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Know The Enemy

by [Alison Glover](#)

Know the enemy, know yourself; your victory will never be endangered. Know the ground;..... your victory will then be total.

Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*.

Remember, the act of obtaining information, of measurement, always perturbs to some extent both the system being observed and that making the observation.

Grebnesieh-Namnyef, Foundation Professor of Physics, University of Coruscant.

Qui-Gon Jinn had left little Anakin in the cockpit, where the boy was still firing questions at the pilot, Ric Olie. Now that the ship was locked in its hyperspace catenary to Coruscant, there was little for the pilot to do, and he seemed to find it amusing, rather than an irritation, that Anakin wanted to know the exact function of every single control.

Someone else that the boy had had no trouble in winning over.

One person on board, however, seemed thoroughly immune to Anakin's enthusiasm and friendliness. Qui-Gon had the distinct impression that Obi-Wan was, as far as possible on a ship this size, avoiding not only Jar Jar Binks, but also the boy. Ironic, really, because Qui-Gon's recollections of his padawan as a child were that he'd been very like Anakin.

Jar Jar he found in one of the aft compartments, snoring loudly, and left him that way. He wondered if it was normal for Gungans to sleep so soundly.

He palmed the lock to the engine room. Inside, the lights were dimmed, most of the illumination coming from the back-lit control surfaces and monitors.

The figure who was seated, chin resting on his hands, staring at a bank of screens, didn't turn as Qui-Gon came in, just said, "Yes, Master?"

Without physically touching it, Qui-Gon pressed the control to close the door. When Obi-Wan kept his voice that calm and neutral, it usually meant that he was feeling exactly the opposite. He was also completely motionless, which wasn't like him. Young Obi-Wan was quite capable of containing his usual energy and enthusiasm to sit or stand still, but normally when he did, it was obvious that being immobile was a temporary and unnatural state, maintained only with effort.

"Is there a problem with the hyperdrive?" Qui-Gon asked, although the beat of the engines was perfectly steady, and he was sure it nothing so tangible that was worrying his apprentice.

Obi-Wan still didn't look round, even once Qui-Gon was standing right behind him. "No, Master."

"And one's less likely to develop if you watch its read-outs all the way to Coruscant?" There being no one to observe that he spoke with less decorum than was perhaps fitting for a Jedi Master, Qui-Gon kept his own voice light, and rested one hand on his padawan's shoulder.

"No, Master. But neither I nor the pilots we freed are qualified drive engineers. I thought it best to confirm that it's still functioning properly." Obi-Wan finally looked up. The corners of his mouth twitched, although the expression in his eyes was still distant. "Also, there was no mention of a warranty."

"No doubt that would have cost extra." Qui-Gon leaned on the edge of the control panel, looking down at the young man. He smiled wryly. When he'd first been entrusted with Obi-Wan as his padawan, the thought of the decades it took to train a Jedi had seemed daunting. Now he kept marvelling at how quickly the years had passed, at how fast the boy had grown up. "Were there difficulties installing it?" Unlike Anakin, Obi-Wan had never claimed to be able to fix everything, but he was good with machinery; perhaps Qui-Gon had been taking how good for granted.

"No. Not after Jar Jar Binks was convinced that his assistance was not required."

Obi-Wan was still perfectly straight-faced, but Qui-Gon smiled. He could see Ben being extremely determined to keep the clumsy, accident-prone Gungan away from the hyperdrive installation. Presumably that was why Jar Jar was so deeply asleep.

"I do understand, Master," Ben went on, gazing innocently up at Qui-Gon, "that you believe that Jar Jar has some important role to play in the greater scheme of things, even if what that role will be is not yet clear to me."

Qui-Gon chose to ignore that. "So what's troubling you, Obi-Wan? The other pathetic life-form that your over-sentimental Master's picked up?"

Obi-Wan turned back to the screens, which were, Qui-Gon noted, displaying not only the hyperdrive read-outs, but also a sensor net schematic. He said quietly, "Just before I left Coruscant, Ki-Adi-Mundi asked me if perhaps you had missed your calling, and should be running an employment agency. Or a pet shop."

Qui-Gon let his smile broaden. "Dare I ask what you replied?"

"I was perfectly polite, Master, I assure you. I merely inquired if he often experienced these profound vocational insights, and, if so, whether he shared them with the Bureau of Employment and Training."

Personally, Qui-Gon wasn't sure if Ki-Adi-Mundi would have had the insight to recognise Obi-Wan's sarcasm, especially as his padawan had no doubt looked entirely innocent as he said it. Though if Mundi had, no doubt he'd be awaiting an opportunity for retribution.

Jedi training was never easy, even for the most talented student, and it had been more difficult for Obi-Wan, being apprenticed to a master who was so often in dispute with the Council, and having to deal with their hints that his progress through the Jedi ranks would be smoother if he acted as a restraining influence on Qui-Gon.

But although Qui-Gon hadn't yet expected Obi-Wan to fully understand some of his admittedly less orthodox training methods, he had hoped that a fellow Jedi Master would have seen his point.

I didn't want you to grow up to be like the Council, Ben, so detached and distanced from the problems of everyday people. I wanted to show you how fragile peoples' lives can be, and that sometimes a little push in the right direction at the right time can make a huge difference. The Jedi used to be a powerful force for good in the galaxy. Now I fear that many of us are impotent irrelevancies.

But if Anakin is the One we can change that...

Because the Jedi have to change. Soon. Or it will be too late.

For all his years of discipline and training, Qui-Gon couldn't suppress his impatience and frustration about that. When he'd been Obi-Wan's age, he'd thought he'd had plenty of time to prove to the Council why and how they had to change. But lately, he kept feeling as if there was very time left.

Resenting getting old, Qui-Gon? It's inevitable. Calm you should be, accepting.

But he wasn't.

And he shouldn't chide his apprentice for worrying about the future when his own visions were so bleak.

The future was obviously where Obi-Wan's thoughts were, too. He'd stood up, and was pacing, with that faraway look in his eyes. Although Qui-Gon sometimes resented what it was hard not to see as interference in his training methods, he knew why Yoda was so insistent that Obi-Wan be mindful of the future. Why the old Master had kept Obi-Wan on Coruscant for weeks before Valorum had requested them as ambassadors to the Trade Federation.

The way Ben saw the will of the Force was different from how Qui-Gon experienced it. Qui-Gon could envisage clearly the potential futures of individuals; see, as it were, particular threads in a grander overall tapestry, but sometimes Obi-Wan could see the whole pattern. As Yoda did.... which was also ironic, considering how otherwise different Ben and the old Master's views were. As yet, Ben's talents in that regard were erratic. Qui-Gon was sure that as soon as Obi-Wan passed the trials and was formally invested as a Jedi Knight, Yoda would pronounce that that was where his efforts must be concentrated.

And the Council would probably then dispatch Qui-Gon back out to the Outer Rim, as far away as possible from the Jedi Temple, so that he couldn't interfere while they did their best to cure young Obi-Wan of whatever heretical notions he might have picked from his troublesome teacher.

And accepting of that you should be, too.

Qui-Gon sighed, tossing his long hair back over his shoulders. *And sure, are you, that you wish to train Anakin for his own good and that of the galaxy? Not just because you were lonely when Ben was on Coruscant, and want to fill the gap there will be in your life without him always at your side?*

He gave another wry smile. *Before any of those might-be's can happen, this ship has to reach Coruscant safely and the situation on Naboo be resolved. You could use a little less mulling over possibilities, and a little more focus on the present yourself, Qui-Gon Jinn.*

Obi-Wan was still pacing; that and his pre-occupied frown were normal, his usual habit when he was thinking hard about something. But he didn't usually have his arms wrapped tight round his middle like that, almost as if he were in physical pain. Obi-Wan had - finally - learned not to let his feelings always show on his face, but Qui-Gon could see the worry in his eyes. "Ben?" he prompted gently.

His padawan shook his head, as if to dispel some unpleasant image, still pacing. "Yes," he said finally, "I am troubled about the boy." Qui-Gon knew that look, too

- the one that meant that Ben wanted to say something he thought his master wouldn't like, and didn't yet know how to express it. "And I'm troubled about that Sith, or whatever it was." He spun round, braid whirling, to face Qui-Gon. "Master, just how close did that thing come to killing you?" It was very rarely that Ben allowed his native accent to creep back into his voice, but Qui-Gon heard it quite clearly now. Wide blue eyes gazed intently into Qui-Gon's. Intently and ferociously. Qui-Gon had never seen Ben look so desperately worried. Or so determined.

For an instant, he had a vision of an older Obi-Wan, a bearded, grim-faced warrior, on the bridge of a battle cruiser, saying, "There is no other way to end this. Launch the attack."

He pushed the image away, concentrated on how concerned Ben was now. "Close," he admitted. He'd kept silent about that, because he hadn't wanted to worry Anakin. But he was certain he and Ben would encounter the creature again, so they must find a way to defeat it. "Too close."

Ben let out the breath he'd hardly been aware that he'd been holding. He hadn't wanted to believe that his master hadn't realised how narrow his escape had been. But Qui-Gon had been acting so strangely on Tatooine that he'd had to make sure.

Ben hadn't thought that the weeks he'd spent on Coruscant with Master Yoda would have made any difference to his relationship with Qui-Gon. He'd assumed that things would simply go back to the way they'd always been. That they'd resume their familiar, frequently non-verbal communication, the running jokes too subtle for third parties to pick up.

But somehow they hadn't. Qui-Gon had always been utterly focused on doing what he believed was right, but now he seemed driven, almost obsessed. And he looked so tired and careworn.... perhaps he was just displeased with Ben, but it seemed that he never smiled any more.

The bad feeling Ben had had ever since they'd been sent to negotiate with the Trade Federation kept getting worse, an ever-increasing leaden weight in his stomach, a dark, ominous shadow that clouded his thinking. For the first time, Yoda's litanies about fear and anger rang true. Ben had never felt rage like this before; he wanted to turn the ship around, go back to Tatooine and dispose of Qui-Gon's attacker *now*.

There had been plenty of times during his training when he'd bitten off more than he could chew and scared himself, but he'd never been afraid like this before, either. This deep, numbing fear that Qui-Gon had missed a crucial turning point in the infinite branchings of what might be, and was now headed irrevocably to certain death.

There had to be something Ben could do to change that....

Qui-Gon didn't even seem to find it odd that a Jedi Master could be so readily convinced that the only way to obtain a hyperdrive on Tatooine was for a child to take part in that insane pod-race. Qui-Gon's actions frequently baffled the Council, and there had been plenty of occasions they'd made little sense to Ben either, at the time. But he'd never done anything like this before...

Why can't you see that the boy is dangerous, Master? As a Force-user he'd be bound to influence his mother and others, probably quite unconsciously, into getting his own way. But can't you see that he's manipulating you, too? Even if he doesn't realise yet that he is.

But Ben didn't know if Qui-Gon was ready to hear that, and, whatever Ben's worries about what the boy's future might hold, Anakin wasn't an immediate threat.

And that black-clad warrior was. If it had found them on a planet as obscure as Tatooine, it could probably guess where they were headed now.

Ben swallowed, pushing away the fear and anger, and said, "You were right, Master. As usual. I see now that there was a good reason for all that practice duelling." And an answer to Ben's continual questions about whose attack with a lightsabre he had to learn to defend against, when all the Jedi were on the same side, and the Sith destroyed a millennium ago. He'd kept his voice perfectly serious, but he smiled slightly as he spoke.

Qui-Gon smiled back, with his eyes, more than his mouth, as he so often did. "Whoever he was, he'd obviously been doing some training himself."

"And not just in martial arts." Ben indicated the display he'd been studying. "Those are the logs of the sensor net that Captain Panaka set up around the ship. It - " Ben couldn't bring himself to think of Qui-Gon's attacker as 'he' "-broke through without any movement or disruption to the circuit registering at all." Perhaps the black warrior had known what type of ship they were in, extrapolated what equipment would be to hand, and come prepared with counter-measures.

Qui-Gon had obviously thought that through, too. "Well-trained and well-prepared."

"Well-trained with a lightsabre...." Ben looked up at Qui-Gon. "Who else but a Sith would - or could - use a lightsabre?" Lightsabres had a conventional power cell, so they could be used briefly by non-Force-wielders if necessary, but its capacity was too low to power them for long. Most of the energy for the blades' coherent photon-soliton field came directly from the Force, channelled through the crystal in the sabre's hilt. During their training, every Jedi used the Force to

tune a crystal into a state that could never occur naturally, to build their own sabre. The crystal's exact energy-band structure, and thus the wavelengths emitted and the precise colour of the blade, were therefore different for each lightsabre. The tuned crystal would resonate efficiently only with its maker's mind, although sometimes one Jedi could use another's weapon. Usually that could happen only if the two Jedi were genetically or otherwise closely related.

Qui-Gon had moved well away from the consoles, and ignited his own sabre, slowly pantomiming first the moves he'd made himself in combat and then his attacker's. "Sith or not, he didn't mind the heat nearly as much as I did." He glanced at Ben. "He also seemed almost as fond of unnecessary somersaults as you are."

Ben grinned, but didn't reply to that, still thinking about the strange, black-clad warrior.

It had fought from a wide, rather formal stance; maybe that was because of the sand. Ben tried the stance, bouncing on the balls of his feet, trying to think himself into the Sith, then spun as he'd seen it do, twirling an imaginary weapon in his hands. Here on smooth, flat deckplates, it was easy. Whether Ben could have done it on a shifting sand-dune and stayed upright, he wasn't so sure.

Qui-Gon repeated a block, then tried an alternative, frowning thoughtfully. He nodded at Ben, who turned his own lightsabre on, and mimed the appropriate strike.

They tried it a couple of times. "I'd say," Qui-Gon mused, "that he's used to fighting with a longer weapon."

Then they spun, simultaneously, as the door slid open.

"Wow!" announced Anakin. "Lightsabres are so cool. Can I try that?"

Ben turned his sabre off, automatically - and possessively - hanging it back on his belt. He glanced anxiously at Qui-Gon. *Is this why the boy bothers me so much? Because he's going to distract Qui-Gon from dealing with this Sith? Partly, he decided. But it's more than that.*

"Master -" he began, noticing, but not caring, that his voice sounded both worried and hopeful, not calm and collected as a Jedi's should.

Qui-Gon had turned his sabre off too, and was looking thoughtful.

"Well, can I?" Anakin came confidently into the room, seemingly sure of what the answer would be.

Qui-Gon dropped down on one knee, and smiled at the boy. "Anakin, young Jedi do a great deal of training with less lethal weapons before they learn to use a lightsabre. So, no, you can't try this."

"Aww..." Anakin seemed to realise that this was not a situation in which pouting was going to get him his own way. His expression brightened again, and he demanded, "What less lethal weapons?"

Ben took a deep breath, willed himself to silence. He was convinced that this was one of those moments where futures diverged, where the most seemingly trivial decision would have repercussions echoing for years or decades...

He was also sure this one wasn't his decision to make. So he bit his tongue, and waited.

"Time enough for that, Anakin, once we reach Coruscant and report to the Council."

"But, Master Qui-Gon, sir...."

"Anakin, if you really want to be a Jedi, the first lesson you must learn is patience."

Ben couldn't help catching Qui-Gon's eye. Twenty years on, he knew he still hadn't mastered that one himself.

"But...."

"I told you, Anakin. Learning to be a Jedi isn't easy. A great deal of the time, it simply means having to do things you'd rather not. If you can't come to terms with that, the Council will never agree to your training." It was odd, seeing that familiar expression of stern tolerance being directed at someone else. And interesting, watching Anakin contemplate further argument, and decide against it.

"Besides," Qui-Gon went on, more gently, "it's been a long day for you. You should rest before we get to Coruscant."

"I suppose. But what are we going to -"

Anakin was looking guilelessly at Qui-Gon, as Ben told himself sternly that he shouldn't let the boy's confident use of 'we' irritate him.

" - do about the Sith? Or whatever it was?" Qui-Gon stood up. "Don't worry, Anakin, the Queen -" he paused, before adding, "- and Padme - will be safe. Obi-Wan and I will find a way to deal with the Sith."

"Yes," said Ben, with the sudden hope that somehow, now, they would.

* * * * *

Darth Maul dropped lightly down to bar the hangar doorway. As his cloak settled behind him and the blast doors opened, he allowed himself a moment's satisfaction at the shock and dismay that greeted his sudden appearance. He was well aware that to most humanoids he looked like a demon conjured from the nethermost depths of hell, a dark death-angel from the primeval mythologies advanced societies liked to think they'd outgrown. That pleased him. Unlike his Master, he preferred that even the non-Force-sensitive knew from the outset how deadly he was.

It was just a little frustrating, sometimes, that so many of those he was sent against would flee at the sight of him without putting up a fight. Maul had nothing but contempt for those who merely ran.

Predicably, however, the Jedi, Qui-Gon Jinn, showed no signs of fleeing. Neither did his apprentice, Kenobi. Maul could sense the younger man's eagerness to fight him. From Jinn he could sense nothing, except maybe calm resignation, as the Jedi said, "We'll deal with this."

"And we'll take the long way round." Maul ignored Queen Amidala. No doubt she was politically important, but politics was his master's domain. Maul's own purpose was simpler; to intimidate, and, when so ordered, to kill.

It was touching, the little contingent's faith in the Jedi. No one even aimed a blaster at Maul as they scattered and ran. Of course, he would have blocked the bolts if they had fired, but he was glad no one was going to interfere in this contest.

He'd trained for a very long time to fight Jedi, and he intended to make the most of this opportunity. He could foresee a time when the dispatching of Jedi would be routine.

But still..... "We'll deal..."

'We' was an interesting concept. Maul doubted that it was one that would have occurred to Darth Sidious, who commanded and directed, but never accompanied. He pondered it as he watched the two Jedi, evaluating the similarities in their stances, the unconscious synchronisation of their movements, noting that Kenobi's cloak seemed too big for him, its hem dragging on the hangar floor and its sleeves hanging down past his hands. Perhaps it was a cast-off of Jinn's, who was tall for a human. Not that Maul was concerned about the Jedi's greater height and longer reach than his. He knew from Tatooine how the older man fought.

From that it was easy to extrapolate how his apprentice would.

Kenobi must have realised himself that his outer garment would be a hindrance; both Jedi were dumping their cloaks, observing Maul warily, but predicably waiting for him to attack first.

Even if he had not been well-informed about these two, the Jedi always made everything simple. Their dress told him exactly what level of master Jinn was, and that Kenobi wasn't even fully-trained yet. The Sith didn't believe in giving such potentially valuable information away so easily.

Maul allowed himself another smile as he ignited his lightsabre. Before thumbing on the second blade, he paused long enough for it to be a surprise that the weapon was double-bladed. Then he stepped back, which probably wasn't what the Jedi were expecting him to do.

Know your enemy and know yourself, and victory is assured....

Maul had chosen his arena carefully, too. The catwalks and raised walkways of the generator complex would allow him to take full advantage of his superior athletic abilities.

He somersaulted over the Jedi, drawing them, as he had intended, down the hangar to the other set of blast doors.

Yes, Ben thought, *finally a reason for all those practice duels...* After all the years of training, dealing with the Federation's droids had been even easier than he'd expected, but a nagging little voice in the back of his mind said, *good against remotes and droids is one thing, good against the living is another.*

He pushed the thought away. Focus on the now, not on vague bad feelings about the future. And right now all he could feel was the Sith's hate. It had been difficult and frustrating, learning calm and patience enough to deal with the Council's habitual disapproval of Qui-Gon, but that was nothing compared to this. He didn't know why, but the Sith hated him and his master, with a bitter, deadly relentlessness that was almost palpable.

And it had almost killed Qui-Gon on Tatooine.....

For a moment, he let himself hate back..

Qui-Gon had considered attacking the Sith first, simply rushing in and getting this over with. But the beliefs and habits of a lifetime were too strong.... *use the Force for defence, never for attack...* And he might learn more by waiting. Perhaps, since the Sith made no immediate effort to pursue Amidala and her guards, it wasn't the young Queen he was after. Indeed, he seemed to have no interest in

her at all. The Sith's attention was focused on Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan. Utterly and completely focused, with a discipline that part of Qui-Gon had to admire.

Qui-Gon had always had his doubts about Yoda's continual admonishments on hate, fear and anger and their inevitable link to the Dark Side. He'd thought that a being as old as Yoda simply didn't understand the feelings of the shorter-lived, and was over-reacting to his distaste for wayward human emotions. But Qui-Gon had never felt hate like this before.

Why? Why hate us so much?

But he didn't ask the question out loud, because the Sith had ignited his lightsabre (two blades, ah, so that explained the odd dimensions of the handle), and it was time to focus his own mind. This wasn't going to be an easy fight, even if it was two against one.

Fortunately Ben seemed to be aware of that too. Unlike with the battle droids, his apprentice was indulging in no fancy flourishes of his lightsabre this time, just waiting, ready, as the Sith spun the double blade, stepped back, and then somersaulted over them.

Together, Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan went after him.

Deliberately, Maul positioned himself between the two Jedi, blade whirling, trying to goad them into striking wildly and taking off the other's limbs. His master would be extremely pleased if he could manoeuvre them into killing each other. That was the type of touch at which his master excelled, as with the dismissal of Chancellor Valorum. Betrayal as well as removal from power, ensuring that Valorum would not have the heart to fight back. Maul knew that his master had toyed with the idea of turning one of the Jedi's own against them, but for all Qui-Gon's continual disputes with Council, had never been able to drive a big enough wedge between them.

But if he could set it up for one of them to kill or main the other, his Master could perhaps use that.... After all, Maul was the chosen apprentice, the second Sith Lord, so if his master wished to also make use of lesser Force-users, what threat was that to him?

But that plan wasn't working. The Jedi were too controlled, too familiar with each other's moves to be lured into getting each other's way or injuring one another. Qui-Gon was a more formidable opponent here, too. Because his balance was better on a firmer surface than sand, and it was much cooler than on Tatooine? No, Maul realised. Here he was more focused, because he didn't have an unarmed child to worry about.

All right, if he couldn't use them against each other, he would have to deal with them one at a time.

He snapped out a side-kick, catching Kenobi in the ribs and sending him sprawling, then backed away, right to the edge of the catwalk, allowing them to think that he would fall, before somersaulting backwards and up, to land, perfectly balanced, on one of the higher gangways. He leered down at them.

Come and get me, Jedi. If you can...

He saw them exchange a quick glance, and then they were somersaulting after him, alighting neatly on either side of him, their landings timed so that he had no opportunity to take one of them out first.

They functioned well as a unit. It would be an interesting experience, to fight with someone one could trust at one's back.

But that comradeship could also be a weakness.

He thrust at Jinn, driving the older man back so his weight was all on his rear leg, and would take a moment to recover, then spun, swinging his blade up and over as he turned. By the time he was facing Kenobi, it was already arcing down to slice the younger Jedi in two. But a blue blade was blocking Maul's red one. It was hard to tell how the young man was built, under his multi-layered tunics, but he was stronger than Maul had expected, and fast. He tried to force Kenobi's own blade down into his shoulder and neck, but the Jedi angled his lightsabre and pushed, partly with the lightsabre and partly with the Force, so that Maul's blade slid uselessly away, close enough to Kenobi's shoulder to singe his outer tunic, but not doing any real damage. And then he had to jump back to avoid Kenobi's kick to his mid-section, and spin to block another attack from Jinn.

Maul feinted at Kenobi's body, then spun his lightsabre to slash his hands off at the wrists, but only sliced a corner off one of those wide sleeves. Kenobi didn't even wince, just kept after him.

Maul leapt nimbly backwards, enticing them to follow, keeping his concentration on their faces and their blades, although his eyes wanted to follow Kenobi's whirling braid as the young man blocked, dodged, spun. Maul swung at Jinn's head, but too slowly, catching only the ends of that mane of greying hair as the Jedi ducked. Perhaps their hair and clothing, which had seemed impractical, had purpose after all.

Qui-Gon ducked, almost not fast enough. There was an unpleasant sizzle, and the choking smell of burnt keratin as the Sith's lightsabre brushed his hair. He glanced quickly at Obi-Wan. Ben's tunic was charred on one shoulder, and he was missing part of one sleeve, but he obviously wasn't injured. Qui-Gon had

thought they'd both come close to wounding the Sith, too, but that dark clothing wouldn't show burn marks if they had. And unfortunately, the Sith was showing no signs of tiring.

In fact, Qui-Gon had the distinct impression that the Sith was enjoying himself.

Maul angled himself carefully, putting Kenobi between himself and the edge of the walkway, watching the Jedi's stance... ah yes, that was it, feet level, stable sideways, but not front to back... he snapped out a front kick, straight at Kenobi's face, and was rewarded with a flicker of surprise in the young man's eyes before the kick connected, and he fell.

Qui-Gon couldn't spare the time to look, so he felt rather than saw Ben grabbing at the ramp below, willing his apprentice's sliding hands to grip on the slippery surface, relief a physical taste in his mouth as Ben caught hold and pulled himself up.

It was hardly as if he'd never worried about Ben before. Sometimes it seemed that he'd spent half of Ben's childhood and adolescence with his heart in his mouth, as his padawan came up with new and interesting ways to nearly kill himself, however diligent a guardian Qui-Gon had tried to be.

But this was different... he'd also felt the Sith's pleasure and satisfaction as its kick landed and Ben fell.

He swung his sabre, striking at the Sith's head, so that in blocking, it left its body exposed. He kicked it hard, and it fell, but recovered enough to land on a lower gangway.

He leapt after it.

Qui-Gon was too busy fighting to think, but his objectives were rearranging themselves according to more primal priorities than the dictates of the Jedi Council. Protecting the Queen, capturing the viceroy, discovering more about the Sith... none of those mattered any more. What was important was that this Sith had nearly killed his padawan, the son of his heart, and Qui-Gon would be damned if he was going to give it another change at that.

He wasn't really aware that, for the first time in decades, he had lost his temper. Just that, as he ran after the Sith, there was a change in its attitude as it whirled away. It was now regarding Qui-Gon with something approaching respect. And perhaps, as his long legs easily narrowed the gap between them, something approaching fear.

And that felt good...

Ben clambered back onto the ramp, wiping blood from his chin, annoyed with himself. He'd been quick enough to prevent the kick from really connecting - if it had, his jaw would have been broken, if not his neck - but hadn't been able to keep his balance. Which meant that his master was left to deal with the Sith alone.

At least he'd kept hold of his lightsabre.

He took a deep breath, looked up, not at the long drop below him, and jumped back to the upper walkway.

Qui-Gon was charging full tilt after the Sith, which now looked less like it was playing games, and more like it was seriously interested in putting some distance between it and his master. Ignoring the ache from his bruised ribs, Ben gulped more air into his lungs and sprinted after them.

Maul reached the end of the walkway, and spun round. This, he felt, would be a fitting place in which to dispose of the Jedi. The melting pit, where the residue from the generator was reduced to its component atoms.

He could feel Jinn's anger, and smiled to himself. *So easy to break your composure, is it, Jedi Master?*

And then there was a barrier between them. Maul snarled, prodded at the energy gate with his lightsabre. That shouldn't have happened. He'd deactivated all the safety devices he could find when he'd first investigated the generator complex.

What the hell? Ben skidded to a halt, boots sliding on the smooth ramp, stopping just short of frying himself on the criss-crossing energy lattices. What turned this on? Some trick of the Sith's?

He looked around quickly for the control mechanism, but there wasn't one on this side. At the other end, the Sith was pacing, apparently also seeking a way to turn the fields off. Qui-Gon, trapped in one of the cells in between, was standing still, breathing deeply....

.... and the nagging worry at the back of Ben's mind coalesced. With sudden, sickening certainty, he could see what was going to happen. Qui-Gon would do the right thing, do as Jedi should, and calm himself, concentrate, banish hate and anger....

... and calm and concentration weren't going to be enough to defeat the Sith.

No! Ben bit his lip to stop from screaming that out loud. He looked for some other way through, some place where he could leap to avoid the energy gates.

But he could see no way, find nothing to do to prevent what he feared was now inevitable. He could almost smell charred flesh, and the vision was all too clear in his mind, of Qui-Gon's lifeless body, and of himself holding him, sobbing helplessly. He pulled at the double-bladed sabre, trying to use the Force to wrest it from the Sith's grasp, and send it tumbling into the melting pit. But the Sith had been prepared for that; it grinned mockingly at Ben, sabre still secure in its black-gloved hands.

The Sith was too good. Any sensible strategy on Ben's part it would anticipate. And he needed to attract Qui-Gon's attention, too, change whatever his master was intending to do.

In desperation Ben shouted, "Hey, Sith! Who are you?"

The horned head turned in surprise. "Why do you want to know, young padawan?" It made an insult of the final words.

Improvising wildly, Ben yelled, "Oh, you know - it's a Jedi thing." His sudden loss of vocabulary being the least of his current worries, he ignored it, and went on, "We consider it extremely impolite to kill anyone to whom we haven't been properly introduced." The Sith was staring at him disbelievingly.

So was Qui-Gon, whose expression suggested deep concern for his apprentice's sanity.

But when the energy gates open, Qui-Gon leapt backwards, not forwards as the Sith had been expecting. Ben thrust at the Sith with his mind, sensing that Qui-Gon was doing so too. Its stance was too solid for them to push it into the melting pit, but they did force it backwards, so that when the beams re-energised, he and Qui-Gon were trapped in the same cell, with the Sith outside.

"You tire so easily of fighting, old man?" the Sith mocked.

Qui-Gon ignored that. "Why do you hate us so much, Sith?"

"Why should I answer you, Jedi?" That was more spat than spoken.

"Why not?" Qui-Gon countered, in tones so reasonable that the Sith looked even angrier. "If you're so sure you can kill us both, what does it matter what you tell us? Are you ashamed of your name?"

"Maul. Darth Maul."

"*Darth* Maul...a Sith Lord, then, if the stories are true."

That prompted something between a snort and growl. "What do you know of the Sith, Qui-Gon Jinn? Nothing! Only the lies the Jedi Council have propagated over centuries, while they claim to serve, and seek only to dominate."

"Lies? What lies?" Ben asked, suddenly interested in what this Maul might say, not just in goading or distracting him.

"If you know who I am, you'll also know that I don't always agree with the council. So tell us the truth about the Sith." Qui-Gon was still sounding sweetly reasonable, but underneath it Ben could still feel anger. Only now it was cold, controlled anger.

He could also sense Maul timing down the seconds before the energy gates opened again, as he said, "The truth is that it is time for the Sith to be revenged on the Jedi. Our thousand-year wait is over."

Behind him, in the main generator complex beyond the energy barrier, Ben sensed movement, heard the clatter of metal feet. He glanced over his shoulder.

A troupe of battle droids.

"Oh, shit," he muttered, which was doubtless an extremely inappropriate comment for a Jedi. Not that these clumsy, bird-headed droids were a problem, but the turbo laser cannon they were carrying was. *They do have enough processing power to learn from their fellows' terminal experiences of fighting Jedi.*

Well, Ben, you've always wondered what the limits are to deflecting energy bolts with a lightsabre. Looks like you're about to find out.

If the Sith doesn't get you first.

He exchanged a quick look with Qui-Gon, who simply glanced down. Ben nodded. Inside the melting pit was their best option, once that laser started firing. If they could get past the energy barriers and the Sith, that was. And even then it would be a refuge only until the droids brought the cannon to the edge of the pit. But maybe there was another exit, down there.

Ben tensed, waiting for the energy gates to open.

But before they did, the droids simply stopped, swayed under the weight of the cannon, and clattered helplessly down on the gangway.

The pilots must have destroyed the Control Ship.

The energy beams flickered out. Ben sprinted for the cannon, knowing that Qui-Gon would guard his back, somersaulting over the fallen droids to aim the laser at the Sith.

But Maul had evidently decided that discretion was the better part of valour, and made the realistic assessment that although he was very fast, no one was fast enough to dodge a volley from a fully-automatic, speed-of-light weapon. He wasn't pursuing them. For a moment, he paused, glowering. "We will meet again, Jedi." Then he was gone, leaping down into the melting pit.

Maul ducked through the small maintenance hatch situated halfway down the melting pit wall. So, those idiots from the Trade Federation had failed and been destroyed. Maul was not surprised; he'd never understood why his master had wanted them, even as puppets, not allies. And Maul had far more sense of his own worth than to risk his life in the Nemodinians' lost cause.

There were times when it was appropriate to run.

But this encounter had not been without value. What he had been told about Kenobi was true. Angry, impatient, reckless.... the young Jedi was all of those. And that could be used.

As could Master Jinn's concern for his apprentice.

And they had been genuinely curious about the Sith, and Maul had read distrust of the Jedi Council in both their minds. If his master wished it, he thought that they would be prepared to listen.

He bared his teeth, part snarl, part smile. *The Dark Side is closer than you think, Jedi.*

As they ran towards the throne room, dodging more downed droids, Ben mopped at his still-bleeding chin with one charred sleeve, and said to Qui-Gon, "Maul believed what he was saying. He really does think that the Sith are owed revenge."

Qui-Gon smiled - a quick, fierce smile. "No doubt what he says *is* true..."

Ben grinned and finished the sentence. "...from the appropriate perspective." Then he added, "Revenge for what?"

"I don't know. Perhaps the Jedi Council, having devoted all their resources to solving the mystery of the Sith since we left Coruscant, will be able to enlighten us." Qui-Gon didn't smile when he said that, just gave Ben a subtle, sideways glance.

"I will remind you to ask them, Master."

Despite his relief that they'd both survived the encounter with Maul, there was still a nagging worry at the back of Ben's mind. That elusive something, which he felt was going to look obvious, when he finally pinned it down and identified it.

He still couldn't quite see it, couldn't make sense of why the Trade Federation had chosen to blockade and invade Naboo, when they could have cut off its trade just as thoroughly with bureaucracy and red tape. Or why the Sith were involved.

But he was sure that now, with the leaden weight that had dampened his thinking lifted, and with Qui-Gon to help him, he would.

(This one's for Sensei Porter and all "waifs and strays" he gathered at Annandale Kykoshinkai Dojo - and most especially the one I married.)

end

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