both hands as if he were attempting to hoard the liquid's steamy warmth.

"Obi-Wan," he called again and the boy looked up. "Drink," he said, punctuating his statement with a sip of his own beverage. Slowly and with a considerable lack of enthusiasm, Obi-Wan raised his own cup to his lips and did as he was ordered. Master and apprentice sat in silence as tea was consumed and empty cups were eventually returned to the shared tray. Qui-Gon had just picked up a biscuit hoping to entice his young apprentice to eat when a soft voice stilled his hand.

"Master?"

"Yes, Padawan?" Qui-Gon replied as he set the baked sweet back on the tray. Obi-Wan wasn't looking at him but was, yet again, staring at his hands. Turning on the sleep couch so that he could face his apprentice properly, Qui-Gon waited patiently for the younger Jedi to speak. He did not have to wait long.

"Master, I've been thinking."

Qui-Gon waited for more, but when nothing else was said and the silence stretched on for several minutes he decided that perhaps some prompting was needed.

"Padawan?" Qui-Gon began but as he watched the boy's continued fascination with his hands, the master chose to act. He reached out and gently placed a curled finger under the small cleft chin of his apprentice.

"Obi-Wan, look at me please."

Slowly the boy's head turned bringing with it the reluctant gaze of blue-gray eyes.

"Will you share your thoughts with me, dear one?"

The boy bit at his lower lip, his teeth worrying the soft skin as if they alone could keep the words he needed to speak from being uttered. Qui-Gon moved his finger from the boy's chin to lightly tap his lip in gentle rebuke. The tender flesh was immediately released and the master offered the boy a small smile as he brought his own hands to settle lightly in his lap. If the boy found any comfort in the expression, he didn't show it, choosing instead to lower his gaze to the tray resting between them.

"I know what I did wasn't wrong," Obi-Wan started finally. "But... it wasn't right either."

"It is true, taking a life is never the *right* thing to do, but it can sometimes be the only thing, the necessary thing. Just as it was for you," he replied gently. Obi-Wan nodded, but didn't yet look up. The master decided to press forwards. "You do know that, don't you?"

Obi-Wan raised his gaze to meet his master's.

"I do, Master."

"Still you are troubled," Qui-Gon stated though the single brow he raised carried the hint of a question.

"Still I am troubled," Obi-Wan repeated. He turned from Qui-Gon then, pulling his knees to his chest and wrapping his arms around himself. The boy laid his head across the tops of his knees, but he at least turned his head so that he could see his master.

"I don't know how to do this, Master. I don't know how I'm supposed to be now. It's different now, but all I want to do is go back to how I was before, but I can't. I can't ever go back, but I don't want to stay like this either. I don't know what to do," he said, the last words just a whisper.

"Will you let me help you?"

"Can you?" Obi-Wan snapped, but Qui-Gon ignored the tone reaching out across the space between them to lightly rustle the boy's auburn locks.

"I wouldn't be a very good master if I could not, and you would be a poor padawan if you had no need of me," Qui-Gon replied, one corner of his mouth quirked in wry smile. "I can help you, Padawan, but only if you let me."

"I don't know how," came the desperate response. Qui-Gon cupped the head under his hand.

"You only have to ask, Obi."

"Help me, Master. Please," was the whispered response, but Qui-Gon heard it. He moved the tray from between them and quickly pulled the boy into his lap. It was a testament to the boy's distress that he did not protest the slight against his teenage dignity. Instead, Obi-Wan clung to his master's robes, burying his face against the broad chest. Qui-Gon held him just as tightly, rubbing soothing circles on the child's back waiting for the tears to come. He knew the child's grief was a spread of dark clouds against the horizon, his guilt ionizing the Force around them – heralding the approaching storm.

The storm had now arrived if the soft keening at his chest and the growing dampness of his tunics were any indication. Through it all, Qui-Gon simply held him, offering his apprentice comfort through his touch, his words, and their shared bond. Eventually, the dark skies lightened, the clouds slowly parted allowing a few tenuous rays of sunlight through. The storm passed, its rage and fury spent in tears leaving only the occasional hiccupping sob or shiver in its wake. Qui-Gon waited silently, his longanimity undisturbed by the snotty sniffles against his sternum. Suddenly, the small form in his lap stiffened, the once relaxed frame now wrought with tension. Obi-Wan pushed himself up from his master's chest, but did not attempt to move from his lap.

"Your tunics!" Obi-Wan yelped, his eyes wide in apparent mortification.

"Will dry," Qui-Gon replied as he gently pulled the boy's head to rest against his shoulder. "Feel a bit better now?" he asked and he felt rather than heard the boy's affirmative response.

"How did you know?" Obi-Wan asked as he turned his head to look up at his master's face. A momentary crease appeared on Qui-Gon's normally serene visage.

"How did I know what?"

"That... that I needed to cry," his apprentice supplied shyly. Qui-Gon paused for a few seconds knowing that he needed to be careful yet honest in his answer if his padawan were to truly learn from this moment.

"When things like this happen," he began "when missions go so horribly wrong... serenity and acceptance do not come easily to me. At those times, often the only way I can find my center again, the only way I can find peace again is to have a good, hard cry. That way, I can release my most intense feelings of guilt and sadness."

"But it doesn't all go away. The feelings I mean."

"No," Qui-Gon sighed as he absently patted the small knee under his palm. "But what's left can be felt, examined, and ultimately given up to the Force."

"Over and over again."

"If needs be," Qui-Gon replied, but the desolate look on his padawan's face made him pause. "But that's not what you meant, is it?"

The auburn topped head at his chest dipped down, obscuring what the master knew to be pained features and trouble blue-gray eyes. Qui-Gon moved his hand across his padawan's back, tracing soothing circles and projecting reassurance along their bond.

"What is it, Padawan?" he asked, the gentle movements of his large hand never stopping. "What is it that still troubles you so?"

“You said you’ve...” Obi-Wan began and Qui-Gon could feel the small frame under his hand shudder. With a deep breath, the boy began again. “You’ve killed before. More than once.”

“I did. I have,” the master answered evenly. Another shudder.

“It’s what a Jedi has to do... sometimes. Which means,” the boy stopped, suddenly falling silent. The quiet lasted so long Qui-Gon didn’t think the apprentice would speak any further, but then his padawan seemed to summon the bravery his master knew all too well resided within the boy’s heart and resumed his speech.

“Which means if I want to be a Jedi, I will have to kill. Again.”

The flat weight of defeat laid heavy in the boy’s voice. This child’s spirit, Qui-Gon knew, was currently as thin and fragile as atkie eggshells. He would have to tread carefully lest truth, too harshly delivered, would shatter the precious shells leaving only ruin in its wake.

Qui-Gon stilled the hand on the boy’s back while he used the other to gently lift the child’s chin. When he spoke, he did so steadily holding the fearful gaze of his apprentice.

“I will never lie to you, Obi-Wan, even when I would save you from further hurt. You are correct in that to be Jedi means that there will come a time when you may have to kill. Even to continue on the path to knighthood places you in risk of this. I truly wish it were not so, but my wants are not the way of things and I cannot make them so,” Qui-Gon said releasing a deep sigh. The hand on Obi-Wan’s back moved to rest on one thin shoulder. “This is a truth of this path, Padawan, and if you choose to walk it, you must do so knowing all it will entail. Do you still choose to walk this path?”

The master was pleased that the boy did not answer immediately. The question he had posed was one that every Jedi and every Jedi-to-be had to ask themselves at least once in their life. Qui-Gon had asked himself that question many times throughout his years of service to the Order, yet always the answer was the same. He was a Jedi. He could be nothing else. And so, he had learned to accept the pain and grief that accompanied that choice; he only wondered if Obi-Wan would do the same. From the very start, Qui-Gon knew this child’s heart was strong and resilient, but that same heart was often open, vulnerable, and easily bruised. The galaxy could be a brutal place for hearts such as his, and Qui-Gon secretly wept for the scars that a lifetime of Jedi service would leave on the core of this boy. But he would not lay his fears on his apprentice, nor would he permit his apprentice’s fears to guide his choice. To act in the face of fear, be it your own or the fears of others, was too a measure of a Jedi.

“What if I don’t know if I can?”

The soft, dulcet tones pulled Qui-Gon from his ruminations. His gaze focused again upon the upturned face of his padawan – a face no longer marred with despairing furrows, but now limned with lines of worry.

“Do you want to?”

“Yes, I want to but-” Obi-Wan started but Qui-Gon interrupted him with a single silencing finger pressed against his lips.

“For now, desire is enough. As for the rest, I believe meditation may guide you to the answers you seek,” Qui-Gon replied. He removed his finger, freeing the apprentice to answer his next question. “Would you like to meditate together or alone?”

“Together, please,” came the diffident reply. Qui-Gon nodded at the response and gently lifted his padawan off his lap and placed him on the sleep couch beside him. He then turned to face his charge, folding his long legs one across the other and resting the backs of his palms lightly on his knees. Within a short moment, Obi-Wan turned to face the master, mirroring his position and posture, sitting just close enough that their knees touched. Without further words, both Jedi closed their eyes and sought their centers. A frisson of anxiety wafted its way through their bond as Qui-Gon felt Obi-Wan seek and fail to find his center. In response to the boy’s likely unintended sending, the master sent back calm and patience.

*/Match my breathing, Padawan. Seek nothing but that. Breathe with me./*

Obi-Wan didn’t answer but he did obey, and soon both Jedi were inhaling and exhaling in tandem. Once Qui-Gon was certain the boy was at ease, he sent further instructions.

*/Now, don’t seek your center. Fall into it. Let go, Padawan. I will catch you./*

And let go the boy finally did and, as promised, his master was there to catch and guide him into the warm currents of the Force flowing through and around them. When Qui-Gon felt the boy slip into a mid-level trance, he pulled his mind back a bit wanting to give the child his privacy and the room to think upon all that had happened, but not retreating so far that Obi-Wan would not feel his presence.

Several hours passed, thought quite how many he wasn’t sure. *Three hours*, an annoying voice in the back of his mind supplied. Qui-Gon released a quiet huff. Those hours were certainly long enough to earn an unpleasant ache in his knees and numbness in his bum. It was rare that his padawan could sustain meditation for so long leaving the master loathe to interrupt the boy. Obi-Wan needed this time and Qui-Gon would make sure that he got it. To that end, the master settled for conducting subtle isometrics from his seated position, isolating individual muscles groups flexing and relaxing them in turn. He prepared his body and mind to continue their vigil, but it would prove unnecessary as after only a few minutes pale lids rose revealing somewhat less troubled blue-gray eyes.

A few quiet moments passed in a silence that was not quite comfortable, but lacked the tension of hours previous as the master waited for his apprentice to gather his thoughts. Eventually, Obi-Wan took a deep breath and found his voice.

“I found my answer, Master, but I still have questions.”

“Tell me your answer and I shall answer your questions,” Qui-Gon replied solemnly. Obi-Wan tugged at the hem of one sleeve, worrying a loose thread before collecting himself with another deep, stilling breath. Qui-Gon sent a soft brush of approval across their bond.

“I do still want to be a Knight, even... even though I know that it means that this will happen again.”

“I have never once doubted your conviction or your oath in this regard, but it means all the more now that you have full knowledge of what that choice involves. That you still choose this path fills me with gratitude and no small measure of pride.”

“Thank you, Master,” Obi-Wan replied somewhat shyly, a faint blush touching his cheeks and the tips of his ears.

“And your question?”

Qui-Gon almost regretted asking as Obi-Wan’s expression fell and a tale-tell furrow appeared between his brows.

“I... I know this is the path I am meant to walk, but,” he paused taking another deep breath. “But I don’t know *how* to walk it, Master.”

Qui-Gon reached across the short distance between them and took the feather soft end of his student’s braid between two fingertips.

“You want to know how you walk this path?” he repeated, and at his words the boy nodded. Qui-Gon lightly tugged the braid in his hand.

“The answer, my Padawan, is simple. We walk this path together.”