

Pete Fletzer

DUEL of the FATES



A Fan Fiction Novelization of
*Star Wars: Episode I -
The Phantom Menace*

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Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace

by Pete Fletzer

Adapted from the film,
“The Phantom Menace”
by George Lucas

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This publication is a work of fan fiction.

Pete Fletzer makes no claim to the original characters, story or setting created by George Lucas. It is created solely out of admiration for the source material.

Thank you, Mr. Lucas, for creating this galaxy far, far away....

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FOREWORD

Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace has the lowest Rotten Tomatoes score of any *Star Wars* film. It is the first part of the Prequel Trilogy which, it is not unfair to say, has been reviled by even the most forgiving *Star Wars* fans. It has been panned for having flat performances by otherwise great actors, for being too focused on politics and, of course, for Jar Jar Binks. Even George Lucas himself said, “It’s a very hard movie to follow.”

While I can’t disagree with most of the critical opinions of the film, I have always believed that there was “something in there,” when I watched *Episode I*. To be fair, I am an unabashed *Star Wars* fan boy and former writer for Lucasfilm fan publications. However, in recent years, I’ve come to look at *The Phantom Menace* as the film version of a good book that didn’t quite get it right.

There are many film adaptations of books that had to leave out important details, gloss over character development or make changes to squeeze it under 150 minutes – all while trying to make it visually appealing. Any *Star Wars* film is first and foremost a space fantasy filled with laser swords, rocket ships, magic, and adventure. However, the story of *The Phantom Menace*, at its core,

is one of political intrigue filled with backroom deals, deception and personal ambitions. These elements are hard to reconcile in a rollicking summer special-effects blockbuster.

So, for its twentieth birthday, I decided to visit an alternate universe and write the book from which the film was adapted. As opposed to a novelization of the finished film, I wanted to create that “good book that the film didn’t get quite right.” This is one of the reasons why I’ve titled it *Duel of the Fates* and not *The Phantom Menace* (but be on the lookout for its reference in the text somewhere). In this novel, you will find most of the dialogue from the movie, the same basic story flow and almost all of the characters. But you will also find the parts the movie “had to leave out.”

I spent time providing backstory and motivation for some characters to explore why we rooted for or against them. For example, I tried to make the most hated character in *Star Wars* lore more of a Steinbeckian Lennie. I wanted to develop Darth Maul, in my opinion, the most wasted villain in cinematic history, and make his fate and future more meaningful. Additionally, I’ve introduced concepts, characters and plot points that are explored in later *Star Wars* films. In some cases, it’s done as a quick name drop and, in others, I’ve developed characters mentioned in passing onscreen that drive the plot of this version of the story. As a result, if you are a student of *Star Wars* canon, you will find that I took some modest liberties to build a more robust story. (Remember: in this world the book was written before the Wookieepedia entries!)

This is where I thank some people who were instrumental in bringing this passion project of mine to life:

Eric Montas was my editor, coach and plot hole finder. He spent more hours than he probably expected he would reading and re-reading this manuscript. It's his fault, really. He encouraged me to do it.

David Amelotti of the wonderful on-line *Star Wars* show, *Beyond the Blast Doors*. Running into him on Facebook led to a great connection, an outlet for me to share this with the world, and the motivation I needed to finish the project.

My wife and kids for putting up with me spending hours behind my laptop on some damn fool idealistic crusade.

And, my father, for kickstarting my love of writing and giving me my first push into putting pen to paper (or is that pixels to screen?).

I hope you enjoy my take on *The Phantom Menace* story. To be clear: **this is a work of fan fiction**, it is not in any way affiliated with Lucasfilm or Disney and I claim no ownership of George Lucas's intellectual property. Think of it as a love letter to galaxy far, far away and a telling of the story from "a certain point of view."

PROLOGUE

*"... And in the time of greatest
despair there shall come a savior,
and he shall be known as:
THE SON OF SUNS"
— Journal of the Whills, 3:127*



CHAPTER 1

Four Years Before

“Boy. Wake up.”

The grizzled, stumpy snout twitched with each word as Watto, the blue-skinned Toydarian junk dealer, used a short stick to poke the human boy sleeping on his cot. “I said: wake up!” his voice was as gruff as his face. Watto’s blue, leathery wings fluttered to life on his back, raising his one-meter, pot-bellied body off the floor to hover above his newly acquired slave. Watto had won the boy and his mother from Gardulla the Hutt the evening before betting on the pod races and was eager to put him to work.

The six-year old boy slowly opened his eyes and fixed a hard stare on his new master. As he pushed himself up on the cot, his light brown hair hung around his round cheeks, tanned from spending his entire short life in the heat of twin suns of Tatooine.

“Where’s my mother?” were his first words.

“She’s up already and working in the kitchen. You, boy, should’ve been up already, too.”

The child harrumphed at that assumption. “I want to see her,” he said with a defiance beyond his age.

“You get to work, you get to see her. I’ll send her in when she’s done.” The boy pulled himself to the side of the cot and placed his feet firmly on the dusty floor of his quarters. “Let’s get going, boy.”

“My name is Anakin, not ‘boy,’” he told Watto, giving him a look out of the side of his eye.

“Alright. Let’s get going, *Anakin*,” Watto said, and a smile almost crossed his mouth. It was hard to see his expression with the two tusks that protruded from his lower lip – one was broken, they both were yellowed. Watto’s ability to maintain a straight face helped him negotiate deals in his shop with the star pilots that often walked through his door in desperate need of some part he had laying around, allowing him to gain the “highest margin.”

Slave ownership was not rampant on the backwater, desert world of Tatooine, but it wasn’t outlawed either. While slavery (human or otherwise) was illegal on the core planets, this world was far enough on the Outer Rim to have its own interpretation of many of the commonly accepted laws of the Galactic Republic. On a planet run by the gangster Hutt clans, the practice of slavery was also a tradable commodity and a way to ensure debts were paid. Typically, slaves were treated well in this part of the planet – as well as someone who is a slave can be. Tales of physical

abuse were rare, but the work was hard, and the life was not one that any being would choose.

“Gardulla...” Watto began in a leading tone. “She told me you are pretty good at making repairs. Is that so?” Watto prodded as Anakin adjusted his tunic and pulled on his well-worn shoes.

“I do alright,” Anakin said with a tinge of pride.

Watto led the boy out of his hut toward the shop, and even though only Tatoo I, the first of Tatooine’s suns, had risen in the sky, the heat was already building. Anakin squinted and saw the blue sky fade into orange as a rising Tatoo II peeked above the yellow sand horizon.

“I sell broken junk for a fair price,” said Watto. “I can sell working junk for even more.” The Toydarian laughed a little to himself, and Anakin, who even at age six understood the value of profit, gave a wry smile and nod back.

When he belonged to the Hutt, Anakin used to find pieces of metal and electrical components strewn about her hangar bays left from the many “visitors” that came through. Often, they would try to buy her favor and beg her to overlook their debts with droids, weapons, and other pieces of technology when they did not have the credits. Gardulla rarely accepted them and forgot them as quickly as those that left them. As a result, if it kept young Anakin occupied – regardless of how dangerous it may have been – she let him play with the loot she did not care about. At an early age, it became clear he had an uncanny knack for finding a way to fix things that were broken and create new things by combining

parts. He became her unofficial court handy man and was often called upon to fix mechanical and electrical equipment around her palace.

Anakin's eyes widened when he walked into the back door of the workshop. For a boy who spent his spare time tinkering, Watto's collection of scrap and spare parts was a dream come true. Piles of droid parts, mechanical lifts, tools, rifle butts, pilex bit drivers, welders and more littered the shelves and the floor.

His eyes were drawn to a pile of wires that strung their way into the neck joint of a human-shaped droid head. The photoreceptors were missing, there was no metal shell and some rust colored the metal braces that surrounded the skull. Anakin picked it up and started to imagine what he could do with it. In his mind he saw it come to life and could envision the parts needed to put this 3PO unit back together.

"Anakin! Over here!" shouted Watto. The slave boy hadn't realized he had wandered away from his master and into the middle of the shop, while Watto had bee-lined over to the work bench at the far side of the shop. "I have a job for you." The boy snapped to attention and gently placed the droid head on a nearby shelf and decided he'd get back to it later if Watto was a kind enough owner to give him free time.

He walked over to the work bench and saw pieces of another droid strewn across the surface. It was a pit droid, the cheap and usually durable repair bot of choice for podracers. When they weren't in pieces on a work bench, they stood about a meter high

and folded into a squat little, portable size in sleep mode, making them extremely useful for traveling race teams. Based on the carbon scoring on the chest piece, Anakin could see that this one was probably the object of some losing driver's rage and took a laser bolt in anger.

“Gardulla was kind enough to throw this in along with you and your mother as part of the bet she lost. I could sell it for parts, but I think I could use one of these if I ever get my own podracer.” Watto's three-fingered, clawed hand rose to his stubbled snout. “Maybe one day, you will drive a pod for me. Of course, no humans have ever won a pod race here.” The blue junk dealer shrugged. “If I start you young enough, who knows?” He giggled to himself at the prospect.

Podracing was an extremely dangerous spectator sport that was also a source of gambling on planets like Malastare, Theron, and Tatooine. Drivers would connect a single-man cockpit craft to starship-ready engines and race at high speeds a few meters above the ground around hazardous courses. Because of the reflexes and skills needed to pilot these vehicles without droid assistance, certain alien races, such as Glymphid and Dugs were better suited than humans to run them. It was not uncommon for many of the pod drivers to be killed in any given race. Nevertheless, upon hearing Watto's vision, Anakin immediately believed he could do it. Fear of the mortal danger that came with it never crossed his mind.

“I have some work to do myself,” Watto said. “I expect to see this pit droid walking around by the time I get back.” And with that, he flapped his wings and floated out the door, leaving Anakin alone with his work.

He laid the parts out on the table and aligned them as closely as possible to where they looked like they would go. The domed head with the single large eye at the top, arms and torso in the middle, and legs and feet at the bottom. He hopped up onto a stool at the workbench and looked cautiously around the room. Confirming he was alone, he closed his eyes and raised his hands to chest level in front of him.

A feeling filled him that he had felt many times before. A distant sort of warmth grew from his trunk, flowed up his spine and then down his arms. When the sensation reached his fingertips, he could almost see an invisible stream pour from his hands. With the wave of energy that could only be seen in his mind’s eye, he was able to effortlessly lift all the pieces of the broken droid from the table and suspend them in the air in front of him. Maintaining his concentration, he opened his eyes and assessed the repair. Waving his hands gently, he moved the headpiece into the torso, connecting wires more accurately than an assembly line droid. He rolled it in the air to one side and connected an arm into an open socket.

The droid parts seemed to be executing an elaborate dance to silent music being conducted by the boy. Parts disconnected from one another to join correctly with others. Unlike the mechanical

approach to putting a robot back together, there were no jerky movements or rough connections; no hard inserts or scraping metal. Everything flowed effortlessly together at Anakin's command.

Then, suddenly: "Anakin! Stop that!"

With his concentration shattered, all the pieces of the pit droid dropped to the table and some fell on the floor with a cacophonous clang. The call was from Anakin's mother, Shmi.

"How many times have I told you not to do that?"

"But Mom –" Anakin pleaded.

"There will be no discussion. We don't know what Watto would do if he knew you could do this. It will only lead to trouble." Shmi could see Anakin was upset. It was equal parts shame for disobeying his mother and anger for not being able to use this gift. She walked across the room and took him in her arms.

"You were born to achieve greater things, Anakin. A slave's life is not for you." A tear came to her eye. "Your power: it scares me, but I know you will use it to find your way in the galaxy." Her tone shifted from caring to warning. She held his shoulders and put him in front of her as she bent to one knee to look him in the eye. "But, until then, you must be very careful. No one must know that you can do these things. If the wrong people knew you can do this, they might take you away from me. I'm not sure I could bear that."

“I’ll never leave you, Mom,” Anakin said. He pulled himself into her grasp and hugged her tightly. “I promise.”



CHAPTER 2

Three Years Before

It was finally over. The selection, the election, the coronation and the celebration had all finally come to an end, and for the first time in what seemed like years, the young queen was finally alone. She closed the door to her chambers and made her way to a soft couch next to the giant glass window looking out across the capital city of Theed. Padme Naberie Amidala was one hundred days past her fourteenth birthday, and today she was crowned the Arch Monarch, Queen of the planet Naboo.

To be fair, she was the leader of only the *human* population that lived on the surface of the blue-green planet that spun on the outer edge of the Mid Rim of the galaxy. Her people had been at arm's length with the amphibian race, known as the Gungans, who lived below the surface for nearly fifty generations. A thousand years before Padme was crowned, her people crash landed on the surface of Naboo. Some twelve thousand peace-

loving men, women and children left the planet Grizmalt en route to a new world to colonize as their home world erupted in a dangerous revolutionary war. In a desperate attempt to save their clan, they left Grizmalt with under-fueled and under-supplied ships to reach the neighboring system known as Naboo. The story goes that they ran out of fuel just as they arrived at the planet and before achieving a safe orbit. The crew fought to bring the ship to a hard landing, ensuring the safety of all but a few hundred passengers who perished in the crash. The vessel was beyond repair, and they moved quickly into the mountain region by the sea using building and farming supplies that were undamaged aboard the ship to make their new home.

Within the first year, their leader, an old and wise man named Kwilaan, had organized the settlers and they were living comfortably off the land, albeit more primitively than when they were on Grizmalt. One early morning, one of their scouts noticed several hundred creatures emerge from the sea at the foot of the hill they called Theed. The creatures were tall and thin with long ears that hung off the back of their heads. Their snouts were more like bills and their skin shimmered a pink-orange under the Naboo sun. Some were dressed in ceremonial robes, some in rags, some barely clothed at all. They were the Gungans, and they had come ashore for their annual sun worshipping ritual.

The scout ran to the settlement and told Kwilaan what he saw. Quickly, the wise old man, a former military strategist-turned-pacifist and revered leader, raced to the edge of the encampment

and watched silently as the Gungans began their worship. Kwilaan, sworn to protect his colony, edged down the mountain to get a closer look. Two Gungans, holding long staffs with glowing orbs atop them, stood on the mountain side of the beach. Their ears twitched as Kwilaan's boot cracked a branch on the forest floor. The Gungan guards turned, noticed the human and each grabbed a horn from their sides. They brought the curved instrument to their bills and blasted a warning sound. The entire congregation of Gungans halted and froze in an instinctive, animal-like way.

Kwilaan knew there was nowhere he could hide, and he was dramatically outnumbered here. He raised his hands and approached the Gungans. Some hissed at him, others held their children closely, afraid of the odd-looking being who lived on the land. Some shouted and some cowered. From the edge of the ocean walked a shorter, rotund Gungan in ceremonial garb. He looked hard at Kwilaan and finally raised an accusatory finger. "Wesa been knowin' your people be here on Naboo." The Gungan paused and squinted his eyes that sat on stalks at the top of his bill. "Wesa stay away from you," he offered. "If yousa stay away fromma ussen."

The human leader said nothing as three more people from his patrol came down the mountain. The Gungans took defensive positions. "My people have come to settle this planet and thrive from the land," the man replied. He then took a harder voice and stepped toward the Gungan. "We have no use for the sea other

than the food we harvest. If you stay there, and leave us alone, you will be safe.” Kwilaan’s years of leadership as a military man taught him to set the tone before the pleasantries. His men looked on in stunned silence, having rarely seen Kwilaan act this sternly. They knew that he was bluffing. The humans had only a handful of weapons that survived the crash and not one was a trained military man. If Kwilaan’s gambit failed, these hundreds of Gungans could surely overtake the human settlement with the most basic of armaments.

The Gungan leader stood silently for a moment. “Wesa gone finish deesa sun worship. Den wesa return to the sea.”

And so, they did.

From that day forward, Kwilaan kept two men on guard at the edge of the village to watch the sea for Gungan invaders and for a full year, none returned.

In the year between Sun Worship days, the people of Naboo formed differing opinions on the amphibian natives. Some of the settlers wished to commune with the Gungans, while others feared them. A dissenting group of colonists began to urge Kwilaan to prepare to defend themselves from the “sea creatures” as they called them. Kwilaan was wise and kind, but isolation and protectionism had set into his mind. The human leader ordered that what few weapon-wielding men he had would guard the edge of the sea.

On the successive Sun Worship day, the Gungans emerged from the sea yet again. This time they arrived with an armed

contingency leading the way. Twelve armed humans (with the only guns the colony owned) were on patrol as the Gungans arrived. The Gungans brought their plasma-based weapons to the surface for the first time in their race's history and with no desire to use them.

It was never clear who fired first. Some say the men panicked and looked to send a message. Some say the Gungans opened fire on the patrol that sat out in the open. While it never escalated beyond a single death on both sides, the Gungans retreated below the surface and were rarely heard from again outside of the occasional sighting or legend. They never surfaced as a group again – abandoning their sun season traditions on the Theed shores.

Over the next dozen years, the human population on Naboo nearly doubled. When Kwilaan died days after the thirteenth anniversary of their crash landing, it was decided by the people that his grandson, the twelve-year-old, Dilligaf, would be selected to rule. The human citizens of Naboo believed that his child-like innocence would give him the ability to lead without the influence and bitterness of age that started to become evident in his grandfather and led to the unsteady relationship with inhabitants of the sea. They surrounded the boy-king with a Royal Council of elders who advised him and ensured he did not make any poorly considered decisions based on his immaturity, and he peacefully ruled until he was twenty-one years old.

Dilligaf was a good leader. He led with the kindness of his grandfather and showed none of Kwilaan's paranoid leanings. However, at twenty-one, he stepped down from office citing the influence of his age and the echoes of his previous rulings as reason to transfer power to another child monarch. He instated the first selection of a new leader and began the tradition that saw Padme Naberie Amidala elected Queen a millennium later. The Royal Advisors went into the settlement and selected a thirteen-year-old girl named C'lirly and presented her to the people of Naboo. They were given the chance to elect her as their new queen. They decided that if more than two-thirds of the people voted in favor of her coronation, she would be crowned. And so she was, as not one dissenting vote was cast. From that point forward, every three and a half years, the Royal Advisory Council consulted with the king or queen to determine if they wanted to continue their rule – providing it was before their twentieth birthday. Once the monarch reached twenty, they would be deemed too old to be re-elected and a new child leader would be selected by the Council and voted on by the people.

A thousand years later, the people of Naboo had built a flourishing civilization, were part of the Galactic Senate, and had become an important trade partner to the surrounding systems. Theed became the capital city, and the survivors from Grizmalt had extended their reach to most of the continents that adorned the planet.

Padme Naberie was ten-years old when the Council were introduced to her as someone to watch. King Varuna was on his way to his second and final term. It was not unusual to begin searching for a successor as soon as it was realized that the current king or queen would “age out” of office. Padme’s family were artists who had been commissioned by the ranking senator representing Naboo in the Galactic Senate when Padme was nine. Senator Sheev Palpatine had stayed close to the family after the piece was completed. He was a wise man who had kind eyes, a gentle spirit, and took note of their youngest daughter’s inquisitive nature.

Padme’s older sister (her only sibling), Sola, followed her parents’ interests in art, but Padme was more “practical” and interested in the logical side of the world she lived in. She questioned everything, and Palpatine liked that about her.

Over the first year of their friendship, the senator offered Padme opportunities to partake in political events in the capital city. He introduced her to all the most important people and even sponsored her application to the Junior Senator club where she got her first taste of decision making and debating. She was a natural leader, and it quickly became her greatest joy. Her artist parents did not understand it, but they supported Padme. The attention of a senator was welcomed as well. His references alone made it easier for them to gain commissions from the wealthiest people in Theed and allowed them to live comfortably while pursuing their passion.

On her eleventh birthday, Senator Palpatine arrived unannounced at Padme's home and insisted on taking the family out for dinner to celebrate. The family piled into his limospeeder and arrived at one of Theed's most prestigious restaurants. After the meal had ended, Senator Palpatine raised his glass and proposed a toast. His voice was silky, and his cadence was practiced. "I would like to take a moment to thank the Naberie family for the fine art they have supplied both my office here on Naboo and at the hideous old Galactic Senate building." He leaned toward Padme's father, Ruwee, and poured on his patented charm: "Your bust of King Dilligaf is the envy of the entire senate!"

The family and the Senator's staff who had joined them laughed and he continued: "More importantly, I would like to thank the Naberie family for introducing me to one of the brightest minds I've ever had the honor of meeting." He turned slowly, deliberately and with royal deference to Padme who sat to his right. "Your daughter, Padme, has shown such poise and promise, I believe we could have a future senator on our hands." Sola broke out in laughter. Padme's parents smiled but never thought of it as more than a child's hobby. "No, I am serious," he quickly continued. "That is why, as a gift to Padme on her eleventh birthday, I would like to nominate her for Queen." He paused intentionally. "Although his last coronation was just a few days ago, King Varuna will not be able to be elected in three years

when his reign ends, and I cannot think of anyone on all of Naboo who is more suited to serve this world as our young queen.”

Padme’s mother audibly gasped. Her father coughed loudly. Padme smiled broadly, and her brown eyes opened wide. Palpatine’s lips curled up, and he surveyed the table. His skill at reading people was legendary, and what he saw told him that his goal was achieved: he shocked her parents enough to put them off guard and fueled Padme’s already stated interest. This combination, he presumed, would make it near impossible for Ruwee to deny his daughter the opportunity to at least explore the process. And if she was elected, Palpatine would reinforce his position of influence – something even the most well-intentioned politician needed to be successful.

After a few weeks of pouring on the familial charm that Senator Palpatine had become known for throughout the galaxy, Padme Naberie was officially inserted into the three-year process of nomination, campaigning, training, and election. The work was exhausting and more involved than she had ever imagined. However, she grew as a person, hardened her exterior, and was ready to become Queen.

When the election came, she received virtually no opposing votes and faced very little opposition. As she looked across the glowing capital city on this Coronation Day, she reflected on her journey. She was filled with pride but felt the pressure to lead. The moment of reflection was short lived, however, as a knock on the door broke the silence for which she so desperately longed.

It was Sheev Palpatine. He did not wait for her to give permission to enter. He had become less like a mentor and more like a favorite uncle to her. “My Queen,” he said, pausing to bow almost ironically, and then briskly strode across the room to greet her. He took her hands in his and looked at her with his adoring smile.

“Senator,” she said.

“Come now, Padme. There is no one in here. We needn’t stand on ceremony.” She smiled like the child she was back at him. “I wanted to come by and tell you privately how proud I am of you. You will be Naboo’s greatest leader. I have a good feeling about this.”

“Thank you, Sheev,” she said. “I am just glad that you are here to help me. I still feel like there is so little I know, so much I need to do, I—”

Palpatine gave her his trademark smile and held a finger up to his lips. “Padme, you will do fine. I’ve asked Sio Bibble to be your personal advisor when I am gone.”

“When you are gone? Where are you going?” Suddenly, she was terrified of the task that lay ahead of her.

“I must leave tonight for Coruscant. The Galactic Senate is meeting, and I must introduce the Trade Federation Taxation bill.”

“I’m still not sure I understand what that is all about,” she said. She could tell *him* that, but never let on otherwise to the Royal Advisors.

“It’s complicated, my dear. But ultimately, the Trade Federation has been using our hyperspace trade routes, transferring billions of credits worth of goods from ours and other planets, and they have yet to have to compensate anyone. A tax on them and their routes will be distributed appropriately, and we will benefit from the additional funds, as will all the systems the Trade Federation currently takes advantage of.”

Padme nodded and shrugged at once. “You have my full confidence, Senator. If you believe it will help our people and those of rest of the galaxy, then I trust you implicitly. Do what you must, then return here as soon as possible.”

“I will, My Queen. I don’t care for the politics, but I must do what is right.” He looked at her beaming with pride again. “As I know you will do as our royal monarch.” Palpatine put his hands on her shoulders, “I see great things for you, Padme. Great things.” Then just as quickly, “But now I must go. I will be back soon – you know how much I hate the bureaucracy and the bickering. But that is a senator’s life.”

“Goodbye, Senator. And thank you.”

“The pleasure is all mine, Queen Amidala. Serving you will be an honor.” He bowed, snapped his heels, and turned to leave the room.

Just like that, she was alone again, but this time she felt the weight of Naboo on her shoulders.



CHAPTER 3

Two Years Before

“This seems like an awfully pedestrian mission for you, Master,” said Obi-Wan Kenobi. He was a fresh-faced boy in his late teens who had known his Jedi Master, Qui-Gon Jinn since he was assigned to him eight years before. His hair was sandy in color, spiky-short, and he wore a long single braid running down over his right shoulder indicating that he was a Padawan learner – a Jedi apprentice.

“After the cycle we spent on Mandalore, I almost welcome these kinds of simple assignments,” Qui-Gon said.

“I can’t disagree with you there,” said Obi-Wan. “But this sort of thing seems far too menial for a Jedi Knight.”

“And that, my young Padawan, is why you will be completing the task.”

Their T-6 shuttle began to lower to the surface. It was crescent-shaped, with its nose cone centered and set at the rounded outside. As the craft came closer to the landing platform,

its wings swung out to create a saucer shape as it settled safely on solid ground.

The droid pilot alerted the two Jedi that they were cleared to exit the craft and opened the ramp that extended from the side. These Jedi were both humans, but the older man stood almost six inches taller than his apprentice. He had long brown hair with wisps of gray that shot through it and a full beard. The two dressed in the traditional, simple Jedi garb: a loose-fitting white tunic and shirt, knee-high brown boots, and a brown hooded robe. On their utility belt were a few simple food rations, a communicator that doubled as a medical device, and the traditional weapon of the Jedi, a lightsaber.

As Jedi went through different stages of their training, they built their own weapon when they were ready. The creation of the lightsaber was an important rite of passage that included discovering the crystal that created the blade which, when switched on, created a bright energy beam emitted from the hilt. The sword could easily cut through most materials, and it had the strength, when wielded properly, to deflect laser bolts from blasters. The Jedi never carried laser guns, citing the elegance of wielding a more civilized, bladed weapon.

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan exited the spaceship and were welcomed by the cold dark night of one of Coruscant's less desirable neighborhoods. Although the planet was home to the Galactic Senate and the political center of the known universe, it had more than its fair share of slums and crime districts. The

entire planet was covered in buildings with virtually no natural surface left after millennia of lifeforms settling on the Core World. Skyscrapers, domes, factories and every other type of structure coated the planet in an unsorted cacophony of architecture that referenced every civilization in the galaxy and even some long forgotten.

This was an area of Coruscant known as Level 1313. A place where bounty hunters would commonly meet their employers, deathstick dealers called home, and from where many beings never returned. There were some apartments that had seen better days and were home to what the elite called “the underprivileged.” People down on their luck could barely afford to live anywhere else – and most could not afford to live here. It was a sad and scary place that teemed with life and death.

But the Jedi Knight and his apprentice were not there to police the area or solve a crime. They had come in response to a call from the Force to save a child.

“Master, this seems an unlikely place to find a future Jedi Knight,” said Obi-Wan.

“The living Force doesn’t choose where a child comes from. It only serves to help lead them to where they must go.” Qui-Gon pulled on his hood and Obi-Wan did the same. “Come, let’s go find this boy.”

The shiny Jedi shuttle had attracted the attention of the residents of Level 1313. Some scattered, afraid of being arrested for a crime they may or may not have committed. Others came

closer to get a look at the fancy ship that had come to this dirty place. The platform they landed on extended from the end of an alleyway surrounded by tall dingy spires and cool darkness. As the Jedi made their way toward the passage, they were given a wide berth. In their cloaks, Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan Kenobi looked mysterious, even among the filth that inhabited Level 1313. They arrived at the edge of the alleyway and paused.

“Obi-Wan, have you found him yet?” Qui-Gon asked.

“Not yet, Master.”

“You are distracted by your surroundings. There is darkness here, but a Jedi must focus on the light.”

As a Jedi trainee, Obi-Wan was being trained to wield the living energy that surrounded him, what the Jedi called “the Force,” to master his environment. By concentrating, he could feel things that those who were not attuned to the Force could not. Those that mastered the Force could use it to sense things before they happened, to manipulate the physical world around them, and to even influence the thoughts of weaker-minded beings. The Order of the Jedi believed it was their duty to master the Force as a tool to help protect the Galaxy from evil – whatever form it might take.

Obi-Wan crossed his arms and closed his eyes. He attempted to quiet his mind and reach out through the Force. He felt swirls of cold and black in this place. There were bad people and horrific things happening all around him. The Padawan could feel the pain of someone a platform above them, he sensed the fear of a young

woman several meters down the alleyway, and he could see the shadowy outline of a murder about to happen several floors below them. Although these events all were happening simultaneously, he was not there to engage with this suffering. He and his master were on a mission to find light in this darkness, and Obi-Wan had to filter out the rest.

“It’s too hard, Master,” he said. “There’s so much pain here.”

“That is why you cannot fail. You must stretch out with your feelings and find this boy Master Yoda has sent us to retrieve.”

“Yes, Master.” Again, Obi-Wan closed his eyes, and as he had a moment before, he began to feel the Force around him. Clouds penetrated his thoughts, and he felt even more of the hurting happening around him. He pushed back on it, and within the darkness, he sensed a thin stream of invisible light.

An infant’s cry seemed to ride on the now growing beam and reached a crescendo as it flowed into his mind. Obi-Wan winced. Although no one around him could hear it, the sound was clear and loud in his head. He opened his eyes and began to make his way through the path. Qui-Gon followed. The bright line he saw in his head was not visible to the physical plane, but he now felt the tide of the world around him urging him toward the light the Force had uncovered for him.

The master and apprentice made their way past beggars, wild diseased vermin, and grimy discarded trash toward an apartment at the end of the alleyway. Obi-Wan was focused but attentive to

his surroundings, while Qui-Gon walked five steps behind observing his student – and the locals who looked on.

“In here,” said Obi-Wan quietly as they approached the entry that was partially opened. He reached out with his right hand and used the Force to push the door. A light from the ceiling flickered on and off as they entered. Directly in front of them was a stairway that Obi-Wan felt drawn to climb. In the corner, he saw a woman sitting awkwardly on the floor. The Padawan paused and looked at her. The human woman’s clothes were torn, she was bleeding from her forehead and sobbing uncontrollably.

“Help me. He took everything from me,” she said through tears quietly but loud enough to be heard by the Jedi. “Everything.” Obi-Wan moved toward her.

“Focus on the mission,” said Qui-Gon quickly and firmly to draw him away from the woman.

“But she needs our help,” pleaded the younger Jedi. “If she’s been robbed or attacked, we should do what we can –”

“We didn’t come here to help the helpless. Your compassion serves you well, but beware it doesn’t cloud your thoughts and put the mission, the child, or yourself at risk.”

This had always been a hard lesson for Obi-Wan. He was immensely gifted in his use of the Force, but his ability to fully embrace the Jedi Code often put him at odds with his purpose as a future Knight. He and his master believed that that was one of the reasons they were paired as master and apprentice. Qui-Gon Jinn was one of the wisest Jedi Knights, but his occasional

“untraditional” approaches kept him from being considered for a seat on the Jedi Council. It was not unusual for Jinn to act on what he called a gut feeling, as opposed to strictly adhering to the facts he was given, citing guidance by the Force as reason to stray the course. Every time he advised his Padawan to “follow the mission” instead of his intuition, it pained him and reminded Qui-Gon of his own commitment to the Jedi way.

“I understand, Master,” said Obi-Wan, and he focused again on the light. In his mind’s eye, it led up the stairs before them, and he ascended the steps to another door at the landing.

He heard the infant cry behind the door. “Master, in here.” He looked behind him and realized Qui-Gon had not followed him up the staircase. Qui-Gon looked up at his apprentice, arms crossed, and nodded to him silently, urging him to continue the mission himself.

Obi-Wan approached the door. Through the Force, he sensed tension and a shroud of anger and fear surrounding the infant behind the door. He pushed it open slowly with his right hand and put his other hand on his lightsaber hilt at his belt. There, on the other side of the room, was a man clothed in dark red pants and a matching armored coat. His hair was matted to his head in a dark unkempt nest. He stood sideways to the Jedi Padawan, cutting a silhouette in the window, lighted only by the bright signs that were on the other side of the alleyway. In his arms, he cradled a squirming, crying baby.

“Hello there,” said Obi-Wan calmly. “I assume you are the man who alerted the Jedi Council about the baby you are holding.”

The man squinted back at Obi-Wan and took a half step away from him. “This is my son. Yes.” Obi-Wan took his hand off his lightsaber and reached out in front of him, taking a step toward the man.

“I will need to meet the child before we can decide if he is to be a Jedi. Would you mind?” He inched forward, cautiously. His feelings through the Force were now squarely on the baby. The dark clouds were there, but he was ignoring them as he reached out to the fussing bundle in the man’s arms. The man pulled the child closer to him and stepped away again.

It was not uncommon in the Core Worlds for parents to identify that their children seemed *different* and expressed an ability to respond to their surroundings in ways that were unusual. Some would fear it and keep it to themselves. Others would see it as a calling and alert the Jedi Council, who would decide through their own means whether to respond. Other times, a child would be so strong with the Force, the Council believed that the child reached out to them his or herself. In those instances, the Jedi would seek out younglings without a parent alerting them. The uninvited arrival of Jedi Knights at their door to recruit a child would be met by many different responses ranging from honor to anger. And while the Jedi never forcibly conscripted a child or took one without permission from the parents, they did make very

appealing cases and strongly urged them to let their child serve the galaxy in a way that no one else could. It was considered a privilege throughout the Core Worlds to be a Jedi. It was very rare that a child who was that strong in the Force would not be given up by his or her parents.

This was the case for Obi-Wan. Born on the planet Stewjon, he was discovered at six months old. A contingent of Jedi were dispatched to escort a senator to a planet in the region when Master Groontona sensed a light pull him off the mission. Groontona alerted the Council and was granted permission to recuse himself from the escort team to seek it out. All Obi-Wan knew of what happened was that the Jedi Knight was able to take Obi-Wan off-world and deliver him to the Jedi Temple for training on Coruscant. Obi-Wan liked to believe his parents were honored by the opportunity to have their child serve the Jedi and would never allow himself to think otherwise. He had no memory of his parents and while this occasionally pained him, the Jedi were his family now.

“You did contact the Jedi?” asked Obi-Wan.

“I did,” he said. “But now, I’m not so sure.”

“I understand,” said the Padawan. “It is never easy to let go of a child.” He stepped forward again. “If he does have some power, then it may be that he is strong in the Force, and he would serve the Jedi with honor as a guardian of peace and justice.”

“I’m familiar with the propaganda,” the man said. “I’m not doing this for him,” he continued. “He’s just lucky he

seems *different*. I can barely feed myself or my wife.” Suddenly the child’s father shifted from slightly hostile to truly sad. Obi-Wan physically felt the change in him.

“A life in hardship is not an easy road,” agreed Ob-Wan. “The path of a Jedi is not an easy one either. But if it is his calling, then you are doing what is best for him.” Again, he stepped forward. The baby stopped crying and his father eased his posture, slid down the wall, and sat somberly on the floor. Obi-Wan reached out to feel the emotions of the baby’s father and felt sadness and tension – like there was something he was hiding. Upon feeling the darker emotion from the man, the Jedi unconsciously touched his lightsaber hilt, sensing he would need to ignite it soon. But doing so around this docile, now at ease, baby was conflicting.

Qui-Gon had told his apprentice about retrieving “Younglings.” The children were taken from their homes, raised by the nurses at the temple, and began training as soon as they arrived. Qui-Gon had only been on retrieval missions like this a few times and each time they came from a call to the Council. He never had to convince a parent to let their children become Jedi. Obi-Wan wondered if Qui-Gon knew something about this mission he did not share.

Obi-Wan squatted to eye level with the child’s father. He shook the long sleeves of his hooded robe to free his hands and reached toward the infant. “May I?”

He sensed fear and discomfort from the man holding the baby. Obi-Wan blinked for a long moment and saw dark clouds

surrounding the man but could not find a strong connection between him and the child. He opened his eyes and took the baby from the man, who released his hold. Obi-Wan quickly stood up with the baby in his arms and took a step back. The man looked up at the Jedi and squinted.

The baby had dark hair and pale skin. It was human, like his father, and looked up at Obi-Wan with turquoise eyes. Holding a baby was not something Obi-Wan had ever done before. He was amazed at the glow that surrounded the infant when he reached out with the Force. It clashed with the darkness that suddenly surrounded his father. Obi-Wan cautiously pulled the comms device from his belt, brought it to the child's exposed thigh, and in a flash, collected a blood sample.

“What was that?” asked the boy's father.

“I need to check his midichlorian count,” said Obi-Wan. “Just a technicality.”

“Midi-what?” said the man confused and irritated,

“It's a measure of how the Force reacts with his body chemistry. Sort of a way to quantify an infant's sensitivity to the Force without being able to witness their ability to use it.”

“You don't believe me? Can't you just use your Jedi powers to see his future or something?” the father barked.

“I can feel that this boy is strong in the Force just by holding him.” Obi-Wan smiled. “Believe me, I'd rather just trust the living Force than apply some convoluted science to it.” The blood

testing device beeped and showed that the boy's blood had, in fact, shown signs of regularly interacting with the Force.

Midichlorians were a natural mutation that was found in the blood and was believed to be a result of opening one's self to the push and pull of the Force. The Jedi discovered it several hundred years before and were able to use the readings to help parents measure their child's readiness to join the Jedi Order. There was much controversy around the introduction of a scientific measure thousands of years after the Force had been harnessed by living beings. After some time, many dissenting voices had grown louder and become more critical of the Jedi, their role in the galaxy, and in the politics of the Republic. Applying a scientific explanation satisfied some, but in general, became a detail dismissed by most – especially those who trusted in the mystical nature of the Force.

“Your boy will do amazing things. He will serve the galaxy. And if he grows and passes the Trials, become a Jedi Knight.” Obi-Wan bowed his head to the child's father and turned to leave. “The Republic and the Jedi offer their appreciation and promise to raise him as their own.”

“Just a minute,” said the man as he stood up quickly. The light that surrounded the baby in Obi-Wan's arms was being eclipsed by sudden darkness. The man strode over to the Padawan and pulled on his shoulder to turn him around. “So, this is how it works? You take my son, and all I get in return is a ‘thank you?’ Where's my reparations?”

“I’m sorry. I thought you realized that.” Obi-Wan was flustered for a moment before regaining his composure. “The boy is now a ward of the Jedi. Your reward is the gratitude of the galaxy and the honor of the Republic.”

“That’s not good enough. Gratitude doesn’t put food in my belly.” He pulled a blaster pistol from his side and aimed it at young Obi-Wan, who, to the man’s surprise, had already ignited his glowing blue-bladed lightsaber. The Padawan held the baby in the crook of his left arm and his shimmering weapon hummed with energy in his right hand. In his mind, Kenobi called out to Qui-Gon for help, but not only did he not respond, he could not sense him nearby.

The Jedi apprentice was unsure of what to do. He had always assumed that once the parent turned the child over to a Jedi, it was the end of the transaction. There was no negotiating, no reimbursement. He imagined a tearful farewell and a reconciliation of pride and loss from the parents, but he was completely unprepared to have a weapon drawn on him – especially while he held an infant.

Obi-Wan did what he believed was right: “Sir, I understand your trepidation. There is no obligation to give up your boy.” He tried to see into the man’s mind, but it was obscured by a haze of anger, fear and confusion. Obi-Wan’s voice betrayed his illusion of calm. “Please, for the sake of the baby, put your blaster down.”

“I don’t care about the baby. Are you kidding me? Would I give it up to some crazy wizards if I did?” Now the anger surfaced

in his voice. “When that woman told me that we were going to have a baby, I was already thinking of ways to get rid of it.” He shook the barrel of the blaster dangerously and carelessly at Obi-Wan and the infant. “All I want is some credits, and you can take the bastard.”

“I’m afraid that’s not how it’s done, my friend,” said Obi-Wan in the most calming tone he could muster. “And even if it was, as a Jedi, I don’t carry any money. I’m afraid I have nothing of value.”

The man stood and pondered the situation. “That fancy laser sword should fetch a hefty price.” The man stepped closer to the Jedi. His entire demeanor had devolved into harsh aggression. “Hand it over, keep the baby, and get out of here.” The Padawan turned off his lightsaber and put the hilt into his left hand where he held the baby.

Obi-Wan stood statue still. The baby started to squirm and began to whimper. The Jedi closed his eyes, and the boy’s father was stunned by the Jedi’s peaceful change of character. Obi-Wan then spoke steadily and fully composed, waved his free hand almost unperceptively and said, “You will put the blaster down.” The man suddenly straightened his posture and slowly put the gun on the floor, unable to remember why he was holding it in the first place. Obi-Wan, again, waved his hand and said, “I am free to leave.”

“You are free to leave,” the man said without emotion.

Obi-Wan turned again to exit while the man stood at the window looking slightly bewildered. As he reached the doorway, Kenobi decided there was one more thing he needed the child to hear. He paused and turned to the boy's father once again. He waved his hand and whispered, "I love you, son."

The man staggered forward a few steps and a tear formed in his eye and trickled down his cheek. "I love you, son," he said. Obi-Wan felt the light glow around the baby as he walked swiftly out the door after the father's final farewell. He quickly closed the door and moved hurriedly down the steps. Qui-Gon was waiting for him at the bottom of the staircase.

"Quickly," said Obi-Wan. "We may not have much time."

Qui-Gon patted Obi-Wan heartily between his shoulder blades. "I sense that was not as easy as you'd hoped," he said.

The woman, who was crying on the floor when Obi-Wan passed her, was now smiling but clearly continued to feel sadness. She was eating Jedi food rations that Qui-Gon had given her off his belt. She reached up toward the baby with trembling hands. "Be good, Caleb," she said in a whisper. "Do good." With a glimmer of hope in her eye – which was not there when they arrived – she looked at Obi-Wan, who was holding her baby. "Please take good care of him."

Obi-Wan simply nodded as he and Qui-Gon made their way through the alleyway and uneventfully back to their ship. The door closed behind them, and the shuttle lifted off the landing platform before it was shut.

The two Jedi, one an apprentice, one a Knight, looked at the sleeping infant in Obi-Wan's arms. "What will happen next for him?" asked Kenobi.

"We'll take him across the planet to the Temple. The Council will decide where he will be weaned and then assign him a Master – assuming he continues to show progress. Did you check his midichlorians?"

"I did, Master. They were in range."

"You know I don't care for having to check that," said Qui-Gon.

"I know you don't," said Obi-Wan. "I don't think I do either. I wouldn't rely on it, anyway. I do believe the child is strong in the Force."

"I believe that too, my Padawan. And I believe you've just taken a large step toward becoming a Jedi Knight. Now, let's get this child to the Temple and see what the Council has lined up for us next."



CHAPTER 4

One Year Before

On the far side of Coruscant in an area known as The Flats, a matte black ship was coming in for a landing. Ball-shaped in the cockpit with a triangular beak and curved wings like ears on the side of the globe, the *Scimitar* settled onto a docking surface near a steaming factory tower.

The Flats were where most of the energy supplied to the massive city structures on the planet was created. The loud unmanned generators churned for hundreds of years and very rarely required maintenance. The air surrounding the area, which spread out nearly a hundred kilometers across the planet surface, was polluted, metallic, and acrid. As a result, it was the perfect place to conduct business without being noticed.

A door yawned open on the back of the *Scimitar*, and out of it walked a dark, hooded figure. He was humanoid but not human. He was part of a race known as the Zabrak, easily identified by and generally feared for the set of ten short yellow horns that

jutted angrily from their hairless heads. This Zabrak had crimson red skin with black warrior tattoos given at birth covering him from head to toe symmetrically in patterns made of triangles, squares and swirls. His yellow eyes almost glowed as he took note of his surroundings. The Zabrak cut a strong, fit figure underneath his black tunic and hooded robe, and it was fueled by an unrelenting desire to exact revenge on the Jedi.

As a child, the Zabrak was raised by his mother, Talzin, on the planet Dathomir. Talzin and many of the other Zabraki women were witches and members of a dying coven known as the Night Sisters. Similar to the Jedi in the way they mastered the living Force – a magick they called the Ichor – they controlled the world around them, but in shadowy, mysterious ways. They used these powers to control their male Zabrak mates and keep them submissive. One hundred years before his birth, the Jedi had come to Dathomir to confront the Night Sisters for using the Force in what they called the ways of the Dark Side. A battle ensued between over a thousand Jedi and a few hundred Night Sisters. They were overpowered quickly, and the Jedi slaughtered them, forcing them into the shadows of Dathomir to practice their dark magick in hiding and begin to plot their retaliation.

As the Zabrak male made his way across the platform to meet his mentor, he recounted his first meeting with the man he now called Master. Talzin had reached out through the Ichor to find an ally in her vengeful plot on the Jedi and mystically connected with this being in meditation. He arrived on Dathomir and recounted

tales of an ancient order called The Sith. Once powerful monarchs of the galaxy and strong in the Force, they had been defeated by the righteous Jedi a millennium ago, but he promised her the Sith would once again rule the galaxy. This human, known to them only as Darth Sidious, promised to teach Talzin in the ways of the Sith, and together they would defeat the Jedi and restore order while executing her mission of revenge. As a boy aged fifteen, he would watch his mother train with Sidious, and he would practice what he saw her learn on his own from the shadows. He was determined to help his mother defeat the Jedi and would prepare himself to fight by her side when the time was right.

One evening, Sidious visited him in his sleep chamber.

“Rise, my boy,” Sidious hissed to him through a whisper. “I know you’ve been watching and learning. I’m quite impressed with your progress. I imagine, if you had my undivided attention, you could become quite powerful.” He paused. “More powerful than your mother.”

The Zabrak boy felt an unfamiliar feeling of pride at this recognition. His mother never gave him the satisfaction of praise – it was the Zabraki way to keep the male in his place and never raise him to the level of the female. Male Zabrak were considered only good for siring children and maintaining the home while the Night Sisters would protect the family through the use of the Ichor and nurture her clan. From his birth, Talzin could sense her son was different, powerful in the living Force, but would never allow herself to give him the avenue to unleash it.

“Your mother has told me she fears you,” said Sidious. “Fear leads to hatred and hatred gives her power. What do you fear, my boy?”

The Zabrak teen looked at Sidious. The Sith Lord was old and wrinkled but oddly gentle in appearance behind the aged skin on his face. His elderly facade belied his power and the mastery of the Force he displayed. “I fear nothing. I have no need to fear. I already have harnessed my hatred,” he said.

Sidious cackled loudly, and it echoed through the silent village. “Good,” he said. “Good. Then use your hatred. I know you and your mother wish to gain your revenge on the Jedi. Did you know it has been written that the Sith will return to overthrow the Jedi Order and bring balance to the Force?” The boy looked eagerly at Sidious who leaned back and sighed. “But by the order of the Sith, there can be only two – the master to hold the power and impart it to his apprentice who craves it.” The boy pondered what that meant for him. “It seems I already have an apprentice in your mother. Your hatred of the Jedi is powerful, but as long as your mother stands in your way, you will never be able to use it.”

With that, Sidious stood up and turned to leave the room. He looked over his shoulder and into the boy’s eyes. “Unless... she’s not really as strong as she seems.” He pulled on his hood and left the chambers into the evening air.

For the next several months, the boy continued to study all the teachings Sidious gave his mother. He learned to use the Force to

choke the animals in the forest to painful deaths, to harness the energy of the Ichor to create fire and lightning with his hands and command the trees around him to crash to the ground. Sidious would discreetly signal to him that he knew he was watching and would occasionally let him know, when his mother wasn't around, that he was impressed with his progression – but also that his mother was still more powerful than he was.

One morning, Sidious found the boy practicing his skills in a forest clearing a few kilometers from the village. “My boy,” he called. “Tomorrow is the day I must leave. And I am taking my apprentice with me.”

The boy was stunned. All this work and now he would be left on his own. No more lessons in secret. No more growth in his use of the Ichor. And his mother would be gone as well.

“Your mother is strong and will make a powerful Sith Lord.” Sidious waited for a reaction from the boy. “As are you.”

“But there can be only two. You’ve told me many times.”

“You are correct. Your mother is willing to abandon you to join me. She’s told me that her hatred for the Jedi is more powerful than her feelings of obligation to you.” The Sith’s tone turned mockingly sympathetic. “I told her you were training in secret, and do you know what she did?” He waited for a reaction from the Zabrak. “She laughed. She pities you, boy. She scoffs at your power and doesn’t recognize you as the powerful Force user that I do.”

Sidious stayed still and listened for a response. The Zabrak boy seethed. All his life he had heard of the terror of the Jedi and had spent every moment of his life envisioning destroying them at his mother's side. But she would leave him behind to do it herself. His mind swirled in a darkness of confusion and anger while he felt the cold swell of the Ichor, the dark Force, filling his body. Tired of waiting, Sidious spoke once again: "I am leaving tomorrow with my apprentice. Together we will rid the galaxy of the Jedi." The Sith Lord walked unceremoniously away from the boy.

The Zabrak inhaled and exhaled deeply, his muscles strained under his tattooed skin and his eyes gleamed yellow. He regained his composure through pacing the open forest floor deliberately like an Ithorian Panther. He knew what he had to do, and he searched within himself for the strength to make it happen.

Night fell and the Dathomir sky was black and starless. The Zabrak boy feigned sleep and when the village fell silent, he rose from his bed. He slipped out of his cabin and across the rocky alley to where his mother called home. He slid open the door of Talzin's quarters and saw her sleeping soundly. She was alone. Night Sisters drew strength from solitude and never shared their rooms with a mate or others from their coven. The boy drew a long metal blade from his side and moved quietly toward his mother's bed. He raised it over her sleeping body and prepared to plunge it into her chest.

Talzin's eyes flared open and in an instant, she harnessed the power of the Force and threw her son across the room through a powerful unseen push of the Ichor. He crashed against the wall, the blade clanging on the floor. He pulled himself up and glared at her. "You are too weak to become a Sith," she hissed at him. "And our revenge is too important to be left in the hands of a boy."

He was infuriated. He felt the darkness fill his body as he summoned a bolt of lightning from his right hand and fired it at his mother. Blue shock covered her body momentarily, and she fell to the ground. The boy advanced on her as she struggled to get up. With his left hand, he pulled on the Ichor and wrapped an invisible energy around her throat, leaving her gasping for air. Talzin pulled at her neck as if trying to remove an unseen noose. Her eyes widened, and she began to panic.

"There can be only two," said the boy. "I am stronger than you. I will fulfill your pledge and destroy the Jedi as a Sith Lord. You, mother, are the one who is weak."

No one had ever overpowered her. As the head of Night Sister clan, she had never been challenged. As she looked at her child, she realized she was right to suppress his use of the Ichor and that her visions of him using it against her were coming true. "Son, save me," she pleaded. His whole life he waited to hear compassion in her voice, to sense love from her and now, as he was choking the life from her, he heard it for the first time.

“Finish her,” said a voice from outside the doorway still open behind him. Darth Sidious looked sternly at the boy as he held his mother’s life in his hands. “Join me as my apprentice, and together we will destroy the Jedi.” The boy looked from his mother to the Sith Lord. He knew his fate was sealed. If he did not complete what he had come to do, Sidious would surely destroy him. Talzin continued to struggle to pull air into her lungs.

The Zabrak turned, walked out the door, and let his mother suffer. He stood outside and released the choke hold on his mother as she gasped and tried to gain control of her surroundings. Talzin pushed herself onto her hands and knees and looked at her son. He had given her an opening. “You *are* weak,” she hissed and raised her hand toward him.

He stared back at her coldly. “And you are a fool,” he said. With those words, he clenched both his hands into fists and pulled on all the dark magick he could reach. He raised his arms in the air, then slammed them down to his side. The roof and walls of Talzin’s cabin followed the motion of his limbs and crashed down upon her. The loud crash fell silent quickly, and all that remained was the crowing laugh of Darth Sidious.

“Good,” Sidious said and turned toward his ship in the distant clearing. “Come, my young apprentice. There is much work to be done.”

When they arrived at the shuttle, Sidious paused and turned to the young Zabrak. “Bow before me, boy.”

He did as he was told and said, “I pledge myself to your teachings.”

Darth Sidious closed his eyes and held his hand over his apprentice’s lowered horned head. “The Force is strong with you. A powerful Sith you will become.” Opening his eyes, he stared hard at the humanoid kneeling before him. Sidious searched the Zabrak’s mind and felt him resisting the exploration with darkness. The Zabrak defended his thoughts with visions of death; the animals he cruelly choked while training alone and visions of maliciously striking down Jedi masters in fulfillment of his destiny. These images brought a dark smile to Darth Sidious’s lips. “Henceforth, you shall be known as Darth Maul.”

The first step to fulfilling his purpose had been completed. Lord Sidious had bestowed upon him the coveted title of “Darth.” He was now a Sith. He bowed his head further and spoke: “Thank you, my Master.”

* * * * *

The memory of that day had not left him in the ten years since it happened. When he needed to find a deeper wellspring of darkness, he would recall the time his mother called him weak and he brought her house down upon her. With the vision clear in his mind, he walked across the Flats to greet Darth Sidious who waited for him that evening, his training still ongoing a decade later.

Darth Sidious did not look any different than the day Darth Maul had met him. His aged face, grim smile, and dark, deep-set eyes portrayed every emotion he felt. When he was angry, the wickedness creased his forehead and cheeks. When he was pleased, his mouth revealed a malevolent grin. Tonight, Sidious was eagerly awaiting the report from his minion.

The Zabrak man approached Sidious, bowed down, and leaned on one knee. “It is finished, my master,” he growled. “The Trade Federation is in disarray. All that remains are the Neimoidians. I told the Viceroy he can expect to be contacted by you.”

“You have done all that I have asked of you, my apprentice. You continue to demonstrate your loyalty. Everything is proceeding as I have foreseen. Now. Rise. There is still much to be done,” said Sidious. Darth Maul stood up and crossed his arms. “For now, leave for the planet Mustafar and await my orders.”

“When will we reveal ourselves to the Jedi, Master?”

“Patience, my apprentice. Patience. When the time is right, you will have your revenge. For now, trust in me and steel yourself for the coming change. For a thousand years, the Sith have eluded the Jedi, giving them a false sense of security and leading them to believe we are no more. The time is upon us, but our actions must be wise. Tempered.”

Maul was already frustrated, but he nodded in agreement. What made Darth Maul strong was his violent nature and his lightning reactions. These times of meditative waiting created a

simmering hatred, which Sidious masterfully unleashed at the right time against the right targets. The Sith apprentice trusted his master even as it caused him mental anguish. “Yes, my Master.” Darth Maul turned on his heels and moved swiftly to his ship to leave for Mustafar and wait.

PART ONE: CRISIS ON NABOO

*"First comes the day
Then comes the night.
After the darkness
Shines through the light.
The difference, they say,
Is only made right
By the resolving of gray
Through refined Jedi sight."
— Journal of the Whills, 7:477*



CHAPTER 1

“What’s that, Mother?” asked a young girl with light hair as she pointed to a shiny twinkle in the deep blue Naboo midday sky. The five year-old human often played ball with her mother on the streets of the capital city of Theed after her lessons, and today was like every other day.

The child’s mother thought nothing of it. “Probably just another star cruiser. Or maybe it’s a lucky star for you to wish on.” This brought a smile to the girl’s lips.

A moment later: “There’s more,” said the girl. “Look!”

One by one, a silver sparkle materialized in the sky, spaced almost mathematically equidistant from one another across the horizon. Nearly twenty-five in all by the time they stopped appearing. “They’re beautiful,” said the little girl with innocence and wonder.

Suddenly, a dozen men dressed in maroon leather coats, royal blue tunics and matching pentagonal hats charged down the street near where the girl and her mother played. They were the Royal

Naboo Security Force, and they rarely appeared on the street outside of parades or other events celebrating the rich history of the one thousand year-old colony. But these men were in a hurry. They were on a mission, and their guns were drawn. The child cowered next to her mother as the guards ran past and made their way into the Royal Palace, a few hundred meters up the thoroughfare.

The Palace was in chaos. Advisors, politicians, and aides ran through the cavernous halls into beautiful conference rooms and luxurious offices. In her receiving chamber, Queen Amidala sat in her oversized throne in silence. She was dressed in full regalia; her face painted stark white with rich black eye liner and a small red dot painted on each cheek. As part of the traditional ornamental pageantry, she wore a gold and cerise headdress with a single large gem that lay on the top of her forehead. The queen's robe was a matching crimson and gold, and the sleeves ran past her hands. In this attire, she did not portray her meager sixteen plus years of age. She was regal and stone-still as she watched the hurried pace of the people who supported her. The royal staff carried data pads and flipped their fingers through information and content. Some shouted to others across the room with newly arriving intelligence. Others hurriedly made holo and radio contact with people around the planet monitoring the situation.

Her Highness sat in silence observing it all. Governor Sio Bibble, her lead Advisor, approached her. He was in his seventies,

had a receding hairline, a pointed beard and, to Amidala, what appeared to be a perpetual worried look on his face.

“We are trying to make contact with Senator Palpatine on Coruscant,” he said. “Until we speak to him, I advise we not make any rash moves.”

She turned slowly and deliberately to him, arms still resting on the wings of her throne, and cocked an eyebrow toward him. “What would we do, Governor?” she asked. Her voice steady and trained. “We don’t have a military, and those are more than likely battleships in orbit.”

Naboo maintained an army of a mere few thousand volunteers and owned only fifty starfighters – used exclusively for ceremonies and escorting royal and Republic missions. The people of Naboo were peaceful to a fault.

The only thing the Naboo government officials buzzing about the room knew for sure at this moment was that two dozen space cruisers, each one measuring three kilometers in width, had dropped out of hyperspace and surrounded the planet. Up to this point, the officials were barely able to confirm from where the ships originated. The best they could discern from the satellite images was that the ships looked like Neimoidian Lucrehulk-class modified cruisers. If they were, in fact, Neimoidian, then there was a good chance they were associated with the Trade Federation.

Then images of the ships began to appear on screens around the chamber. They were unimaginably massive with a globe in

the center that acted as both a control center and power generator surrounded by circular arms in a “C” shape. In the open gape of the “C” were wide maws at the tips with two massive hanger bay openings. Originally used as enormous cargo ships, some had been converted to bear heavy laser cannon batteries and carried thousands of white, almost skeletal shaped droids over the past several years since the passing of the Trade Route Taxation Legislation. Originally, the Trade Federation contended that armaments were for defense from space pirates, and the droids were for managing inventory and carrying out the tasks related to freight management. But when some of the droids began carrying blaster rifles it raised questions about the intentions of their masters.

When the Trade Route Taxation bill was introduced by Naboo’s Senator Sheev Palpatine, it was initially met with mostly positive support. Designed to impose a tariff on the Trade Federation, who had exclusive jurisdiction to hyperspace routes between over four hundred planetary systems, the law would force a payment to the worlds through which they traveled. It was a miniscule percentage that would more than likely be passed onto their import and export partners, but it would benefit systems that were essentially blocked from managing their own commerce due to the presence of the Trade Federation. The bill passed by a two-thirds majority and went into effect shortly after the deciding session concluded. Politically, it was considered by many to be a massive victory for Senator Palpatine.

The Trade Federation, which was made up of a council of seven representatives from multiple systems and several species, demanded the opportunity to debate what they called “an unfair burden.” As a collective group, they had no formal voice in the Galactic Senate and requested a better way to debate their concerns about the fees being imposed on the trade routes they had profited from for hundreds of years. Supreme Chancellor Finis Valorum, the democratically selected leader of the Senate, controversially granted the Trade Federation an official seat among the one-thousand-twenty-four systems with representation, granting them the same single vote on all measures but, more importantly, a process to be heard in session. Several senators expressed concern that this action would embolden the Federation to act as if they were a full and independent planetary system and the simple act of a unified voice gave them an undeserved entitlement.

The Trade Federation itself was managed through a board ordinarily made up of representatives from species from an array of systems. It was always a contentious group who struggled for power among themselves to ensure that not only was the Federation profitable, but the systems they represented benefitted most. Somehow, the Neimoidian contingent managed to wrangle two seats on the board shortly after the taxation bill was introduced. Two years later at a Trade Federation meeting on the third moon of Jkai’la, representatives from the five other species were murdered by an unseen assassin. While hundreds of planets

were reliant on the smooth operation of the Federation, their Viceroy, Nute Gunray, took quick advantage of the tragedy and filled the open seats with fellow Neimoidians claiming an urgent need to restore leadership. From that point forward, the Trade Federation had been, for all intents and purposes, a Neimoidian organization.

“We’ve raised the senator!” shouted a voice from across Amidala’s chambers. On a squat table in front of the Queen, a blue holographic image of her old friend, advisor, and representative on the galactic capital world of Coruscant, Senator Palpatine appeared.

“My Queen,” he said. His voice slightly over modulated from the transmission. “First things first. Are you alright?”

“I’m fine, Senator. And for the moment, our people are too.”

“I’m relieved to say the least. Word traveled fast,” he said. “This is a very forward play for the Trade Federation.”

“So, it *is* the Federation,” said Sio Bibble. “They have not made contact yet, and we could only identify the cruisers as Lucrehulks.”

“Yes,” started Palpatine. “There was word through various channels that a few dozen ships had left Trade Federation headquarters on Cato Neimoidia. The only reason it raised any eyebrows was because, as you may know, they had never moved this many ships at once from their home world. A scout ship was sent from Alderaan, and they reported that the Trade Federation had dropped twenty-five ships out of hyperspace around Naboo.

They contacted me immediately. As you can imagine, it was very difficult for me to get a moment alone to reach out to you.”

“I appreciate your concern for our citizens, Senator.” Amidala was unsure how to respond about not being informed more immediately but still trusted that Sheev Palpatine would be able to advise her from across the galaxy. This was the only conflict she had faced since taking office. In fact, it was the first interaction with any military warships in Naboo’s history. “Have they made this move on any other systems?”

“There are no other reports,” said Palpatine. “Unfortunately, it appears to be only us.”

“I see,” she said. “What can we expect?”

“Well, I am not quite sure, Your Highness. From what I can tell, they have placed a blockade around the planet. I am not sure that any ships will be able to get in or out.”

“Why would they do this, Senator? Do they not realize we are peaceful, we are complicit with the Trade Federation requirements and we are an important import and export partner? Our plasma reserves alone make up nearly ten percent of their shipping.”

“I do not know,” he said. He seemed appropriately flustered by the situation while maintaining the regal air he was famous for. “However, Your Highness, you mustn’t open communication with them. They are shrewd negotiators and will twist every word we say to them in an effort to manipulate the laws. I will handle things from here on Coruscant.” Palpatine had witnessed

occasions when a simple mispronounced word or incorrect phrase opened a loophole in the laws giving the Federation an advantage and often led to the exploitation of entire systems on the trade routes. “I can’t be strong enough with this advice, Highness. Nute Gunray is notorious for trapping his opponents in technicalities.”

“I understand, Senator,” she said. “Thank you for the advice. Are we at risk for any sort of military action?”

“I would not think so, Your Highness, but I cannot say for certain. A blockade is quite an out-of-character move.”

“Then I need you to act swiftly,” Amidala said. “This is not a situation I wish to be in for a moment longer than necessary. I want the Trade Federation evicted from the Naboo system as quickly as possible and dealt with accordingly.”

“Yes, My Queen. I am heading to the Senate immediately to arrive at a solution.” The hologram fizzled out, and Senator Palpatine was gone.

The Queen stood up and took a deep breath. She walked to the window that overlooked the courtyard. People had begun congregating in the beautiful city plaza, adorned with statues of leaders before her, and were fixated on the lights in the sky. Amidala did not know if word had made it to them that Trade Federation battleships loomed just above the atmosphere. She knew she had to move quickly to ensure the safety of her people, and even though it had been less than an hour since the Neimoidian ships arrived, it was taking too long in her mind for resolution.

“Your Highness,” came a call from another advisor. “Viceroy Nute Gunray of the Trade Federation requests to speak with you.”



CHAPTER 2

“Ready my shuttle,” Senator Palpatine barked at his attendant droid as he rushed out of his office in the Galactic Senate building on a mission to speak directly to Supreme Chancellor Valorum. He strode down the hallway while the robot tried to keep pace. Whispers were spreading and the news was out that the Trade Federation had taken an unexpected and drastic action in an effort to protest the taxation laws imposed on them by enforcing a blockade around Palpatine’s home world. Senators from around the galaxy were waiting for him at his office door and in the gleaming hallway that led to his private shuttle and on the platform where his craft awaited him. He spoke to no one. He simply smiled in a way that portrayed, “thank you, we are fine, I will make this alright.”

His shuttle was stubby, two rows deep with four total seats, and was open air with no roof. It was designed to simply carry him between his office and the senate floor. In a matter of minutes, he had arrived and, again, senators and other officials

were waiting for him. Some were there as a show of support, some to ask what he planned to do, and others to urge him to acquiesce to the Trade Federation. Again, he was regal and professional as he made his way past the crowds and into the great domed Senate Hall.

The gates opened, and he worked his way across the building to the Chancellor's office. Galactic Republic Guards in rich blue robes and centurion helmets flanked the office entrance. Palpatine approached the closed doors, and the guards stepped politely but firmly in front of him.

"I demand to see the Chancellor," he grunted, pressed his way past the guards fearlessly and stormed into the chamber. He saw Supreme Chancellor Finis Valorum sitting in his tall chair behind a wide metal desk, his back to the window that overlooked Coruscant's political district. His Vice Chairman was seated across from him. Mas Amedda was from the planet Chagria and was typical of the species that called it home with two long horns atop his head, a pair of fleshy tentacles that hung at the side of his face and sky-blue thick hide. Valorum, a human man born and raised on Coruscant, looked even more pale when he stood next to Amedda, with short white hair and almost colorless skin.

"Senator Palpatine, welcome," said Mas in a deep voice that bubbled from his throat. "We were just discussing your... situation."

"What is there to discuss, gentlemen? The Trade Federation has illegally blockaded my planet with two dozen Lucrehulk-

class ships, and we know at least one of which is a modified battleship. I want them sanctioned and forced to leave the system immediately.”

“It’s not that simple, Sheev,” said Chancellor Valorum a little too informally. He had known Palpatine for twenty years, and they had come up through the Senate together. “It seems that their occupation is perfectly legal.”

Palpatine stood silently for a moment as he collected his thoughts. His eyebrows pulled down, and he turned his head slightly. “Legal?” was all he could come up with to say. “Please explain to me how.”

“In your haste to enact the Taxation Laws, there were some concessions made,” began Mas Amedda. “One of the clauses in the bill gave the Trade Federation the leeway to, in certain circumstances, stop the flow of goods to a planetary system based on a supply and demand algorithm they alone maintain. It seems they’ve decided that Naboo’s flow of plasma has reached a quota of some sort.”

“That’s simply ridiculous,” said Palpatine. “You know as well as I do that the Trade Federation is pulling this stunt on my planet to send a signal; to punish my constituents for the introduction and subsequent passing of the Taxation bill. This is a disgrace, and it cannot be tolerated.”

Valorum stood up, walked around his desk, and leaned against the front edge. “I *don’t* know that, Sheev. And neither do you. Look, you know how this works. You’ve been here as long as I

have. I am going before the Senate floor tomorrow afternoon, and we will make a motion to create a committee to investigate the action taken. That committee will look into the algorithm and the operating procedure by which they arrived at the decision to blockade Naboo, and then decide if it is, in fact, a legal course of action. From there we will then have to decide what recourse, if any, the Senate has in the name of the Republic.” The Chancellor pinched the skin between his eyes in exasperation. “It’s all very cumbersome.”

“By that time, Finis, who knows what kind of damage they will inflict on my people financially or worse. Naboo is reliant on fuel to be imported to run the power stations of Theed, and the economy is driven by the plasma export.”

“I understand, my old friend. I really do. But my hands are tied. The bureaucracy of the Senate is the only way to ensure decisions are made in the best interest of the Galactic Republic. I’m sorry, but that’s all I can promise you right now.”

Palpatine knew he was right, of course. Nothing moved quickly in the massive government by design. The checks and balances gave an equal voice to the smallest and the largest of the planetary systems in the great Senate Chamber. His home world, Naboo, fell into the smaller category, and it was through that very system, which was now putting his planet at risk, that Palpatine was able to leverage and propose the Taxation of the Federation three years ago.

The senator took a step forward. He had an idea. “What about the Jedi?” he said.

“What about them?” replied Mas Amedda.

“Could we send them to negotiate on behalf of the Republic? To work behind the scenes, unknown to the Senate, to reach some sort of agreement? They are allegedly impartial.”

“They are also not at our disposal to use for such missions,” said Valorum. “The Jedi lead diplomatic and even conflict resolution missions for the Republic, but they do not engage in the politics of the Senate. They are guardians of peace and justice, not a taskforce for us to use when the system is slowed by process.”

“What if I could get them to agree to do this in *secret*?” asked Palpatine.

Mas Amedda now stood up. He was very tall and wide, towering over both the humans. “Senator Palpatine, I am appalled by your suggestion!” Sheev braced himself, and then Amedda chuckled. “But I am impressed with your ingenuity.” Palpatine grinned, and Finis furled his brow. “As a special envoy to the Chancellor, it could be easily reconciled as an advanced reconnaissance mission, at the very least, to allow us insight to this unprecedented chain of events.”

“If it could speed up the process, it could improve your appearance to the public,” said Palpatine to the Supreme Chancellor. “And if it were to minimize the damage to Naboo’s people, you would be a hero to the smaller systems.”

Valorum harrumphed and pondered the option. “There is no guarantee the Jedi would even agree to such a thing,” he said. “And if they refused, it would reflect poorly on the office of the Chancellor.”

“Let me speak to them,” Palpatine offered. “If they deny me and word got out, it would appear that I was only acting in the best interest of my home. No one could begrudge me that.”

The Chancellor let out a long sigh through his nose and finally relented. “As long as I can distance myself from the request should it backfire, I reluctantly agree. If this fails, I will disavow all knowledge – the same goes for you, Vice Chairman.”

“Knowledge of what, Chancellor?” said Amedda with a broad smirk.

“Thank you, Finis,” said Palpatine with a hint of relief in his tone. “I will reach out to one of the Jedi Masters at once.”

* * * * *

When Senator Palpatine arrived back at his office, there was still a mob of fellow politicians waiting for his return. Among the crowd was a medium stature man with dark hair and a beard that ran thinly on the border of his jaw. He wore brown robes, a hood, a white shirt and tunic, and simple brown boots. Palpatine pushed his way past the throngs waiting to speak to him and perhaps influence how he would handle the Federation blockade, but he invited only the Jedi Master among them to follow him into his

office. When both men were inside, Palpatine hurriedly shut the door behind them.

“Master Sifo-Dyas, how fortunate that you were here. I was just about to reach out to you,” the Senator said.

“The Force works in mysterious ways, Senator.” Sifo-Dyas was one of twelve members on the High Jedi Council. He pulled back his hood exposing his long black hair drawn into a slick pony tail.

“Am I right to assume you are familiar with the current situation on my home planet?”

“I am. And I believe it could be much more than a simple blockade,” said the Jedi. “I have foreseen a coming war, and this act of aggression does not bode well for the current state of peace in the galaxy.”

Sifo-Dyas was among the most tenured members of the Jedi Council, but over the last several years, tensions had risen among the assemblage of Masters over prophetic images he had seen and shared with them. Blessed and cursed with an unusually strong ability to see vivid, but brief, visions of events yet to come through meditation in the Force, he had seen violent battles erupting in space above peaceful planets, vicious ground battles among vast armies, and even a vision so vague in detail that he believed it could be the end of the Jedi Order.

Even the most venerable of the Jedi, like Master Yoda, could not see the future as clearly as Sifo-Dyas claimed he was able. This led to strong disagreements among the Council when Sifo-

Dyas made overtures of recommendation to the creation of an army to protect the Republic.

The Republic was dependent on local systems to police themselves and to manage their own armies. There was no military force representing the Republic. Jedi Knights numbered in the thousands but were designated to find peaceful resolution wherever possible and only draw on their great skills in battle as a form of defense. Sifo-Dyas argued that an Army of the Republic would add credulity and authority to the Jedi if the time came to engage in a war. A war that the rest of the Jedi Council believed was not as imminent as Master Sifo-Dyas did.

“Well, Master Jedi, while I appreciate the severity you apply to this course of action by the Federation, I am not so sure that I would call it an act of *war*.”

“I do hope you are right, Senator. I am well aware that Naboo is a neutral world with no military defense to speak of.” Palpatine swallowed hard and nodded in agreement. “The Republic has no peace keeping force, and the Jedi are but protectors of the principals of the law, not an army.”

“I understand,” said Palpatine. “And I thank you. I would never dream of asking the Jedi to fight on behalf of Naboo. However, I might ask that you negotiate on behalf of the Republic you are sworn to protect to peacefully put an end to this blockade.”

Sifo-Dyas brought his hand to his chin and considered it. “A swift, peaceful resolution is, of course, the best outcome.”

“And should the Jedi be the first to understand if there are larger, more devious forces at work, well, it might give the Council an upper hand in how to *address* a threat.”

“But the Chancellor would never allow it. Not without the approval of the Senate.”

“I have already spoken to the Chancellor. Let’s just say, he hasn’t approved it.” Palpatine paused. “But he hasn’t made a move to stop a single Senator from doing what he thinks is in the best interest of his planet.”

Sifo-Dyas cocked an eyebrow at Palpatine. “Politics is not my arena, Senator. But I will bring your request to the Council.”

“I expect you will do so with the greatest care to respect the Chancellor’s wishes to remain officially *uninvolved*.”

“Of course,” said Sifo-Dyas as he bowed shallowly to Sheev Palpatine. The Senator returned the courtesy, and the Jedi Master left his office.



CHAPTER 3

Jar Jar Binks splashed his way out of Lake Paonga on the far side of Naboo. He was a Gungan, and he was alone.

Binks shook his head, and his long ears flapped spraying water on the leaves of the kalaki trees on the lake shore. His eyes swiveled on the stalks at the top of his head as he surveyed his surroundings. His clothes made of Hiberian Whale hide had aged and torn in the two years since he was banished from the Gungan city below the lake's surface.

The Gungans lived in the city of Otoh Gunga, an underwater metropolis that consisted of a thousand different sized glass and plasma globes, each creating individual bubbles that served a purpose. Some were small and only large enough for a few Gungans to fit into. Others were large enough to hold homes, shops and government institutions within them. Still more were as large as half a kilometer in diameter and were open common areas. The underwater city was legendary among the humans who lived on land, but none had ever seen it. The lake itself was over

one hundred kilometers from shore to shore and connected to the oceans the encircled the planet. Construction on Otoh Gunga had begun long before the humans had crash landed a millennium ago, and after their encounter with the newcomers, it became the only home the Gungans had come to know. Originally designed to be a home for their royal family, the tight knit culture of their species agreed to expand it to house the entire race in an effort to insulate themselves from the land dwellers who threatened their lifestyle.

Jar Jar was the son of a whaler, as was his father before him, who served the royal Boss Nass by hunting Opee sea killers and other behemoths that roamed the surrounding sea floor and the dreaded Naboo Abyss. The bounty hauled in by Jar Jar's father and his crew would supply food and fuel for the Boss and the entire city. When his father was killed by a Colo Claw Fish on an expedition, the incident left Jar Jar an orphan, as his mother had died giving birth to him. Boss Nass felt pity for the child and begrudgingly took him into his home as his family.

Jar Jar did not learn to speak until he was almost twice the age that average Gungans began to talk. Once he did learn to use his verbal skills, he rarely did. His voice was higher pitched than the other male Gungans and cracked when he got excited or scared. He was dramatically stronger than most of the children and stood a head taller than them all. But Jar Jar was clumsy and had trouble with fine motor skills. As a result, he was an outcast who longed to make friends. Even living in Boss Nass's palace, he never connected to other children. If he had not been part of Boss Nass's

home, he more than likely would have ended up on the streets of Otoh Gunga or dead by the time he reached his maturity.

Two years earlier, on the first evening of the Otoh holiday, Totga, the head of the Boss's imperial guard, Captain Tarpals, was drinking Jaia Ale with some of his men in the royal distillery long after it had closed for the night. They were drunk and clearly overstepping their position as royal guards when Jar Jar, who often walked alone at night throughout the Boss's castle, heard the commotion they made and found the guards atop a barrel of ale.

"Wassa you doin' here?" called Binks.

"Nonna you bidness, Jar Jar," Tarpals slurred. His voice was gravelly and was naturally authoritative. "Wassa *you* doin' down here?"

"Meesa just goin' bout meesa way," he said. "But yousa not supposa being in da ale housen."

Tarpals clamored to his feet and stumbled over to Jar Jar. Binks was taller than the captain but that didn't stop him from poking him in the chest. "Yousa gone get in bombad trouble for being in da big Boss Nass's private stashen. Not me." said Tarpals. Jar Jar had not thought of that, but now he was worried he was in an area for which Boss Nass would reprimand him. "Now, meesa not needing to tell da big boss weesa find you in here. But yousa needen to be helpin me and da boyos out."

The one thing Jar Jar feared more than anything was getting in trouble from Boss Nass. Even though Nass took Jar Jar into his

home, he never felt welcome. He was disciplined regularly and reminded time and again that he was only there because his father was a great Gungan. Tarpals's threat chilled Binks to the bone.

"Howsa can meesa help?" Jar Jar said eager to put this incident behind him.

Tarpals swirled around to his compatriots and smiled. As an older Gungan, the captain's skin had a deeper orange tint, and he had grown fleshy whiskers on his bill that twitched while he held back a laugh. "Weesa like to go for a bongo ride in da big boss's *Heyblibber*."

The *Heyblibber* was a luxury submarine built just for Boss Nass and named for his grandmother. It was fast and stylish and was one of the monarch's prized possessions. Jar Jar stood up straight as an arrow and shook his head. "No." His voice cracked. "No, meesa can't."

"OK, Jar Jar. Meesa understand. Yousa afraid, and meesa has to do my duty and tell Boss Nass dat yousa visiting his private ale reserve. Meesa sure that heesa gone be fine wit dat."

Jar Jar looked around scared. He brought his hands together in a ball and writhed his fingers together nervously. "Oh, no, Captain Tarpals!" He paced the floor and tried to speak, but just as when he was a child, indiscernible gibberish came from his beak. The soldiers and Captain Tarpals burst out laughing.

"Wassa dat, Jar Jar?" one of the guards asked. "Yousa not making any sense, boyo." They continued to heckle him and laughed at each other's jokes.

Jar Jar was nearly in tears when he finally gathered the strength to force out a sentence: “Meesa gone do it for you.” He stepped forward and looked down into Tarpals’ eyes. “Please, promise you longo no tello what happened.”

“Of course, Jar Jar,” he said. “Now go and getten dat bongo.”

Jar Jar turned left and then did a complete circle right to quickly make his way out of the ale reserve. “Weesa meet you at da dock!” shouted Tarpals. The other drunken guards swigged their tankards and laughed again loudly.

Binks ran up the stairs and out of the basement. He sprinted down the hallway of the castle’s main section and out to the royal garage where all of the Boss’s vehicles were stored. He looked around the large cavern and found the *Heyblibber* on the far side. Jar Jar made his way down the catwalk to where it was attached to the dock. Quickly, he untied it, lifted open the door, and crawled into the cockpit. He mumbled worriedly to himself as he started the engines.

As they whirred to life, the bongo began to slide away from its moorings and backwards toward the opening of the garage. He squeaked in fear as he nearly side swiped a wall. Once the submarine was out of the hold, he reached for the stick to push it into gear. The engine sputtered and then came back on line with a screech. “No again!” said Jar Jar.

When Jar Jar was a child at sea with his father, there were inexplicable times when he was able to expertly drive huge sea vehicles. As the son of the royal whaler, he had come to learn the

various sea lanes and short cuts by traveling with his father. There were moments when he could guide a large hunting vessel through the narrowest parts of the Abyss, but as was his curse, sometimes his motor skills eluded him, and he was unable to make the intricate moves needed to safely navigate the seas. This usually happened when there was stress. When his father let him take the wheel and there was no pressure, Jar Jar could have passed as a seasoned sailor. But when they were pursued by a Sea Goliath or the weather drove down into the ocean causing difficult conditions, he would falter, and his father would have to take over.

The stress of stealing Boss Nass's prized *Heyblibber* was causing him to stutter to himself, and he felt his muscles turn to mush.

Jar Jar brought the submarine into the open water and drove it around the floating castle to the other side where the palace dock protruded. In the distance, he could see Tarpals and his Gungan guards waiting at the end of the longest pier. Binks pushed the speed regulator down to accelerate and get the illegal delivery over with. As he approached the dock, he reached for the throttle and pulled back. But instead of the throttle, he had pulled the gear shift and dropped it into reverse while at top speed. The *Heyblibber's* engine cried out in a metallic squeal and, instead of going backwards, it was driven to the side by the sudden change of direction.

Binks panicked. He spun the control wheel wildly in both directions and the craft began to circle in reverse in the open water. Finally, Jar Jar found the accelerator stick and began to slow the engine. He tried to right the direction of the vehicle, but it continued its seemingly random trajectory. Tarpals and his pals jumped off the dock into the water just as the *Heyblibber* crashed into it, splintering it into a hundred planks of plasticrete.

Lights flooded the area. Alarms sounded and fifteen additional Gungan guards ran down what was left of the pier to see what had happened. Jar Jar opened the cockpit and sat silently at the controls. Two guards came to pull him out and all he could do was hold his hands up to be arrested and mumble unintelligibly.

He was frightened to the point of uncontrollable shaking the next morning when he was taken before his foster father for deposition.

“Yousa been found guilty of stealin’ meesa bongo *Heyblibber*,” said Boss Nass in a remarkably formal hearing. He was squat, round and often spit when he spoke. “Issa da anyone here who can speak otherwise on meesa decision?” Tarpals and the two guards who were brought in as witnesses to the crash remained silent.

Jar Jar was literally paralyzed in fear. Whenever he attempted to speak or note that he was coerced by Tarpals, his words failed him, and he stuttered incoherently. Boss Nass stood up to deliver his sentence.

“Jar Jar Binks,” he began. “Itsa not too strong to say dat yousa showin’ me no respect as your Boss and, worsen, yousa caregiver. For dat, meesa gone do what I shoulda done longo many years begone: banish you forever from Otoh Gunga.” The court gasped.

Binks gathered himself and was able to put together one clear question in a whisper, “Wheresa meesa go?”

“Anywhere but here,” said Boss Nass. He waved a dismissive hand at him and stood up. His attendants put a cloak on the Boss’s back, and he walked out of the court. As he reached the door to his chambers, Nass called back, “Tarpals, you and yousa men escortin him to the Great Gate.”

Within the hour, Captain Tarpals had led Jar Jar to the grand entrance of Otoh Gunga and unceremoniously pushed him toward the malleable plasma field door that kept the sea from entering the enormous bubble.

“Yousa bombad,” said Jar Jar. “Yousa no a good Gungan.” Tarpals felt a tinge of guilt as he looked down and refused eye contact with Binks. “But meesa be back, Captain Tarpals,” said Binks positively and with a lilt of happiness in his voice. “And maybe then, yousa beein’ my friend.”

Jar Jar swam to the surface and lived off fish and leaves on the shores of Lake Paonga for the next two years. He made a shelter for sleeping at night and spent most of his days just below the surface of the lagoon hunting for his next meal.

On this morning, he sat on a rock on the shore, chewed on a Cottle fish he had nabbed from the mud, and looked up into the

sky. Twenty-five stars ran across the dawn horizon in a straight line. “Meesa got a bad feeling about dis,” he mumbled and took another bite of his morning meal.



CHAPTER 4

“Twenty-five warships surround the peaceful planet of Naboo, the Senate is undecided how to respond, and the Republic doesn’t have a peacekeeping force to send even if they wanted to,” said Jedi Master Sifo-Dyas. The Jedi High Council had gathered in response to the blockade at Naboo. There had been relative peace in the galaxy since the Tholothian incursion nearly a generation before and no recent inter-system conflicts.

In the top of the fourth spire of the Temple on Coruscant, eleven of the twelve Jedi Masters on the High Council sat in a large circle of the windowed chamber. They represented various races and systems around the galaxy, but there was no quota or species distinction. The Council selection process was an ancient and guarded ceremony, to which only sitting members were privy. Grand Master Yoda, a one meter high, eight hundred fifty year-old being with green skin, long pointy ears that jutted from his balding head, and deep blue eyes, sat at the center of the ring of simple, unadorned thrones. He was the oldest and wisest of all

the Jedi Masters and the overseer of the Jedi Council. Yoda sat with his clawed hands on his lap and looked hard at Master Sifo-Dyas.

“Use this blockade as motivation to build your army, we will not,” Yoda said. “A peaceful solution, we must find.”

“Master Yoda, we are in uncertain times. You have even admitted you have felt it, and I have seen it through my visions,” Sifo-Dyas pleaded. “If this blockade turns violent, the people of Naboo are defenseless. With all due respect, this is exactly the kind of incident that makes the case for a Republic army.” This was not the first time Sifo-Dyas suggested the council urge the Senate to authorize the creation of a military. He was outspoken in his opinion that a great war was coming and concerned for the future of the Galactic Republic. And if they were being true to themselves, most of the other members of the Council would acknowledge they had felt some indescribable disturbance in the Force over the last several years, but most refused to address it due to it being a vague and fleeting feeling. “However, Master, I am not pressing that today. I believe there is another step we can and should take.”

“I am happy to hear that,” said Ki-Adi-Mundi. “Now is not the time. There is the crisis at hand that must be dealt with.” With a long, cone shaped head and a white beard that extended from his chin, Ki-Adi-Mundi spoke in a quiet calming voice. He was a humanoid from the planet Cerea and had only served on the Council for less than a year.

“Guided by the Force are we to protect the interests of the Republic? Warriors, we are not.” Yoda blinked slowly and then turned to address the rest of the Council. “What action do you recommend?”

“I have spoken to Senator Palpatine of Naboo, and after our conversation, I recommend we offer the Chancellor our services to negotiate a settlement while the Senate takes on committee after committee to reach a resolution,” replied Sifo-Dyas.

“Do you think this is wise for us to bypass the politics of the system?” asked Mace Windu. Born on Harun Kal, he came through the Jedi trials alongside Sifo-Dyas. The two were friendly with one another, but Mace sensed occasional conflict in Sifo-Dyas and felt obligated to question his motives – even if he at first agreed with it.

“While it is not our place to interfere with the work of the Senate, we can be seen as a neutral party to find a middle ground between the Trade Federation and Naboo.”

“And should the Chancellor not accept our offer?” asked Windu, the bright purple pupils of his eyes glared at Sifo-Dyas from across the chamber. Mace Windu was an imposing human Jedi. He was muscular and had dark skin. Unlike his other human Jedi counterparts, he opted to shave the hair from his head and wore no facial hair.

“He already has, in a way. Palpatine suggested it, and he didn’t deny it as an option.”

Yoda squinted in thought. “A difficult position, we are now in, Master Dyas. Asked us to assist his people, Senator Palpatine has. Made a request of our services to the Chancellor, he has. Yet, no clear path from the Republic nor Chancellor Valorum, have we received.”

“Then we dispatch an envoy in secret,” said Sifo-Dyas. This drew looks of disdain from some members of the Council while others leaned in to hear more. “We cannot wait to see what next move the Trade Federation might make while the Senate argues what should be done.”

“We cannot undermine the authority of the Republic government,” said Depa Billaba, one of four women on the Council. “Sending an undisclosed negotiator would give voice to those that already feel the Jedi have too much influence on the Senate,” The Jedi began talking among themselves and soon order had left the discussion.

“Silence,” barked Yoda as he tapped his wooden cane on the arm of his throne. “Always in motion, the future is. An outcome to this blockade, no one has seen. But cloud our vision, chaos can. Have order among the Council, we will.”

Adi Gallia spoke up. She was born on Coruscant but was Tholothian in descent. Her parents proudly gave their daughter to the Jedi when they realized she was Force sensitive near her third birthday as they had been refugees and escaped their home world, Tholoth, when it came under attack by invaders from its inhabited moon. While not Force users themselves, they believed in its will

and were convinced they escaped by its divine intervention. Adi had this message instilled in her by her parents and her Master, and as a member of the Council, she was acutely aware of the plight of invaded peoples. “Sifo-Dyas is right. If there is more to this blockade, we must become aware of it as quickly as we can. If it is truly a decision of economics, then we will let the Senate battle it out. If there is something more sinister at play, then we have an obligation to protect the rule of the Republic.”

Mace Windu surveyed the Council with a sweeping run of his eyes before breathing deeply and pulling up his posture in his chair. “I suggest we send Master Dooku. His years in the private sector may serve him well on this mission.”

“Master Dooku will not return in time from his mission to Sullust,” said Master Plo Koon nodding his head toward the open chair. “Perhaps his former apprentice would be a suitable substitute,” he offered.

“Master Qui-Gon and his apprentice we shall send,” said Yoda. “A wise man, Master Jinn is. And the trials, his Padawan Obi-Wan are nearing. A good test for both, this will be.”

“All in favor of the recommendation?” said Mace Windu. Around the circle each Jedi Master gave their approval until the vote reached Sifo-Dyas.

“Diplomacy is a virtue that I admire in all of you,” he said. “And while I will give my vote in favor, I ask that we watch this matter, be mindful of the disturbance in the Force you all have felt and consider reopening the conversation about militarizing

our Grand Republic. I cannot help but feel we are on the brink of... something.”

“Understand the Council does, your interpretation of your visions,” said Yoda. “But darkness battled by darkness is a path of which we must be mindful.”

Yoda pushed himself up from his throne and began to walk across the chamber floor. “Meet with the Chancellor, I will. Master Windu, dispatch Master Jinn and his apprentice.” He paused to look hard at Sifo-Dyas. “Escort Senator Palpatine to the Chancellor’s office, you will. This mission must never be spoken of outside this room. Only those who must know, must know.” He continued his slow limp across the room. “Uncomfortable I am with this course of action. But trust the Council I do. May the Force be with us.”



CHAPTER 5

Qui-Gon Jinn’s quarters, like most Jedi Masters’, was simple. It consisted of a bed to sleep on, a chest of drawers in which to keep his clothing and limited personal affects, and two tuffets – one to meditate alone on and another for his apprentice when he was teaching. He opened the top drawer of his dresser and placed a golden and steelglass cube in the back corner, under one of his robes. Since he came into possession of the ancient holocron on a mission to Jedha with his Padawan several years before, he committed to study and learn all he could from the artifact, for the warning it came with sent a shiver down his spine.

When Obi-Wan Kenobi was around twelve years old, he was deemed ready to build his own lightsaber. As was the tradition, he would be escorted by his master to one of two worlds that were known to produce a substance called kyber that acted as the focusing source of the energy that created the blade of the Jedi’s weapon. Kyber was a living crystal that grew in caves on the planet Ilum and a desert moon known as Jedha.

The moon was believed to have been the home of one of the first civilizations to harness the Force and was a holy site for the Jedi. While no one knew for sure and it was commonly contested, some scholars believed the first Jedi Order was born on Jedha.

The kyber crystal caves on Jedha were hidden in the mountain range of Sittah and protected by warrior monks known as the Guardians of the Whills. These protectors were sensitive to the Force, but not trained in the ways of the Jedi. Born into service, they believed their sole purpose was to protect the mystical kyber and maintain the history of the wielders of the Force.

Upon arrival on the desert world, Qui-Gon advised Obi-Wan that he was to seek out the caves and find the crystal that called to him alone. It was a sacred journey that each Jedi Knight underwent and included no guidance from their master. Kenobi bid his mentor farewell and wandered into the desert mountain range to find the crystal that would complete his ceremonial yet extremely functional weapon.

Qui-Gon followed tradition as well and visited the great Jedi temple on Jedha where he would meditate, while his Padawan learner completed his quest. This could take days and often weeks to accomplish. The beautiful stone structure of the shrine was perfectly square with four towering statues of the first Jedi Knights on each corner rising one hundred meters into the sky. Here, the Guardians of the Whills studied, prayed, and maintained the vast history of the Force on mysterious boxes that fit in the palm of a human's hand called holocrons. These cubes were

metallic and had panes of steelglass intricately etched and embedded into the golden frames. A unique combination of technology and organic material, holocrons were only able to be opened through the use of the Force. They would float between the open palms of the user who would manipulate the unique lock to access these containers where holographic beings would tell the tales and impart the knowledge inside. Holocrons could only be manipulated by the focus of a trained Force user, and thus their secrets were maintained exclusively for the Jedi.

The Jedi master arrived at the temple gate and was greeted by two Guardians. They said nothing but forbade him from entering by stepping silently in his path. Qui-Gon waved his hand and attempted to plant thoughts in their minds to honor his request for entrance. They were strong-willed enough to resist but recognized his ability to use the Force in this way and stepped aside to allow him passage. He nodded his head in thanks and pushed open the six-meter tall door.

When he entered, there were a dozen monks seated on the floor and one of the lead monks, known as a Shaman, was lecturing. He was a Bothan; one and a half meters tall, had pointed ears and was covered in brown hair from his snout to his feet. The Shaman wore a long, deep green robe with golden piping. Qui-Gon arrived in time to listen to him imparting a story of the Great Sith War to his students, each a different species, who sat in their simple robes in rapt attention. The walls of the temple were adorned with paintings that depicted key milestone tales in the

history of the Force. From legendary battles to the wisest of Force users, over a hundred scenes adorned the stone ramparts. At the front of the temple, filling the space from bottom to top of the fifteen-meter wall, was a massive painting of the mystical Father, Daughter and Son. The Jedi were taught that the Father represented the balance of the Force, the Daughter represented the Light and the Son the Dark aspects of the preternatural energy. The Guardians of the Whills believed that these mythical humanoids existed on an ethereal plane as living beings. Qui-Gon could not fully bring himself to consider that they were real but fully believed in what they symbolized. As a Youngling and Padawan, he enjoyed the tales of the battles between brother and sister, good and evil, light and dark, and all that they represented.

Jinn stood arms crossed, at the back of the stone temple, listening to the sermon.

“And the Sith have not been heard from for nearly a thousand years,” concluded the Shaman. His voice was deep, and each word was animated. There was utter silence in the chamber as his last word echoed off the walls. After what seemed an eternity, the Shaman spoke again. “Isn’t that right, Master Jedi?” he asked calling on Qui-Gon.

“It is true,” he said. “Fifty generations of Jedi have come and gone since the fall of the Sith.”

“But that won’t last forever, my friend. The Father has kept the Son and Daughter in harmony for many a lifetime. In the great scheme of time and space, however, those thousand years are but

a mere snap of the finger.” He clicked his fingers together in a crack to drive the instance home. “The Son will return, and the Daughter will exit. The Father will wither and, in his place, a new Child will bring balance. But not before chaos and darkness reigns.”

“Sounds rather bleak, oh Shaman,” said Qui-Gon with a smile and a light heart.

The Shaman waved to his students and the monks stood, bowed, and dispersed from the temple. The Bothan walked slowly toward the Jedi.

“It does sound austere, doesn’t it, Master Jedi? But the Whills, we have seen it.”

“I hope the Son waits at least another generation before it happens,” quipped Qui-Gon.

The Shaman studied Qui-Gon’s face, pulled his lips tight and nodded his head. “Come with me. I have something for you.” The Jedi raised an eyebrow. This was his first pilgrimage to the Jedha temple, and he was not expecting gifts.

Qui-Gon followed the Shaman to the back wall where the image of the Father, Son and Daughter was, and they entered through a two-meter door hidden in the painting. They walked down a dimly lit hallway that started away from the building, but twisted as it turned back toward the temple to another entry below the surface. The Shaman placed his hand on the door, and it eased quietly open revealing a chamber even larger than the temple above it.

“Welcome to the Journal of the Whills, Master Jedi,” said the Shaman proudly. It was the library of the monastery, lined with hundreds of half walls, which extended in rows a few meters apart from each other for as far as Qui-Gon could see. On each half wall were dozens of compartments and in each compartment, a holocron. On the far-right side of the room, Guardians were digging out a wall to build more storage for future holocrons. The legend of the library was that it grew with the Journal, and that was why it was built underground: so that it could expand as much as needed to accommodate entry after entry.

The Shaman started down one of the rows and Qui-Gon followed silently, in awe of the countless holocrons that held millennia of history.

“There is a famous passage from the Journal,” started the Shaman. “A part of *The Prophecy*. It says:

‘SON comes before darkness falls
Wise and foolish ignore the calls
For when revealed the seer is blind
The LIGHT ahead is left behind’”

Qui-Gon had heard this from his days as a Padawan, but it had become something to memorize versus a passage that held meaning. *The Prophecy* was an ancient story about a being who would bring balance to the Force. “It’s been a thousand years since the Jedi destroyed the Sith. Their fire has gone out of the galaxy. *The Prophecy* is but a tale to keep the Jedi attentive and

focused on our mission,” Jinn said. “We, Jedi, maintain balance in the Force.”

The Shaman smiled. “When the Jedi defeated the Sith, Light shone on the galaxy, to be sure.” He drew a breath. “Another passage from the Journal says, ‘Darkness rises and Light to meet it.’ How can you have balance if the opposite isn’t also true? I don’t mean to speak in riddles, Master Jedi, I just wish to remind you that for every day there is a night, and it’s been a long time since the dawn.”

Qui-Gon felt cold. He wondered if the Shaman reminded every Jedi who visited the temple to be vigilant or if the Force had spoken to him and given the Shaman sight into something *imminent*. “Why are you telling me this, oh Shaman?”

“Because I have been waiting for you,” he said. “Well, not *you*. But for the Jedi who would enter the temple at the right time.” He halted his walk and turned to Qui-Gon. “I have something for you. A lesson. A mission. A holocron.”

They walked several hundred meters from the door when they arrived at another seemingly common looking row of holocrons. The Bothan reached for one and pulled it from its socket. There was nothing out of the ordinary about it. It was similar to all the other holocrons he had seen and that were on the rows and rows of walls. He placed it in Qui-Gon’s hands.

“There has been a great disturbance in the Force, Master Jedi. I feel the darkness will emerge again soon. The Force has brought

forth the Child. I have felt it. That can only mean the Son is rising and balance will be lost.”

“I will bring the message to the Council when I return with my Padawan,” said Qui-Gon.

“They will not listen. That is why I have given you this holocron.”

Assuming the information needed to convince the Council was in the holocron he now held, he nodded to the Shaman. “I understand.”

“With all due respect, Master Jedi. I do not believe you do.” He tugged at Jinn’s arm and led him back toward the entry of the library. “There *will* be darkness. When the Sith rise, a generation will be lost. If the Sith are in control, the Jedi are not. And like Light and Dark, one erases the other. And like the Sith, the Jedi must survive... for balance. Do not be fooled. Balance is where we exist. Not in one side or the other.”

“You are right, oh Shaman,” said Qui-Gon. “I am afraid I don’t understand.”

The Bothan stopped again in his path and waved to Qui-Gon to come down to eye level with him. “Listen to me. If the Light is destroyed by the Dark, how can there be balance? You have been selected by the Force to be here today, now. You must outlive your line. You must grow beyond what you are.” The Shaman drew a breath. “There are pathways in the Force that some consider to be ‘unnatural.’ The Jedi and the Sith are disciples of the Daughter and the Son, and as such do not accept all of the

teachings of the Whills. They have selected the Light or the Dark as their guide. They accept what they want to and what serves their order. What is in this holocron will not be welcomed by the Jedi and must never fall into the hands of the Sith. The Force has chosen you, Master Jedi.” Qui-Gon stood up in silence, absorbing the words of the Shaman.

“I am honored to –”

“Do not confuse honor with burden,” said the Shaman.

* * * * *

The Jedi Master closed the drawer as the door to his living quarters opened. Mace Windu stood in the entry and waited to be invited to enter.

“Of course, Master. Please, come in,” Qui-Gon said offering him a seat on one of the tuffets.

Mace shook his head at the offer. “I won’t be here long, Master Jinn,” he said. “I’ve come to inform you that the Council has a mission for you.”

“Excellent. How can we serve?”

“You and your Padawan are to go to Naboo and negotiate a settlement with the Trade Federation now blockading the planet. This mission is not sanctioned by the Senate, so this operation must be handled with extreme care.”

“Won’t the Trade Federation report back to the Senate that the Jedi are involved?”

“The Trade Federation are cowards, but they are loyal to their obligations. If you negotiate a settlement that benefits them with the condition that they keep your meeting confidential, they will not break their end of the deal.”

“It’s a big risk to take, Master Windu,” said Qui-Gon.

“And that is why you must be successful. The Chancellor will disavow all knowledge of the meeting, and Senator Palpatine will take the fall if you fail. The Council has complete faith in you.”

“That’s a phrase I don’t hear that often,” said Qui-Gon.

“Now is not the time to discuss your disagreements with the Council,” Windu replied. “You should be honored that Master Yoda selected you for this mission.”

“I will not take it lightly, Master. I assume Obi-Wan and I will leave at once?”

“Correct. We are preparing a Consular ship, and you can be on your way by nightfall. You will be briefed while on the journey there. May the Force be with you, Master Jinn.”



CHAPTER 6

The blockade had been in place for two days. Viceroy Nute Gunray had tried to open communications with Queen Amidala – or anyone in the Naboo monarchy for that matter – every hour since they had arrived, and each time he was rebuffed. Her advisors were weary, Sio Bibble was tiring, and the Queen herself was beginning to consider taking matters into her own hands. The Neimoidian ships hadn't done anything other than orbit the planet. There was no act of aggression but there was no indication that they were moving out any time soon. Following the advice of Senator Palpatine and not opening a dialogue with the Federation only served to add to the uncertainty of the situation.

The Trade Federation had blocked the space lanes and disrupted communications from the Theed spaceport to incoming ships, advising they have no clearance to land and were told to return to where they came from or a nearby system. Word had reached the citizens that Neimoidian starships had encircled the planet and no one was allowed to leave or enter the system. The

Office of the Queen had already received dozens of requests from families who had loved ones returning to the planet from off-world journeys wondering what would happen. Queen Amidala assured them this was a temporary situation and that all would return to normal shortly.

She hoped she was right. But she hadn't heard a word from Senator Palpatine since she spoke to him at the beginning of the crisis.

Again, the signal came to the throne room that someone was trying to make contact. Queen Amidala had grown numb to the sound as it was an hourly reminder that nothing had been done to help her people.

"Queen Amidala, it's Senator Palpatine," one of her advisors said. The relief was clear in his voice and for the first time since the Lucrehulk cruisers arrived, she felt a moment of calm.

"Patch him through," she said.

A blueish hologram of her mentor and friend, Senator Palpatine, flickered to life. "My Queen," he started. "I need to speak to you in private. Please take my communique in your chambers." With the final word, it faded out.

She nodded and stood from her throne. She walked across the hall and entered her private office as Sio Bibble attempted to follow her. "I must follow the Senator's wishes," she said. "Please wait for me outside."

Amidala closed the door as Bibble began to protest, until it clicked shut. She walked around her room to her desk, pressed

some buttons on the glassteel surface and a holoivid of Palpatine appeared.

“My Queen, I regret that I am unable to converse with you directly, but, as you can imagine, I am bogged down in meetings and this recorded message is all I can send.” Amidala sat down heavily in her chair and sighed. She had not expected an impersonal pre-recorded communication. “I have spoken to the Chancellor and his hands are tied. Not surprisingly, the bureaucracy of the Senate has made it impossible for our case to be presented and acted upon in a timely manner. I expressed that this is unacceptable.” His face turned from dour to his famous smile. “However, he has decided to send an envoy in secret to negotiate a settlement while we go through the machinations of the political morass the Republic has become. You must keep this information among only Governor Bibble, your security advisor, Captain Panaka, and few other key advisors. He has asked that it remains a secret. I would recommend that you keep your staff to a bare minimum to ensure word of this does not extend beyond your Office. You will be notified when the Chancellor’s ambassadors arrive. In the meantime, please wait for me to contact you directly before you speak to the Trade Federation.” And then the hologram disappeared.

She was frozen in her chair, unsure of what to do next. Queen Amidala had so many questions for the Senator and, even though his words were encouraging, there were still answers that she felt she needed. Worse, there was no clear indication of when this

predicament might end. She inhaled, filled her lungs, and let the breath out slowly through her mouth. She pressed another button on the console.

“Governor Bibble. Captain Panaka. I need you in my chambers immediately.” Amidala sat straight in her chair, adopted her most confident pose and stared at the door, waiting for the two men to come in.



CHAPTER 7

Yoda pulled his diminutive self up onto a chair on the other side of the desk from Chancellor Finis Valorum. Mas Amedda remained seated as the leader of the Senate stood out of respect for the Jedi.

“I am pleased to see you, Master Yoda. Though not at all surprised,” said Valorum.

“Under better circumstances, I wish we were meeting,” said the Jedi.

“I assume you are speaking about the crisis on Naboo.”

“And the request for Jedi intervention Senator Palpatine has made,” added Yoda.

“I cannot play politics with you, Master Jedi. I have a great deal of respect for Senator Palpatine, and I, too, am concerned for the people of his home world. However, the Senate is what it is, and we cannot make the clock tick faster. I don’t like Sheev’s recommendation, but I understand what it might do.”

Yoda perked up. “What it might do? Cast the Jedi in a negative light, it may. If backfire Senator Palpatine’s plan does, then give ammunition to those that say the Jedi are unchecked, it will. Risky this is. For over a thousand generations, the Jedi have served the Republic. Only recently, questioned our intentions, some have. But for the people of Naboo, act we must.”

“I agree completely, Master Yoda. That is why this must not fail. To be clear, it would also reflect poorly on me, as I am sure you understand. Either I will be condemned for allowing the Jedi to act independently on behalf of Naboo without my ‘permission’ or I will be denounced for not acting more swiftly in the Senate to support the people of Naboo. As you can see, I am in a no-win situation. My only choice would have been to shut Palpatine down –”

“Which of course you couldn’t do in good conscience,” called Senator Palpatine as he entered the Chancellor’s office in grandiose style with Jedi Master Sifo-Dyas a step behind him.

“As if we had a choice,” said Mas Amedda, finally coming to his feet. Valorum glared at the big blue Chagrian as he shook Palpatine’s hand.

“You must do what you feel is right, of course. I am just pleased to see that although the Senate is mired in process and unable to perform its duties in the most obvious of situations, the five of us are able to have the vision to serve the greater good of the galaxy.” Palpatine flashed his grin.

“Still uncertain are we what the Trade Federation’s objective is,” harrumphed Yoda.

“Master Yoda is right,” said the Chancellor. “We are yet to communicate with the Federation directly, and Queen Amidala has not contacted us either. We must assume no ill will until we are given reason to believe otherwise.”

“And what if this is something more hostile?” asked Sifo-Dyas. “What if this is the beginning of what I have foreseen?”

“We are all familiar with your visions, Master Jedi. Do you really believe a trade dispute could be the start of some great war?” asked Mas Amedda dismissively. “Look, the worst that will happen here is that the Trade Federation will be effective in their blockade, Naboo will suffer an inconvenient fuel shortage, and their economy will take a hit while they are banned from exporting plasma. The Senate will be discussing the Taxation of Travel Routes again, and with a voice in the Republic, the Trade Federation may be able to get the tariffs removed. It’s a political ploy, Master Jedi. Not some phantom menace you seem to believe in.”

“While I agree with you, Mister Vice Chancellor,” began Palpatine. “I do worry about the rumored militarization of the Trade Federation droids and ships. I understand at least one of the Lucrehulks in the blockade has been modified as a battleship. Why would the Trade Federation send an armed ship to an allegedly peaceful blockade?”

“Again,” started Valorum, “We know nothing about the motivations of the Neimoidians or the Trade Federation. The Jedi ambassadors will play a significant role in helping us understand what is at stake here. I don’t like going around the Senate, but, as we’ve gone this far, it is in the best interest of the Republic that we wait to hear from them.”

“Uncertain times we are living in,” said Yoda. “A disturbance in the Force, I have felt.” He looked at his fellow Jedi Master, Sifo-Dyas. “Hope we must that sending the ambassadors to Naboo, the right decision is.”



CHAPTER 8

Maoi Madakor heard the signal come from the navicomputer alerting her that they were moments away from dropping out of hyperspace in the Naboo system. She felt the familiar and almost welcomed clench in her stomach. She was not a battle pilot but had been in these situations before.

“Lieutenant Williams,” she said without taking her eyes off the controls. “Lock in coordinates for Coruscant and be prepared to jump on my mark.”

The *Radiant VII*, being a consular ship, had only deflector shields and no weapons. If they were met with a hostile welcome upon their arrival, she had to be prepared to get clear of the blockade that was awaiting them, jump back into hyperspace and escape as quickly as they arrived. A move she had executed before.

Antidar Williams was a young man on his first interstellar mission for the Republic and was promoted to lieutenant for this assignment. His family lived on the planet Barkhesh, where he

had been a cargo aviator since he was old enough to fly, like his father before him. He joined the Republic Pilot Corps on Coruscant when he left home and was certified to fly small craft for government officials within months of his acceptance. With no Republic military, it was a civilian job that only used militaristic titles as a familiar hierarchy, but among pilots in the Core Worlds, it was a good career and it made his family proud.

His captain, Maoi Madakor, was born and raised on Coruscant. She was abandoned by her parents at a young age and adopted by wealthy diplomats unable to have children of their own in the Gem Sector of the capital planet. She rebelled against her adoptive parents' wishes to join the family jewelry business and left home to pursue her passion for flying. She became a trusted member of the Pilot Corps, known for her flight skill, and Maoi often flew diplomatic missions for Master Yoda himself. Although not her property, the *Radiant VII* was *her* ship.

The *Radiant VII* was a standard Galactic Republic transport vessel often used on diplomatic missions for Republic or Jedi Order ambassadors. A little over one hundred fifteen meters in length, driven by three barrel-shaped engines across the tail, and painted a brilliant red to signify its neutrality, the Consular-Class ships were easily recognized around the galaxy. When fully staffed, it had eight crew members and enough room for sixteen passengers. As it was top-secret, this mission flew with a skeleton crew: two pilots and two Jedi.

“Shields on double front, Lieutenant,” she said sternly.

“No shields,” said Qui-Gon Jinn as he entered the cockpit with his Padawan. “Defense begets offense. We are here in peace.”

Madakor squinted her eyes in disagreement but relented. “Yes, sir. Lieutenant, strike that order.”

The conical swirl of stars that was the pilot’s view from the cockpit while in hyperspace abruptly stopped as they dropped into the Naboo system. The planet was beautiful. Blue oceans, white swirls of clouds and green land masses covered the surface. However, their eyes were quickly drawn to the twenty-five spacecraft which hovered around it ominously and obviously out of place. Madakor assessed the situation. No swirling starfighters. No alarms on her ship’s display about charging weapons or incoming attacks. She dropped the speed controls to minimum, eased the *Radiant VII* very slowly toward the blockade and waited for her Jedi passengers to give the next command.

“Sending our arrival signal to Coruscant,” said Lieutenant Williams.

“Captain,” said Qui-Gon. “Tell them we wish to board at once.”

“Yes, sir.” She tapped some controls on the panel in front of her with her right hand, opening communications channels, while keeping her left hand on the flight yoke.

A screen above the transparisteele cockpit window flickered to life, and on it appeared a Neimoidian representative from the Trade Federation. He was taller than the average human, had

green glistening skin, no pronounced nose and oval, crimson eyes with thin wavy slits for pupils. He was wearing the traditional Neimoidian headdress with three spikes on the top and two fabric flaps that lay across his shoulders. It was very likely the Trade Federation Viceroy himself.

Captain Madakor swallowed hard and opened the channel. She was fully debriefed on the appropriate way to deal with the Trade Federation: show respect, consider every word, and limit engagement to the least possible communication. “This is Captain Maoi Madakor of the *Radiant VII* on a diplomatic mission for the Galactic Republic. With all due respect, the Ambassadors from the Chancellor request to board immediately.”

Trained in the legal details that the Trade Federation used as a weapon, and aware that any and all communications may be being recorded, the Neimoidian replied with carefully guarded but purposeful words. “Yes. Of course. We are surprised and honored by your arrival.” He spoke in the thick accent of his home world. “As you know, our blockade is perfectly legal, and we’d be happy to receive the ambassadors.”

Equally aware that any communication could be used to impact negotiations, the crew and passengers of the *Radian VII* said nothing in response.

“We welcome you to dock on our flagship, the *Saak’ak*, in docking bay two. Prepare for tractor beam to guide your landing.” Madakor looked to Qui-Gon for approval, and he nodded silently toward her.

“Confirmed,” was all Captain Madakor said as she flipped the communications channel off and the screen went to black.

She turned to her passengers. “You Jedi are very trusting. Did you see the turbolaser cannons installed on that ship? That’s not a trade vessel. That’s a battle cruiser.”

Obi-Wan looked to his master who stoically stood, arms crossed and focused. “I did, Captain,” said Jinn. “However, did you notice that the other twenty-four ships are unarmed? In fact, I would guess if you ran a scan you would find them to be completely empty of cargo, and perhaps life forms. This is a show for the Senate. I do not sense an act of aggression here.”

“Well, I hope you are right,” she said. “The tractor beam is locked on, and we’re going in.”

The ship lurched forward and began to be pulled toward the three-kilometer wide behemoth. Madakor shut down the thrusters and rested her hands on the flight controls. The enormity of Lucrehulk battleship became more evident as they were drawn into the open maw of the docking bay. Anti-fighter weapons lined the top and bottom of the curved arms of the vessel on swiveling turrets. The globe at the center of the C-shaped cruiser filled their viewport entirely as the *Radiant VII* rotated to enter the ship. Lieutenant Williams carefully adjusted the landing repulsor jets while Captain Madakor worked the landing gear, and the consular ship settled onto the shiny metal floor of the landing bay.

Through the cockpit, they saw fifty or so white Trade Federation B1 droids make their way toward the ship. The go-to

freight robots stood nearly two meters tall and were built in a skeletal humanoid shape with a downturned snout-style head swiveling on a long thin neck joint. Lanky arms that ended in claws designed to clamp onto cargo extended from the box-shaped torso, as did sturdy yet slender legs. The B1 droids vaguely resembled their insectoid makers from the planet Geonosis. A sensory array dangled from the back of their heads like a solid lock of hair, and their built-in backpacks acted as communications controls. All of the B1 model droids were controlled from a programmed central location, in this case the Federation ship the *Radiant VII* had just landed on. Designed to work independently based on a core set of objectives issued from the command unit, the B1s didn't have the free will of most droids without restraining bolts, but they were built with enough intelligence to complete tasks without requiring an order for each action.

Behind them were a dozen four-legged walking droids about twice the height of the B1s and about five meters wide. With two scissor-like legs, a saucer in the middle and a head similarly shaped to the B1, but with a flat bottom, they occupied along the back wall of the hangar, seeming to peer at the newly landed ship with red "eyes." A door slid open on the side of the docking bay, and a silver protocol droid walked out and toward the ship.

"I guess that's our welcoming committee," said Obi-Wan in a dry monotone.

Protocol droids were among the most common type of robot in the galaxy. Humanoid in shape with friendly round glowing photoreceptors for eyes, a soothing vocal tone, and usually a polished gold, silver or bronze shell, the Cybot Galactica 3PO units were a luxury item owned by diplomats, dictators, crime lords, and military leaders. Their fluency in millions of forms of communication made them valuable and versatile translators, and their programmed demeanor was based on the etiquette of the cultures with which they interfaced.

“Open the door, Captain,” said Qui-Gon. “And don’t get too comfortable. We won’t be here long.”

A long panel separated from the side of the red consular ship doubling as a gangway. Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon pulled on their hoods and walked down the plank as B1 droids watched their every step.

“I am TC-14 at your service,” said the protocol droid in a soothing feminine voice. Its arms held in a crook at its side like dancer, the droid bowed ever so slightly. As a protocol droid, the first step in performing their duties was to visually assess its guests to determine which cultural algorithms to run, making them most comfortable. “This way please.” The human-shaped robot turned toward the round opening in the hangar bay and began to lead them down a hallway with curved walls emulating the lines of the Lucrehulk design. “I do hope your journey was pleasant,” it said idly as they made the one hundred meter journey to the meeting room. The Jedi said nothing.

The door to the conference room slid open, revealing a window to space and a long shimmering table with several chairs. Otherwise, the room was empty. No one was waiting for them. Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon followed TC-14 into the room. “We are greatly honored by your visit, Ambassadors,” it said pausing at the doorway as the Jedi continued across to the window. “Make yourselves comfortable. My master will be with you shortly.” The droid bowed again, tried to get a reading on how the guests were responding, and walked out of the room as the door closed behind it.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” said Obi-Wan pulling back his hood.

“I don’t sense anything,” said his master furrowing his brow and shaking his head slightly.

“It’s not about the mission, Master. It’s something elsewhere. Elusive.” This was the first time in his training that Obi-Wan expressed a concern about a disturbance in the Force. As a Padawan, he was very in tune with his traditional Jedi skills, but he was feeling something beyond himself and more connected to things beyond his immediate surroundings. Qui-Gon wondered if his apprentice was showing signs of harnessing the skill of foresight, like Master Sifo-Dyas who was able to latch onto these feelings and draw in clear visions.

There were many feats all Jedi Knights could perform, but each of them tended to latch onto certain skills more than others. Obi-Wan had learned the “mind trick,” as it was known among

the common citizens of the galaxy. This was the ability to plant thoughts into the heads of the weaker minded and urge them to take certain actions without consciously being aware of it. All Jedi could use the Force to push or pull objects, but their training and skill often determined how large the items they could move would be. There was also the ability to run at great speed for a moment to escape danger or to jump beyond the typical heights and distances of members of their species by connecting to the living Force.

It was this sudden mention of feeling “something” beyond himself that gave Qui-Gon Jinn pause. Perhaps it was because he himself felt nothing out of the ordinary. “Perhaps it’s the stress of this mission. Don’t center on your anxieties, Obi-Wan. Keep your concentration here and now where it belongs.”

“But Master Yoda says I should be mindful of the future –”

Qui-Gon turned to him. “But not at the expense of the moment. Be mindful of the living Force, my young Padawan.”

“Yes, Master.” Another lesson learned, but Obi-Wan continued to notice an underlying current in the Force that he could not identify.

They stood at the window together staring at Naboo silently for a few long moments. Obi-Wan spoke up again, changing the subject to the mission at hand. “How do you think the Viceroy will deal with the Chancellor’s demands?”

“We are to understand their method for deciding on a blockade. Then we will offer a small discount on the tariff for the

Naboo space lanes and a promise from the Chancellor to raise the matter of taxation once again in the senate in exchange for them reopening trade through this system. It is quite simple. If there truly is nothing more to this façade of force, they will quickly agree, and we will be back to Coruscant before you know it.” Qui-Gon went to the table and sat down. “The Federation has too much at stake and won’t be willing to risk a trade license or anything else that will impact their business. These Federation types are cowards. The negotiations will be short.”



CHAPTER 9

Queen Amidala paced the floor in her chambers, Sio Bibble sat quietly in the tall, ornate office chair and Captain Quarsh Panaka stood at attention near the door. It had been almost three days since Palpatine sent his recorded message, and since then, not a single word from anyone else other than the attempts by the Trade Federation to make contact. She had barely slept, and her patience was wearing thin. The Queen started to feel as if Governor Bibble was getting a little paranoid, which did not help her outlook. Every hour that nothing happened, he would say things like, “The Republic has abandoned us,” or “Something rotten is afoot, I just know it.” While this did not help her fragile mindset, it did give her more resolve to remain more focused on how she could handle this crisis alone. As her second closest advisor, she wondered if this was the Governor’s intent.

Panaka rarely spoke. Occasionally he would communicate with other members of the Royal Guard over his commlink to ensure the citizenry was remaining calm. They were. As a

peaceful society, very few of them gave into the worry that there was something more to the blockade other than a necessary part of being a trading partner in the Galactic Republic. In fact, most did not even realize there was a blockade at all.

A light flashed on Amidala's desk. She nearly ran to it and read the console to see who was trying to reach her. The Trade Federation had reduced the frequency of which they tried to make contact, and this communication was coming in on a direct channel from Senator Palpatine's office on Coruscant. When she was sure it was not the Neimoidians, she pressed the button. A hologram of Senator Palpatine appeared on her desk.

"My Queen, I bring encouraging news," he said. "Are you alone?"

Sio Bibble stood up and came to her side at the desk as did Captain Panaka. "I am here with my closest advisors. You may speak freely."

"As you wish." On Coruscant from his office, the hologram that returned to him showed the Queen, the Captain and the Governor huddled together viewing his image. "I've just received word that the Chancellor's ambassadors have arrived in the Naboo system. Negotiations should begin shortly, and if all goes well, a settlement will be reached that will end the blockade."

"That is encouraging, Senator. What are the terms they are authorized to offer?" asked the Queen.

"Well, I am not certain of the details," said Palpatine. "I believe they are willing to reduce the tariff."

“Reduce the tax on the Federation?” said Bibble incredulously. “The Chancellor is rewarding them for this act of...” he struggled for the right word. “Aggression?”

“With all due respect, Governor,” said Palpatine. “The matters of galactic taxation and Republic politics are best settled from here on the Capital. The primary objective is to free up the hyperspace routes as quickly as possible and return life to normal on Naboo.”

The Queen spoke up. “I must agree with Governor Bibble, Senator. There must be recompense for this unprecedented blockade. At the very least, I would expect some sort of fine to be assessed or revisiting of the limits on their actions in situations like this.”

“I don’t disagree, Your Highness. I am sure the topic of taxation will be back in front of the senate in short order. Please take comfort in knowing that the ambassadors are there to negotiate the best possible agreement for the situation. We must do what we must do to end the blockade. Once we make it through the first milestone – getting them to leave – we can discuss the damages.”

“Can we speak to the diplomats?” Amidala asked. “Can we influence them to ensure they negotiate in the best interest of Naboo?”

“This is a highly sensitive and top-secret mission, Your Highness,” Palpatine explained. “We cannot do anything to put the identity of the arbiters at risk should something go wrong. I

do hope you understand.” He paused and pursed his lips in smile. “And I ask for your faith that I have done all I can to put Naboo’s welfare first.”

The Queen was visibly exasperated. “Thank you for doing what you can for us in the Senate,” said Amidala. “I expect now that the diplomats have arrived, this will end quickly and satisfactorily.”

“I will keep you informed from here, My Queen. In the meantime, please remain patient. I believe that this will be over soon enough.” And with that, the Senator’s hologram faded and disappeared.

“I don’t like it,” said Sio Bibble. “I don’t like it at all. The Senate is backing down to the Trade Federation, and we are footing the bill.”

“I agree,” said Panaka. “It doesn’t seem right that the Chancellor would act on Senator Palpatine’s wishes only to give in to the best interests of the Federation.”

The Queen fell silent and into deep thought. “What I don’t like is that we can’t even express our minimally acceptable terms with the delegates. If we could add an extra push to the negotiations, perhaps we could ensure as little impact on Naboo as possible. A settlement without our involvement is not something we need to abide by. If I understand policy, I will need to sign a treaty to ratify it and accept the terms of ending the blockade. We need to ensure our voice is heard.”

“What are you suggesting, Your Highness?” asked the Governor.

“I am suggesting, at the very least, we make the Trade Federation aware that we know about the negotiations and that we will expect a hand in the outcome.”

“But Senator Palpatine has urged you to not make contact with the Neimoidians,” said Panaka.

“Senator Palpatine is not here, Captain. I must do what is best for my people.”



CHAPTER 10

“What?” barked Viceroy Nute Gunray. The protocol droid had returned to the bridge of the *Saak’ak* to report to its master. He was angry, shocked and shaken by the assessment. “What did you say?”

“The Ambassadors are Jedi Knights, I believe,” TC-14 repeated. The protocol droid circuitry recognized the typical attire, the braid in the younger one’s hair and, of course, the lightsabers dangling from their belts.

“I knew it,” said the Viceroy’s Neimoidian captain, Daultay Dofine. “They are here to force a settlement.”

Several years after the ratification of the Taxation bill, Nute Gunray was contacted by a mysterious human being who requested a meeting with the Viceroy and his Representative, Lott Dod. Gunray agreed that they would join him on Mustafar, a planet that circled its sun so closely that its surface was almost entirely covered in lava flows, dotted by tall craggy mountainous islands. It was a planet which fell outside of the Trade Federation

space routes in the Outer Rim territories but was rich in natural ore and minerals used to create transparisteel, plastisteel and a large percentage of the outer casings on intergalactic vessels. It had long been an acquisition target of Nute Gunray as the Mining Guild had been able to make immense profit from Mustafar's exports without interference from the Trade Federation.

In a castle high above the surface in the middle of a molten ocean, Gunray and Dod met with the man who offered the promise of brokering a deal with the Mining Guild and Banking Clan that would incorporate the use of Trade Federation hyperspace routes and give them a percentage of the take. This would more than make up for the lost revenue as a result of the newly imposed tax and would broaden the reach of the Federation. In return, the stranger asked that Gunray allow him anonymous influence on Trade Federation tactics in the Senate and beyond. Nute was dubious about accepting the offer. With unspecified consideration, it was impossible to estimate the return on investment from the bankers and the miners. As an expert negotiator, the Viceroy agreed in principal but asked for one more condition added to the deal. In return for influence on the actions taken by the Federation, Gunray pointed out it would be easier for him to influence fellow Neimoidians than the other species' representatives on the seven-person leadership committee. He asked the stranger to help "fortify" their presence on the Federation Board.

Within weeks of the meeting, a mysterious assassin arrived at a congregation of Trade Federation leadership and murdered the members who were not Neimoidian. With the Board in disarray, Viceroy Nute Gunray replaced the five deceased members with his Neimoidian cronies. He already had Lott Dod representing the Federation in their recently appointed Senate seat and he elevated his cousin and hive-mate Rune Haako to his number one lieutenant. Other Neimoidians filling seats on the board included Tal Tassa as finance coordinator, Bomma Brokk as lead legal counsel and Klinn Hil as interspecies relations. Daultay Dofine, the reliable leader of shipping operations, was promoted to Captain of the Trade Federation Fleet and given the final seat on the board. His vessel was the flagship for the mission to blockade Naboo – a tactic demanded by the stranger who Nute Gunray had met on Mustafar.

The Viceroy brought his pointy fingered hands together and walked the length of the *Saak'ak's* bridge considering his options. The flagship of the Trade Federation fleet was once an enormous cargo vessel like the other nearly three hundred Lucrehulk-class ships in their armada. When pirates began disrupting some of the space lanes decades before, two of the ships were modified to include turrets with anti-fighter laser canons along the ridge of the ships spine. Then soon after the Taxation dispute, it was reported, but never confirmed, that upwards of fifteen percent of the fleet had been weaponized. It was also rumored that some of the B1 cargo robots had been seen carrying blasters on occasion

when delivering freight. The response from the Trade Federation, when confronted about gun-toting droids, was inconsistent ranging from claiming an outrageous miscarriage of truth to assertions that the space trade had gotten rougher in recent times which called for greater protection of goods.

Nute Gunray had been secretly informed that the Chancellor was sending an envoy to discuss a settlement. However, he had never imagined that Finis Valorum would involve the Jedi. As a master negotiator, he was not at all worried about gaining an upper hand in a discussion of policy and demands with a diplomat from some neutral world. But negotiating with the Jedi was something else entirely. The Viceroy turned to his Captain. “I need to make contact with our benefactor.”

Captain Dofine bristled at the mention of the sponsor who had helped Viceroy Gunray hatch this plan to blockade Naboo even if its outcome was designed to once again raise the issue of the unfair tax to the Senate. Dofine was outspoken in his distrust of the voice in Gunray’s ear and agitated by what the human, who seemed to be plotting the Federation’s most recent and important moves, was gaining in return for the perilous circumstance in which he was putting the Neimoidians.

“I need you to distract them,” said Gunray to the Captain.

Dofine’s jaw dropped. “Have you lost your mind? I’m not going in there with two Jedi,” he said. “Send the droid.”

“What are you afraid of, Captain Dofine?”

“The same thing you are, Viceroy.” While the Neimoidians were experts in bully tactics, negotiations, and fluency in the language of trade law, they were also known to be susceptible to the Jedi ability to infiltrate the minds of others. And while he had never met a Jedi, Dofine knew this was not the time to see how strong he was against their “mind trick.”

Gunray turned to TC-14 who was patiently awaiting the next orders. “Keep them occupied.”

“As you wish,” it said and left the bridge of the *Saak’ak*.

“Captain, I want you and Chief Haako with me in my chamber. Now!”

A door slid open at the back of the bridge where Nute Gunray held command meetings. Daultay Dofine and Rune Haako followed him and the door sealed shut behind them. Gunray opened up the communication channel. The hologram projector came silently to life and in front of the three Neimoidians appeared the blue-hued image of a man in black robes, his face obscured by a hood.

“What is it?” hissed the man.

Captain Dofine quickly spoke before Gunray could offer a proper greeting. “This scheme of yours has failed, Lord Sidious. The blockade is finished! We dare not go against the Jedi.”

Darth Sidious was furious but maintained calm. “Viceroy, I don’t want this stunted slime in my sight again.” Gunray gave the Captain a stern look and Dofine skulked backwards so as not to

be in the communication field of the hologram. Sidious continued. “What is he talking about?”

“My Lord, the ambassadors from the Chancellor. I had no idea they would be Jedi Knights,” said the Viceroy.

“Valorum sent the Jedi to do his bidding. This is unprecedented and unfortunate.” The Sith Master paused in contemplation. “We must accelerate our plans. Activate the droid army and begin landing your troops.”

Gunray and Haako looked at one another in disbelief. The plan to blockade the planet Naboo did not include a full invasion. If events escalated, they had been prepared to engage in a defensive battle but making the first act of aggression was not part of the strategy, and it was something Neimoidians – as a people – tended to avoid. To the Trade Federation leaders, this seemed like a rather rash next step.

Trying to find a way to diffuse the order, the Viceroy asked nervously, “My Lord, is that ... legal?”

“I will make it legal,” spat Sidious.

“And what of the Jedi?” asked Haako.

“The Chancellor should never have gotten them involved. Kill them and their escort. Immediately.”

Viceroy Gunray suddenly felt trapped. If he ignored Darth Sidious’s orders, he would surely meet the same fate as the assassinated non-Neimoidian Trade Federation leaders. Only now did he consider the consequences of opening the door for Sidious without an avenue to close it. If Gunray followed his

commands, the trade dispute would explode into something he was not sure he was prepared to undertake. He was not a military leader; he was trained in procurement law and financial models.

Recently, at the recommendation of Sidious, the B1 droids were coded to respond to armed commands and drop ships were ordered and stowed on board the *Saak'ak*, prepared to dispatch thousands of them onto any planet quickly and efficiently. Gunray had no choice. And if Sidious felt this was the best way to achieve the goal of eliminating the taxation of the trade routes, while it may seem extreme, it was his best and only option.

“Yes,” Gunray said reluctantly. “Yes, my Lord. As you wish.” Nute and Rune bowed ever so slightly to the hologram as it disappeared.

“This is a mistake, Viceroy,” said Dofine from the corner in which he stood.

“What choice do we have?” shot back Gunray. He tugged at his robe and regained what composure he had lost in the presence of Darth Sidious. “Besides, it is for the betterment of the Federation. Our investment in the B1 Battle Droid protocols will pay out more quickly than expected. This will make our position clear to the Senate and once again, the Federation will take full control of our trade routes.”

“I hope you know what you are doing,” said Rune Haako.

“Now is not the time to question my decisions, Cousin,” said Gunray. The door to his chamber opened up and he assumed

command on the bridge again. “Ensign How, destroy the consular ship.”

The young Neimoidian officer was not sure what he had just heard. “Sir?”

“Destroy the ship the ambassadors arrived on.” He had converted his lack of confidence to zealousness. “And seal off the room where the Jedi are waiting. Flood it with dioxin.”

“But that will kill them, sir” said How.

“Why else would I do it, Ensign?” Gunray was committed to this plan of action. “Now obey my command!”



CHAPTER 11

Captain Madakor was pouring through the ship’s log and entering information about their journey to Naboo. It was the same protocol she had done on a hundred missions before. As every action of a diplomatic mission was recorded and maintained, she had to confirm and certify time and date of arrival, the exact position where they dropped out of hyperspace, who the crew communicated with and what was said, and dozens of other pieces of minutiae. It was all very tedious and her least favorite part of the job.

To Lieutenant Williams, even this most basic record keeping task was exciting. As a short-range cargo pilot back home, he had to clear manifests, report stock discrepancies and gain delivery approvals, but marking down details for a mission with implications of potentially galactic proportions was electrifying. “So, this information gets sent back to the Republic data computers?” asked Williams.

“Ordinarily, yes,” said the Captain. “But, as of right now, this mission didn’t happen, if you understand what I mean.” Williams nodded. “All information from this assignment will be encrypted in the onboard data system until such time that someone at the highest levels decides it needs to be uploaded. If things go sideways, no one will ever know we were here.” She spoke from experience. Maoi Madakor had run “silent missions,” as they were called, for Jedi Knights investigating strange disturbances on far-off worlds, diplomatic deals with details she would never know, or want to for that matter, and runs for senators to liaise with beings their families and constituents would not approve. And on occasion, things did not go as planned and data was “never recovered.”

“I see,” he said. His excitement quickly turned to unease as a wave of nerves flooded his body. His face felt hot and his palms became moist at the realization that they were in the middle of a contested piece of space on a ship with no weapons inside a potentially unfriendly battle cruiser. “What do you mean, ‘if things go sideways?’” he hesitantly asked.

She began to tell a story of a certain senator when, out of the corner of his eye, Antidar Williams noticed all the cargo droids stop their busy work in unison and turn to look toward the *Radiant VII*. The walking droids scissored up their legs as their limbs collapsed to wings transforming into hovercrafts pointing at their ship. From the ceiling of the hangar bay dropped a large, twin

cannon laser turret that swung swiftly and took aim at them. The young lieutenant panicked.

“Captain! Look!” he shouted. Maoi Madakor looked up from her data entry in time to see the gun open fire.

Her last words were, “Shields –”

Laser bolts lanced out from both barrels of the cannon and, in a single salvo, the *Radiant VII* was completely destroyed along with the two crew members who brought her there.

* * * * *

Obi-Wan Kenobi and Qui-Gon Jinn were seated at the table patiently waiting to meet with the Viceroy. The apprentice sat focusing his mind on feeling the waves of the Force around him while the master was silently trying to reconcile what Obi-Wan had said when they arrived about the “elusive” disturbance he felt. Jinn was a powerful Jedi, but he wondered why his command of foresight was obscured.

The apprentice broke the silence. “Is it in their nature to make us wait this long?” asked Obi-Wan of his master.

“No,” said Qui-Gon. “I sense an unusual amount of fear for something as trivial as a trade dispute.”

Their attention was seized by the door to the room as it slid open allowing TC-14 to enter, holding a silver tray with silver cups and a silver decanter that matched its silver shell. “My master offers a sample of his favorite libation,” the droid said.

“Devaronian spiced wine.” The Jedi politely took the cups, smiled and tipped them toward the protocol droid in a “thank you” gesture as the robot moved to stand unobtrusively at the side of the room. Feigning a sip, the ambassadors placed their cups of untasted wine on the table.

Both Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan suddenly felt an intangible, not physical, pressure in their chests – the feeling a Jedi would often feel through the Force at the demise of a living being they had some connection to. Someone near them had died or was about to. Then, before they had the chance to process the feeling, an explosion rocked the hangar bay they had entered from, one hundred meters down the hallway. The two Jedi jumped from their seats and ignited their lightsabers instinctively taking a defensive position, back to back. TC-14, startled, dropped the silver tray.

A hissing sound came from the floor, and from the ventilation grates on the bottom of the walls, white smoke poured into the room. Qui-Gon caught a faint whiff of the gas and identified it immediately. “Dioxin!” The two Jedi flicked off their lightsabers and inhaled deeply to capture as much oxygen in their lungs as possible.

Outside of the room filling with poison, nine B1 cargo droids marched to the door awaiting their next orders. They were carrying blaster rifles that had been fitted into their hands and connected directly to their logic circuits. As part of a “precaution,” Darth Sidious had recommended that all B1 droids

be modified to be able to carry weapons as the new military strategy protocol was installed in the command ship databanks, effectively giving the Trade Federation an army of *battle* droids numbering in the thousands instantaneously.

After a few minutes, Viceroy Gunray issued a command to the lead B1. A hologram of the Neimoidian appeared in the palm of the droid's hand. "They must be dead by now. Destroy what's left of them."

The droid, called OWO-1, had a red stripe painted through the middle of his torso indicating a command rank. What was once a freight management role had instantly become an infantry captain's position. Military hierarchy was built into the new artificial intelligence that drove the now-former cargo robots to activate the same built-in "thinking" that allowed them to finish tasks without constant communication and be able to respond in the field to changing conditions. OWO-1's head swiveled to another battle droid beside him. "Check it out, corporal. We'll cover you." All B1s had the same mechanical voice that modulated at a timbre that was audible simultaneously to both Neimoidians, who tended to hear lower frequencies better, and most other beings in the known galaxy, giving them a buzzy overtone.

OWO-1's underling responded with the Neimoidian code for affirmative: "Roger, roger." The droid stepped toward the door controls and unsealed the meeting room. A white cloudy haze poured out and into the hallway where the battle droids waited. A

shadowy figure appeared in the mist and began to inch cautiously from the chamber.

“Fire!” said OWO-1. The battle droids pulled their triggers and riddled their target with laser bolts. There was an electronic, high pitched squeal as TC-14 fell forward in shiny silver pieces on the hallway floor.

“Whoops,” said OWO-1.

The B1 droids were built with slightly whimsical personalities in their original order from the Trade Federation seventy years before. At the time, the labor leader for the Federation was a Sullustan named Tya Nuuv and she suggested that, “If we are going to be on long journeys with only a handful of sentients and thousands of droids, they may as well have some sort of *personality*.” As was the case on the *Saak’ak*, most Lucrehulk cargo ships ran on about twenty-five sentients and had a work crew of upwards of a thousand droids. Since it did not cost any more to build this personality feature into the vocoder and communications protocol, the randomization of responses was designed to, on occasion, be somewhat irreverent.

“Viceroy,” started OWO-1 via audio channel. “You are going to need a new protocol droid. Otherwise, there is nothing to --” One blue and one green blade ignited in the fog that continued to roll out of the meeting room. “Wait. Open fire!”

Nute Gunray heard laser blasts and the whirring of lightsabers over the communicator channel left open by OWO-1. “What is going on down there?” he shouted.

B1 rifles pummeled the Jedi with laser fire and each bolt was deflected by their lightsabers as Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan leapt from the fog and into battle. Both the master and apprentice were experts in lightsaber combat, having trained vigorously through the years. Qui-Gon was the Padawan under Master Dooku, an expert swordsman who was sought after by Jedi throughout the galaxy for his mentorship. Qui-Gon was committed to ensuring his own Padawan was as masterful with his laser sword.

Obi-Wan swung his blade, knocked away a shot from a droid rifle back into its shooter's chest, while finishing his move with a thrust through another B1. Qui-Gon reached out through the Force and pushed three droids down. He deflected a shot from behind by swinging his green blade at his back and then sliced through the ones he had knocked over as they attempted to stand up from the ground.

“Viewscreen on!” shouted Captain Haako. The Neimoidian flight crew and a handful of battle droids watched as the younger Jedi sliced through one of his attackers, jumped into the air kicking over OWO-1. The older Jedi Knight sliced left, taking out one droid, then fluidly right, taking out another. Finally, Obi-Wan thrust his lightsaber straight down through the chest of OWO-1. In an instant, all nine battle droids were eliminated by the Jedi.

The screen went dark. Ensign How frantically tapped controls. “We’ve lost the transmission, sir.”

Rune Haako, maintaining his poise as best he could, placed his hand on Nute Gunray's shoulder and urged him to the side of

the bridge away from the alarms and the frenetic pace that had taken over the relative calm of the control center. “Viceroy,” he started. “Have you ever encountered a Jedi Knight before, sir?”

“Well, no, but I don’t –”

“You saw how easily they handled those droids.”

A hint of panic crept into Gunray’s voice as he ordered, “Seal off the bridge!”

“Yes, sir!” called one of the crew members as doors on all sides of the bridge slid shut.

“That won’t be enough,” said Haako. “I’ve heard stories of the Jedi being outnumbered one hundred to one by the greatest armies in the galaxy and not only surviving ... but *defeating* them.”

Gunray again shouted an order: “I want destroyer droids up here at once!”

“We will not survive this,” said the Captain.

* * * * *

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan made their way to the hangar where they had landed earlier. The smoldering remains of the *Radiant VII* were being extinguished by maintenance droids and from where they were standing they could see the walking droids transforming into fighters, exit the battle cruiser and begin a patrol-like pattern outside the opening of the landing bay.

“We must make contact with the Chancellor,” said Qui-Gon. “And we have to take the Viceroy into custody. It’s safe to assume our crew didn’t survive. This has gone from a trade dispute to the premeditated murder of two innocent pilots and an act of aggression against the Republic.”

“You were right about one thing, Master,” said Obi-Wan. “The negotiations were short.”

“Nice,” said Qui-Gon. “Come on. We have to get to the bridge.”

They made their way back up the hallway from whence they came, slaying another handful of battle droids along the way. The *Saak’ak* architecture was very intuitive and the two Jedi had studied the layout of the Lucrehulks en route to Naboo, which helped them to quickly find a way to what they assumed was the bridge. They were also helped by the fact that through the Force they could only find energy from life forms in one location on the ship.

“Master, the doors are closed, and the controls are on the inside,” said Obi-Wan.

“Stand back,” said the master as he ignited his lightsaber and stabbed into the center of the large, round metal door.

The Neimoidian crew looked on anxiously as a red dot of molten metal appeared on their side of the entrance to the bridge; the lightsaber’s intense energy melting their line of defense.

“Close the blast doors!” shouted Nute Gunray. With that, a second set of thicker doors shuttered on either side of Qui-Gon’s

lightsaber blade. The Jedi Master didn't flinch as his laser sword continued liquefying the thick metal gates.

Six more battle droids marched quickly from the opposite hallway and opened fire. Obi-Wan effortlessly deflected the bolts back at their attackers, eliminating three before they were close enough for him to strike them down with his lightsaber.

Smelted metal continued to drip through on the bridge-side of the door. Rune stated the obvious in terror: "They are still coming through!"

"This is impossible," mumbled Gunray.

"Where are the destroyer droids?" Haako shouted urgently at any Neimoidian crewmember who would listen.

The doors to the bridge were weakening and light from the hallway beyond began to become visible. Qui-Gon began to push the lightsaber up, down and in a slightly circular motion in an attempt to make the hole large enough for them to enter. Just as he started to feel as though he was getting close to gaining access, his Padawan shouted, "Master! Destroyers!"

Two metal wheels, two and half meters tall rolled loudly down the hallway. The spinning steady tone of terasteel on the shiny metal floors of the Lucrehulk was a mesmerizing tipoff to the presence of destroyer droids, also known as Droidekas. Unlike the B-1 droids that came from Geonosis, the Droidekas – so known due to a local dialect on the world from which they were built – were specially ordered from the droid manufacturing plant on Colla IV. The B-1s heads had a similar shape and appearance

to their Geonosian makers, while the Droidekas were almost identical robotic versions of their Collicoid designers. The insectoid race would travel vast distances by curling their legs into their abdomens and rolling up into a ball shape, spinning toward their destination. When ready to attack, the Droidekas would deploy by opening up, resting on three claw shaped legs positioned as a tripod and drop blaster arms from their side to engage their opponents.

Qui-Gon pulled his lightsaber from the door and readied himself to defend against the droids. When the Droidekas were within twenty meters they came to an abrupt stop by rolling into their attack form. Unlike B-1s, they projected a laser defense shield as they opened fire. The blaster arms poked through the shield perfectly in sync with each blast, allowing the laser bolt to break through the plasma defense.

Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon stood in a defensive posture and swirled their lightsabers, deflecting each shot that came from the destroyers. The barrage of laser fire made it impossible for the Jedi to advance on their attackers and attempt to slice them through the shields while each bolt returned was absorbed by the Droidekas' shields.

“It’s a standoff,” said Qui-Gon to his apprentice. “Let’s go. This way.” Obi-Wan nodded. Both Jedi continued to protect themselves from the hail of laser fire while they drew on the Force around them to find a current they could harness and dash away. The Jedi had been known to be able to move faster than the eye

could see if they allowed themselves to be pulled by the Force to a destination a short distance away. In an instant, Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon dashed away and the Droideka laser fire blew through the weakened blast door to the bridge of the *Saak'ak*.

Fifty meters down the hall, the Jedi were away from their attackers for the moment. They looked around for their next move when Obi-Wan looked above them. "It's not my favorite, but we could move through the ventilation shafts," he said pointing to an entry point overhead.

"We forget about the Viceroy for now. We have to find a way off the ship and get a message to the Chancellor. Let's find our way back to any one of the hangar bays." They pushed open the trap door and made their way into the ship's duct system.

"Sir, they've gone up the ventilation shaft," said the Neimoidian lieutenant.

"They won't survive long in there," Gunray said.

"You continue to underestimate them," said Haako.



CHAPTER 12

Queen Amidala finished reapplying her ceremonial white makeup. She had made a decision that could define her as a leader for generations to come or prove to be the biggest mistake in her world's history. She left her office and entered the throne room followed by Quarsh Panaka and Sio Bibble. Her advisors and handmaidens stood up in reverence and slight surprise as she had not left her office chamber in days. The Queen made her way to the throne, turned and sat down.

“I understand from Senator Palpatine that the Chancellor has sent a diplomatic mission to meet with the Trade Federation on the flagship that currently orbits our planet,” she said in her deepest, most royal voice. When she spoke in official capacity outside of the closed doors of advisors and in matters in private, she lowered her voice and adopted a regal accent common among the galactic leaders throughout the Core worlds. “They arrived a short time ago and the time has come to show our resolve. I will make contact with the Federation’s Viceroy and alert him that we

are aware that a settlement is imminent. More importantly, we will not accept anything less than their complete evacuation of the Naboo system and that we will be making a case in the Senate for punitive damages to be paid to our people.”

“I must ask,” started Tang Hagen, one of her royal advisors and one of her father’s classmates from years ago, “What do you hope to gain from breaking the communication embargo? What will your voice add to the negotiations?”

She was silent for a moment. The child Queen was well aware there was great risk to opening a line to the Trade Federation, and she worried that she was acting on instinct. Governor Bibble stepped forward in the space offered by Amidala’s delayed response. “We expect to impart additional pressure on the Federation by showing them the negotiations are not being performed in a vacuum by the Republic, but with the full support of the Naboo government. As such, we will ensure that our minimum demands are met. In addition to them simply being forced to leave, we will demand compensation for the hardship caused to our people.”

Tang shook his head slowly. “The Trade Federation are hardened, experienced negotiators. With all due respect, Your Highness, you have very little practice in this area.” He looked her in the eye from across the throne room. “You are taking a gamble that I can only advise against.”

“I appreciate your perspective, Counselor Hagen,” said Amidala. “But this is a pivotal moment in our history. I cannot sit

idly by while our fate is decided by anonymous negotiators and a corrupt trade syndicate.”

The room fell silent.

“Are there any other words of advice from my Counselors?” she said sternly. The six advisors remained seated in a semi-circle around the throne in silence, and Sio Bibble took his chair to her right. “Thank you. Now raise the Viceroy.”

Panaka nodded and opened the communication channel to the Federation.

“This is Captain Panaka of the Royal Naboo Guard,” he said. “Her Royal Highness, Queen Padme Amidala, requests to speak with the Viceroy.”

On the *Saak’ak*, the comms indicator on Tey How’s instrument panel blinked on. The trebly message beacon from Captain Panaka played in his headpiece. “Sir, a transmission from the planet.”

Rune Haako leaned in to hear the repeat of the hailing signal. “It’s Queen Amidala herself.”

Nute Gunray put his hands together and moved across the bridge to a large viewscreen that was slightly damaged by the Jedi’s attempt to gain access. “At last, we are getting results,” he said. In his mind, he held out hope that she would accept an increased Trade service fee in exchange for the end of the blockade and be willing to take a position in the Senate opposing the taxation of the trade routes. However, he believed she would

not be so easily inclined to accept that outcome and the invasion of her planet would be necessary to reach a settlement.

The viewscreen flickered on and her image rippled onto the display. “At last you come before me, Your Highness,” Gunray said.

“You will not be pleased when you hear what I have to say, Viceroy,” said the Queen. Inside, she was terrified. Outside, she was solidly regal and in full control of her faculties. She would not fail her people. “Your blockade of our planet has failed and will be coming to an end.”

Nute looked at his advisor and captain and a smile nearly crossed his mouth. “I was not aware of such failure,” he said.

She sat resolute and looked hard into the communications screen. “I am aware the Chancellor’s Ambassadors are with you now and that you have been commanded to reach a settlement.”

“I know nothing of any *ambassadors*,” said the Viceroy selling each and every word. “My young Queen, you must be mistaken.”

As the words poured from his mouth, she felt heat fill her face, the flush it caused disguised by the traditional thick white makeup she wore to cover it. Surprised by what he was saying, she remained calm and did not move a muscle as she stared back at him from her throne. “Beware, Viceroy,” she said, electing to portray a belief that she *knew* he was lying to her. “The Federation has gone too far this time.”

Gunray's forehead furrowed in an expression of innocence. "Your Highness, we would never do anything without approval of the Senate. You assume too much."

"We will see," was all she could think to say as she finished the sentence with a push of a button to abruptly end the transmission. Her gambit was refuted. The screen went black on the bridge of the *Saak'ak*.

"She's right," said Haako. "The Senate will never —"

Gunray turned on his captain sharply, "It's too late now. Do as Lord Sidious says and begin the invasion."

"Do you think she expects an attack?" asked Rune.

"I don't know," said the Viceroy. "But we must disrupt all communications down there. Lieutenant jam all signals coming in or out of the system."

* * * * *

Queen Amidala sat stunned and stone silent on her throne. The room around her looked on and eagerly awaited her next move. Amidala's thoughts raced as she weighed the consequences of all the possible events that could have taken place. She considered everything: did she tip the Chancellor's hand in her haste? Was it a negotiation ploy by the Federation to portray that the diplomats had not arrived? Was her own Senator given incorrect intelligence or was he outright lied to? She even let her mind entertain that Palpatine had lied to *her*. Finally, she snapped to action.

“I need to make contact with Senator Palpatine, immediately.”

Panaka quickly worked the communications table. Suddenly Palpatine could be heard from speakers overhead but not seen on the holoprojector. “Please give me one moment, Your Highness,” he said. A moment later his holographic image appeared, and he was straightening his cloak. “I apologize,” he said, “I was just settling down for the evening. Please tell me you have good news!” His voice was cheerful and expectant.

“Senator Palpatine, it appears the negotiations with the Trade Federation haven’t begun. According to the Viceroy, the Ambassadors haven’t yet arrived, and he claims to be completely unaware of any such meeting.”

“Well, how did you come to know this? Did you speak to him?”

“I did –”

“I specifically asked you not to speak with the Federation directly.”

“Senator, did you not hear me?” The tone in her voice wavered ever so slightly. Beneath her regal intonation, a sixteen-year-old child could be heard. “The ambassadors have not arrived. You informed me they were there, but the Viceroy has no knowledge of them.”

“How could that be true?” said Palpatine. “I have assurances from the Chancellor...” His hologram began to flicker, and the audio transmission became spotty.

“Get...negotiate...Ambassador...” Then the holographic image sputtered and flashed off.

“Captain, what’s happening?” demanded Amidala.

“Check the transmission generators,” Panaka called to an assistant nearby.

Governor Bibble drew a deep breath. “A communications disruption can only mean one thing: invasion.”

“The Federation would not dare go that far,” said the Queen.

Tang Hagen snorted a sarcastic harrumph. “Communications disruptions can mean many things, Governor. The only thing we can assume for certain is that they do not want us in contact with the Republic. For what reason remains to be seen.”

“Counselor Hagen is right,” said Panaka. “The Senate would revoke their trade franchise, and they’d be finished.” Panaka, although the head of the Royal Security Force, had no interest in events turning violent, knowing the Naboo forces were woefully unprepared for combat.

“We must rely on negotiation,” said Amidala.

“Negotiation?” scoffed Bibble. “We’ve lost all communications! And where are the Chancellor’s ambassadors?”

“This is a dangerous situation, Your Highness,” offered Panaka. “Our security volunteers are no match for any sort of invasion army.”

The Queen stood up and surveyed her advisors. “The very thought of putting our people in harm’s way is not one I am

willing to consider. We will take the high road. I will not condone a course of action that will lead us to war.”



CHAPTER 13

The Jedi followed the ventilation ducts until they arrived in one of the hangar bays. The gravity that drove the operation of the shafts made it difficult to breathe and harder to move, but within several minutes they reached a hatch and pushed it open. They were twenty meters off the floor and jumped onto cargo boxes piled high just below them. Qui-Gon and Kenobi climbed down to the floor and hid behind a few crates to see if they could find some sort of craft to “acquire” and travel down to the planet’s surface.

Several large brown shuttles with rounded corners filled most of their vision as they began to yawn open across the hangar bay. Over a dozen meters tall and thirty meters long, the ships were designed to move mass amounts of cargo. At the front of the massive ship was an enormous circular hatch, more than half the height of the vehicle, which was open and flipped upward while multiple metal tracks slid out and rotated to meet the ground below. Obi-Wan was the first to notice what appeared to be

several hundred B1 droids with guns in hand marching toward the craft along with Droidekas and several heavily armored tanks. The battle droids, who formed a perfectly spaced line of about twenty, approached the shuttle and turned on their heels, as one of the metal arms swooped down and latched onto their backs. Immediately after connecting to the track, the B1s folded in their arms and legs to become half their height. The arm lifted and pulled them into the carrier, while another row of robot troops moved into place behind them to be loaded. The automated orchestration of military droids being onboarded into what seemed to be a cargo ship-turned-troop transport was almost a thing of beauty, if its implications were not so terrifying. There were at least ten other transports following the same precision loading operation across the platform.

“It’s an invasion army,” muttered Kenobi.

“This is an odd play for the Federation,” said Jinn. “We’ve got to warn Naboo before we contact Chancellor Valorum.”

“It doesn’t appear that there are any pilotable ships here, master.”

Qui-Gon nodded toward the troop transports. “We’ll need to split up, stow aboard separate ships, and meet down on the planet.”

“Split up?”

“We can’t risk the mission,” said Qui-Gon. “If one of us is captured, the other must complete it. Let’s make our way into separate transports and make our way to the surface. We’ll find

our way to Theed, the capital, warn the Queen of this invasion, and then send a message back to Coruscant.”

“Understood,” said Obi-Wan.

“Reach out with the Force when you arrive. You’ll know if I’ve made it, and you’ll know where to find me.” Qui-Gon looked at his Padawan. “May the Force be with you,” he said. Obi-Wan hunched down below the line of crates and made his way closer to one of the huge transport ships. His master turned the opposite direction and looked for a way to board one of the other ones.

Obi-Wan came around the corner of a stack of containers piled to the ceiling and got a closer look at the transport. From what he could tell, they were newly minted vessels. No carbon scoring or entry burns could be seen, and there was a sheen on any exposed chrome. From his vantage point, he saw side doors open along the bottom of the craft where tanks – that also appeared to be new – hovered into hatches to be brought to the surface. That was where he would stow away. Eight bays were open. He closed his eyes, felt the Force around him and used it to dash across the floor and into an open compartment. He hoped that it would stay empty of any Federation tanks as he knelt down in the darkness and waited.

Qui-Gon made his way to a transport on the opposite side of the hangar. The vessel was sealing all its doors as he thoughtfully surveyed his options. It was too late to board one of the transports as they began to roll toward the large opening into space where they would be deployed. He noticed an even larger craft than the

troop transport spinning slowly toward the landing bay maw outside the Lucrehulk. It was clearly made by the same designer, as it had rounded corners and was the same earthy tone, however this was a space-faring vessel and much larger. It was easily twenty times the length of the transports and was T-shaped with a large platform across the top of the large boot structure at the center.

He watched as transport vessels slid out of the hangar bay mouth, connected themselves to the underside of the T on a rail and then pushed their way into the middle column of the craft, disappearing inside. The T-shaped lander was collecting the troop transports to bring them to the surface in bulk.

The last of the transports sealed up and started making its way towards the exit. As the bay emptied, Qui-Gon frantically looked for another ship to fly in to the surface, but there was nothing to be found. He had only one chance to make it to the planet. He sprinted across the hangar floor as fast as his legs would carry him alongside the transport vessel as it headed toward the carrier, and just as it reached the invisible energy barrier that maintained safety from the vacuum of space in the hangar, he pressed himself hard against the brown behemoth.

Intense energy from the landing bay shielding sent a shockwave through his body followed by penetrating, deep cold as he entered the darkness of space. Qui-Gon closed his eyes and felt his way through the Force to the opening on the T-shaped lander that the transport was headed to. He reached his hand out

toward the large entry hatch that the transport was aiming for and worked his way through the emptiness of space toward the gap.

Many Jedi had been trained to survive in the cold void of space for several minutes but not for much longer. On Tonari II, he put his training to the test to rescue a Senator who had been pushed from an airlock in an assassination attempt. He was able to survive by pulling on the Force to seal his mouth, eyes and nose giving him a virtual airlock for a short period of time. But he had no idea how long his current journey into space might last.

The transport was moving slowly, and his awareness was fading as Qui-Gon, focused on staying safe in the vacuum of space. He also urged the Force to push him toward his target. He felt ice forming on his hair and beard, while his robes stiffened in the absence of gravity and warmth. Jinn was drifting slowly toward unconsciousness, which would mean certain death at the loss of concentration, when, abruptly, a wave of heat wrapped around his body. He involuntarily regained all his faculties, feeling the pain that the deep freeze had brought to his skin, as he realized he had made it to his objective: the opening of the large T-shaped ship.

Gravity wells inside forced him to refocus quickly as he felt the rush of hot air around him. His body was plunging to the bottom of the boot at the center of the craft. Qui-Gon could make out maybe two dozen troop transports stacked top of on one another along metallic tracks awaiting deployment on the planet's surface. He reached out with both hands and felt the rungs of the

maintenance ladder that ran up the inside of the ship. His fingers grasped and missed the first few metal bars, stinging him to the bone. Jinn quickly turned his focus to grasping the Force and pushed straight down with both hands. An invisible field slowed his fall just enough to give him a moment to take hold of a rung on the ladder and swing his body, so his feet could stop his descent on the bars below. He was safe, for the moment.

Qui-Gon looked up. He realized he had fallen quite a distance, and he watched as the door that allowed the troop transports in sealed shut.



CHAPTER 14

A loud whirring sound caught Jar Jar's attention as he spit the tail of his breakfast Cottle fish out onto the ground. His long ear pulled up and he cocked his head trying to find the source of the noise that was increasing in volume. He stood up and slowly turned as his feet sloshed in the mud on the edge of the lagoon.

He looked into the sky and saw a dozen black dots growing larger as they approached the surface. They appeared to be coming from a central location somewhat near one of the twenty-five stars that appeared on the horizon when he first rose from the water that morning. A moment later, he realized he had been frozen in the same position for about a minute and his mouth was dry from hanging agape watching the specks turn to blobs and then to more clearly defined T-shaped *some things* as they came closer and closer. Jar Jar Binks may not have been the most intelligent Gungan on Naboo, but he knew these were spacecraft and they were landing all around him and his adopted home on the shore of Lake Paonga.

When he gathered his faculties, he panicked. The T-shaped ships were enormous – larger than anything he had ever seen here on the surface or under water in Otoh Gunga. As they began to set down in the forest that surrounded the lake, they indiscriminately crashed through towering trees, sending the local wildlife scurrying in fear. Herds of Ikopi scattered, adding to the mayhem as their tall, four-legged muscular bodies crashed through low lying vegetation. Quadducks making their nests in surrounding trees flocked violently from their homes screeching in fear.

The slamming sound of the boot-shaped centers of the bulky brown space ships echoed around the forest floor. Jar Jar made a move back toward the lake to get under the surface when six large Tusks cats fleeing the chaos broke between the Gungan and the shoreline. They stopped and skidded in the mud, long teeth revealed behind their pulled back black lips. The feline predators were as tall as Jar Jar and, as fierce hunters, were known to attack when scared.

“Oh no,” said Binks as he halted his flight to the water. He turned back and ran toward the center of the forest. BAM! BAM! More of the ships landed within the area. He could no longer tell how many there were, but he could clearly make out that a line of three had landed to the south. He made his way into a clearing and froze again in fear as he stared at the base of the ship nearest him.

The landing of the ships seemed to have stopped, but that didn't end the bedlam happening around him. Animals of all sorts scurried hurriedly to the north, away from where the landing craft had settled. The woods were full of screaming animals, cracking wood and the ominous hum of alien spacecraft. Jar Jar stood still and watched the doors at the base of the landers begin to yawn open and slam hard on the forest floor. Then ominous vehicles began to roll out of the hangar bays that had appeared in the gaping openings. Hovering heavy craft with blaster canons, followed by even larger bronze-brown vehicles, and then platforms with handle bars piloted by white robots flew out like Takka flies around a Gulama, buzzing out into a patrolling pattern. The hovering blaster canons – which Jar Jar thought looked much like the things called “tanks” that the Naboo police force allegedly had – turned to their left, and he realized were joining up with several dozen exactly like it before continuing to... somewhere. But the large bronze-brown vehicles continued in a straight line – directly toward Jar Jar.

Binks's flat, bare feet felt like they were soldered to the ground as he felt the warmth of fear envelop his body. His arms were raised at his side in utter distress, his head swiveling from side to side, and his ears flapped on the back of his skull. A tear found a way to creep into one of his stalked eyes as he tried to get comfortable with the fact that this was where he would die. Even if he could find a way to run, he could never outrun these machines. Or worse, he'd be trampled by another Ikopi herd or

eaten by a frightened Tusksat. Jar Jar was scared, his hearts pounding in his chest and back.

Then he heard a gruff voice. “Quick! Get out of here!” it shouted. Jar Jar believed it was only in his head or perhaps it was the warning of a Gungan god. Again, he heard it, only slightly louder and coming from the direction of the enormous brown-bronze vehicle. “Move! Move!”

Jar Jar was able to shift his feet and spin around to face the voice and the terrifying vehicle. He was surprised to see a human man running directly toward him. He had a beard, was wearing brown robes and seemed to be trying to outrun the vehicle which was even bigger now that it was just a hundred meters away from him.

The Gungan moved to his left to make some sort of attempt to flee at the same moment the shouting human moved to his right, putting them in each other’s path of escape. The man instinctively opened his arms and hit Jar Jar at top speed, tackling him to the ground just as the huge, alien hovercraft reached them and drove directly over the two beings entwined on the forest floor.

* * * * *

Obi-Wan pressed his back against the wall of the hangar bay and waited for his moment to escape. The landing was rather rough as he was on the cold, metal ground level of a spacecraft cargo hold

as it landed and was not fortunate enough to have a harness or any sort of equipment to prepare him for impact. He was jostled and bruised, but he survived.

Shortly after they touched ground, and Obi-Wan Kenobi regained his footing, the door of the bay where he had stowed away slid open. The tank, with which he had shared the short journey from the Lucrehulk starship, whirred to life and followed its automated orders to hover out of the transport ship and meet up with others like it somewhere on this planet. He was certain he was on Naboo, but he was surprised to be able to make out only trees surrounding the landing area. They weren't in the capital city as he had expected. The only thing clear was chaos.

As the noise of the tank dissipated and became part of the cacophony outside, Obi-Wan marveled for a moment at the mix of sounds he heard: crackling trees, the machine hum of a hundred battle-ready vehicles gathering, screeching animals and shouting of orders from the mechanical droid army. His next thought was how he was going to find his master. The young Jedi stayed behind in the hangar for a moment to reach out through the Force and determine if he could sense Qui-Gon's presence nearby. Kenobi could only hope – and was fairly certain – that the always resourceful Jedi Knight had found a way off the Trade Federation ship and that they landed somewhat near each other on the planet surface. He sensed *something* that he hoped was his master coming from the north, but where the T-Shaped ships had landed was teeming with lifeforms who were now surrounded by war

machines causing a dissonance of information from the Force. Regardless of his teacher's location, he knew his number one priority was to reach the Queen to warn her ahead of this invasion – if that was even possible – and to make sure communication reached the Republic about this military action by the Trade Federation.

In the brief moment he took to focus on finding his master, the door to the hangar began to slowly close. He had one opportunity to escape the ship but as a result of his momentary lack of urgency, it would not be able to be done as stealthily as he had hoped. Obi-Wan darted toward the door that was closing more rapidly than he had expected and leapt to the top lip as it was nearing the overhead opening. As he reached the top, he thrust his feet forward and slid on his side, barely making it through the door just as it slammed shut. He landed hard on the leaf covered forest floor and immediately sprung up into an athletic position.

Kenobi noted the tanks heading west to gather in their muster zone and the large droid-carrying vehicles were heading north, where he felt what could have been Qui-Gon Jinn. While none of the container ships seemed to have opened up to let the battle droids out, he did notice what would be his biggest challenge: patrolling single-droid speeders. Dozens of them buzzed around the forming convoys and encircled the large ship on which he had been a stowaway moments ago. He ducked low and alongside the transport ship and surveyed the situation.

Obi-Wan heard the nasal electronic voice of one of the battle droids on a commlink just around the corner from where he was standing still.

“Viceroy, we’ve arrived at the muster point. The caravan has begun moving out and we should be in Theed by tomorrow morning,” it said.

“Excellent, Captain,” came the response. Obi-Wan could barely make out the Neimoidian accented voice that returned on a commlink. “We searched the ship and there is no trace of the Jedi. Be aware, they may have gotten onto one of your landing craft.”

“If they are down here, sir, we will find them,” returned the droid.

“Use caution,” said the Neimoidian. “These Jedi are not to be underestimated.” Obi-Wan heard the familiar electronic beep signaling the end of the transmission. The Padawan smiled at the warning to the droid about himself and his master. Kenobi decided to make sure the message could not be shared with the droid captain’s troops. He jumped around the corner where he heard the conversation, ignited his lightsaber, and instantly chopped the droid leader in half. He switched off his weapon and looked down at the ground for a brief moment to admire his handiwork. Kenobi reattached the hilt to his belt and began to jog behind a monstrous droid troop transport headed north and took cover alongside some large brown beasts, who were native to the

forest in which they had landed, as they were going the same direction.

Out of nowhere, the enormous beast howled and flopped lifelessly to the ground with a laser blasted hole opened up on its side. Obi-Wan looked behind to see where it came from to find half a dozen of the patrolling droid army's one-man speeders bearing down behind him. Once again, Kenobi pulled the lightsaber from his belt and began deflecting laser bolts as they rained down on him. A shot ricocheted back and hit one of his attackers sending him spinning off formation and into one of its counterparts. They both swirled wildly out of control and exploded when they hit trees they could not avoid. The remaining four split off as they flew over Kenobi's head and began to regroup for a second attack.

The Padawan broke to his right toward a lake he could make out several hundred meters away. The beasts had already dissipated and broke in every other direction. The four battle droids had circled around and, based on their programming, opened fire. They blasted along the direction in which Obi-Wan was headed before they realized he had changed course. Another local animal was killed in the fire, and the patrolling droids banked right and toward Obi-Wan. They flew low and over his head, too close to fire on him, then out over the lake before turning around for another attack run.

Kenobi was on the lake's edge when the droids came back at him. Again, he deflected the bolts taking out one more and then

swinging his blade at the one closest to him as they came in on their vector. He caught the bottom of the single-droid craft, and it crashed hard behind him on the rocky shore. As the final two speeders zoomed away to turn back around, Obi-Wan dove into the lake for cover, forgetting in the moment to switch off his lightsaber. The droids sped by on their next pass and, after waiting for a moment, they seemed to have been satisfied that he was gone and didn't return for a third attempt. The young Jedi slowly crawled from the water and sat behind a rock and waited another few minutes to make sure the bulk of the droid army had moved on before reaching out again to find a trace of his master.

His eyes were squeezed shut when he felt Qui-Gon's presence just north of his current position. He began to jog toward it when the two droid speeders returned. Obi-Wan tried to switch on his lightsaber, but it had been momentarily discharged by being submerged in the water when it was still lit. He panicked and picked up speed into a sprint. He was exhausted within moments, and the pain of the landing was still present in his legs. With all he had, he found a current in the Force and was able to dart forward for a few moments, getting just ahead of the latest droid attack. Kenobi leaned on his knees, caught his breath and, a moment later, began again to jog toward where he felt Jinn's presence, while hearing the speeders behind him.

* * * * *

The sound of the monstrous troop transport ship was deafening, and the heat of the repulsor lift hover engines was intense. Searing air whooshed around Qui-Gon Jinn and the native creature which had gotten directly into his exit path, as they laid tightly together on the ground. As the back end of the vehicle crossed over the two of them, there was a brief moment before he felt he could move and was safe to stand. Qui-Gon pushed himself up and away from the long-eared pink creature and dusted himself off as he stood. The being, dressed in a leather vest, and long disheveled pants, laid motionless on the ground, seemingly still stunned by what had just happened.

Finally, Jar Jar Binks stood up and tilted his head to look at the human who had just saved his life. Qui-Gon had begun to casually walk away when the Gungan walked to his side and tapped him on the shoulder. “Mooyie mooyie,” he said in a native greeting. The Jedi stopped in his tracks and turned to Binks, who was a head taller than him. “Mesa loves you,” said the being, his eyes blinking.

Qui-Gon pursed his lips and rolled his eyes. “That won’t be necessary,” he said, nonplused by the alien creature speaking a variation on Basic, the universal language of the galaxy, and started again walking into the forest.

“Yousa saved me,” said Jar Jar. All Binks could register in his somewhat simple mind was that his life was about to end, and this human being arrived from nowhere to stop that from happening. His hearts were genuinely filled with admiration for the bearded

man and the steps he seemed to have taken to keep him alive. “Yousa come from da heavens, and yousa stopped bombad machineek from killing Jar Jar.” The Gungan put his hand on his own chest and smiled a large tooth-filled grin. “Dassa me. Mesa called Jar Jar Binks.”

“You’re welcome, Jar Jar Binks. But if you’ll excuse me, I have some very important business to attend to.”

“Mesa come with you,” Binks insisted.

“Are you paying attention?” chided Qui-Gon. “I said I have important things to do. A moment ago, you almost got us both killed. I appreciate it, but I need to move along. Alone.”

“But – I – mesa ...” Jar Jar stammered, still walking behind the Jedi.

“I know you are intelligent enough to speak,” said Qui-Gon. “So, you must be intelligent enough to know when you are not needed. Now, please, get out of here.”

The Gungan stopped and looked at the ground dejected, while the human continued to make his way through the trees. Suddenly undeterred, Jar Jar continued to follow, only at a slightly further distance. Qui-Gon could feel his presence but decided to pretend he was not there. His only objective now was to find his way to Theed, the capital city of Naboo, and the best way to find it, he figured, was to follow the path of the invasion army that had just deployed.

“Esqueeze me,” Jar Jar whispered loudly toward Qui-Gon. “Mesa still witchoo,” he said.

Qui-Gon continued to ignore the creature who, by virtue of his long legs, was silently catching up to the Jedi. Once again, the Gungan tapped the Jedi on the shoulder. This time, Jinn could no longer be polite. “What could you possibly want?” he shouted.

Jar Jar raised his hands to his chest and cowered back a half step. “Mesa sorry,” he started sheepishly. “But, mesa your humble servant.”

Qui-Gon blinked hard and shook his head as if he did not hear Jar Jar. “Now *that* is really not necessary,” he said.

“Oh, but it is,” continued Jar Jar. “Tis demanded by da gods, hit is. Issa a life dett. Yousa save mesa life, mesa give you mine.” He bowed toward Qui-Gon and again shared the silly wide smile.

Qui-Gon was about to respond about how ridiculous the concept of owing someone their life for saving them was when the air around them was shattered by two quick laser bolt blasts. The Jedi shouted, “get down!” to Jar Jar and pushed him to the ground. Just as quickly, he ignited his lightsaber. Two more shots came from the droid speeders bearing down on him, and he spun his weapon to knock them both back at the incoming attackers, hitting them precisely and incinerating them before they hit the ground.

A drenched Obi-Wan Kenobi emerged from behind the fiery wreckage and made his way quickly to his master. Out of breath, he said, “Sorry, Master. The water fried my weapon.” Kenobi pulled his lightsaber off his belt. “I had to make a quick escape into the lake.”

“You forgot to turn off your power again?” said Qui-Gon with the tone of a father Kenobi could not recall. With a guilty nod, Obi-Wan admitted his mistake. “It won’t take long to recharge,” Jinn continued. “But this is a lesson you must learn.”

Before Obi-Wan could acknowledge the teaching, Jar Jar rose from the ground.

“Yousa saved my again,” said Jar Jar looking at Jinn with veneration.

“What’s this?” asked Kenobi.

“A local,” spat Qui-Gon. Jar Jar turned his head and smirked at Obi-Wan. “Let’s get out of here before more droids show up.” Obi-Wan followed his master on a path toward the army in the distance, disregarding the Gungan who continued to keep pace behind them.

“Mure?” said Jar Jar feeling dread fill his body. “Mure did you spake?” He could not possibly face those machines again, and he suddenly had an idea to please his new master. “Esqueeze me,” he called, picking up the pace to catch the two men. “But da mosto safest place is da Gungan city. Otoh Gunga. Tis a hidden city!” Qui-Gon stopped short and so quickly that Obi-Wan nearly walked into him.

Jinn turned to face Jar Jar. “A hidden city?” Binks nodded so hard his ears flapped on his back. “Can you take us there?”

Jar Jar, in his haste to please the human, had momentarily forgotten that he was told never to return to Otoh Gunga at the decree of Boss Nass. The punishment for returning could be as

severe as execution. A different sort of panic set in. “Uh,” the Gungan stalled. “On second tawt, no. Not really. No.”

“No?” insisted Qui-Gon. “No? You are my humble servant are you not?”

Jar Jar looked at Qui-Gon, then at Obi-Wan, then back to Jinn. He brought his fingers to his mouth and spoke silently: “Iss embarrassing, but my afraid my have been banished. Mesa forgotten. The Boss’ll do terrible things to me.” He looked at Obi-Wan. “Terrible things if mya goin’ back dere.”

The grumbling splintering of trees in the distance echoed in the valley where the three beings stood still. “Do you hear that?” asked Qui-Gon sternly. Jar Jar angled his head and lifted a floppy ear to the air, listened and nodded. “That is the sound of a thousand terrible things heading this way,” the Jedi said.

Obi-Wan followed his master’s lead. “If they find us,” the Padawan continued. “They will crush us, grind us into tiny pieces, and blast us into oblivion.” Kenobi could tell the local was terrified and naive. While he was not lying, he did feel a tinge of guilt for scaring Jar Jar.

“Ah,” said Jar Jar. He weighed the pros and cons of the options in front of him. Binks did owe his life to the bearded man, and he didn’t want to disappoint the gods. He also faced possible execution if he returned to Otoh Gunga. But the younger man’s argument about being torturously killed was the most clear and present danger, and the only way to avoid it was to get away fast. “Yousa point issa well seen,” said Jar Jar. “Diss way.” The local

creature turned and jaunted into the forest toward where, not long ago, he was enjoying a quiet morning and a Cottle fish for breakfast. “Diss way!”



CHAPTER 15

The Scimitar touched down once again in the Flats on Coruscant as it had countless times before. This was the meeting place for Darth Maul and his Sith teacher, Darth Sidious, and the apprentice was always at his master's beck and call. Maul spent most of his time on the lava coated planet of Mustafar in the residence that Sidious once lived. It was the same simple home, carved into a mountainside and filled with ancient texts and artifacts that a hundred Sith apprentices had studied before him.

Maul was beginning to become weary of his master's demands. For just over a decade, Sidious had kept his word to instruct him in the ways of the Force and the teachings of the Sith Order, but the Zabrak still waited for the opportunity to launch the plot against the Jedi and exact the revenge he had been promised. According to Sidious, each mission he was sent on and every test he passed was a step toward readiness to begin the execution of the plan to eliminate the Jedi and make way for the Sith to rule the galaxy, but Maul's patience was wearing thin, and

in the hours, days and months he would spend alone on Mustafar, he began wondering if it would ever happen.

The Zabrak had become a master swordsman, able to wield his red-bladed lightsaber as an extension of his powerful body. He had become stealthy and nearly invisible to his prey, making him very useful for the assassinations that Sidious would often mandate. He had improved his ability to use the Force to move objects the size of starfighters and was able to easily conjure lightning from his hands. But through all of this physical improvement, Sidious gave minimal praise and insisted that Maul study the Sith writings. He was specifically told to uncover more of the secrets to manipulating the Force to cheat death. There were legends that told of the ability to master the living Force energies and bring a being into existence – to create life – but there were never any proven successful attempts in a millennium of trying. From the apprentice’s perspective, this seemed an unworthy study. Avoiding death, he believed, was what made him a more focused killing machine. He was a well-trained weapon, an expert at taking life, why would he possibly want to stop death? But Sidious was obsessed with it. And while Maul didn’t disobey his master, he didn’t make it a priority. He had learned of the ability to use the Force to survive in the vacuum of space for short periods of time, to close off wounds and even read myths about being able to maintain a corporeal existence after death. He didn’t have the patience or the interest to pursue it in more than a

cursory response to his master's demands. He was keenly focused on the day he would destroy the Jedi.

As a result, while studying the manuscripts of Sith Lords long gone, he was easily distracted by the stories of great battles with the Jedi. He had become an expert in the strategies of the legendary "War of the Fittest" and the rise of Darth Bane, the first Sith Lord to enact the Rule of Two. He understood the tactical execution of battle and saw the Force primarily as a weapon for revenge.

The Zabrak powered down his engines, stood up from the controls of his oversized fighter, and pulled his cloak from the hook on the side of the cockpit. He adjusted his black tunic and black gloves before putting on the black robe. He pulled the hood up and strode down the open runway at the back of his vessel and into the warm Coruscant daylight. In the sunshine, the smell of the factories was stronger, and he felt it tighten his lungs. His gait was aggressive and swift as he made his way to the abandoned facility where he had met Darth Sidious many times before. Like every other meeting, Sidious emerged from the shadows inside just as Maul arrived.

Sidious walked very deliberately. Each step, while not slow, was considered and measured. His pale white hands always jutting out from his black robe and in front of him, just above waist height. Unlike Maul, his cloak was made of simple Zeyd cloth, closed and clasped at the throat, with a black obsidian Sith brooch. The master was simple in his attire, and Maul was certain

that, like everything else Sidious did, it was calculated and purposeful.

Maul approached the dark lord and bent down on one leg, lowered his head and crossed his arms across his knee. “What is thy bidding, my master?” he asked. Each time he asked that question, he hoped for the response that the war against the Jedi was about to begin, and every time he was disappointed. Today would be no different.

“There is member of the Banking Clan that needs to be eliminated,” spat Sidious. His voice was always raspy, and each syllable was enunciated sharply. “I cannot allow his interference with my plans in support of the Trade Federation, and there is no negotiating with him. I need you to destroy him.”

“Yes, my master,” uttered Maul. He was disappointed to say the least.

“I sense you feel this is not the best use of your power, Lord Maul,” said Sidious. Maul quickly tried to bury his feelings. “Rise, my apprentice.” The Zabrak stood as ordered. Maul was half a head taller than his master, who tilted his head up slightly to look at him. “We are closer than you know, my boy,” Sidious snarled. “Your patience is critical as is your success in this mission.”

“I understand, master,” breathed Maul.

“You cannot hide your feelings from me,” Sidious said. “You must use your frustration, your anger toward me, and your hatred of the Jedi to strengthen your power and become the greatest

weapon the Sith have ever known. I have foreseen your role in the revenge of the Zabrak and the rise of the Sith. You *are* fulfilling your destiny.” The master and apprentice turned and walked deeper into the darkened facility. “Right now, I need you to remove this obstacle. I had always considered his existence a threat, and now is the time to put an end to him.”

“As you wish. Who is he and where can I find him?”

Sidious smirked with amusement. He could sense Maul’s heart rate increase with the thought of his next kill. “He is here, on Coruscant. His name is Hego Damask the Second, and he is maintaining residence, not surprisingly, in the Financial District. He is heavily guarded, as I am sure you can imagine. Damask is old and frail, but do not let his appearance fool you.”

“Master?” asked Maul of the last part of his statement. He quickly noted that there was something more to that last bit of information.

Darth Sidious continued, uninterrupted by Maul’s query. “He is from the planet Muunilist, and he is meeting with Senator Clovis tonight over dinner. I would suggest you wait until he is sleeping, and then make your move.”

“Yes, my Lord,” Maul said. “Are there any other specific pieces of information I should know?”

“There is one.” Sidious paused. “Damask must disappear. If his body is found, it will raise suspicion. If he is suspected murdered, it may lead to opportunity for his position opposing the Trade Federation to gain momentum. His disappearance will raise

less suspicion, as the financial leadership in the galaxy rarely make their whereabouts known. It serves them well. As it will serve us.”

“I will cut him into pieces if I must, my master.”

At that suggestion, Sidious cackled. “Good,” he cooed. “Good.” Sidious stopped walking and turned to his apprentice. “He will be found in his apartment on the twentieth floor of the Montas Complex. You will report to me as soon as it is complete. It must be over with tonight.”

“Yes, my master. It shall be done.” Maul bowed his head and walked to his ship to prepare for yet another mission that didn’t include killing Jedi.



CHAPTER 16

The Jedi Master, his apprentice and the Gungan reached the edge of Lake Paonga, while the droning sound of the Trade Federation Army faded behind them.

“Weesa going underwater, okeeday?” squeaked Jar Jar. Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan pulled devices off their belts and prepared to put them in their mouths to give them the ability to pull oxygen from the water. “And mya warning you: Gungans no liken outsiders, so don’t be espectin any warm welcome.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” said the Kenobi. “Today hasn’t been a day for warm welcomes.”

The Gungan made his way into the lake, and when he was at shoulder depth he turned to make sure his human friends were still in tow. “Yousa follow me now.” With that, he disappeared into the water.

Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon dipped below the surface, and through the light that filtered through the lake’s surface, they could see Jar Jar swimming down into the depths. The Gungan was a natural

swimmer, and he sliced his way easily through the water. The Jedi did their best to follow quickly, still in their robes and tunics, so Jar Jar was forced to slow his pace and sometimes even circle back to make sure they were with him.

In the distance, as the lake swallowed up any topside light, they could make out the faint glow of the underwater city. The fish they passed were getting progressively larger and appeared to be increasingly dangerous. After nearly thirty minutes of swimming, they had arrived at Otoh-Gunga.

The city was impressive. Thousands of glowing bubbles interconnected with golden gilded paths and each housing either a courtyard or building. Some were home to fish kept for eating, others were open paddocks for livestock and animals. Otoh-Gunga was a thriving underwater metropolis. Jar Jar approached the Great Gate where a few years ago he had been pushed out by the Gungan who tricked him, and he was banished for life. His hearts pounded as he pointed to the plasma opening that kept the bubble from flooding. The Jedi nodded and followed as Jar Jar nervously poked at the membrane. His hand broke the surface and sealed around his wrist allowing him to enter without a drop of water following him. Binks was inside, standing on a plasticrete floor when the two guests followed suit, entering the city limits.

The underwater park that opened up beyond the Great Gate was nearly one kilometer square, and the bubble that enclosed it reached high into the water with lights affixed to various points on the structure that generated the plasma sphere.

Plasma was found in abundance in pockets across Naboo. It was a naturally occurring, renewable source of energy that was used by the Gungans to create the impenetrable barrier for their city, the weapons they created, and the energy to power their underwater craft. It was also processed off-world for use as defensive shields on spacecraft that ranged from small fighters to enormous intergalactic cruisers. It made up the protective barriers on outer space landing bays and was also known to have some healing qualities for certain species. It was the primary export of the planet, and there was enough for both the humans and the Gungans.

In the courtyard, Gungan children were playing, Gungan citizens strolled about, and mounted Gungan guards on tamed Kaadu patrolled. Kaadu were found on the surface, but herds had been transplanted to the underwater world to be used as transport for the Gungan army. The beasts were not much taller than the Gungans, but they were strong enough to carry one on its back. With two muscular legs, no arms and a stubby tail, the animals were swift and tamed as a rite of passage for Gungan warriors.

“How is it that the Republic has no representation from these creatures?” asked Obi-Wan of his master in awe of the civilization they had just discovered.

“I suppose we may find out,” said Qui-Gon.

Two mounted guards approached Jar Jar and the outsiders, as citizens stopped and stared. One of the mounted guards was Captain Tarpals, who instantly recognized Jar Jar.

“Hey, yousa!” he shouted in his gruff tone. Jar Jar knew it was the Gungan who had betrayed him and could not believe his bad luck. “Stopa dere.”

“Heyo-dalle, Captain Tarpals,” said Jar Jar, actually believing for the moment that there was a chance that by now all was forgiven. “Meesa back!” The Gungan offered a smile, and the Jedi looked on in silence.

“No again, Jar Jar,” said Tarpals as the other guard poked Binks with a plasma stick from behind. “Yousa in big big trouble.”

Jar Jar started to say something, but he immediately fell back into his stuttering inability to make complete sentences. Qui-Gon interrupted. “Thank you. It is very important that we speak to your leader.”

“Whosa are yousa?” queried Tarpals.

“I am Qui-Gon Jinn of the Galactic Republic. With all due respect, we need your help.”

“Gungans no even part of de Republeek. Wesa no care,” the captain barked. Qui-Gon threw a glance to his apprentice. “Yousa with Binks? Yousa in big dudu too.” Jar Jar shot a surprised look at Tarpals and then to his new human friends. “Wesa locken you up and when da Boss be ready, hesa decidin to see you or no.”

Jinn waved his hand unperceptively. “You will take us to see the Boss now.”

Captain Tarpals shifted in his saddle. “But ... Mesa tinks I take you to da big Boss Nass now,” he said. Jar Jar blinked hard

and looked back and forth between the Jedi and the captain in astonishment. “Dis way.”

Tarpals led the way, followed by Jar Jar, Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan, while the other guard followed behind. Otoh-Gunga’s residents pulled their children back away from the hideous humans and the criminal Gungan, Binks, while others looked on gawking at the procession.

They traveled across a few bridges and bubbles before arriving at the Court of Boss Nass. The last time Jar Jar had been in this pod, Boss Nass banished him from the city for life. Boss Nass sat surrounded by advisors on a platform a meter off the floor. When they arrived, he was handing down some sort of decree. When he finished, he turned to Tarpals.

Boss Nass’s voice was deep and booming. He was squatter than most Gungans, but this was typical of the leadership class in the clan. “Captain Tarpals, meesa tinkin dees yoomins have sumting ta do wit da machineek. Meesa scouts be long tello reports from da surface dat big bombos be comin from da sky wit machineek.”

“Yes, Boss Nass, sir,” said Tarpals. “Meesa tink.” He was suddenly free of the Jedi mind trick and was not really even sure how he got to the Boss’s court.

Qui-Gon spoke: “If you are speaking of the droid army that has invaded Naboo –”

“Meesa no talkin to you,” said Boss Nass.

“That droid army is making their way toward Theed. They’ll be there before the sun rises tomorrow.” continued Qui-Gon strongly. “We have to warn them.”

“Meesa no talkin to you,” Boss Nass repeated. “Binks!” he called. “Yousa bringen da yoomins, you riskin’ da machineek to follow you, you disobeyin da banishment. Whysa me no kill you now?”

Jar Jar gulped hard. He managed to gain some composure and stepped forward. “Meesa sorry big Boss Nass, sir. Issa scary da machineek. Daysa makin a big bombad mess of da forest.”

Boss Nass let out a bellowing laugh. “Meesa no care. Let dem take da surface cities. Wesa no liken da yoomins. Dey tink dey so smarty. Dey tink dey brains so big.” He laughed again and turned to Jinn. “Look at meesa big city. You tinkin weesa needin dem?”

“Once those droids take control of the surface, they’ll take control of you,” urged Kenobi.

“Meesa no tink so. Unlessen dey followed Binks, dey not know of ussen.”

“You and the humans form a symbiont circle,” said Obi-Wan. “What happens to one of you will affect the other. You must understand this.”

“Already told yousa. We no carin’ about da yoomins,” Nass said.

Obi-Wan’s face crumpled up in disbelief and frustration. Qui-Gon remained stoic. As he did in the courtyard, he casually waved his hand and said, “Then speed us on our way.”

Nass paused for a moment. “Weesa gone speed you on yousa way.”

“We could use a transport,” Qui-Gon followed.

“Weesa give yousa una bongo,” said the Boss.

“Thank you,” offered the Jedi master.

Then Boss Nass leaned forward in his throne. “Da speediest way to da city Theed,” he said with a hint of warning in his voice. “Is through da planet core.” A smile formed widely across his lips. “Now. Go.”

“We appreciate your help,” said Qui-Gon. “We leave in peace.” The two Jedi bowed shallowly and turned to leave.

“Master, what’s a bongo?” asked Obi-Wan.

“A transport, I hope,” smiled Qui-Gon. They passed Jar Jar, who was being pushed forward to be judged by the Boss as the next order of business.

“Deysa settin yousa up,” whispered Binks. “Goin through the planet core is bad bombin.” The Jedi both stopped, and Qui-Gon gave the Gungan an inquisitive stare. “No easy maky through dere. Any help would be nicey good. Mesa maybe know tings.” The Gungan offered a sheepish grin. Qui-Gon hesitated then turned back toward Boss Nass.

“Master, we’re short on time,” hissed Kenobi.

“Honorable Boss Nass, we’ll need a navigator to get us through the planet’s core.” He gestured toward Jar Jar. “This one may be of some help. What’s to become of Jar Jar Binks?”

Nass perked up in his seat. “Jar Jar? Hesa to be pyoonished.” He gave a harsh smile to Binks who shrunk back in response.

“Interesting,” started Jinn. “I saved him from the droid army. He owes me what you call a ‘life debt.’ Your gods demand he belongs to me now.”

Nass furrowed his brow and looked at Jar Jar. “Binks?” He started a small laugh. “Yousa havin da lifeplay wit dissen hissen?”

Jar Jar nodded very slowly. “Uh huh, meesa do.”

“Meesa not sure who be more stooped, Binks or deesa yoomins.” The Boss exploded with laughter as did everyone on his council beside him. “Dissa make it so easy. Begone wit him. Binks issa you navigator now.” He continued laughing. “Make sure to be askin him on yousa journey why hesa no more allowed in mesa city. Begone wit him!”

The room erupted with more laughter as the Jedi turned to leave. Jar Jar followed timidly behind them, embarrassed and ashamed. Jeers were shouted at him and the humans as they were escorted from the Boss’s court to a dock, where they were given a beat-up bongo submarine – transport as promised. The three cast-outs climbed into the vessel and started on their way to cut through the center of the planet to warn the Queen in Theed of the impending invasion.



CHAPTER 17

Out of breath, Senator Palpatine made his way to the portcullis outside the Jedi Temple main meeting hall. The two Jedi knights who were on guard greeted him. “The Council is in session, Senator. We can’t allow you entry.”

“You can, and you will,” Palpatine ordered. “I must speak to –” The door to the hall opened, and Master Sifo Dyas stepped out.

“Senator. I thought I sensed your presence.” He softly closed the door and put a hand on the senator’s shoulder. “Is something wrong?”

“Is something wrong?” Palpatine said more loudly than he should have. Realizing the tenor in his voice, he looked around and began speaking in hushed tones. “I spoke to my queen. She says the Jedi haven’t arrived. She says that when she spoke to the Trade Federation, they claimed to be completely unaware of a meeting with them.”

“Calm down, Senator,” said Sifo Dyas. “The Council received word that they have arrived. I am sure it is a negotiation ploy from the Federation.”

“I hope you are right. My transmission was cut off, and I haven’t been able to make contact. I am worried that something has gone wrong.”

“Go back to your residence for the night, Senator. We can talk in the morning. I will raise your concern to the Council,” the Jedi said. Palpatine looked him hard in the face.

“My planet is in danger. You have felt it,” said the Senator. “A communications disruption is not a good sign. I trust the Jedi – well, most of you – but I have a bad feeling about this.”

“We will speak in the morning,” repeated Sifo Dyas. “I must return to our session.”

“I expect to hear from you before breakfast, master Jedi. This is a touchy situation. We must be cautious and quick.”

“I understand, Senator. Believe me. Now, go. I will speak to you soon.” The Jedi opened up the door quietly and ushered himself back into the conclave. Palpatine stood silently alone with the Jedi guards for a moment before heading back to his speeder to return to his office.

* * * *

Sifo Dyas took his seat among the Council, shook his sleeves and placed his hands upon his lap. “Senator Palpatine is getting nervous. As am I,” he said.

“It is unusual for us not to have heard from Master Jinn and his Padawan since they arrived,” said Mace Windu. His voice was deep and there was doubt in its timbre.

“A risk this was from the start,” said Yoda. “Unclear the benefits were. Wait further we must.”

“There are dark clouds about this mission,” said Dyas. “Search your feelings, you know it to be true. Something is not right.”

“Then what might you have us do?” postured Ki Adi-Mundi, bringing his hands in a triangle to his white beard.

“Nothing,” said Yoda banging his cane on his throne. “Nothing there is to be done. Our only play this was. Watch the Senate we will, while wait for word from Master Qui-Gon we must. Patience we must have. If something more sinister at work there is, reveal itself it will.”

“And what if it does, Master Yoda?” prodded Sifo Dyas. “What then? We are sworn to protect the Republic, but we are not an army. We do not have the numbers to protect an entire planet, never mind the galaxy.”

“We have no reason to believe that there is anything larger than a planetary blockade and a trade dispute at play here, Master Dyas,” Windu said in an attempt to balance the conversation, which was growing tense. “Do you?”

“You are all aware of my visions,” Sifo Dyas demanded. “And you continue to dismiss them. I pray that I am wrong, but I also believe that we may be in the time of the Prophecy.”

“Aware of your concerns, we are,” Yoda said. “Trust your experience, we do. But no evidence do we have to believe on the brink of war we are.”

“With all due respect, fellow Masters,” said Dyas standing up. “If we wait for proof and lose faith in our gift of sight, we are no better than the bureaucrats in the Senate. I only ask that you meditate on this and follow what the Force is telling us.”

The green Jedi master wrinkled his nose and shook his head. “Dismissing the Council for tonight I am,” said Yoda. “Wait for word from Master Jinn we will. Trust you, I do, Master Dyas. Always in motion the future is. Act on suspicion alone, we cannot.”

“I will respect your wishes, Master Yoda,” Sifo Dyas said. “But I am obligated to say that I disagree with your choice to delay a decision. You all have felt something mysterious, a disturbance in the Force. I only hope our inaction is not our undoing.”



CHAPTER 18

The lights of the bongo switched on as Obi-Wan guided the submarine out of the dock, through the plasma gate, and into the open water. Jar Jar sat to his right as copilot, and Qui-Gon Jinn squeezed himself into a passenger jump seat behind them.

“We’ll be relying on you Jar Jar,” said Qui-Gon patting the Gungan on the shoulder.

“Dissen nuttin,” said Binks. “Meesa used to navigatey on meesa father’s whaler ship. Meesa not knowin everyting, but meesa knowin how to get through the Abyss. Ooh, gooberfish!” The instrumentation flashed to life on the deck in front of Obi-Wan and Binks, showing a map of the sea floor. “Makey go dat way,” Jar Jar said pointing with his thumb to the right.

The controls were similar to a starfighter, something Obi-Wan was familiar with. He pulled back and rolled the sub in the direction Jar Jar suggested as they dove deeper into the lake. “Why were you banished, Jar Jar?” prodded the Padawan.

“Tis a longo no tello, but small part, ah, meesa clumsy,” said the Gungan reluctantly.

“You were banished for being clumsy?” said Obi-Wan with a hint of disbelief.

“Yousa mighten be sayin dat,” said Binks. “Meesa causin’ maybe one or two-ah accidentays, yousa say. Maybe boom de gasser, den crashin da boss’s *Heyblibber*. Den, meesa banished.”

Obi-Wan looked over his shoulder at his master and wrinkled his brow trying to understand. “I don’t know,” said Qui-Gon. They traveled along in silence for nearly fifteen minutes before a loud scraping crash came from under the bongo.

Behind them was a large fish with a rounded back that was at least three times the size of their vessel. It had bulbous orange eyes, flippers from its head and six legs swung below it. The crustacean had lashed its tongue out, attached it to the rear of the bongo, and began to pull it back to its wide-open mouth, filled with hundreds of teeth.

“Uh-oh!” shouted Jar Jar. “Huge Opee!” Obi-Wan pressed the accelerator, and the engine whined as it fought to break free from the creature that was intent on making them his meal.

“I can’t pull us free, Master!” said Obi-Wan. Qui-Gon sat calmly behind them and kept his eyes forward. They lurched ever closer to the gaping maw of the Opee sea monster when suddenly they were released and fired forward no longer attached to the mammoth fish. All three passengers turned their head in unison to watch a two-armed, two-legged beast, which was twice the size

of the Opee, grab the fish trying to eat them and bite its head off like it was eating a piece of fruit for a snack.

“There’s always a bigger fish,” said Qui-Gon calmly. Jar Jar’s eye stalks leaned toward one another in relief and Obi-Wan righted the ship.

The sub continued along the map line that appeared on its view screen. Jar Jar regained his focus and pointed at a craggy portion of the chart. “Wesa goin in dere. Das de Abyss. Once we getting troo dere, wesa make it to da yoomin city.”

“Then that’s where we shall head,” said Qui-Gon.

“Mesa get you dere, but issa not easy drivin.”

“Don’t worry,” Qui-Gon said. “The Force will guide us. Right, Obi-Wan?” The younger Jedi simply nodded a non-committal agreement.

“Ooh,” started Jar Jar. “Maxibig da Force. Wesa Gungans hear about dissen magic, be wesa no sure it’s real. Mesa tink dat smell stinkowiff.” He looked at his human friends. “Wait one longo momento. Yousa Jedi?”

As they reached the front of the outcropping, a light flashed to life on the view screen as the sub began to slow down. “Our friend, the smaller gigantic fish, seems to have damaged the exterior converter,” said Obi-Wan. “We’re losing power.”

“Oh, no,” moaned Jar Jar. He felt his mouth dry out and his brain became confused in the overwhelming panic attack that was coming on. “Wesa dyin’ here.”

Obi-Wan took the craft slowly down to an outcropping that stuck out from a cave at the front of the Abyss. The ship bumped hard against the sandy floor and a cloudy murkiness rose around their viewport. The young apprentice pulled open a hatch on the central panel and assessed the wiring it exposed. It was his experience on many small vehicles, that he could override the power converter – at least for a short period of time – by bypassing the circuit.

“Just relax,” said Qui-Gon trying to soothe the noticeably stressed Jar Jar Binks. “We’re not in trouble yet.”

“What yet?” barked the Gungan. “Monsters out dare. Brokey ship here. All sinken and no power? Whensa yousa tinken wesa in trouble?” With that, a spark flew from the open circuit box and the bongo fired up, while every light inside and outside of the vessel came to life.

“Power’s back,” Obi-Wan said dryly. Jar Jar began babbling to himself incoherently as the Padawan pulled back on the yoke to continue their journey. “What is that?” cried Kenobi as yet another creature appeared before them.

“Colo claw fish!” squeaked Binks. The fish was a bottom dweller making its home at the floor of the cave on which they had landed. The creature’s eyes lit up with deep sea phosphorescence, followed by a long thin glowing fin that ran fifty meters down its back. It lunged forward, opening its huge fanged mouth and swatting at the bongo with two clawed spikes.

Obi-Wan gained control of the sub and spun it around, away from the beast.

Qui-Gon, still calm, pointed at an open area above them. “Head for that outcropping,” he said as his apprentice swerved away from another swing from the claw fish and pushed the bongo out away from the monster’s cave. Once they were out of reach, their attacker retreated back into the soft sand of the cavern floor and waited for its next victim.

“Wesa can goin down de Abyss from dat entryway ober dare,” said Jar Jar pointing toward yet another outcropping. “Ah corse, dat way bein much more bombad.”

“Would you recommend we try our luck with the claw fish, again?” asked Qui-Gon.

“Ah, mesa no tink so. But dissa way more wiggly and squeezier.”

“Obi-wan here is an expert pilot,” replied Jinn. “If the bongo can fit, my Padawan can make it through.”

“Okey day,” said Jar Jar. “But mesa not knowin any Gungan who made it through dis way.”

“I am not sensing much confidence, my friend,” said Obi-Wan smiling cockily at Binks.

The young Jedi slowly approached the opening his Gungan copilot had pointed to. As he did, he let go of a certain amount of his focus and urged the Force to guide him. In his mind’s eye, he saw the darkness of the catacomb caves ahead of him, just before the headlights of the bongo illuminated the way. As a result, he

knew when the path would turn sharply one way or the other. He was able to slow the vehicle as needed and speed up just before it was appropriate. Jar Jar's mouth hung open as the younger human expertly made his way through the maze littered with dozens of vessels that had fallen prey to the maw of rocky tusks that darted in and out of the Abyss.

"Wesa goin through da planet core. Dissa fastest way from Gungan city to da yoomin city," said Jar Jar. Obi-Wan ignored him, connected to the Force, and Qui-Gon silently assessed his apprentice's skills. "Da Gungan legend say dissen used to be wide open but da gods got mad at ussen for not praisin' dem on da shores after da yoomins came. Mesa no tink dat. But wassa me know?"

The tunnels grew narrower and the turns sharper, but Obi-Wan was able to maintain his speed and slice through the waters and the increasingly challenging caves. "There. Ahead," said Qui-Gon. Several hundred meters in front of them, the exit of the Abyss appeared. The sub glided toward it, then Obi-Wan suddenly changed direction, pulling on the yoke and driving them hard to their left, away from the end of the Abyss.

"Wassa yousa doin?" cried Binks as his body slid in the seat at the jarring sudden turn.

"I'm sure Obi-Wan knows what he's doing," said Jinn calmly.

"Mesa hopin so," said the Gungan.

To be safe and with a slight creep of doubt, Qui-Gon looked over his shoulder out the rear viewport. Through the bubbles that

issued from the bongo, he could see where they had just come from. Unfortunately, when he turned his attention forward again, he also could see the exit they had planned to use was now clouded over as thousands of creatures poured into the opening. They aggressively moved toward the sub as Obi-Wan accelerated through yet another winding turn. “Sometimes a thousand little fish are as powerful as one big one,” said Jinn.

Jar Jar noticed the approaching swarm and began to panic. “Beeza fish! Beeza fish!” The bongo was at maximum power and headed upward toward the surface, dipping and dashing through the crags of the cave. “Beeza fish be eatin’ little subs. Wesa outswim dem and get to da surface or wesa be longo gone.”

The first of the Beeza fish horde reached their sub and latched on. They sounded like dozens of electric hydrosaws grinding on metal as their teeth began to scrape into the hull. Jar Jar murmured in dismay while Obi-Wan glared ahead. He took them through another opening, and within moments, they could see they were approaching the surface. Sunlight cast on broken beams touched the front of the ship and caused the passengers to squint at the intense brightness. The Beeza fish, when touched by the solar rays, immediately let go of their prey and returned swiftly out of the light.

“Wesa gone make it!” shouted Jar Jar as the bongo sub crested the glass-like surface. The vehicle bobbed on the surface for a moment as Obi-Wan slumped back into his chair in relief and exhaustion from the journey.

“You did well, my apprentice,” said Jinn stoically. “I never doubted you for a minute.”

“Thank you, master,” said Obi-Wan. He reached forward and tapped the control panel, releasing the plasma-based shield that was the cockpit cover.

They had, in fact, arrived in the city of Theed. Its ancient statues rose over the orange-roofed buildings and shone brightly in the midday sun. The blue sky above was dotted with white clouds, and the Jedi took note of the twinkling Trade Federation ships in mid-orbit around Naboo.

Jar Jar had never been to Theed. He had heard tales of the beautiful human city. The Gungan legends said that humans were ugly creatures with hairy heads, eyes on the front of their heads, and ears that were barely visible. Theed was where they governed the surface, and no Gungan was to ever set foot on its streets for fear of being captured and tortured. “Yoomins no likey Gungans,” said Jar Jar to Qui-Gon. “Mesa scared me no makey outa dare. Me stayin’ here, and bidding you farewell.”

“Thank you for your service, Jar Jar,” said Obi-Wan. “You truly are a great navigator.” Kenobi winked at Jinn. Jar Jar blinked hard, nodded and displayed his goofy, toothy smile.

“But you must come with us,” said Qui-Gon. Obi-Wan suddenly changed from a smile to questioning smirk. “You are our humble servant, remember. And, besides, the Force brought us together for a reason.”

“Mesa?”

“Master, clearly that reason has been seen,” pleaded Kenobi. “And besides, this is a dangerous mission. I would hate to put Jar Jar here in harm’s way.”

“Mister Obi-Wan is sayin true,” said Binks. “Mesa takin’ da bongo and – ”

“And what, Jar Jar?” asked Qui-Gon. “Go back to the Gungan city to be arrested and worse? Go back to the lake shore where who knows what the Trade Federation army has planned?” Jar Jar brought his hands to his beak.

Slowly, he started speaking. “Okey day. Mesa goin wichoo,” decided Jara Jar. Obi-Wan rolled his eyes and piloted the vehicle toward the city rising against the horizon.

“A wise choice, my Gungan friend,” said Qui-Gon.

The beach they had arrived at was rocky and free of any people. “Over there,” said Qui-Gon pointing to a tree lined area along the shore line. “We’ll hide the sub and make our way into the city on foot.” As the boat’s bottom scraped along the sand, the three passengers hopped out and began their journey toward Theed.

“I sense something dark is coming,” said Obi-Wan. “The same foreboding I felt on the Federation ship.”

“Dissen lovely,” quipped Jar Jar, ignoring his human counterparts and marveling at seeing the human capital for the first time with his own eyes.

Ahead of them rose a massive hillside, several hundred kilometers across, carpeted in lush green grasses and wildflowers

at the edge of Theed. The ground was virgin, and the stark contrast of untouched fields kissing the edge of the beautiful bustling city made it look as if there was a clear decision made to end the metropolis where it did and allow nature to overlook her in the form of greenery to one side and blue waters on the other.

“Here’s where the fun begins,” said Obi-Wan nodding toward the vast pasture. Over the top of the hill, the front line of the Trade Federation army crested and was plodding slowly across the green grass.



CHAPTER 19

“It’s time to go, highness,” said Captain Panaka, resisting the urge to grab the young queen by her arm and physically move her at that moment.

“My fate will be no different than that of my people,” Amidala said, hiding the tremble in her voice, belying her absolute dread. The report came twenty minutes before, that the Trade Federation army was spotted making its way toward Theed, and the last communique a moment ago reported that the military forces were making their way toward the palace. Sio Bibble, Tang Hagen and other advisors stood at the window and waited.

“You’ve been here too long already. The Federation army is on our streets. They’re heading in this direction.” Sio Bibble had given up trying to sound rational and panic colored his every word.

Screams suddenly echoed in the streets just outside the palace doors. Security volunteers had created a blockade around the palace and hundreds of loyal men and women joined them as

civilians but they were not prepared for what was rolling down the main thoroughfare toward them. Hundreds of skeleton evoking robots, holding blaster rifles leveled at hip height, preceded dozens of tanks which sported three large canons. As they marched through the Grand Archway named for Kwilaan, the first leader of Theed, they dispersed. Citizens who stood on the streets were pushed roughly by the droids and pulled into groups, to have electrobinders put on their wrists before taken into custody.

Groups of battle droids kicked and blasted open doors, with no regard for maintaining the structures, while searching for humans who hid from their invaders. The cries of children began to rise above the cacophony as the tanks hovered off the square and down alleyways.

Two tanks settled in front of the palace and took a ready position. The security force and volunteers pulled tighter together in opposition and obstinance. “You may not enter the palace!” shouted one of the guards dressed in a Naboo uniform.

OOM-9, a B-1 droid with a red command stripe painted on its torso, strode up to the maroon clad man at the front of the crowd. The droid increased the volume setting on his vocoder to ensure he was heard throughout the square and pushed his pointy “finger” into the man’s leather armored chest. “I’m sorry, I didn’t hear you,” said the robot commander with a nasally rasp.

“You may not enter the palace. You and your army are not welcome here.” The man swallowed hard and waited. A

mechanical whir came from the neck joint of the B-1 as the droid cocked its head slightly to the side.

“That’s not what my orders say. You have five seconds to move.” OOM-9 said again: “Five.”

“We aren’t going anywhere,” said the guard.

“Four,” the B-1 spat.

“We are loyal-”

“Three,” interrupted the droid.

“To her highness-”

“Two.” The robot’s voice was steady.

“Queen-”

“One.”

“Amidala.” That was the last word the guard uttered as OOM-9 fired a single blast from its rifle into the man’s belly. He dropped to the ground, and the crowd erupted with terror. Many of the gathered security force and volunteers dove out of harm’s way. Some ran. Others tightened up their backs and redoubled their resolution.

The commanding droid pushed its way through the crowd and approached the door to the palace. It knocked with a metal clank politely on the massive entryway.

Queen Amidala, Panaka, and Bibble watched from the beautiful stained glass window in the throne room that overlooked the courtyard. Governor Bibble’s mouth hung agape in shock while Captain Panaka squeezed his fists. Padme Amidala

maintained a stoic appearance as her face, hidden by the thick white paint, flushed hot in a mix of fear, rage and sadness.

“It’s too late,” said the Queen solemnly. “I’ve failed.”

“We have to get you to safety,” said Panaka, this time with a militaristic grunt to his order. “We must leave now. Through the catacombs.” Theed Palace was built with an array of tunnels below it, which led to various exits. Some led to the street, some to other parts of the royal residence, some to the underground plasma mines, and others led hundreds of meters beyond the walls to secret hidden doors throughout the city.

The Queen stood still, considering her options. “You are no good to your people captured or dead,” said Bibble.

“He’s right,” said Panaka. “Let’s get to safety, and then we will figure out your next move.”

An explosion rocked the palace. Panaka instinctively tackled the queen and covered her while Bibble rushed to the window.

“The tanks have opened fire on the palace doors. They must’ve broken through!” shouted the Governor. He pointed out the window and stared as several dozen battle droids poured into the building. He gazed out at the scene, unable to describe what he was seeing as he watched the guards open fire on droids while the volleys were returned. Robots, men, and women fell lifelessly to the street as the first battle ever on the streets of Theed began.

Amidala pulled herself up, grabbing the throne for support. Panaka checked his communicator as it hissed with static. This

time, he did grab his queen's arm and began to urge her toward a panel in the wall just off to the side of the main doors to her office.

"Wait," she said. "Let's keep that secret." She heard the metallic clash of robotic feet making their way quickly to the throne room.

"But we have no time!" said Panaka.

"That's right, Captain," she said. "Time has run out. For this round."

It didn't take long for battle droids to make it up the stairs and into the throne room led by OOM-9.

"Surrender or be destroyed, Your Highness," intoned the battle droid – the same commander who moments ago murdered Amidala's devoted security guard on the street. Panaka pulled his blaster from his holster.

Battle droids fanned out behind their commander and took positions around the perimeter of the throne room. The handful of other advisors and politicians who were with the Queen put their hands above their heads.

"Drop the weapon," said one of the B-1s as, in unison, the droid soldiers began to advance slowly into the center of the room, forcing the group of humans together into the center. Panaka bent down and placed his shiny silver gun onto the floor.

The robot commander approached Amidala, holstered its rifle on its back and extended its arm forward. Amidala didn't move, Bibble flinched, and Panaka stepped forward but was obstructed quickly by two battle droids that walked in front of him.

A blue holographic image of Nute Gunray appeared on the projector built into the palm of the battle droid's hand. "Report, Commander?" said Gunray.

"Viceroy, we have captured the Queen," the droid said. "You may start your landing."

"Ah, victory!" the Neimoidian said.

"How will you explain this invasion to the Senate?" shouted Sio Bibble at the hologram. The image of Gunray turned to face the Governor.

"I am glad you asked. The queen and I will sign a treaty that will legitimize our occupation here. I have assurances that it will be ratified by the Senate."

"I will not cooperate," the Queen spoke.

"Now, now, Your Highness," said Gunray with mock sincerity in his voice. "I have studied you and your culture. In time, the suffering of your people will persuade you to see our point of view." Another explosion from outside the Palace rattled the walls. Screams echoed in the courtyard. The Queen's jaw tightened. "Commander?" issued the Viceroy.

"Yes, sir?" said OOM-9

"Process them," hissed Gunray as his image flickered out.

"Roger roger," replied the droid commander, closing its hand and reaching again for the rifle strapped to its back. With its free hand, OOM-9 pointed to a droid standing nearby. "Captain, take them to camp number four."

“Roger roger,” said the robot captain, stepping forward and shoving the group of humans toward the ornate wide opening through which the droids had entered the room.



CHAPTER 20

The Montas Complex was well-lit, even in the middle of the Coruscant night, making shadows in which to hide that much harder to come by for Darth Maul. The mass of buildings took up nearly half a square kilometer and were piled close to two thousand levels above the surface. Shaped by multiple pyramids which appeared beautifully jammed together, making them seem randomly arranged, each floor was an entire single-level mansion, a residence for the rich who visited the capital planet. In gaps that formed between the triangles, ornate gardens grew as courtyards. The outside walls were sheer and painted in reflective silver and gold, with the occasional jutting balconies and decorative ledges. It was gaudy and modern all at once, in an effort to provide comfort to the ultrawealthy. As a result of its pointy façade, the floodlights, which projected onto and from the building in multiple directions, created natural, sparse pockets of darkness around the various windows that speckled the compound. Maul waited in a dark slice on the twentieth floor, pressed against a wall

outside a window of Hego Damask the Second's residence and perilously close to the edge of a fall that would lead to his death.

Maul spent much of the evening watching the entry to the *Wild Fathier* restaurant waiting for Damask to emerge after his dinner with Senator Clovis. The Sith apprentice watched them arrive, and for the three hours they spent inside, Maul meditated with his eyes focused on each lifeform that came and went, until he saw Damask leave with three armed guards in deep blue robes and helmets that hid their faces.

From what Maul could make out, Damask was as old and frail as Sidious had described. It was not because he had an old face. The Muunilist people (known as Muun) had longish heads with pale skin and barely discernable features which made them generally appear elderly. It was his walk that gave away his age. As most Muun were, he was taller than the average humanoid by almost half a meter, but he was hunched over severely at the waist bringing his eye line down to that of a man. He wore deep red robes that were common among the Banking Clan, with a collar that reached up to near the top of his head. Damask used a cane to drive his walk and appeared to be pained by each step. He seemed to be a target not worthy of Maul's skills if not for his master's warning to the contrary.

He followed Damask back to the Montas Complex and watched as he cleared security to enter. From the moment he disappeared into the building, Maul began to make his way up the outside of the complex to the twentieth level, where Sidious told

him he made his residence. Like a mountain climber making his way from jutting rock to open crevasse, the Zabrak started at street level and relied on his athleticism and his mastery of the Force to make huge leaps from point to point.

Maul was a wise assassin. He made his moves only when air cars flew near to avoid being spotted on security droid screens. Figuring the actual murder and disposal would be swift, he played the long game never sacrificing speed or safety for stealth.

Another speeder taxi buzzed close to him, and Maul worked his way over the edge of this particular pyramid and into a dark corner of the courtyard for Damask's residence. The Sith flattened his back against the wall behind a Muunilisti ganglefruit tree when a light came on in the window across the plaza. He looked down at himself and was relieved to note that the light did not reach and expose him. Maul's black robes covered his black tunic and black tattooed red face. The only thing on Maul's person that was not black was the silver hilt of the lightsaber that rested against his leg, as it hung from his belt, behind a fold in his cloak.

The light switched off and then another came on in a room next to it, and through the window he saw Damask walking slowly with a beverage in hand. He was coming toward the door to enter the courtyard. "He's going to make it easy for me," said Maul under his breath, as he squinted his eyes and put a hand on his saber.

The door slid open, and the silhouette of the elderly Muun filled the entryway. He had the cane in his left hand and a teacup in his right. Damask took one step out of the door and stopped.

“I know you are out here,” he called in a deep, dark voice. “And I know you’ve been watching me all night.”

Maul froze. He quickly contemplated every appropriate next move considering a fast and vicious attack, maintaining his position and waiting, or responding to the Muun. He decided he would wait.

Damask took a few steps forward to a stone table which was illuminated from above when he reached it. He placed the cup down and grunted as he took a seat in one of the two chairs, which were set up next to it.

“Oh, please make it easier for both of us. I know why you are here,” Damask said.

Maul’s face twisted into a scowl at the first thought he had: the possibility that his master had sold him out and set him up.

Damask sipped his Rodian tea and casually breathed in the night air. He leaned back in his chair. If he did truly know why Darth Maul was there, then he understood that he was there to kill him, but his posture showed no sign of fear. Perhaps it was resignation. After a few long moments, Damask spoke again, his voice almost soothing in its baritone. “Darth Maul. Lord of the Sith. Child of Dathomir. Apprentice to Darth Sidious.”

The Zabrak felt those words like a punch to his stomach. He held his breath and squinted his yellow eyes. Not only was he not

accustomed to having his presence known until just before he committed the murders, which he was commissioned to execute, but no one knew who he was. In fact, no one other than his master had uttered his name in the years since he became an apprentice. The very sound of his name being spoken by another voice fell on his ears in an unexpectedly exciting way. “I know who you are,” Damask called to the darkness. “Do you know who I am, Lord Maul?”

Fully aware that his voice would give away his location, Maul put a hand on his lightsaber hilt at his belt before steadily returning: “You are Hego Damask, the Second, Chief of the Banking Clan.”

“That’s right,” said Damask, looking into his teacup before taking a sip. There was an interminable silence while the elderly banker continued his thought. “I assume that is all he told you.” He offered a large, close lipped smile that creased his long face. Then he let out a small, barely audible chuckle smothered in pity. “Of course, it is.”

Maul was suddenly seething. He pulled his lightsaber from his belt and held it in front of him and emerged from the shadows. “He also told me to kill you and to make sure your remains are never found.” Maul ignited the hilt and two red laser blades emerged – one from each side – creating a six foot long double-sided lightsaber.

Instead of cowering in fear or begging for his life, as Maul had come to expect from his victims, Damask simply broke out

into an enormous laugh that echoed off the walls of his courtyard. “I love your saber staff,” he finally said, as his eyes showed a sinister happiness and his voice lilted in admiration. “Originally designed and used by Exar Kun during the Great Sith War. Most impressive.”

Maul said nothing. His expression subtly shifted to a curious stare. The saber hummed with power as he took up an attack stance and breathed easily through his nose, focusing on his first move.

“It’s a beautiful weapon, boy. And in your powerful hands, I imagine it is as deadly as it looks.” Damask dropped the smile and narrowed his eyes. “But do you know how to use it?”

Maul had so many questions for the Muun sitting in front of him, but his training told him that now was not the time for answers. He was built to not ask questions but simply execute the task at hand. He spun the lightsaber twice effortlessly in his hand and whipped it over his head in a forward motion to strike down his target. In a wave that belied his elderly appearance, Damask blocked the blow with his cane. Sparks flew from the black staff as Damask pushed it up at Maul without leaving his seat.

With no time to consider the speed of his opponent, his unseen strength, or the material of his staff that allowed him to defend a lightsaber attack, Maul leapt onto the table, switched off one of the two blades and came down again with a two handed overhead chopping motion. Again, Damask blocked it with his cane. With his free hand the elderly Muun reached up and pushed against the

night air, thrusting Maul across the courtyard with the Force. The Zabrak crashed hard against a wall several meters away and landed firmly, his back on the ground. He watched as Damask stood slowly from his chair.

“Who are you?” hissed Maul regaining his stance. Damask’s use of the Force, as threatening and powerful as it was, excited Maul. Perhaps his first Jedi kill was at hand.

“I’ve been waiting for this moment to arrive,” said Damask pushing himself up from the table. “I guess I’m not surprised your master sent you to do the deed. That seems his style.” He walked with a great deal of effort, and reliant on the black cane, toward Maul who was yet to reignite his blades. “You are stronger than I had imagined. Sidious has taught you well.” Damask inched closer. “But you are unwise to lower your defenses!”

In unison with his last word, the Muun fired blue lightning bolts from his left hand. Maul attempted to ignite his saber to absorb the Force energy – as his studies had taught him – but he was caught off guard. The web of lightning wrapped around Maul’s chest. He felt his heart freeze and his joints sizzle. He dropped his lightsaber and stumbled back against the wall he had just been thrown into. The attack ended with Maul exhausted and Damask laughing.

“I take it back,” the Muun said. “You are not as strong as I had thought. And not as bright.”

Maul was furious. Not only was he caught off guard, on the losing side of a duel and in physical pain, but he was now insulted by the very target he was there to eliminate.

“I would have expected more from Sidious,” Damask continued as he knelt down slowly to pick up Maul’s lightsaber hilt. “I thought I had taught him better.”

Maul’s eyes widened. More questions flooded his mind, but he pushed them out to allow pure hatred to fill him. There was no room to process the uncertainty of who Damask was and the implication that Maul’s own master was the elderly Muun’s apprentice. Maul hissed a breath inward. Pulling the pain from his aching bones, he could almost see it turn into dark energy inside him. He felt it course through his every blood vessel and reveled in the power it created as he slowly pushed himself back onto his feet for the second time.

“Your next move better be to kill me,” said Maul. “Because mine will be the end of you.”

Damask smiled with thin lips again. “I don’t want to kill you, boy,” he said. “I want you to join me.” Maul furrowed his brow and his body heaved with dark breaths as he stared at the Muun. “You will call me Master, and I will complete your training. The Second Great Sith War is upon us. Sidious has served me well in sowing the seeds, but he is old. Weak. I no longer have a need for him. You have an important role to play in the revenge of the Sith.”

Maul stood in stunned silence. An assassin had to learn to bury questions in his mind. To be fully effective, he had to focus on the mission and not be distracted by his prey. Every target he had eliminated begged for their life and offered something in exchange for sparing their lives. He'd been offered credits, powerful positions, and amnesty, but this information was confounding. Damask turned Maul's lightsaber hilt slowly in his long-fingered hand and looked hard at the Zabrak with quiet, confident anticipation.

"You have questions, boy," hissed Damask. His deep set eyes softened, and his smile returned. "Ask me."

His mind raced, but the Sith apprentice, aware that he was weak when he was not focused, turned his attention to a plan to complete his mission. When he had a singular vision, he was a weapon, a killing machine. He pushed the newly shared information from his thoughts and prepared to make his next move. Maul began to pace in front of his target. Five steps one way, ten steps the other, over and over. All the while keeping his yellow eyes fixed on Damask.

"I feel the power in you. But I also I feel the conflict. The uncertainty," said Damask.

Maul heard him say it, but as he hardened himself and mustered intense focus, the words were foreign. He was effectively blocking the distraction that Damask was attempting to create. Still pacing, he waited for the moment to perform his attack.

The banking clan leader and self-proclaimed teacher of Darth Sidious was still speaking and revolving the lightsaber hilt on his fingertips.

Maul reached out for and found a current in the Force. He rode it and darted forward at Demask, using the Force to pull the lightsaber hilt from the elderly Muun's hand as he drew closer. When the weapon reached the Zabrak's hand, he ignited one side of the hilt and ran it through Demask's chest in a single motion. Maul ripped the red blade through his mark's torso, inflicting a cauterizing wound that nearly severed it in half.

Damask fell solidly onto his knees and looked up at Maul with pain and intense hatred in his eyes. Maul paused for a moment to draw energy from his victim's despair. Then he twirled the double-bladed weapon in his hands and thrust toward the Muun again, carving off the hand that held the cane he had used to block his first attacks. Damask looked down in shock at his missing limb.

The Zabrak returned his attention to Damask, who had fallen back on his haunches and closed his eyes. He held his remaining hand close to the wound Maul had created from his chest to his hip. Maul was distracted for a moment as he watched Damask close the wound invisibly, reforming the opening torn in his body. Maul had read about the ability to close otherwise mortal wounds with the Force, but he had never seen it done. Within a moment, the Sith apprentice pulled on his focus and jumped in for another attack. He twirled the red blades above his head and came in low,

cutting through Damask's belly. The Muun screamed a gruesome, hollow moan as his body was severed in half.

Maul stood over both halves of the body, the torso half pushing itself up with the stub at the end of one arm. "You can't kill me," said Damask in spitting gasps. "I've studied the texts."

"As have I," said Maul. "They say one must separate the head from the heart." Maul switched off one of the twin blades and reared back, bringing the weapon up high at his side before swinging with every ounce of energy he had through the throat of Hego Damask. The blade cut through flesh, bone and blood like air, dropping the Muun's head with a thud to the ground. Maul swung again as the torso fell away, chopping it in half.

At that moment, Maul heard security drones begin to make their way toward the courtyard. For a fleeting moment, he considered trying to destroy them but his training reminded him that that was a risk that he should avoid. He quickly switched off his lightsaber, pulled his hood over his horned head and rode on the Force to make the long leap to a nearby shadowy crevasse above Damask's apartment. He stayed hidden and contemplated how he would get rid of the body as was part of his mission.

But it was too late.

Four security drones circled the courtyard and pointed their camera faces down at the carnage that moments ago was Hego Damask the Second, Chief of the Banking Clan. Even if he could eliminate the corpse in its multiple pieces, it was already captured on security cam, and the proof had been recorded. He had

completed his primary goal, but he had failed in eliminating the evidence.

His master would not be pleased. Realizing that time was not on his side, Darth Maul quickly made his way down the Montas Complex and disappeared into the Coruscant night.



CHAPTER 21

OOM-9 pushed Queen Amidala every so often with the butt of its rifle as he marched her and her staff through the streets of Naboo on their way to Camp Four. The internment site was set up on the outskirts between the lake and the grassy hill that surrounded the eastern side of the city. As they made their way through the archway that marked the edge of the city, the droid captors fell under attack.

Three battle droids that took up the rear of the battalion were sliced in half by a green lightsaber blade, and two that flanked the right side were cut down by a blue one.

“Protect the Queen!” shouted OOM-9 in a nasally tone. On the droid’s command, the remaining eight robots created a perimeter circle around Amidala, Panaka, Bibble, Hagen and three other advisors. Jar Jar Binks loped into the chaos, picked up a battle droid blaster, and examined it like a child with a new toy.

“Put that down,” called Qui-Gon Jinn, noticing the Gungan from the corner of his vision. Jar Jar’s face looked sad

momentarily before he tossed it at his feet in front of him. When the blaster hit the ground, it discharged in the direction of the droids and their prisoners, clipping OOM-9's gun-toting right arm, blowing it off its body. Chaos continued, and the rest of the battle droids opened fire.

Realizing it was too risky to deflect the laser bolts being fired in their direction back at the droids surrounding the human captives, Obi-Wan raised his free hand and connected with the Force to push two of the remaining droids back and to the ground. Qui-Gon ran around Obi-Wan's back and chopped through them as they lay on the pavement.

The droids continued a barrage of fire at Obi-Wan. Jinn slid feet first in front of the firing line and below the blaster salvos, swiping his blade through the legs of two more battle droids. As they lost their footing, they toppled to the ground still firing wildly. From his prone position on the end of the street, Qui-Gon Force pushed the fallen droids as far away as he could and into a brick-faced wall.

Captain Panaka bent down and picked up a discarded droid rifle, looked it over, and opened fire from behind the remaining four droids. With a single blast from the Captain, one of the droids rocked forward lifelessly. Qui-Gon leapt to his feet and swung in a Z-shaped motion taking out two more while a second shot from Panaka took out the last infantry-level droid.

Obi-Wan Kenobi strolled up to OOM-9, who was now literally and figuratively disarmed. “Surrender?” Kenobi asked smugly.

“Surrender is not in my programming,” said the red-striped battle droid.

“How about defeat?” said Obi-Wan swinging his lightsaber through the neck joint of the droid commander.

“Woah,” said Jar Jar. “Yousa guys bombbad!”

“We have only a few moments before reinforcements arrive,” said Qui-Gonn. “Your Highness, I presume?” he said to Queen Amidala.

“Did the ceremonial makeup give it away?” she said. Jinn ignored the sarcasm, smiled tightly, nodded and began urging them out of the archway, away from the vast field and closer to the city walls. “Thank you for rescuing us.”

“We aren’t out of this yet. We are the ambassadors for the Supreme Chancellor,” Qui-Gonn said.

Sio Bible, visibly shaken from the attack and all the events of the last several days, stepped forward angrily. “Your negotiations seemed to have failed, Ambassador.”

“The negotiations never took place,” Jinn said calmly. “It is urgent we make contact with the Republic.”

“That’s going to be difficult,” Panaka said. “They’ve knocked out all of our communications. We lost them during our last transmission to Senator Palpatine.”

“Well, I am sure the Republic must be aware that something is going on here then,” said Kenobi.

“Do you have transports?” asked Qui-Gonn.

“Only in the main hangar,” said the Queen.

“This way,” urged Panaka, nodding north toward the outskirts of the city, where the enormous royal hangar could be seen.

“Flying out of here is our next best option,” said Qui-Gon. “Let’s go.”

The group huddled close to a wall that led around the city. At the end of the passage, some six hundred meters away was the vast opening to the main hangar connected to the palace. They scurried along, hunched low and in silence.

As they finally arrived at the edge of the hangar opening, Panaka, Amidala, Jinn, and Kenobi peered into the bay. “What do you have in there?” asked Qui-Gon.

“A handful of N-1 fighters are ready. A bunch more are in storage above the floor,” said Panaka, quietly surveying the enormous hangar. “And the Queen’s Royal Starship looks like it’s still intact.”

“Let’s make our way to the Queen’s ship,” said Qui-Gon.

“It looks like it won’t be easy to get in there. Look at all those droids,” Panaka stressed. Scattered throughout the hangar were several groups of four to six battle droids, standing guard around pilots and Naboo guards who had been captured. Some were on their knees, others stood with their wrists in binders. In all, there were at least twenty-five battle droids on duty in the hangar and

six able-bodied Naboo pilots. “There’s too many of them,” said Panaka.

“That won’t be a problem,” said Qui-Gon. Kenobi smiled and was ready to accept the challenge. Jinn turned to the Queen and said, “Under the circumstances, I suggest you come to Coruscant with us.”

“Thank you, ambassador. But my place is here. With my people.”

Qui-Gon, who was half a meter taller than the young queen, looked down at her and gave a commanding stare. “They will kill you if you stay.”

“They wouldn’t dare!” said Sio Bibble, louder than he should have. Panaka and Obi-Wan shot him a silencing look.

“They need her to sign a treaty to make this invasion of theirs legal,” Panaka said in hushed tones. “They can’t afford to kill her.”

Jinn shook his head. “There is something else behind this, Your Highness. There is no logic to the Federation’s move here. My feelings tell me they will destroy you.”

Bibble was struck by the Jedi referencing “a feeling.” He had heard of the Jedi being able to see the future, and if this was one of those times, his queen was in trouble. At the same instant, he was also struck by the realization that if she left the planet, with Palpatine off-world, he would be next in command and most likely forced to take the lead on negotiating with the invaders. This immediately increased his already heightened stress level

even, though he knew it was the right move under the circumstances. “Either choice presents grave danger,” he said quietly. “However, our only hope may be for the Senate to side with us. Senator Palpatine could use your help.”

Amidala considered her options. Jinn spoke up. “If we are to leave, Your Highness, it must be now.” The pressure mounted on her mind.

She looked down at the ground and hoped the answer would magically present itself. It did not and, finally, she said, “I will plead our case to the Senate.”

“I’m coming with you,” said Panaka.

“And... I will stay behind,” choked Sio Bibble.

“Be careful, Governor,” Amidala said, placing a gentle hand on his arm. “I recommend you return to the internment camp and surrender. They will want some semblance of victory, if we want to keep our city safe. Do not sign anything. Do not negotiate. Be strong and represent Naboo.”

“We are a brave people, highness,” Bibble said. “It is you who must be careful. We need you.” He smiled hard and turned with the remaining advisors to head back to where they were rescued shortly before.

Obi-Wan, Qui-Gon, Panaka, and Jar Jar crowded together on the edge of the hangar.

“We’ll need to free the pilots,” said Panaka.

“I’ll deal with that,” said Kenobi.

Qui-Gon began giving orders. “Captain, you and I will protect the queen. Make your way to her cruiser. Obi-Wan, you free as many fighter pilots as you can. We’ll need them to cover us on the way out.”

Obi-Wan nodded and ran almost recklessly headlong into the hangar. Firing up his lightsaber, he slashed his way through the very first group of four battle droids he reached. Before the robots responded, he made it to another group and took down three more.

The hangar erupted in confusion. “Now’s our chance,” said Qui-Gon. “Go!”

Panaka took the queen’s arm and began sneaking around the far side of the hangar toward the gleaming silver spaceship. The craft was a reflective, shiny mirror-surfaced luxury cruiser, which tapered to a pointed front and was flanked by two smooth wings with tubular engines. It filled a third of the hangar and was positioned near the front, making it easier to reach than any other craft. The now-confused battle droids opened fire towards them, as well as Obi-Wan. The two Jedi deflected laser bolts back toward their assailants taking them down quickly. They were less concerned about the military personnel – the pilots – and their safety, but the Jedi were conscious of keeping them out of harm’s way where they could.

Within a very long sixty seconds, Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon had dispatched nearly all of the robot militia, and they joined Panaka and Amidala near her ship. Around the gangway to the silver spacecraft were six battle droids and a red-striped droid

commander. The battle droids stood still with their guns held high against their chests.

“Halt!” called the droid commander. Qui-Gon strode up the robot and looked it straight in its visual sensors.

“I’m ambassador for the Supreme Chancellor, and I am taking these people to Coruscant,” he said, ignoring the robot carnage that had just taken place.

“*Where* are you taking them?” asked the droid.

“To Coruscant.”

“To Coruscant?” said the droid again. Its acerbic circuits kicked in. “That does not compute. Ahhh... wait... You are under arrest!”

Without a moment’s hesitation, Qui-Gon sliced through the command droid, Panaka fired on the two nearest to him, and Obi-Wan used the Force to push the remaining droids hard against the ship breaking parts off them as they fell to the floor.

“We’re going to need a pilot,” snorted Jinn. Panaka looked around the hangar and saw that the Queen’s personal chauffeur, Ric Olie, was among the captured. He and Obi-Wan released the half a dozen pilots and quickly ran toward the ship.

Qui-Gon waited for everyone to board. “I need a handful of fighters to cover us,” he shouted as several pilots climbed aboard the nearest yellow and silver N-1 fighters parked against the wall. Shaped like beautiful darts, the fighters looked more ceremonial than battle-ready. “Where’s Jar Jar?” he said. Obi-Wan shrugged and ran up the gangway into the ship. “Jar Jar!” Jinn shouted.

The Gungan was cowering in the corner just in front of the large silvery craft. He was crouched down with his hands over his ears and was visibly shaking. “Get on the ship, Jar Jar. Right now!” He was shouting as the engines whined to life. Jar Jar did not move. “You can stay here and die, or come with me. Now move!”

Binks remained hunched over and practically crawled ten meters into the cruiser. Jinn followed and pressed the button to retract the gangway and seal the ship. He pushed the Gungan into a small hold to his right where half a dozen droids sat plugged into chargers. “Now stay here and keep out of trouble,” Jinn scolded. Then the Jedi trotted toward the cockpit where Ric Olie was settling in behind the controls. “Get us out of here,” he said, crossed his arms and stood next to Panaka. Kenobi took the co-pilot’s chair next to Olie, and the Queen walked slowly, still shell shocked, to her chamber aboard her spaceship.



CHAPTER 22

Yoda, the ancient Jedi master, sat in his simple apartment. No lights were lit. No sound entered through the closed doors and windows. As he had for almost eight hundred years, he meditated and communed with the Force.

Sifo-Dyas's words had been especially powerful over the last several days since the Trade Federation began their blockade of Naboo. He had a hard time admitting it, but he too felt some sort of disturbance in the Force. Something was happening. Something was not right. In the generations since he had become a Jedi Knight and then Master, he had only known relative peace in the galaxy. There was always the occasional scuffle, uprising or unrest on one of the thousands of systems near and far, and the Jedi always responded as they were sworn to: visit, observe, negotiate a settlement and resolve the conflict as peacefully as possible.

In his heart, Yoda felt that what was happening on Naboo was not a typical political maneuver. There was something dark

clouding his ability to gain a clear vision, which in and of itself made the events more troubling. Not since the Great Sith War – the War of the Fittest – had the Jedi had to raise a lightsaber in an act of military combat, and Sifo Dyas was right: if the Republic or one of its worlds needed to be defended, the Jedi were not equipped nor numerous enough to handle the task. He wondered if that was in fact their remit.

Yoda scrunched up his face and squeezed his eyes closed focusing on Sifo's comments. As he inhaled deeply through his nose, he felt a sudden pressure in his chest. He exhaled every last bit of his breath and slumped over. He felt a cold spot well on the back of his neck and somewhere in the distance he heard a clap of thunder. None of it was tangible. All of it was relayed through the Force.

His eyes opened wide, and he looked around, unable to see anything physical in the darkened room. He leapt off the tuffet and scrambled toward door. Then a whisper very close to his ear from an unseen specter hissed. "It begins..." was all it said.

Yoda had never felt what had just struck him. Something had broken in the Force. Something unseen and perhaps incorporeal had shifted a fragile balance that kept darkness and light separated. He could only describe it to himself as the line between dawn and darkness becoming clearly binary and suddenly shattered. The feeling was so remote and *frightening*.

As a Jedi Master, Yoda had never allowed the feeling of fear touch him. It was as foreign to him as any of the events that had

just occurred. He pushed the feeling out as soon as he righted himself. Yoda breathed deeply again and pulled his back tight to stand as tall as his one meter frame would allow. He swallowed hard, held out his hand and used the Force to draw his cane from the corner of the room and into his hand. Something was out of balance in the Force.

He decided he would keep this experience to himself.



CHAPTER 23

As soon as Queen Amidala's J-Type Nubian spacecraft broke free of the Naboo atmosphere, the Neimoidian Lucrehulk battle cruisers opened fire on it. Dozens of droid vulture fighters shot from the hangar bays of the two closest Federation battleships and took formation up behind the silver spaceship.

"Where are our fighters?" muttered Ric Olie nervously looking at the multiple readouts in front of him. He was an older, experienced pilot with a bald head, wild eyes and wore a classic leather pilot's suit. "This is a yacht, not a military craft!"

"Don't you have any weapons?" asked Kenobi urgently.

"Why would the Queen's cruiser have weapons?" asked Olie.

"Why wouldn't it?" Obi-Wan said under his breath.

"There's the blockade!" Ric Olie stated looking straight ahead. The Federation ships had moved to make an instant jump to lightspeed dangerous if not impossible. "We'll have to get past it to get out of here."

Qui-Gon leaned in and put his hands on the back of his Padawan's chair.

Suddenly six N-1 fighters popped up behind them and started breaking into a formation to take out the Federation Vultures that had joined the attack. The Naboo fighter pilots, however, had very little battle experience, and two were destroyed as soon as they engaged. Olie took notice of this on the battle readout. "They aren't going to make it," he said with a resigned tone of voice.

Olie pulled back on the flight yoke and made a move to fly above the Lucrehulk in front of them. "If we make it past that one, we can make the jump. Punch in the coordinates for Coruscant." Obi-wan swiveled his chair and began tapping information into the navi-computer.

"We're set! Get us clear!" called Kenobi. Suddenly the ship was rocked from behind.

"Communications array is destroyed," Ric Olie called.

"Hold steady," urged Obi-Wan.

Another blast hit the cruiser.

"Shield generator's been hit," said Olie. His eyes widened as he glanced down to see what the damage report said. "Looks bad."

"How bad?" asked Qui-Gon.

"Pretty bad," said the pilot. "I'm releasing the droids. Shield is nearly gone."

In a hold at the back of the ship where Jar Jar stood, the six robots snapped to life. They were bullet shaped, about a meter

high and had two legs with small magnetic wheels shooting down from below their domed tops, straight down their sides. One by one, the lights on their single eyed “heads” switched on, and they all beeped and booped to attention.

Binks watched in amazement as they released themselves from their slots, rolled to the center of the aisle and made their way to a door that led to the outside of the space yacht. They each had their own coloring. One was red and white, another was yellow, a third was orange and black, and a fourth was green. The last two both bumped into Jar Jar, who was in their path. The first was solid black and the last was blue, white and silver. It whistled loudly and impatiently at the Gungan.

“How wude!” said Binks as the last droid made its way into the hatch to go out into space onto the ship.

On top of the spaceship, a hatch that held the shield generator was sparking. The black carbon scoring of the laser blast it took was the only part of the ship that was not a gleaming reflective silver. Around the hatch, the six droids, sealed magnetically to the hull, bent at the shoulder below their domed top, and were working feverishly to repair the damage. They each had silver or black arms jutting from the front of their cylindrical bodies, twisting knobs and connecting wires in the hatch.

Meanwhile, the Lucrehulks continued to fire.

“If that shield generator doesn’t get fixed, we’ll be dead!” said Panaka.

“I know, I know,” said Olie. “Just need to make it past that battleship right there!”

Without a shield, any direct blast would be a fatal blow. The N-1 fighters had been quickly and completely obliterated and, as a result, there was no cover for the Queen’s cruiser. Four Federation Vultures had turned their attention to the Nubian and quickly caught up to her. Similar to the invading battle droids operating speeder platforms on the surface of the planet, the Vultures flew a similar pattern: come in at the target, open fire, accelerate past, then turn out and around for another pass until the mark is destroyed.

On the first pass, the Vulture droids connected a few successful salvos. Three of the droids were blown off the back of the shield generator hatch, and one of the engines was hit but not destroyed. The Vultures flew out ahead of the Nubian and began to make their next run.

“We are losing droids fast,” said Obi-Wan.

“Shield generators almost on line,” called Olie. “If they’re not up by the time we come over that Lucrehulk, we’ll be obliterated.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” said Obi-Wan. Qui-Gon still stood stoically and silently.

“I have to slow down to give the droids more time,” the pilot said. Panaka stiffened up and began to pace the hallway between the cockpit and the droid hold nervously.

The three remaining droids worked on fixing the generator. The black and orange one resoldered a fried circuit board, the red and white one tuned the plasma frequency harmonizer, and the blue, silver and white one was frantically reattaching wiring.

The Vultures were back for their next run. In two easy shots, the orange and black droid was destroyed. The ship was rocked by another blast that connected near the hyperdrive console and was strong enough to disconnect the red and white robot who floated off into space. The silver and blue droid redoubled its efforts. As a newer astromech model, it benefited from an ability to process the urgency of a situation and make decisions to prioritize work on its own. It had to select between repairing the comms unit or the shield generator. It chose the preservation over communication. The droid quickly discovered that the circuit board that activated the shields was complete enough to operate, the wiring would be fine for a short period of time but the frequency harmonizer was critical to making the generator work.

The Vulture droid fighters were on their way back for a third pass.

With a quick calculation, the astromech robot rerouted some power from one system to another and suddenly the shield frequency harmonizer came back online.

A light flashed on the panel in front of Ric Olie. “Power’s back!” he said. “That little droid did it! I don’t know what he did, but it worked. Deflector shield is back up – at maximum.”

The Vultures opened fire, but their shots were absorbed by the plasma field shield that had now once again enveloped rear of the ship. The blue, white and silver droid tilted itself back, pushed another wheeled foot out from the bottom of his cylinder-shaped body and rolled back to the hatch from whence it came. The ship swallowed it up and plunged it back into the droid hold. It was alone. All five of its counterparts had been lost. Its dome head swiveled around and took note of the five open compartments. It whined a subtle quiet cry in memory of its fallen compatriots.

“Closing in on the Federation ship,” said Obi-Wan.

“We’re going to make it,” said Olie nervously. A few laser blasts glanced off the shielded ship as they sped past the Lucrehulk. “Punch it!”

The Nubian J-Type rocketed into hyperspace and made the jump toward Coruscant. As soon as the hyperspace star lines took form around the cockpit, more lights flashed on the display. “Bad news,” said Olie. “There’s not enough power to get us to Coruscant. The hyperdrive is leaking.”

“Well at least we are free of the blockade,” said Qui-Gon. “We’ll have to land somewhere to refuel and repair the ship.” He made his way next to Obi-Wan Kenobi who was already studying the system charts looking for a nearby place to land.

“Here, master,” said Obi-Wan. “Tatooine. It’s small, out of the way... poor. On the plus side, the Trade Federation has no presence there.”

Captain Panaka leaned in. “How can you be sure?”

“It’s controlled by the Hutts,” answered Qui-Gon simply.

Panaka stood straight up. “You can’t take her highness there,” he pleaded “The Hutts are gangsters. If they discovered her –”

“It would be no different than if we landed on a system controlled by the Federation,” said Qui-Gon calmly. “Except, the Hutts aren’t looking for her, which gives us the advantage.” Panaka breathed in deeply through his nose as his nostrils flared. He knew Qui-Gon was right.

“I’ll alert the Queen,” said Obi-Wan standing from his chair and exiting the cockpit. Panaka immediately took the seat abandoned by the Jedi Padawan.

“Tatooine it is,” said Ric Olie.

“I don’t like it, Master Jedi,” said Panaka over his shoulder to Qui-Gon, who stared out the cockpit window.

“I don’t like any of this, Captain,” said Qui-Gon.



CHAPTER 24

Maul waited for his master to arrive in the pre-dawn darkness of Coruscant. The glow of the nearest city-sector was visible over the horizon, the grinding of the power plants that comprised the Flats was droning on, and his mind considered how this reunion would transpire.

Normally, Maul would come together with his teacher, simply alert him that whatever mundane chore he had been sent to complete was a success, and then Darth Sidious would send him back to Mustafar to meditate, study, and hone his skills as a weapon of the Sith. This time, there would be things to discuss. The mission was mostly successful in that he sliced Hego Damask the Second, Chief of the Banking Clan, into multiple pieces ensuring his death. The mission was a failure in that he was unable to dispose of the body as was clearly demanded by his master. Surely there would be discussion about the task. But in

addition to the mixed-success of the execution, there was the matter of revelations imparted by Damask.

Darth Maul unconsciously paced backwards and forward, as he often did in preparation for action. It came from his earliest days of combat training with his mother on his home planet of Dathomir. He was taught never to be flat footed; never to be the second to move.

Sidious emerged from the shadows, as he often did, moments after his apprentice arrived. The master walked at his usual metered pace directly toward Maul. His apprentice maintained his preparatory walk, left then right, then back again.

“Something is troubling you, my apprentice,” hissed Sidious. The usual venom that was normal for his tone was somehow more noticeable. “I trust the mission was a success.”

Maul paused but leaned indiscernibly forward on his toes. “Damask was dispatched as you commanded, my master,” he said. “But the body had to be abandoned.”

Sidious scowled. His eyes squinted almost involuntarily, and his shoulders rose slightly. “You have failed me, Lord Maul. Only part of the mission was completed. This will cause me great inconvenience.”

The Zabrak didn’t seem to be bothered by the scolding. He started his pacing again.

“He is destroyed. I cut him into pieces. Security droids arrived quicker than I had anticipated.”

“You truly are a fool,” moaned Sidious.

Maul continued, undeterred by his master's admonishment, and with an aggressive tenor to his own voice he growled back, "You lied to me, Lord Sidious," Maul said, and for the first time, he expressed disrespect in the tone he chose. "You told me your master was Darth Plagueis."

Sidious peaked his eyebrows. "He was," said Sidious simply. "Until you killed him for me last night." Maul was furious. His pacing quickened. "It is true," said Sidious. "He was once my master. I've outgrown my need for him. And for the Sith to rise again, he needed to be ... eliminated."

"But," started Maul, confused for a brief moment. He regained his aggression and continued. "You led me to believe you were the Sith master. There can be only two. Isn't that right, my lord?" Maul once again let contempt color his words.

"Mind how you speak to me, Darth Maul," breathed Sidious. "If I led you to believe anything, it was because you were too ignorant to ask the question." He paused, sensing the irritation of his words permeating his apprentice. "Good. Use your anger. Let it make you stronger." Sidious waited and let the rage in his apprentice peak before he spoke again. "Bear in mind, I have chosen you over my master."

The Zabrak was seething now. His chest rose and fell with each angry breath. "Why shouldn't I kill you now?"

"Quite simply because it is not your destiny." Sidious laughed quietly and turned his back, walking slowly away from Maul. "I may die one day, but it won't be at your hand." Somehow, this

made Maul angrier. “My master was so powerful, he claimed to be able to use the Force to create life. He was such a master of the ‘Ichor,’ as your mother once called it, he could even use it to become nearly immortal.” He paused to let the words infect Maul’s brain. Using the Zabrak term for the Force and reintroducing the memory of bringing his mother’s house down upon her was as effective as it was intentional. “Do you know how old the Sith Master you just murdered was?”

Maul didn’t answer. He was not sure he cared.

“Several hundred standard years, by my calculation,” said Sidious. “Can you imagine what one can learn with centuries of study? The Force, Lord Maul, is still a mystery to us. To the Jedi. To the galaxy. There is so much to know about it. So many things it can do in the right hands. Tell me, did he survive your first attacks?”

The apprentice took a moment before he answered. “He did. He sealed his wounds.”

“So how do you know you killed him?”

“Because I separated his head from his heart,” said Maul.

“Good,” cooed Sidious. “Then you *have* been studying. Imagine what more there is to know. Imagine what more *I* can teach you. That is why you will not kill me. You need me.”

“Perhaps I know all I need to know,” said Maul.

“Perhaps,” agreed Sidious. “But I have prepared you for the revenge of the Sith, and with the end of Lord Plagueis, the time is finally upon us.” Sidious paused. Maul stopped his pacing.

Sidious breathed in the early morning, polluted air and could feel cold anticipation from his apprentice. “With him out of the way, now I am the master. We are nearly ready for the Sith to ascend.” Sidious walked to a ledge overlooking the machinery that churned across the Flats.

A spark crackled in Maul’s mind erasing all the questions he had brought with him. The Rule of Two, the betrayal he felt upon learning his master had a master and the reason he needed to dispatch the body of Hego Damask seemed evaporate – at least for the moment. Instead, Maul’s greatest strength, his ability to focus on pure hatred, saturated his being, and Sidious could sense it. He relied upon it. Maul crossed the platform and joined his master at the railing.

“The moment will present itself shortly, my apprentice,” Sidious said. “Do not leave Coruscant until I give the command.”

The Zabrak apprentice sidled his way next to his master. “At last we will reveal ourselves to the Jedi,” Maul said crafting searing revulsion into his own form of twisted pleasure. “At last we will have our revenge.”



CHAPTER 25

Obi-Wan tapped lightly on the Queen's chamber door. "Your Highness?" he said cautiously.

There was no response. He tried again.

"Your Highness?"

"Yes. Please come in," she said at last. The door slid open and the young Jedi Padawan entered cautiously and respectfully.

Her chambers were simple but elegant. There was a bed, a couch, a wide, squat square table, and a mirror with a smaller stand and chair in front of it where Queen Amidala sat slowly wiping the white ceremonial makeup from her face. She had been caked in the formal face paint for days, forced to reapply regularly. She had to be prepared to speak as Queen Amidala at a moment's notice in the event she needed to greet the ambassadors, the Viceroy or act in any official capacity. It was tiring to be constantly at the ready and lacking sleep did not help either.

Kenobi watched her silently for a moment. Her eyes were a deep brown and looked at once sad and exhausted. He had only seen holoimages of her in full royal regalia and had no idea what the young woman behind the painted visage looked like. In fact, he had almost forgotten that there was a real person behind the regal mask.

She removed the headdress and brown silken hair fell around her shoulders. Immediately her entire look changed. Amidala no longer appeared as the head of state she portrayed herself as. She revealed herself as the young woman she was becoming.

Kenobi was stunned. He was struck by her simple innocence and by the look in her eyes, which was distant and worried. There was power in her face that was juxtaposed by vulnerability. The combination presented as human beauty, and Obi-Wan could not reconcile the waves of feeling that washed over him.

The Jedi, of course, were forbidden from engaging in deep personal relationships. The very thought of traditional attraction was extraneous to him, but he felt something stir inside him. Something completely foreign. Jedi were forbidden from wedding, much less maintaining an affection for another being. Their devotion was to the Force, the Jedi Order, and they were duty-bound to remain faithful to their mission of maintaining peace and justice throughout the galaxy. The Jedi teachings he had studied stated overtly that personal relationships led to attachments that were not only distracting but dangerous. There was an ancient Jedi adage which read:

Fear is a path to the Darkness.

Fear leads to Anger.

Anger leads to Hate.

Hate leads to Suffering.

Kenobi dismissed the strange feeling as best he could and was able to regain focus when the Queen turned in her chair to face him and speak. “Can I help you, Master Jedi?” she said. Her voice was no longer the deep tone she had been using earlier. It was as if her accent was washed away with her makeup, and her voice rose an octave from when he first met her.

“Oh,” he started. “I’m not a Jedi Master.” He felt his face flush, another feeling he had never experienced. His eyes darted away from her for a moment.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’ve never met a Jedi, so I naturally assumed...”

“It’s ok, Your Highness,” he said. “I’m but a Padawan learner. Master Jinn is my teacher.”

She could tell that he was slightly flustered, and, if she was honest with herself, she felt some strange, unintentional spark herself. Perhaps it was the relief of the momentary escape from the problems she was managing or his gray-blue eyes and engaging, nervous smile. Either way, for the first time in days, she felt at ease. “You can call me Padme,” she said.

“And you may call me Obi-Wan,” he returned.

“So, how can I help you, Obi-Wan?”

He had almost completely forgotten why he came to her chambers before he reminded himself to return his focus. “I was coming by to tell you that the ship was damaged as we made our escape. Unfortunately, we will need to stop for repairs if we are to make it to Coruscant.”

She suddenly looked downtrodden. “I should never have left,” she said. “My people need me, and I abandoned them. Now I can’t even complete my mission.”

“We are headed to a small planet called Tatooine,” he said taking an unconscious step toward her. “There is no Trade Federation presence there, and my master believes we can find what we need to make repairs to continue on to the Capital.”

“Is it safe there?” she asked.

He could hear in her voice and sense in her presence that she hoped and needed to believe it was. Since he was not sure, he smiled and said, “I think so.”

“You aren’t fooling me, Obi-Wan,” she said as a smile crept across her lips.

“You are with a Jedi Master, a padawan, and your head of security,” Kenobi said with a little laugh. “We’ll do our best.”

They looked at each other for an uncomfortable moment when there came another knock on the door. “Come in,” Padme called almost relieved.

The door opened up and Captain Panaka stood there with the squat robot that had fixed the shield generator behind him. “I wanted to introduce you to the droid that saved us,” he started as

he walked in. The droid beeped cheerfully and rolled along at the captain's side. "An extremely well put together little droid. Without a doubt, it saved the ship, as well as our lives."

"It is to be commended," said Amidala. "What is its number?"

"R2-D2, Your Highness," said Panaka. The droid let out a warbling welcome.

"Thank you, Artoo-Detoo," she said. The droid beeped a reply and spun its domed head on its body in appreciation. "Obi-Wan tells me we are headed to the Tatooine system."

"I do not agree with the Jedi on this," Panaka said. "It is dangerous. It is a world run by gangsters and crime lords." The Captain was never one to coat his concerns in pleasantries or politically safe terms.

She looked at Obi-Wan. "I trust the Jedi judgement on this," she said. "I am sure they will only do what they feel is best for Naboo."

Panaka looked at Kenobi, shook his head, and left the room without a word. Artoo's domed head swiveled looking at the Jedi and the captain before rolling out the door itself.

"I suppose, I must be leaving as well," said Obi-Wan. "I believe it will only take us a few hours to arrive." He bowed slightly toward the queen.

"Thank you, Obi-Wan," she said gently.

"You are most welcome... Padme," he said and left her chambers.



CHAPTER 26

Viceroy Nute Gunray's ship landed in the massive courtyard at the center of Theed. The Neimoidian shuttle's four legs extended from its underbelly and settled just outside the battle-scarred Royal Palace of Naboo. Quite pleased with himself and how quickly the invasion had achieved its goal of capturing the queen with little or no resistance – as Darth Sidious had instructed – he prepared to wait in the throne room for his next orders.

Gunray boarded a mobile throne that would carry him off the ship and into the palace, built for him by the same species that built the Droideka destroyer droids. It walked on four insectoid legs while carrying a platform with an ornate chair on which the Viceroy made himself comfortable. He exited the back of the shuttle and tasted the Naboo air for the first time. The scent of carbon scoring from laser blasts hung in the air. Rune Haako walked on his own feet behind him.

As they approached the hole blown into the palace during the incursion, a platoon of battle droids took formation behind them

creating a procession. The throne crawled up the stairs and into the great room where the queen had been captured shortly before his arrival.

“Captain!” he called. “Report please.”

OOD-7, a commander level battle droid with a red stripe down its chest approached the Viceroy on his mobile throne. “We have some good news and some bad news, sir,” it said. Immediately, Gunray leaned forward nervously. “The queen has been captured,” the droid continued. “But as she was being taken to Camp Four, per your instruction, the battalion escorting her was attacked.”

“Attacked by ...” he prodded.

“It appears to be the Jedi, sir,” the droid said.

“Where are they now?” Gunray asked urgently and already fearing he knew the response.

“We aren’t sure, sir.” The droid continued. “She seems to have disappeared. We received word of a similar attack in the hangar, and then the queen’s cruiser was identified achieving escape velocity.”

“Enough!” shouted Gunray. “Get me Captain Dofine.”

“Roger roger,” said the droid. It held out its hand, and the holographic image appeared of Dautay Dofine, who had stayed aboard the Lucrehulk.

“Viceroy, I am pleased to see you landed uneventfully,” said Dofine.

“Tell me you’ve captured Queen Amidala’s ship,” Gunray cut him off.

“Well, it’s complicated, Viceroy,” he stammered.

“It’s a simple question,” said Gunray. “Do you have her or not?”

“An unidentified ship did make it past the blockade. I cannot say if it was Queen Amidala with any certainty. It was damaged. However, they were able to make the jump to hyperspace.”

“You idiot!” shouted Gunray. “Do you have any idea where they were headed?”

“As I said, the ship was damaged and their hyperdrive left traces indicating it was leaking. While we don’t know where they were traveling exactly, our systems estimate they did not make it far,” Dofine stated.

The droid commander holding the hologram interrupted. “Darth Sidious requests an update,” it said.

“Send a signal that I will talk to him in one minute,” said Gunray, flustered.

“He is interrupting the transmission, sir” said the droid. With that, the image of Dofine disappeared and was replaced by Darth Sidious.

“My lord,” started Gunray. “The invasion has been successful. We are in complete control of the planet and the capital city.”

“Excellent,” said Sidious. “And Queen Amidala? Has she signed the treaty?”

“She has, erm, disappeared, my lord,” Nute Gunray said, without thinking about how to follow up this piece of information. He continued nervously, “One Naboo cruiser made it past the blockade. We have reason to believe it might possibly have been her.”

“I want that treaty signed,” scoffed Sidious.

Nute panicked. “Um, Lord Sidious, the cruiser made a jump into hyperspace. It is impossible to locate the ship. It is out of range.”

“Not for my apprentice,” said Sidious. Darth Maul stepped into holoimage camera range and crossed his arms. “Lord Maul will find your lost ship. Don’t fail me again, Viceroy. Await my next orders. Don’t let anything else in or out of the system.” The image crackled and faded.

Viceroy Gunray turned to Rune Haako who stood behind him, hands to his mouth, stunned with fear. “This is getting out of hand,” said Gunray. “Now there are two of them.”

Haako shook his head. “We should never have made this bargain.”

PART TWO: RACE TO CORUSCANT

*The fool, The Protector,
The Keeper, The Queen
The Fallen, the Risen
The sight yet unseen
From the darkness, came light
From the light, came new hope
That begins without starting
At despair's steepest slope
— Journal of the Whills, 12:266*



CHAPTER 1

Watto's shop was on the east side of Mos Espa, a port city in the Ogaar Valley. Situated in the bowl between two large mountain ranges, it was susceptible to wind and sand storms, but it was also located in a fairly easy to spot area from orbit of the planet, making it a common first stop for interstellar travelers. Anakin was doing some work on his own before he went to the shop that morning.

Anakin was not only a slave, he was a scavenger. Not only was he a scavenger, he was learning from his master how to be quite a strong negotiator. In the four-plus years he had belonged to Watto, the Toydarian junk dealer, he had learned to create, increase and use his own stash of parts and pieces. He had learned how to trade with other children to upgrade his collection or get parts he needed to complete his projects. He, of course, knew some of his collection was probably stolen from the other children's keepers, locals, or pilots and gangs making their way

through Mos Espa on the sun-dried desert world of Tatooine, and while somewhere in his heart this bothered him, he had also had become comfortable with the notion that the choices others made were not something he could change, and if it led to him achieving his goal, he would have to live with it.

He had a very clear vision of what he wanted to do: he wanted win a pod race.

He was building his own racer and was only a few important parts away from completing it. The pod racers, which Watto had purchased to allow his slave boy to compete, were second- and third-hand junkers. No matter how good a racer the now-eleven year old boy was – and he was an extraordinary racer for a human – the pods he was piloting would be difficult at best to win with. Anakin knew he could win. He knew he *would* win. He had a clear image in his mind of crossing the finish line, covered in Tatooine dust and race exhaust smeared across his face, while being declared the champion. In his fantasies, he was never in any of the pod racers Watto had bartered for. While he couldn't make out all the details, he knew, somehow, that the one in his dreams was the one he was building.

Humans rarely took part in pod racing events, much less ones like the contests on Tatooine which attracted multiple species of pilots with various levels of scruples. The first thing about pod racing that made it a unique competition was that, unlike piloting a starship, no droid assistance was allowed. Even though pod racing was essentially connecting an open air cockpit to two

space-ready engines via long contact cables, the rules strictly forbade any outside intelligence to pilot the vehicle. As a result, only certain races excelled at the high speeds attained in the races. The non-humans known as gymphids, for example, had exquisitely fast brains that gave them an advantage when navigating an often changing terrain at space cruiser speed. Creatures like Dugs used their unique hands and feet to create piloting systems, which could be manipulated extremely quickly and leverage speed and angles in unique ways. Humans, generally, were too slow mentally and did not have the dexterity to compete at the high levels required of pod racing.

The second unique quality about pod racing was that, other than no mechanical or artificial intelligence to pilot a pod, there were virtually no other rules. If pilots wanted to risk a crash by bumping a competitor's pod, they could. If a pilot was willing to slow down or fly an odd angle to block an opponent, it was allowed. Crashing at these speeds was not at all unusual and extremely dangerous. As a result, it was fairly common for upwards of a quarter of the racers being killed during an event depending on the terrain and competition and what was at stake for the winner.

Watto began entering Anakin into pod races around the boy's ninth birthday. The kid had shown a propensity for piloting only rivaled by his skills as a mechanic. For a human, the reflexes he displayed were unparalleled. The Toydarian would often describe it as if the boy was able to see things before they happened.

Unfortunately, most of the racing pods that Watto bartered for, which Anakin piloted in races, were either using outdated mechanical technology, making it impossible for Anakin to fully take advantage of his skills, or the engines lacked the speed to achieve and maintain a winning pace.

In the most recent race Watto had entered his slave boy, Anakin was doing surprisingly well and was on pace to win, when he was beaten by a Dug named Sebulba. Sebulba was a local racing celebrity with a near perfect win record and a reputation for doing whatever he needed to win. As Anakin made his move behind the Dug on the back stretch, Sebulba slid his racer sideways to block the human's route. Anakin expected this move and powered up his engines, maxing them out and causing them to nearly overheat. His only chance was to gain enough power to fly above the Dug – a risky move in any circumstance – come over the top of him and keep his straight line to limp across the finish line.

Of course, being the seasoned pilot he was, the Dug expected this maneuver. As Anakin began to gain the few meters he could to leap over Sebulba's engine leads, the Dug opened the vents on the sides facing the boy. A combination of heat, a radioactive cloud, and spitting Tatooine sand blasted into Anakin's face, causing him to lose concentration and control of his pod. The human boy and his pod racer swung wildly to the outside of the track and scraped across a rockface that lined the canyon of the final stretch of the race.

As Anakin skidded several hundred meters to a halt, he knew he was lucky to escape with his life. He watched as Sebulba's pod swayed back to straight ahead, and he crossed the finish line without any further competition. The human boy angrily punched the steering mechanism of his pod and then crawled out and waited for the pit droids to arrive with the towbot. He would have to face Watto, who would reprimand him for destroying yet another racer. For the junk dealer, the pain of the loss was easily overlooked when he collected the winnings for his wager on Sebulba. Betting against his own entry was not only not unusual, it was how Watto ensured he would not lose money on the pod should his slave crash it... again.

The boy kept his own pod under a large tarpaulin made from an old shop canopy for which he had traded some rusting tools. On this particular morning, Watto had given Anakin a few tasks including shining up some TT-47 fins and charging some random droid batteries, while the Toydarian went into town to scout out pilots who were desperate enough to deal on some part he had in his shop. Anakin decided to risk a few minutes on his own to pop a recently acquired part into his personal project.

Anakin pulled the tarp back from his racer exposing a blue and silver fender. He popped open a hatch on its underside and pushed in a piston-shaped converter for which he bartered the day before. He was only a few parts away from having his racer ready. Watto was unaware of his build, and he wanted to keep it that way.

The boy admired his racer for a few long moments, then pulled the cover back onto it and squinted out over the horizon. He noticed a silver ship stream out of the bright blue morning sky. There were literally hundreds of ships that came and went throughout the day and night, but what made this one unusual was that it was making a landing outside the city limits and not in any space port. Anakin shrugged and ran to the shop to finish his chores before Watto returned.



CHAPTER 2

Sio Bible scrambled along the wall that ran around the outside of Theed. When the Queen made her escape – at least when he watched her ship rocket out of the hangar – he decided it was safe for him and the others to make their break back toward the internment camp as instructed by her highness. Before starting back, he instructed the few remaining attendants and Counselor Hagen to “disappear” and urged them to make their way into the forest that lay beyond the green hill and wait until all the madness had died down. They reluctantly followed his orders and darted off through the high grass on the hill.

He was alone. He was afraid. He was not sure how he would make it through this but he committed to his Queen that he would turn himself in, even if it meant his own death – a thought he would do his best to avoid allowing into his mind.

After every hundred meters or so, he would pause, catch his breath in his aging lungs and watch as his compatriots ran across the hill, before turning his own attention to getting back to the

point where they were rescued. The Governor decided he would tell the Federation army that he believed the Queen was captured and the Jedi destroyed. He would tell them he did not see it – to give himself plausible deniability – but from what he heard as they got to the hangar, it was his best assumption.

Again he worked his way down the wall, and again a hundred meters or so along the way, he needed to rest. Hagen and the advisors were now four small specks nearing the peak of the hill. Bibble was relieved to see them escaping. He swallowed hard and once again, started down the wall.

Out of the corner of his eye, Sio Bibble saw six fighters that did not belong to the Naboo fleet jet out from above the city and out toward the direction of the green hill. He held his breath and eyed them as they dipped in their trajectory and cleared the wall. They whined electrically and sped a few dozen meters above the green field toward the top of the hill.

Bibble bit his lip but wanted to shout to his colleagues that danger was coming. Suddenly, they seemed to become aware of the fighters, and it appeared to the governor that they were running for their lives. The people at the top of the hill split up and each sprinted off in their own direction. Then the fighters opened fire, picking them each off easily with one shot apiece.

Stunned, Bibble felt a tear run down his cheek. He considered for a moment not continuing on, but he promised his Queen he would. It was imperative to her safe escape. It settled on him that by sending the others off to their freedom, he was responsible for

their doom. He took six steps along the wall when he heard the nasal, buzzy tones of Trade Federation droids.

“Halt!” a droid called. “You are under arrest. You are coming with us.”



CHAPTER 3

The lights in the Nubian Cruiser that was Queen Amidala's ship began to flicker. The damaged hyperdrive was nearly depleted from the leak and the vessel was tapping into the auxiliary power systems. Obi-Wan was in the engine room monitoring the quickly deteriorating technical situation and, upon realizing they were nearing the planet, ran up toward the cockpit.

A few moments before, they had dropped out of hyperspace and into orbit around Tatooine. The sandy, featureless planet loomed large outside the transparisteele windows of the flight deck. They quickly identified a spaceport, and Qui-Gon instructed Ric Olie to land outside the city to avoid attracting attention. Even on backwater planets like Tatooine, landing in a spaceport required identification, but landing anywhere else generally did not.

"The hyperdrive generator is gone, Master," said the Padawan, as he walked through the opening to the cockpit. "We'll need to replace it." Olie was guiding the craft down, while Panaka

sat in the co-pilot chair. As usual, Qui-Gon stood, arms crossed and solemn-faced observing the action around him.

Upon hearing his Padawan's voice, he merely turned his head slightly toward him. "That'll complicate things," he said. The ship touched down on the flat desert surface.

Some lights jumped to life on the screen in front of Ric Olie and the tinted glass of the cockpit turned off allowing bright light to pour into the ship. The entire crew squinted and raised their hands to shield their eyes. There was very little to see. Blinding yellow sand blew silently and calmly across the bowl where they had settled, and they spotted a herd of large furry creatures with long curling horns making their way toward a distant destination. The spaceport was several kilometers away, and even from this distance, they could see it was abuzz with activity.

"Be wary. I sense a disturbance in the Force," said Qui-Gon quietly to Kenobi.

"I feel it also, Master," replied Obi-Wan. Qui-Gon closed his eyes for a moment. This disturbance was both around them here on Tatooine and beyond. There was a present swirl nearby and a nagging feeling that lingered in his mind. The distant disorder struck him halfway through their journey to Tatooine, but the closer fluctuation arrived when the ship touched down. He was ready.

"I'm going," said the Jedi Master instantly and loudly in a commanding voice. "I'll need the ship's technical readouts."

“They are loaded into the R2 unit,” said Panaka. “You can take him with you.”

“Where’s Jar Jar?” called Jinn. “I want him as well.”

“Master?” asked Obi-Wan.

“You will stay here. Don’t let them send any transmissions,” he instructed his student.

“But, Master – ”

“Your place is here, with the Queen.” Obi-Wan felt uneasy about being left alone with her for a reason he had never sensed before, but he was certainly not ready to discuss it with anyone, much less his Master on the bridge of this ship.

“Yes, Master.”

“Hello, boyos!” said Jar Jar as he loped into the cockpit.

“You are coming with me,” said Jinn. Binks mouthed a question but made no sound. Qui-Gon turned to the captain and the pilot: “No one is to leave the ship or open it for anyone other than us. We will go to that spaceport, get the replacement hyperdrive, and return as soon as possible.”

“Understood,” said Panaka.

“You got it,” said Olie.

Obi-Wan walked slowly back toward the engine room. “May the Force be with you, Master,” he said.

Qui-Gon nodded, tapped a button on the wall, and a gangway yawned open at the side of the silver ship. A blast of heat flooded the cabin from the twin-sun heated air. Qui-Gon walked swiftly

into the Tatooine morning, followed by Jar Jar Binks a few meters behind and Artoo-Detoo bringing up the rear.

The suns shone down hard, bringing heat from above and radiating from the desert floor. Winds whooshed by occasionally, whipping hot sand up into their faces. Artoo beeped happily behind them.

“Dis suns a dooen murder to mesa skin!” called Jar Jar. Qui-Gon ignored what he suspected would be the first of many complaints from Binks on the several kilometer trip which laid ahead of them. They started toward the spaceport, watching a consistent stream of ships come and go.

They were several hundred meters away from the Queen’s ship when they heard Captain Panaka. “Wait!” he called. “Hold up!”

Qui-Gon stopped, rolled his eyes, and turned around to see Panaka running toward him. And then he noticed a young woman behind him in what appeared to be a variation of the uniform the Captain wore. Panaka reached them before the woman did. “What is it, Captain?” said Jinn already exasperated.

Panaka was out of breath as the hot atmosphere played on his lungs. “Her Highness commands you to take her with you.”

“No more commands from her highness today, Captain,” Qui-Gon said. “This spaceport is not going to be pleasant.”

The woman continued to make her way to the group. Panaka continued, “The Queen wishes it.”

“I’m curious about the planet,” said the woman. It took him a moment, but Qui-Gon realized that this woman was the queen unmasked. She looked even younger and inexperienced to him than he expected.

As a Jedi Knight, Qui-Gon could, on occasion, meditate in an instant. He would close his eyes and let his mind drift quickly away and back in search of some indication from the Force. Qui-Gon Jinn tried this to get a sense of what benefit this might bring. He received very little from the Force, but the same gut feeling he got about bringing the Gungan along for this journey seemed to play on the Queen.

“This is not a good idea,” Jinn relented. “Stay close to me.” He turned and continued through the desert toward the spaceport.



CHAPTER 4

Sifo-Dyas arrived, as promised, before breakfast at Senator Palpatine's suite. The senator's guards were expecting him and moved aside to let the Jedi Master enter the apartment.

"This is madness!" said Palpatine striding across the room upon seeing the Jedi appear. "I'm sure you've heard the latest."

Sifo-Dyas had. News, good and bad, traveled faster than hyperdrives on the capital planet and doubly so in the governing quarter. While nothing was corroborated, there was word that Hego Damask the Second, head of the Banking Clan, had been assassinated the night before.

"First my home world is blockaded by the Trade Federation and now this: The leader of the Federation's largest adversary is found murdered?" Palpatine was incredulous. "If they are capable of that, then they are capable of anything. And still, no word from my Queen."

“There is no evidence that this crime was committed by the Trade Federation,” said the Jedi. “In fact, there seems to be some evidence to the contrary.”

Palpatine stood still and waited for Sifo-Dyas to continue his story, but the Jedi paused.

“What evidence are you aware of?” prodded Palpatine.

“It may be unwise of me to share all of what I know, Senator. But what I will tell you is that while his body appears on the holos, his body has not been recovered. When the security forces arrived, he was nowhere to be found.”

Palpatine took a step back and felt behind himself, nervously, for a place to sit. His hand found the sofa and he dropped down into it. “I... I don’t understand,” he said. “Then how do you even know he’s dead?”

“I suppose we don’t, Senator. That is one of the myriad of reasons this information cannot get out. Hearsay and rumors make challenging situations that much more so. There is no evidence of any wrong doing other than the fact that the cams showed a body. Demask has not been heard from, and there is no physical evidence of his whereabouts,” said Sifo-Dyas. “Of course, it is not unusual at all for Demask or any member of the Banking Clan to leave without alerting anyone to their whereabouts. The whole thing makes little sense.”

“Nor does the blockade of my planet,” said Palpatine, turning the conversation back to his issues. “Or the disappearance of the ambassadors. What is happening, Master Jedi?” His voice was

weakened by bewilderment and his eyes looked beyond Sifo-Dyas.

“Are you familiar with The Prophecy, Senator?”

“The Prohecy of the Whills? I’ve heard stories. But I am not a Jedi, my friend.”

“There are those that believe that the Force requires balance. That the Jedi exist to maintain it,” said Sifo-Dyas.

“This is all something I don’t understand,” said Palpatine dismissively and clearly distracted by the current political issues, as he placed a worried hand on his chin.

“We believe that there exists a light side and a dark side to the Force,” Sifo-Dyas continued, undeterred by Palpatine’s apparent lack of interest. “The Jedi draw our power from the light. We are committed to maintaining a purity and to using the power we derive from the Force only to protect the peace. To keep *balance*. A Jedi uses the Force from a place of goodness, of positivity.” Sifo-Dyas sat down on a chair across from the Senator and gained his attention. “There are those who once used the Force for pure evil. They harnessed the dark side and used it to kill, to destroy, and to seize power. These people were called ‘The Sith.’”

“Why are you telling me this, Master Jedi?”

Sifo-Dyas continued as if he hadn’t heard Palpatine’s question. “A thousand years ago, the Jedi destroyed the Sith in a massive war. To defend the galaxy, they drove them out of the universe and for all these generations since, the Sith have been silent. Completely unheard from. But there is a prophecy – the

Prophecy of the Whills – that says when the Sith return, another war will erupt, there will be pain and suffering, and the Jedi will be destroyed.”

“You have reason to believe the Sith have returned?” asked Palpatine finally.

“I believe it is what my visions have shown,” said Sifo-Dyas sullenly. “And I am afraid Hego Demask’s murder is evidence.”

“How so?” asked Palpatine.

Sifo-Dyas considered whether or not to share what he had seen on the holovids. He and Palpatine had developed a trust among each other, as the senator was an ally in the belief that a militarized Republic was a stronger one. But what he was about to say was not only highly confidential, but it would also create complication for the Jedi if it became public knowledge. He shared his inside information. “Because from what I saw on the security holos, Hego Demask’s wounds appear to be inflicted by lightsabers,” said Sifo-Dyas.

“He was murdered by a Jedi?” exclaimed Palpatine incredulously.

“A Jedi would not commit such a crime,” said Sifo-Dyas in hushed tones. There was a long pause between them. “I believe it was a Sith.”

Palpatine was silent and processed what he had just heard. “And what are the Jedi planning to do about this?” the senator finally asked and expectantly.

“The Jedi have only just been told. I am not sure what steps we will take,” he said. “I only hope I have been wrong in my visions.”

“And the Sith? Are they behind the Trade Federation blockade of my planet?” asked Palpatine.

“I don’t know what the reason would be, but I also don’t know why they would murder the head of the Banking Clan.”

Palpatine was suddenly flustered. “Master Jedi, I believe you have seen visions and the Jedi are a mystical people. I do not understand talk of foresight and prophecies, it is all beyond me, to be sure. I don’t mean to be flippant, but I hope you appreciate that my main concern is the safety of my people.”

“I understand, Senator,” the Jedi said. “My concerns are for the safety of the galaxy. The two are not mutually exclusive.” There was a cavernous silence between them.

“Your support of an army of the Republic is not misplaced, I’m afraid. How can I help you?” asked Palpatine finally.

“I am not sure... yet.”

“And what of the ambassadors? Any word from them?” Palpatine pushed almost like he had just remembered that he was still awaiting answers.

“Not a word, Senator. I have a bad feeling about this. All of it.”

“We need to tell the Senate,” Palpatine once again regained the furious pace of his speech like a man possessed with a mission. “We have to tell them that Hego Demask has been

murdered. We have to tell them that my planet is still under blockade. We have to mandate action!”

“Senator, we must not fuel the flames,” warned Sifo-Dyas. “There are still many unanswered questions. Many mysteries shroud these events. Without clarity, there is chaos, and chaos only benefits those that wish to remain unseen. We must be cautious.”

Palpatine was visibly upset. Emotion was showing through his usually calm demeanor. “I’m giving it only a few more days, Master Jedi. Nobody knows what is happening on Naboo. Where are your Jedi Knights? It may still simply be a blockade or it could be something much, much worse,” said Palpatine. “I will not allow my people to suffer. I will respect the Jedi’s wishes for just a little while longer, but I cannot remain silent forever.”

“Thank you, Senator,” said the Jedi Master. “Once the Jedi have decided a course of action, I will let you know. And of course, as soon as we hear from the ambassadors, I will find you.”

“I pray your visions are wrong,” said Palpatine. “But please know, what is happening on Naboo is where my focus lies.”

“I understand,” said Sifo-Dyas. He stood up and let himself out of Senator Palpatine’s apartment.



CHAPTER 5

“Moisture farms, for the most part,” explained Qui-Gon to Amidala as they entered the main part of the port town called Mos Espa. “There are some indigenous tribes, and a lot of scavengers. But the few spaceports, like this one, are havens for those that don’t wish to be found.”

“Like us,” said Padme.

“Dissen berry berry bad,” said Jar Jar. His hearts had been racing since they arrived in town. His skin was dry, and he desperately wished he was in a less arid atmosphere. Artoo-Detoo continued rolling along with the group whistling to himself.

They walked around a large, open air market square. Squat buildings made of stone and mud with domes or cloth roofs lined the streets and merchants populated the plaza selling everything from local food to illegal spice, from ship parts to weapons. Over a hundred species were represented either as vendors or visitors. The Queen, who had visited Coruscant, had seen many sentient beings on the Capital and on occasion visiting her world, but in

those instances, it was all very controlled and “safe.” Here, in this lawless environment, she felt ill at ease.

Upon entering Mos Espa, they stopped at the first few mechanics and parts dealers, which they had come across, and were met with the same response: the parts they needed were a rarity at best on this world. Those that visited Tatooine very rarely flew luxury cruisers, and those that did made sure they were prepared to get off world easily.

“Let’s try one of these smaller dealers,” said Qui-Gon.

An open air cart, with the words “Ship Parts” written roughly in a local language on the front, was being managed by a Twi’lek male. He was as tall as Jinn, had two pale head tails that lay on his shoulders, and smiled with sharp teeth and yellow eyes. “Pitally colly ongua,” he hissed.

Qui-Gon spoke some Twi’lek, but was not as fluent as he’d like. He understood more than he could respond with so he tried speaking Basic. “I am looking for parts for my ship,” he said.

“Cottongi boddee nona?” asked the Twi’lek, who unsurprisingly understood the most common language in the galaxy, even if he chose not to speak it.

“J-Type,” said Qui-Gon. “Nubian.”

The Twi’lek broke into a hearty laugh. Qui-Gon looked at Padme and shrugged. “Tatakka skonna lotalia,” the merchant said. “Scabba no badda teekee Noo-by-onn.”

“Looks like we are going to have to keep looking,” said Qui-Gon turning to the Queen. “Thank you,” he said to the merchant with a slightly sarcastic smile.

They turned and made their way deeper into the crowd that filled the square.

“Hey!” called a gruff voice from Qui-Gon’s right. “Outlander! I hear you need some parts for a J-Type Nubian.”

Qui-Gon and Padme turned to see a blue-skinned flying creature with a longish snout and protruding tusks sidling up on them. He wore a saucer-shaped metal hat and slight stubble on his chin. Jar Jar approached the being, reached out with his pointer finger to touch creature, and was slapped away when he got close.

“Thank you,” said Qui-Gon. “You may have heard right.”

“I gots lots of those parts in my shop. Come with me, and I will show you,” the creature said. “The name is Watto. I have the best selection of rare ship parts, I promise you that. I can tell you, there’s not much call for Nubian around here. I just-a so happen to have a bunch.”

“Can we trust him?” asked Padme.

“We don’t have to,” said Qui-Gon quietly. “But we are desperate, and that gives him the advantage.” He caught up to Watto. “Okay, show us the way.”

They followed Watto to the end of the square and walked a few blocks through an alleyway to a shop. The Toydarian floated through the door, and a bell rang announcing their arrival.

The storefront to Watto's shop was relatively clean, the floor was covered in Tatooine sand and light poured in from a plexisteel window in the ceiling. There were numerous droids in various states of disrepair along the side wall and boxes of ship parts behind the counter.

Also behind the counter was an eleven year old human boy with sun kissed skin and a mop of brownish blond hair. Watto questioned the boy in Huttese – neither Qui-Gon nor Padme understood them – and the boy fired answers back in the same tongue.

Jar Jar walked casually and carelessly around the shop, amazed by each gadget, droid arm, hydrospanner and flight yoke. Artoo followed the group and beeped a hello.

“So,” called Watto. “Let me take-a you out back. We'll find what you need, I'm sure abouts that.”

Artoo and Qui-Gon followed the lead of their shopkeeper host and walked toward an opening in the back of the store to where they could see more and larger pieces of starships piled outside. As they reached the egress, Qui-Gon turned and pointed sharply at Jar Jar: “Don't touch anything.”

“Okey day,” smiled Binks.

“Any. Thing,” said Jinn sternly.

Jar Jar nodded his understanding with a wild bob of his amphibian head, as he watched the Jedi and the droid exit the shop. He then proceeded to run his long fingers along the metal casing of a large, hollowed out GNK droid.

Padme Amidala, on the other hand, pulled her arms in on herself and walked slowly around the perimeter of the building's interior. She was unsure of her surroundings, and while this store felt less scary than the open air throngs of the Mos Espa marketplace, it was still very foreign, and she was left unattended for the first time in what felt like years.

Just then, the human boy, whom she had forgotten was even there, leapt up onto the shop counter and silently watched her. His hair dropped down the sides of his face and across his eyes. His arms were stiff and straight at his side, while his feet dangled in front of him. As he did with every other customer that entered his master's shop, he watched her to make sure she did not steal anything. But to his keen eye, this girl was not a threat to anyone. In fact, she was the most beautiful customer he had ever seen. He started thinking that maybe she was the *only* beautiful customer he had ever seen.

At any given time in Mos Espa, one could find thousands of humans among the crushing crowds of space travelers and locals. Typically, humans were the most common species found in the known galaxy – or some variation thereof. Humans represented at least a quarter of the planets in the Galactic Republic, and races that were very close to human made up another quarter. But the humans that passed through Mos Espa and Watto's junk shop were usually not as pretty as the one that just came in with the tall bearded man, the R2 unit, and the odd-looking pink being with floppy ears and a bill for a mouth.

It was not just that she was pretty. She seemed strong and confident, even though the boy could also tell she was scared. She was clean and sharply dressed, with smooth skin. The slave boy discerned that she was not here on purpose. Perhaps the bearded man had kidnapped her. Maybe she was here to sell something. The boy even posited that she could be on Tatooine to study something. Whatever the reason, he felt very fortunate that she walked through the door.

She felt his young eyes on her. She turned and was not at all surprised to notice that he was watching her every move.

“Are you an angel?” he asked after an awkward moment.

“What?” she asked, not sure if he was being rude or polite.

“An angel,” he said again, completely and totally serious in his tone. “They are supposedly the most beautiful creatures in the universe. They live on the Moons of Iego, I think. I’ve heard the deep space pilots talk about them.” What he had no way of knowing was that when the deep space pilots asked the same question of women they met, it did not come from the same genuine place of innocence that Anakin raised it.

She was flattered and, as Queen of Naboo, had heard many a little boy call her beautiful out of respect, politeness, or genuine admiration. She chalked his comment up to the first, although his posture and tone of voice made his intention less clear. “You’re a funny little boy,” she said. “How do you know so much?” She smiled her usual royal grin at him.

His demeanor changed. He was being questioned, and he wanted to prove that he was not just some silly kid. “I listen to all the traders and starpilots that come through here. I’m a pilot, you know,” he said. “And some day, I’m going to fly away from this place.”

She maintained her smile and stepped toward him with an interest that was part feigned and part genuine. “You’re a pilot?”

“All my life,” he said boastfully.

“How long have you been here?” Now she had become engaged in his tale.

“Since I was very little. Three, I think. But my Mom and I were sold to Gardulla the Hutt, then she lost us betting on the pod races.”

Padme was struck by what he said. She had to ask: “You’re a...” she paused and tried to find a more polite word but was at a loss. “A slave?”

The child scowled at her. “I’m a human being, and my name is Anakin Skywalker!” He was angry and tended to always react to the word “slave” in a similar manner. Even though it had been his life, he still hated the thought of what it meant.

Padme was authentically apologetic and bothered by hurting the strange boy’s feelings. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I don’t fully understand. This place is strange to me.”

“Well, it’s my home. At least for now,” said Anakin. “So, why are you here?”

Padme did not immediately jump to respond. She had not thought about what to tell someone who might ask that question of her. She was, after all, a Queen on the run from an army of robots who had surrounded her planet with hostile spacecraft. In a place like Tatooine, run by Hutt gangsters and outlaws, her title meant nothing other than she was probably worth a lot to somebody. The boy seemed innocent enough, but that was no reason to share her whole story. She felt she owed him a little hint of the truth. “I’m on my way somewhere, and my ship broke down.”

Anakin felt the pain that colored her words. It was not overt, but she seemed worried. He had seen a similar look on his mother’s face many times. “Well,” started Anakin. “If I can help you at all, I am at your service.”

In the far corner of the shop, Jar Jar knocked over a pile of parts, and a pit droid sprang to life. The Gungan chased it as it chirped away to itself and continued to elude Binks.

“The nose!” shouted Anakin. Jar Jar looked to the boy, then back to the droid, and then back to Anakin. “Hit the nose,” pleaded Anakin.

“Oh!” said Jar Jar, and he poked the brown-bronze pit droid on its central eye located where a nose might be on another robot or sentient. A click echoed around the shop, and the pit droid folded itself up into a nearly flat square of feet, arms, torso, and head.

“Who is that?” asked Anakin.

It suddenly struck Padme that she really was not entirely sure. She had not taken the time to speak with him or to even introduce herself. Her heart sank as she realized that she stood on a foreign world with a fellow sentient being from her home, and she had ignored him. Padme worried that it was because he was a Gungan, and there was still an unspoken animosity among their people.

“He’s from my planet. His people and mine share the same world... although we rarely interact with each other,” she said sadly. “I’m afraid I’ve only just met him on our way here.”

“Well,” started Anakin with a lilt to his voice that sounded more like a grizzled old space freighter pilot than the eleven year-old slave boy he was. “I don’t know where you are from or where you are going, but you two better stick together. Family you hardly know is better than no family at all.”



CHAPTER 6

“Please tell me where you are taking me!” Sio Bible was afraid. The battle droids did not take him back to the internment camp as he expected. Instead, they were pushing him roughly at gun point back toward the Royal Palace.

They ignored him.

As he entered the Theed capital square, he felt a rush of sadness, fear, and anger. There were holes blown into the facades of buildings that had stood since the first royal families. Some of the twenty meter tall statues of ancient kings and queens were cracked or missing their marblecrete limbs. Smoke billowed from homes and people – the people for whom he was now responsible in the absence of his queen and senator – sat on the streets surrounded by white skeleton-shaped droids holding blasters.

“We are a peaceful society,” he said distressed. “What are you monsters doing?”

The sky was turning a light purple as the star that lit their system lowered to touch the horizon for dusk. Trade Federation

droid fighters ran exercises across the low atmosphere and their tanks patrolled the streets. Droids, which were not guarding groups of Naboo prisoners, walked in formation through the open areas of the city.

For a thousand years, the Naboo people lived in peace. Rarely was there a report of petty violence or crime among the people, much less an invasion from another world. Not since the run in with the Gungans, when his relatives first arrived fifty generations ago, had a skirmish broken out on this world. His mind raced. He not sure how to govern or respond as an elected official under these conditions, but the very fact that it was happening at all was so foreign and incomprehensible, his mind almost could not process it.

They came around a corner to the battle-damaged front gate of the Naboo Royal Palace. Brick and rubble polluted the ground, droids by the dozen stood guard on the stone steps, and the bodies of Naboo security volunteers from the earlier encounter that he himself had witnessed were still where they had fallen. A large shuttle that Bibble assumed belonged to the Trade Federation was parked unceremoniously in the court yard and droid technicians buzzed in and out of it, while still more guarded the extended entrance hatch.

The droid leading his escort pushed Sio Bibble toward the steps and up into the battle-scarred Royal Palace. Just a day or two before, it had been a symbol of leadership and hope to the

Naboo people, but now it was a reminder that the whole world was prisoner of some heartless invading force.

Droidkas rolled through the great foyer, and more battle droids clanked their way across the grand entrance. Everywhere he looked, there were illustrations of the contradictions his brain had to process. Lush artwork suffered blaster holes. Royal effigies were knocked to the ground by a recent battle. Queen Amidala's image on a ten-meter banner was covered in burn marks, and half a dozen of her most loyal military men and women lay dead, slumped in various states around the vestibule.

Bibble made his way up one of the grand staircases with a gun firmly lodged in his lower back. They were taking him to the throne room, and he dreaded what he might see there.

As he entered the large hall, the first thing he noticed was the alien creature sitting in Queen Amidala's throne. It was taller than the average human, had green skin and large, oval red eyes with wavy black slits for pupils. It wore a garish robe and matching three prong headpiece. To its right stood another similar looking being in similar gowns, wearing a less ornate decorative crown.

"Ah, at last, the prisoner has arrived," it said in its thick Neimoidian accent. "I have been awaiting your presence, Governor Bibble."

Bibble was hunched over after being nudged forward to the center of the room. He stood in the same spot he had just days earlier seen a hologram from Senator Palpatine speaking in stunned disbelief that the ambassadors had not yet arrived. The

Governor, for better or worse, was right. The communications disruption did signal an invasion, although they were completely powerless to stop it.

Sio was in pain and exhausted. He was the only human in the room, and he was challenged to speak as the Naboo leader for the first time. The droid behind him intoned: “The Viceroy is speaking to you,” it said. He looked around the room and saw some droids busily working at computer terminals and some standing guard.

“This invasion is unprecedented, and the damage you’ve caused...” stammered the Governor. “Is catastrophic.”

“If the Queen would only sign the treaty, we can move on, and leave your system, Governor.”

Bibble thought quickly, reminded himself that he was going to stick to the story he invented: that he saw the Queen captured and paused to gather his word selection. “I... I assumed you had captured her,” he said. “The last time I—”

“Don’t take me for a fool, Governor,” barked Viceroy Gunray. “We have reason to believe her ship escaped the blockade and left not far from where we captured you. You will help me find her.”

“And if I don’t?” he asked trying to sound brave.

“Oh, you will,” the Viceroy said. “Or we will wait until she communicates with you. All the while causing more suffering for Naboo.”

“She’s smarter than that, Viceroy,” he said. “She knows not to contact me.”

“Then perhaps you can sign the treaty in her stead.”

“We will not bow to your wishes,” Bibble said defiantly and with a resolution in his voice that surprised even himself.

“Then we will begin killing prisoners,” said Gunray simply.

Bibble was stunned. “Haven’t you killed enough of our people?” By now, he had lost any sense of decorum.

“Up to now we have only been forced to eliminate the few Naboo citizens who were, how can I put this? Non-compliant with our occupation”

“You are an animal,” spat the Governor. “The Republic will make you pay for this.”

“I have assurances that this is all perfectly legal,” said Gunray in complete control of his tone and demeanor. “A signature from your Queen will ratify the steps we had to take in the form of a trade blockade to ensure the terms of our taxation were met.”

“How will you explain the damage? The death toll?”

“I’m sure to save her people, your Queen will exonerate the Trade Federation.”

“Sir!” called a droid from the far side of the throne room. “We have found the transmission codes to a ship that matches the markings of the Queen’s. They also match those of the Nubian vessel that escaped the blockade.”

“Excellent,” hissed Gunray. “Prepare the transmission. We will trace her inevitable reply.”

The battle droid behind Governor Bibble stepped forward. “I assume you no longer need the prisoner, sir?”

“I believe we have used enough of the good Governor’s time,” said Gunray. He waved his hand dismissively. “Process him.”



CHAPTER 7

A grainy image flickered into place from the holoprojector that rose out of the center of the floor in the Jedi Council chamber. It captured the point of view from one of the security droids that monitored the Montas Complex. Darkness shrouded the image of a courtyard with only a splash of light pouring from the inside of the apartment on the twentieth floor, making it more difficult to see the details.

“Composite image,” Mace Windu said, and the projector’s operating system created a three-dimensional view of the image, constructed out of the best and clearest shots from the four cambots that arrived on the scene.

Only the three members of the Jedi Council assigned to matters of security were present for this emergency session. Mace Windu and Ki-Adi Mundi stood together in front of the projection rather than sitting in their thrones and Yoda paced behind them walking with his cane. Mundi and Windu watched intently at what the security droid recorded as part of its scheduled rounds,

and Yoda paused on occasion to see what they were seeing, wrinkle his nose befuddled, and moved along.

“Hold there,” said Ki-Adi Mundi. The hologram’s rotation froze and clearly showed the corpse of what appeared to be Hego Demask the Second, leader of the Banking Clan, in half a dozen severed pieces on the ground. “There is no blood.”

“There are several slashes but all of his remains seem *cauterized*,” said Windu bewildered. “The wounds appear consistent with... a lightsaber.”

Yoda stopped in his stilted gait. “No proof do we have that created these wounds by a lightsaber were,” he said almost cautiously. “Another weapon perhaps this was.”

“Master Yoda,” pleaded Ki-Adi Mundi. “The precision of the cuts, the cleanliness of the wounds... It’s all there.”

Yoda crinkled his face and harrumphed. “Draw conclusions we must not.”

“No Jedi would do this,” countered Windu. “Not unless it was in self-defense, and even then nothing as... brutal as this.”

Ki-Adi Mundi raised his hand to his bearded chin. “And the body, you say, is missing?”

“When arrived the security patrol did, found Hego Demask they did not.”

“Continue the holovid,” said Mundi, and the hologram came back to life. The hovering cambots captured the body from multiple angles and continued to record for several seconds

longer before suddenly going dark. “Why does the recording stop?”

“Unclear the answer is,” said Yoda. “Like everything else surrounding this event.”

“But, Master Yoda, that simply does not make any sense,” said Ki-Adi Mundi.

“Sensors in the droids automatically alerted security when found the body they did,” said Yoda. “Moments later, damaged the robots were.”

“All four?” asked Windu.

“Simultaneously,” replied Yoda. “An untimely malfunction, it would appear.” Mace Windu snorted at the assumption.

“And when the security team arrived?” asked Ki-Adi Mundi.

“No sign of Demask there was.”

Yoda hobbled to his squat throne and sat down seemingly exhausted.

“That’s impossible,” said Mace Windu. “The body is very clearly on the security vid.”

“Unless,” began Mundi. “The security team removed the body. I mean, the Banking Clan’s whereabouts is always a matter of high security clearance. It’s not unusual for their members to be unheard from for long periods of time with no one accountable for their location.”

“So, if his security team were to hide the body, it might give the Banking Clan time to get ahead of an investigation,”

continued Mace with a slight lilt of question. “Who else is aware of this situation?” Windu turned squarely to Yoda.

“Unclear this also is,” said Yoda exasperated. “Received the hologram I did from Master Sifo-Dyas. Claims he does it was delivered to him from an anonymous source at the Montas Complex very early this morning.”

“Why Master Sifo-Dyas?” asked Ki-Adi Mundi.

“Was it shared with anyone else?” asked Mace Windu, ignoring Mundi’s question.

“Believe it was not, Master Dyas does. Unsure who delivered it to him, he is.” Yoda looked down at his cane as he scraped it quietly back and forth against the foot of his throne. “Unsure *why* he also is.”

“Perhaps they hope to get help from the Jedi in solving the mystery,” pondered Windu.

“Perhaps,” said Yoda.

“Identifying the wounds as those from a lightsaber, alerting the Jedi and seeking aid from the Council does make sense,” offered Ki-Adi Mundi. “Even from the Banking Clan.”

“But why not come to us directly?” said Windu.

“A weapon to be used against us, it may be as well,” replied the elderly green Jedi. “A threat perhaps.”

“Would someone blackmail the Jedi? With what? Why?” Windu’s voice tipped his confusion.

“Shifted sentiment has about our role,” said Yoda. “Too much access to the Chancellor, some say. Too much meddling in the

affairs of the Senate and the Republic. What better way to cause dissent than to release a holo of a prominent figure by Jedi weapon murdered?” He made a silent airy snort sound, placed his cane down, and crossed his arms. “Our move to help with Naboo, an unwise move may have been.”

“No one knows about that,” started Windu. “It’s been highly classified and a secret held by the Jedi and the Chancellor himself.”

“It is odd that we haven’t heard from them since their arrival at Naboo,” offered Mundi.

A tone beeped across the chamber, signaling an incoming message from a member of the Council. Yoda looked a moment at Mace Windu, then to Ki-Adi Mundi and then he tapped the button that let a hologram stream into view, replacing the security video they had just been watching.

The image of a hooded figure appeared and after a moment, it pushed its cowl back to reveal a familiar face. “Master Yoda,” said Sifo-Dyas via holoprojection. “I met with Senator Palpatine this morning, and he made mention of the murder. It would seem —”

“Why meeting with Senator Palpatine were you?” demanded Yoda. “No news we have from the ambassadors. Reason to speak with him there is not!”

“I promised him I would provide him an update this morning whether we had anything to report or not,” replied Sifo-Dyas. “A Jedi Knight is true to his word.” The three Jedi in the Council

chamber exchanged glances with one another. “The point I want to make is that it would seem that information about what happened at the Montas Complex may be spreading.”

“Unfortunate this is. Control it we must.” Yoda again crinkled his face. “Assume that confirm nothing you did.”

“You may assume that, yes,” said Sifo-Dyas.

“Speak nothing of this you must,” said Yoda. “And speak not again with the Senator unless authorized by the Council you are. Dangerous times these are.”

“I could not agree more, Master Yoda. I fear we are on the edge of dark times.” And his hologram faded.

Yoda sat silently in thought before speaking. “Too close Sifo-Dyas is to the Senator from Naboo,” said Yoda to Windu and Mundi. “Feeds his thirst for a grand army of the Republic, he does. Need this, we do not.”

“I don’t disagree, Master Yoda,” said Mace. “Would you like me to have a conversation with him about it?”

“Right now, more pressing things we must deal with.” Yoda pushed himself up from his chair. “If no body there is, then no crime committed there was. Only rumors. Conjecture. If confirm our knowledge we do, then respond we must. Speak of this, none of us will. On this, my own ‘council’ will I keep.”

“But what about Master Sifo-Dyas?” asked Mundi.

“Speak to him myself, I will. Speak of it to him, you will not.”

“And what if word starts to spread?” Mace tested. “What if people hear that the head of the Banking Clan was murdered by lightsaber?”

“Until confirmed that is, then true it is not.”



CHAPTER 8

The twin suns of Tatooine were high in the sky and the air outside Watto's shop felt somehow hotter than in the market square. A noticeable but extremely faint breeze lilted sand through the air, and it dragged across Qui-Gon's face. Ship parts of all shapes and sizes piled along the mud-baked walls behind the shop in what appeared to be no semblance of organization. "Show me whatcha need exactly," said Watto.

Artoo leaned back on his two wheeled arms and projected a hologram of the part they needed to repair the Queen's ship.

"Ah! A T-14 hyperdrive generator," said the flapping blue shopkeeper. "You are in luck! I'm the only one hereabouts who has one. It's not cheap though." Qui-Gon rolled his eyes at this not unexpected sales pitch. "Speaking of which, how's you going to pay for all this?"

"I have twenty-thousand Republic dataries," replied the Jedi.

"Republic credits?" Watto laughed. "Republic credits are no good around here. I assume you don't have local currency, and

no one here wants Republic funds. Too traceable. And forget about exchanging them. I need something... more real.”

“I don’t have anything else,” said Qui-Gon. He raised his left hand and gestured subtly in front of Watto’s snout. Reaching out through the Force he attempted to plant a thought in the dealer’s mind. “But credits will do fine.”

“No. They won’t.” said Watto firmly.

Again, the Jedi Master motioned with his hand and reached out, trying to access Watto’s conscience. “Credits *will* do fine.”

“No,” said Watto again. “They won’t. What do you think you are some kind of Jedi waving your hand around like that? I’m a Toydarian. Mind tricks don’t work on me.” He poked Jinn in the chest with a sharp finger that protruded from his blue hand. “No money, no parts. No deal. And no one else has a T-14 hyperdrive, I promise you that.” He turned his back and fluttered his wings, leaving Qui-Gon alone in the junk yard with his droid.

The Jedi master pulled a communicator from his belt, tapped a button on its side, and it gave a small buzzing tone. “Yes, master?” said Obi-Wan from the other end of the signal.

“I found our part,” he said.

“That’s good news,” replied Kenobi eagerly.

“Considering how hard it is to find here, yes it is. However, the dealer who has it seems unwilling to accept payment in Republic credits.”

“That’s bad news,” said Obi-Wan. “Let me see if we have anything to trade on board. It’s unfortunate we lost so many of the R2-units. I am sure half a dozen of those may have worked.”

“I don’t know, Obi-Wan. This proprietor seems to be ready to drive a hard bargain.”

Through the communicator, Qui-Gon could hear Obi-Wan scurrying about the ship looking for anything of value. “Well, I’ve found a few containers of supplies. The Queen’s wardrobe, maybe?”

“I don’t think fancy clothes hold much value here,” said Qui-Gon. “How much in supplies?”

“Not enough for you to barter with,” replied the Padawan. “Not in the amount you’re talking about.”

“All right,” said Qui-Gon. “I’m sure another solution will present itself. I’ll check back later.” He switched off the commlink and tapped Artoo on the dome before striding back into the shop.

The boy was showing Padme around the junk shop, telling her about how he and Watto had acquired each part, piece and droid. Qui-Gon’s entrance was not subtle. Dirt kicked up from under his brown boots.

“We’re leaving,” he commanded. The Queen was not used to be spoken this way as the Jedi barked the order and stormed past her.

“Excuse me?” she said.

“I said we’re going. Jar Jar?” The Gungan juggled some small parts he had taken an interest in and nearly dropped them on the ground.

“Alright then,” said Padme allowing irritation to shine through her otherwise polite demeanor. She turned her attention back to the boy. “I’m glad to have met you, Anakin Skywalker,” she said mindful of calling him by his name.

“I’m glad to have met you, too!” he said and watched her leave, barely noticing the other human, the Gungan, and the robot who accompanied her. His mind wrestled with what he was feeling. A thousand beings from a hundred species had come through this shop, but never had one affected him in the way this Padme person had. It was not just that she was another human. It was not just that she had a beautiful face. He was drawn to something about her. She seemed genuine, caring and interested in him for who he was. No one had ever looked at him the way she did – other than his mother. Anakin’s mother could see into him somehow, and the way Padme smiled at him felt very much the same. He shook his head to get her image from his mind, but it remained burned into his consciousness.

However, he was startled back to reality by the grunting cough of his owner, Watto. “Outlanders! They think they know everything!”

“They seemed nice to me,” said Anakin.

“The girl? Maybe. That man, not so much,” harrumphed the Toydarian. He glanced around the shop. “Who moved that pit droid?”

“That Gungan they were with,” Anakin said.

“Ugh. That one. Never met a Gungan. Never need to meet another. Clean the racks, then you can go home,” said Watto. Anakin hopped off the counter top excitedly and started his cleanup by moving the pit droid back to where it belonged.

* * * * *

Ric Olie had fallen asleep in his pilot’s chair aboard the Queen’s ship, feet on the console, and hands across his lap when he was woken by a subtle hissing sound. His eyes opened one at a time, and he rubbed them to clear the blur and try to discern what the noise was. Ric had darkened the transparisteel cockpit windows to keep the twin suns from blinding him. He reached across the control board to lessen the shade level and revealed some of the Tatooine view.

Sand was blowing in drifts over the ship, driven by a wind that was slowly increasing in intensity. The sound of millions of granules created a steady sizzle across the reflective metal body of the Nubian. Captain Panaka entered the cockpit to see what the sound was as well.

“Sand storm. That will slow them down,” Panaka said. The storm created a sandy haze across the valley where they had landed. “Sooner we get out of here the better.”

“Couldn’t agree more,” said the pilot. He was going to continue his complaint when a light flashed on the center of the console. “A message from home!” he said eagerly. As he reached instinctively for the receiver button, Panaka tried to grab his arm.

“Don’t answer it!” said the Captain. But it was too late. Ric Olie’s finger had tapped the key opening the channel.

A small hologram of Sio Bibble materialized on the dashboard flickering on and off and appeared to be a broken transmission.

The Governor looked terrified. “...death toll... catastrophic... bow to... wishes... contact me...” and then it repeated. “... death toll... catastrophic... bow to... wishes... contact me...”

Panaka and Olie looked at each other in horror.

“What have you done?” said Obi-Wan bursting into the cockpit. “No transmissions in or out!”

“It was reflex,” said Olie.

“We haven’t replied,” said Panaka. “They can’t trace us without it.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure. This is a royal vessel. By Republic protocol, I imagine it sends a receipt beacon. You may have given away our location,” scolded the Padawan. “Shut it down. It’s a trap!”



CHAPTER 9

The three travelers and their R2-unit started down yet another alley in search of a T-14 hyperdrive. After failing to make a deal with Watto, they were equally unsuccessful in locating another hyperdrive in the dozens of other shops they had tried since landing on this desert world. Whether it was a negotiating tactic or not, it appeared that the Toydarian junk dealer had not been wrong when he said the part they were in need of was not to be found anywhere but in his shop.

The suns were beating down on them and winds had begun whipping sand up from the surrounding valley and across the dusty streets. Jar Jar, whose skin had never been this dry before, was also suffering from severe hunger. He had not had anything to eat since his cottlefish breakfast on the shores of his lake home, several systems away from this arid world. The pain on his dehydrated skin was occasionally diminished by his bewilderment at the myriad of beings, colors, sounds and noises his simple senses were being bombarded by. Jar Jar only knew of

his life in Otoh-Gunga and then his time in the lagoon. He had seen vehicles flying in the sky and seemed to remember stories about traveling among the stars, but the whirlwind journey he was suddenly on was almost incomprehensible.

“No again,” said Jar Jar in a state somewhere between frightened, angry and confused. “No again! Da beings hereabouts are cawazy. Wesa gettin robbed or crunched or both.”

Qui-Gon, who walked a good five meters in front of him said, “Not likely. We have nothing of value. That’s our problem.”

As the group of “outlanders” made their way around yet another corner, they passed by a shop with all kinds of fruits, vegetables, and meats on display. The burly scent of cooked flesh mingled with the sweet smells of imported harvests, and the aromas overwhelmed the Gungan. Dangling from an awning, Jar Jar noticed half a dozen fish-shaped somethings, and the smell which wafted from them was intoxicating, amplified by the emptiness of his belly. With no sense of reference about commerce or a concept of payment, Jar Jar grabbed one and slid it into his beak.

“Ay ay!” shouted a gristly voice from inside the building from which the appealing food hung. A large, blubbery being appeared from the shadows with enormous red eyes and dozens of stubby horns on its head and neck. Jar Jar snapped his head in fear toward the creature, while the fish was still in his mouth, and he realized it was still attached to the string. Jar Jar panicked. “Yawoba wonga?” the other being barked.

Binks cowered, pulled his head back, but kept the fish in his teeth.

The beast shouted at him again and began to move on Jar Jar. “Uga wupiupi wep!”

Binks stepped slowly backwards, and the fish slid from the grasp of his mouth and sprung back toward this creature who apparently was the proprietor of the food stand. She swatted it away, and it jettisoned from its string ten meters down the lane into a bowl that sat on a café table. The contents of the bowl splashed onto the alien that was eating from it, visibly angering it.

“Chuba!” the soup-splashed creature cursed and hopped onto the table. The being had hands for feet and feet for hands giving him a naturally hunched over stance as he stood a little over one meter in height. He looked vicious. His brown face had a square snout with fleshy whiskers which drooped on each side of his mouth, and his eyes were a piercing gray-yellow. He grabbed the fish that had crash landed in his bowl and scampered quickly over to Jar Jar. When he landed in front of the Gungan, he planted the feet on the end of his arms firmly on the ground, and with the hands on his legs, pushed Jar Jar down onto the street. With the Gungan flat on his back, the assailant bounded onto Jar Jar’s chest and looked him square in the eye. “Is this yours?” he growled in a gravelly voice that matched his menacing face.

“Whosa me?” said Jar Jar not even trying to hide his fear.

The angry being shook the fish in Jar Jar's face. "I said, is this yours?" A small string of saliva leaked from his mouth, and he sucked back in before it reached Jar Jar's neck.

"Careful, Sebulba," came a juvenile human voice from behind Jar Jar and out of his view. "He's a big-time outlander. I'd hate to see you diced before we race again." The disgruntled alien froze and looked up from Binks to the boy. The Gungan was relieved to see his recent acquaintance, young Anakin, walking up the street a few meters away.

"Next time we race, boy, it will be the end of you," sneered Sebulba, still firmly planted on Jar Jar's chest. "If you weren't a slave, I'd squash you now."

"It would be a pity, if you had to pay for me." Sebulba hopped off of Binks, grunted something in Huttese, and scurried back to his table. "Yeah, get outta here," said Anakin victoriously. A shadow crept over him, and when he turned, he was startled to see Qui-Gon had somehow appeared behind him.

"Hi there," said Qui-Gon.

"Oh, hi," said the boy. "Your buddy here was about to be turned into orange goo. He picked a fight with the wrong Dug."

"Mesa haten crunchen," said Jar Jar as he staggered back to his flat feet. "Dat's da last ting mesa wanten."

"Nevertheless," started Qui-Gon. "The boy is right. You were headed for trouble." He put a hand on Anakin's shoulder. "Thank you, my young friend."

Padme wandered up to the crew with Artoo and flashed a smile at Anakin.

Anakin felt his pulse quicken at the sight of the girl again. “If you’re hungry, I can get you something,” he offered. Jar Jar nodded wildly and followed the boy past Sebulba – who was now eating the fish that flung into his bowl – and down to another food stand. The boy pulled out some black coins and handed them to the shopkeeper in exchange for a small box filled with bright blue berries.

“My bones are achin’,” said the old human woman shopkeeper handing him a second box. “Storms coming up, Ani. You better get home.”

“That’s where I was headed, Ms. Jira,” he said. “Thank you!”

Anakin took a handful of berries from the container and handed them to Jar Jar.

“Tanky yoo,” said the Gungan greedily shoving them into his mouth.

Anakin turned to Padme and handed her some as well. “You are too kind,” she said oozing with sincerity. Anakin then reached out to give some to Qui-Gon.

“Here, you’ll like these pallies.” Qui-Gon nodded, smiled and took the half dozen berries the boy offered. He popped one into his mouth.

“Delicious,” Qui-Gon said. “I’ll save some for later.” He rustled the tunic that covered his belt to find a pouch to store them in, and Anakin noticed a shiny silver tube on his belt. Before he

could ask about it, the cloth covered it again, and Qui-Gon began to walk further down the lane.

“Hey! Do you have shelter?” Anakin called. “Storm will be here any minute.”

“We’ll head back to our ship,” said Qui-Gon without breaking stride.

“Is it far?” shouted Anakin, as the group of strangers moved further down the street and the wind steadily increased.

Qui-Gon stopped and looked over his shoulder. “It’s on the outskirts.”

“You’ll never reach it in time,” called Anakin. “Sandstorms are very, very fast and very, very dangerous. My home is just up this street. You can come with me until the storm dies.”

Before Qui-Gon could respond, Padme, Jar Jar and Artoo began making their way toward Anakin. “Thank you!” shouted Padme. “You are also a very generous little boy.”

Anakin waited for the entire group to arrive before leading them down an alleyway to another unassuming mudbrick building. In its side was a stash of buttons upon which Anakin tapped allowing the door to slide upwards and open. He walked inside, waved to his guests to follow and shouted, “Mom! Mom! I’m home!”

“Dissen cozy,” said Jar Jar looking around the simple hovel. They entered into a room with a table and a place to prepare meals off to the side. In the back was another, smallish, open room with two cots. A woman, with weather-beaten skin, brown-streaked

gray hair and a warm, friendly smile made her way out of a third room on the side and was startled to see her home was full of guests.

“These are my friends, Mom,” Anakin said striding across the room to see her. He threw his arms around her, and she kissed the top of his head.

“Oh,” she said. “I see.” Her son had a wonderful heart but never had he brought strangers home.

“Hideoe!” said Jar Jar offering his toothy grin and a wave.

“I’m Qui-Gon Jinn,” said the tall bearded man dressed in a robe and pale cream tunic. He extended his arm and Anakin’s mother accepted the polite handshake.

“I’m building a droid,” said Anakin to Padme suddenly and completely oblivious to the rest of his guests. “Wanna see it?”

“Your son was kind enough to offer us shelter,” said Qui-Gon.

“Come on!” called Anakin. “I’ll show you Threepio.” He took Padme by the hand and to the small room with two cots. Artoo chirped and followed them.

“I’m Shmi Skywalker,” said Anakin’s mother. “I suppose if Anakin trusts you, so do I.” She maintained her smile but there was a small amount of doubt. She had seen the kindness of strangers turn bad first hand on the streets of Mos Espa. But she also knew her son had a way of reading people that was generally not wrong.

“We won’t be a bother, ma’am. As soon as this storm passes, we’ll be on our way,” said Qui-Gon.

“Don’t be silly,” said Shmi. “It’s nearly time for our midday meal. I’ll make enough for all of us.”

The Jedi master smiled kindly. “We *are* hungry. You are as generous and kind as your boy,” said Qui-Gon.

In the back corner of the sleeping quarters stood the beginnings of a protocol droid. Most of the frame was intact but almost all of the wiring and motors were exposed. There was virtually no outside casing other than obviously random spare parts.

“Isn’t he great?” said Anakin. “He’s not finished yet... of course.”

“Of course,” agreed Padme. “He’s wonderful.”

“You think so? I’ve been building him since the day Watto became our owner. Been scrapping parts whenever I can.”

Artoo warbled and squeaked a comment.

“He’s a protocol droid – or will be – to help my Mom.” Anakin continued as he reached up to the neck joint of the incomplete robot and flipped a switch. “Watch!”

A servo spun to life in the top section of the protocol droid’s head and a moment later the rest of its body reanimated. The torso was wobbly on the incomplete legs and the arms flinched upwards bringing its hands up from its side. Then a polite voice emanated from a small speaker on the face, tucked behind a plate that, when finished, would represent its mouth.

“Oh,” it started in the traditional accent that the upper crust of the galaxy adopted when speaking. “I’m terribly sorry, but...

where is everybody?” Anakin reached across to the other side of his cot and grabbed a photoreceptor from a table and stuck it roughly into the empty socket where a second eye should have been. When it made contact with the circuitry in the outlet, both electronic eyes lit up, glowing a subtle golden yellow. The incomplete protocol droid stood as straight as its skeletal form would allow. “Thank you, Master Anakin,” it said, then addressed his guests. “I am C-3PO, human-cyborg relations. How might I serve you?”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, C-3PO,” said Padme as politely as she would greet a royal visitor in her court several systems away. “He’s perfect,” she said to Anakin.

“Oh? Perfect?” said Threepio, his audio receptors alerting his conversation program to respond with a flattered tone to his voice. “Thank you.”

Anakin quickly shifted his attention from his droid project and toward the captivating female guest in his home. “When the storm is over, I’ll show you my podracer,” he said excitedly turning his back on Threepio and leading Padme out of his room. “I’m building my own.” Padme smiled sweetly at his enthusiasm and followed him to the main room where Qui-Gon and Jar Jar were seated at the table.

Shmi brought a plate of fruit and placed it on the table. Anakin pulled a chair out and politely offered it to Padme who sat down and smiled a thank you to the boy. His mother took the seat at the

head of the table on the opposite side of Qui-Gon, who was flanked by the Gungan.

“As I was saying,” Shmi started. “All slaves have transmitters in their bodies somewhere.”

Anakin took his seat between his mother and Padme. “I’ve been working on a scanner to try to locate mine,” he said.

Shmi smiled at him. “Any attempt to escape –”

“And they blow you up!” exclaimed Anakin with an open-handed slap on the table to punctuate the finality.

“How wude,” agreed Jar Jar.

Padme shook her head. “I can’t believe there is still slavery in the galaxy,” she said. “The Republic has anti-slavery laws.”

Shmi looked at the young woman to her right. “The Republic doesn’t exist out here,” she said. “We survive on our own.”

There was a moment of tension at the table as the opposing realities of civilized and wild space clashed in the air between the guests and their hosts. The silence was broken by a slurping slap sound emanating from Jar Jar, as he fired his long amphibian tongue from his mouth and collected a pally berry from the tray. The Gungan immediately felt the disapproving glare of Qui-Gon Jinn and the side-eyed look from Padme.

The uncomfortable silence returned until it was broken by Anakin, who felt it too. “Has anyone ever seen a podrace?” Padme shook her head, and Jar Jar eyed his next choice of food from the platter.

“They have podracing on Malastare,” said Qui-Gon. “Very fast. Very dangerous.”

Anakin nodded and then raised his chin proudly. “I’m the only human who can do it.” Out of the corner of his view, the boy noticed his mother slump indiscernibly.

“You must have Jedi reflexes if you race pods,” said Qui-Gon.

Jar Jar could no longer resist another pally berry and shot his tongue out one more time to grab one. Before the Gungan tongue made it half way across the distance between his mouth and the fruit selection, Qui-Gon grabbed it between his forefinger and thumb and glared once again at Jar Jar. “Don’t do that again,” he warned.

Padme and Anakin couldn’t help but laugh a little in response to Jar Jar’s scolding, looking at each other. Binks mumbled something before Qui-Gon released his tongue, and it sucked back into his mouth.

“You’re a Jedi Knight, aren’t you?” asked Anakin, somehow innocently and with a bit of interrogation to his voice.

“What makes you think that?” asked Jinn popping a berry into his mouth.

“I saw your laser sword,” responded Anakin readily. “Only Jedi carry that kind of weapon.”

Qui-Gon leaned back in his chair and finished chewing the fruit before responding. “Perhaps I killed a Jedi and took it from him.” He looked around the table to gauge the reaction of Padme

– who smiled and looked down – and Shmi. Anakin’s mother’s expression did not change as she watched the exchange.

“I don’t think so,” said Anakin. “No one can kill a Jedi.”

“If only that were true,” reflected Qui-Gon.

Anakin continued speaking. “I had a dream once that I was a Jedi. I came back here to free all the slaves.” His face brightened, and he leaned in. “Have you come here to free us?” he asked eagerly.

“No,” said Qui-Gon. “I’m afraid not.”

Anakin was not deterred. “I think you have. Why else would you be here?”

Qui-Gon was silent for what felt like a very long moment. He reached out through the Force to get a read on the very attuned boy and what he received was like nothing he had felt before. There was a familiar feeling he would get from untrained younglings and children identified as potential Jedi Knights, but this was somehow more raw. He was also unsure of why it seemed to resist his attention. “I can see there’s no fooling you, Anakin,” he began. The Jedi darted his eyes toward Shmi before turning his attention back to the boy. Anakin’s mother continued sitting resolutely, waiting on his next words. “We are on our way to Coruscant, the capital of the Republic, on a very important mission.”

Anakin interrupted. “How did you end up here on the Outer Rim?”

“Our ship was damaged,” said Padme. Anakin felt sweetness from her voice. “We landed here, but we are stranded until we can repair it.”

Anakin perked up again, a smile returning to his face. “I can fix it! I can fix anything,” he said.

“I believe you can,” said Qui-Gon. “But first we must acquire the parts we need.”

“Wit no-nutten mula to trade,” said Jar Jar, slowly reaching with his hand for a larger piece of fruit.

“We’ve tried to find a hyperdrive to use in our ship, but we’ve only found one with your master, Watto,” said Jinn. “And as my long-eared friend here said, we have nothing to trade for it.”

“There must be something he’s interested in,” said Padme. Her face portrayed worry for the first time, and Anakin took notice.

“Podracing,” the boy said.

“Gambling on podracing,” said Shmi. “Everything here revolves around betting on those awful races.”

“Greed is a powerful thing,” agreed Qui-Gon.

“I’ve built a racer,” offered Anakin. “There’s a big race tomorrow. The Boonta Eve Classic. You could enter my pod!”

“Anakin!” spat Shmi. She was impressed with this show of generosity but protective of her son. “Watto won’t let you.”

“Watto doesn’t even know I built it!” he said and turned to Qui-Gon. “You could make him think it’s yours, and then get him

to let me pilot it for you in the race.” It all made perfect sense to Anakin.

“I don’t want you to race,” said Shmi. “It’s awful. I die every time Watto makes you do it. Besides, the Boonta Eve race brings out all the most ruthless –”

“But, mom, I love it!” pleaded Anakin. “The prize money will more than pay for the parts they need.”

“Anakin, no,” said Shmi with finality.

“Your mother is right,” said Qui-Gon before his mother could continue. Although, if he was being honest with himself, there was something about this scenario that made sense to him. The Force, he knew, worked in mysterious ways. He continued: “Shmi, is there anyone friendly to the Republic who might help us?”

“No,” she said sadly and shaking her head.

“Mom,” begged Anakin. “You always say the biggest problem around here is that no one helps each other.” Shmi sighed heavily. He was right, and her heart swelled with his display of kindness.

Padme’s eyes darted between the Jedi and Anakin’s mother. “I’m sure Qui-Gon doesn’t want to put your son in danger,” she said. “We’ll find some other way.”

After a few seconds, Shmi relented. “There is no other way. I may not like it, but he can help you. He was meant to help you.” She looked hard at the Jedi Knight sitting at her table.



CHAPTER 10

“It worked just like you said it would,” said Nute Gunray in hologram form. “The signal was received, and the response beacon came back in moments.”

“Of course, it did,” said Darth Sidious. “Now, my apprentice will find them.”

“And what should we do in the interim?” asked the Viceroy nervously.

“Wait for my next orders.” Sidious tapped a button on his console, and the hologram disappeared instantly.

The Neimoidians were good at following instructions and had obeyed his every command up to that point. Everything was proceeding as he had foreseen, other than the escape of the Queen, and while that was a large and usually unforgivable mistake, it was something he was certain he’d be able to leverage to his advantage. It was Sidious who recommended they send a distress signal made of secretly captured and edited images and words of Sio Bibble on hologram creating a scrambled plea for help from

Queen Amidala's homeworld. When the message was sent, they were careful to ensure it was only receivable by the Queen's ship, to guarantee that any receipt beacons were from them. Additionally, Darth Sidious still did not want word of the invasion getting back to the Republic. There would be time for that, but it would have to happen when he wanted it to.

"Tatooine is sparsely populated," said Darth Maul who was pacing expectantly behind his master. "If the trace is correct, I will find them quickly."

"I am certain the Jedi are with her as well. Move against them first, then you will have no difficulty taking the Queen back to Naboo to sign the treaty. Kill anyone else with her."

"With pleasure, my master," Maul said. His pulse quickened, his fingers tightened in a fist, and he made his way toward the door that led to his ship.

"You have been well trained, my apprentice. They will be no match for you." Sidious laughed and waved a dismissive hand toward his Zabrak student. "Now go."



CHAPTER 11

“Are you sure about this?” said Padme walking swiftly behind Qui-Gon, making his way through the alleyway back toward Watto’s shop. “Trusting our fate to a boy we hardly know? I’m sure your Jedi Council would not approve.”

“My Jedi Council doesn’t need to know,” he said sharply.

“Well, I don’t approve,” she said under her breath. While there certainly was something sweet about that young boy, there was no evidence that she could see that he would survive a dangerous pod race, much less win enough local money to buy the new hyperdrive they needed. For that matter, they hadn’t even seen the racer he claimed to have built.

Amazed at how quickly life returned to normal on the streets after the sandstorm came and went, they approached Watto’s shop. When they walked in, Watto was fluttering about the shop, and Anakin was cleaning the sand that had made its way under the door and onto his master’s valuable junk.

“The boy here,” started Watto. “He tells me you wanta sponsor himma in the race. How can you do this? Not with Republic credits, I think.” He laughed.

“My ship will be the entry fee,” replied Qui-Gon.

“Ah,” said the dealer bringing a clawed finger to his stubbly chin. “Okay. Dats good. Nubian. Dats good.”

“It’s in good order, other than the parts I need.”

“Okay, okay...” he continued pondering the details until he thought of the next hurdle. “Ah, but... what will the boy ride? He smashed up my pod in the last race. It will take some time to fix it still, and the race, it’s tomorrow.”

“It’s not my fault,” said Anakin stopping what he was doing for a moment to defend himself. “Sebulba flashed me with his vents. I actually saved the pod... mostly.”

Watto laughed. “That he did. That he did. The boy is good, no doubts there.”

“Well,” said Qui-Gon. “During the sandstorm, I ducked into a local watering hole and actually won a racer in a game of chance. Claims it’s the fastest ever built.”

Watto’s eyes widened. “Well, I hope you didn’t kill anyone I know for it,” he laughed and then quickly got back to the business at hand. “So, you supply the pod and the entry fee, I supply the boy to pilot, we split any winnings then down the middle.”

Qui-Gon countered. “If it’s going to be an even split, then I suggest you front the money for the entry fee.” Watto opened his mouth to protest, but Jinn quickly continued. “If we win, you keep

all the winnings and give us the parts I need. If we lose... you keep my ship.”

Padme swallowed hard, and Anakin’s jaw dropped.

“Either way,” said Qui-Gon. “You win.”

“Deal,” Watto said quickly. “I’ll go register the boy now, and I will see you at the track tomorrow.”

“Deal,” said Qui-Gon with a nod.

“Boy, if you are going to race tomorrow, you’d best get home and work on this pod your foolish friend here claims to have won. You can use some parts in here if you need them,” said Watto. “But I want a full inventory of what you take. If you don’t win, you’ll be working them off.” The blue skinned junk dealer floated off and out the door. “And lock up when you leave!”

“Well, let’s get going,” said Qui-Gon. “I’m excited to see this pod of yours.”

Anakin grabbed a few parts from the shelves on the walls and was quickly at the front door of the shop, waving his guests out the door, so he could close up and finally finish his racer. He led them back up the alley and toward his hovel, while Qui-Gon raised his apprentice on the communicator from his belt. The Jedi quickly explained what was happening and that they would need one more day on the planet.

“What if this plan fails, Master?” asked Obi-Wan from the ship. “We could be here a very long time. And time is another thing we don’t have much of. Why don’t we send word to the Chancellor? I’ve fixed the communications array.”

“Well, it’s too dangerous to call for help right now,” Qui-Gon spoke quietly into the device and followed Anakin and the Queen. “And a ship without a hyperdrive doesn’t get us anywhere. Besides, there’s something about this boy.”

“With all due respect,” started Obi-Wan.

“I don’t want to hear it, Obi-Wan,” said Qui-Gon. “The Queen here already disagrees with me.”

“She’s not wrong, Master,” said Kenobi.

“You just standby, my padawan” responded Qui-Gon.

“I’ll be here, Master,” said Obi-Wan. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Jinn clicked off the communicator, reattached it to his belt, and walked swiftly to catch up to Padme and the boy.

“Here we are again,” said Anakin as he opened the door to his home.

“Take Artoo with you,” said Qui-Gon. “And Jar Jar too. If you need any help, I’m sure they can give it to you.”

Jar Jar stood up from the table, where he was still sitting, eating some sort of meat left over from their lunch, and Shmi was washing dishes with hot air and steam at the basin. Artoo chirped and beeped a happy tone at Anakin as he tapped him on the head.

“Thank you, sir,” said Anakin to the Jedi Master. “What about you?”

“Oh, I’ll be out in a minute,” Qui-Gon said.

Padme, still looking disappointed in her Jedi protector, followed Anakin, the droid and Jar Jar out the door. “I’ll go too,” she said stiffly.

After Anakin and his makeshift race crew left the home, Qui-Gon crossed the room to Shmi. She looked at him expectantly. “Well,” she said. “How did it go?”

“It went just as I suspected. The Toydarian is driven by anything he stands to profit from. He accepted the deal, and Anakin will be racing his pod tomorrow.”

Her lips curled in a false smile to express worried satisfaction. “That’s good.”

Qui-Gon stepped again toward her. When he spoke now, his voice was very gentle. “You should be proud of your son – you are, I can see that.” She looked shyly down. “He gives without any thought of reward.”

“He knows nothing of greed. Well, other than what he sees around him. He despises it.” She paused and then looked down into the basin. “Are you really a Jedi Knight?”

“I am,” he conceded.

She nodded. Qui-Gon sensed a nervousness in her but was not sure if it was attributable to her son racing in the Boonta Eve Classic or something else. “Anakin,” she started. “He has...” she stopped.

“He has special powers,” finished Qui-Gon. Shmi maintained her attention on the chores she was completing. “He can see

things before they happen. It's why he appears to have the reflexes to race. It's a Jedi trait."

Finally, she turned to him and looked at Qui-Gon with hope in her eyes. "He deserves better than a slave's life," she said desperately.

Jinn stepped back and sat on the edge of the dining table. "Had he been born in the Republic, we would've identified him early. The Force is strong with him."

"Can you help him?" she asked.

He ignored her question. "Who is his father?" Qui-Gon asked flatly.

Shmi knew the question was coming. She gently placed the last dish into a box next to the basin. Finally, she took a deep breath and turned toward the Jedi Master. "There was no father. I gave birth, I raised him... I can't explain what happened."

Qui-Gon brought a hand up to his chin and reached for a chair with his other one. He pulled one away from the table and sat down comfortably.

"I'm not sure I fully understand," he said.

She turned to face him and leaned against the now empty sink and crossed her arms uneasily. "I was born a slave myself. My mother and father were split up by our owner, and one morning I woke up in the custody of a completely different slaver. I was treated well by my owner, but I never saw my parents again. I decided very young that as long as I was a slave, I would never have a child.

“A dozen sun cycles ago, I was part of Gardulla the Hutt’s housekeeping staff when I suddenly fell very ill. I didn’t know it at the time, but it was sickness from being pregnant. But it was impossible. I’ve never... well, you know...”

Qui-Gon nodded.

“Anyway, it just wasn’t possible,” she said.

“I don’t want to intrude, but is it possible you were somehow drugged or, as a slave, has anyone bought you for...?”

“No,” she said. “Gardulla is a crime lord, but she treated me with respect and never subjected me to anything like that. She seemed to like me. Even kept me away from strange men by dismissing me for the night, if she felt I was in danger. I’ve never been with a man. Not even against my will.”

“And so, you just ‘became pregnant’ and gave birth to Anakin?”

“That’s all there is to it. Like I said, I can’t explain it.”

“Very well,” said Qui-Gon.

“You don’t believe me, do you?” she said.

“The Force works in mysterious ways,” he said. “I have no reason not to believe you.”

“So, can you help him?” she pleaded again.

“I don’t know,” he said slipping into deep thought. “I didn’t actually come here to free slaves.”

* * * * *

Anakin eagerly pulled the tarpaulin off his podracer. The silver side fins swept up into a plow shape and were painted with sharp blue swirls. The back half continued the striped pattern and jutted back into a stunted space fighter design. Overall, the pod was only about three-and-a-half meters long, with a single seated cockpit that would only fit a boy of his size.

From the front side, just before the end of the cockpit, came two five-and-a-half meter long connecting cables, which were magnetically sealed to the pod. The cables ran into two long fighter engines that once belonged to a BTL-A2 starfighter. Tubular in shape, the Radon-Ulzer Repulsorlift engines had yellow vanes off the front that opened and closed to adjust speed. Like his protocol droid, the podracer looked unfinished.

“I still have some work to do, but she’s going to be the fastest thing on the track tomorrow,” said Anakin proudly.

“Mesa no knowin podracers, but seemsa to mesa dissen be needin a lots of work!” said Jar Jar, as he surveyed the craft. The Gungan had taken a hydrospanner from the tool chest and was tapping it on various parts around the podracer, pretending in his own way that he was helping

“I’m sure it’s fine,” said Padme, trying to reassure herself as much as the Gungan. “Right, Anakin?”

“Once I get it started, I’ll know for sure,” he said.

“Started?” she asked wearily.

“Yea,” he said sheepishly. “I still haven’t actually gotten it started. I need to put in a C-21 power box. I took one from the

shop, but it's in the house. Last piece I need to get it going. Jar Jar, can you go get it?"

The Gungan came around to the front of the racer where the two fighter engines were connected by a purple blaze of electricity. Most pod racer vehicles used two engines that were stabilized through electromagnetic beams. Jar Jar stopped by the front of the engines, peered across the power couplings and when his ear touched a piece of the exposed circuitry, he got an electrical shock that pushed him straight up and back, making him drop the tool he casually held in his hand. It clanged down along the top of the front right engine and bounced into an open gap along the fuel injector line.

"Uh, meesa not sure meesa knowin a C-21 power boxin," said Binks. "But mesa try."

"Is it this one?" asked Qui-Gon Jinn, as he came around the corner to check the progress of the team. Artoo beeped a hello and whistled happily.

"That's it!" Anakin sprinted to grab it from the Jedi knight and brought it back to his racer.

Qui-Gon assessed the incomplete racer and, upon inspection, was starting to wonder about his decision to put the outcome of the entire mission in the hands of this boy and this machine. He wriggled up his arms into his sleeves and folded them across his chest, while leaning toward the Queen who looked on.

"How's it look?" he asked.

"I have a bad feeling about this," she said.

Anakin walked around to the back of his podracer's cockpit, opened a latch and pushed the power box into place. "Ready?" he said and smiled crookedly at Jar Jar, Jinn, and Padme.

The boy hopped up over the side of the pod and dropped into the brown leather seat. Expertly, he adjusted his seat, turned two smallish dials, and pushed down on a stiff accelerator on the floor. He looked briefly over at Qui-Gon who nodded approvingly at him before powering on the racer.

Anakin flipped the ignition switch.

It sputtered momentarily before roaring to life. The fighter engines glowed on both ends and whined loudly over a guttural growl. In the cockpit, Anakin smirked and then broke into an uncontrollable smile. His project was complete and his dream of racing his own pod was hours away from coming true. He grabbed the two handle bars that steered and regulated the speed, revving the engines like a veteran pilot. Anakin was unable to hold back his excitement. "It's working!" he shouted. "It's working!"

From the window in her simple home, Shmi looked out on her son and a proud smile gathered across her lips. Her pride was only marred by her sudden sense of loss at his taking another step further away from being the little boy whom she had birthed.



CHAPTER 12

“You wanted to see me, Master Yoda?” inquired Sifo-Dyas, as he cautiously entered the personal living quarters of the senior most member of the Jedi Council.

“Yes,” Yoda grunted. “Sit, please.” The diminutive master waved his clawed hand toward the tuffet which was positioned across from the one upon which he was sitting. Sifo-Dyas did as instructed, shook his brown robe, and sat cross-legged across from the elder Jedi. It was midday, and the Coruscant sunlight shined through the open slits in the window coverings that adorned Yoda’s simple room.

“What can I do for you, Master?”

“Grave concerns I have about your dealings with Senator Palpatine. Trust him too much, you do,” said Yoda. “Remember, a politician, he is.”

“Of course, I realize he is a politician,” protested Sifo-Dyas. “And please believe me when I say I don’t trust him.”

“Don’t you?” asked Yoda pointedly.

A Jedi, being trained in the Force and focused on the light side, avoided anger at all costs. They were taught that anger and its accompanying emotions were a path that opened a Force wielder up to the dark, using the awesome power they had gained to fulfill their first, instinctive response. Over the centuries, there were unspoken stories of Knights who gave into the quicker, easier route of the dark side, betrayed the Order and were cast out or eliminated by their fellow Jedi as they presented danger not just to themselves, but to those around them. As a result, the Jedi used meditation and other mental exercises to ensure they didn't allow anger to dominate their mind. They were taught that once they allowed it to take root, even in the slightest form, it would control their destiny and consume them. This lesson was among the earliest shared with the Younglings, and his childhood teachings played vividly in Sifo-Dyas's mind at this moment. As the Jedi Council leader sat across from him, accusing him of being too foolish to realize that Senator Sheev Palpatine from Naboo was not to be trusted, he felt an uneasy heat rise in his being.

Sifo-Dyas closed his eyes, drew a deep breath, and exhaled before responding with carefully selected words. "I appreciate your concerns, Master Yoda. However, I am uncomfortable with what you are implying."

"Uncomfortable you are because perhaps correct I am."

Sifo-Dyas again closed his eyes and pushed the aggressive feelings from his mind. "With all due respect, Master," he started.

“If you have invited me to your chambers to scold me like a child for a relationship I have with a member of the Galactic Senate – one that has, through the years, done nothing but support the Jedi and our peaceful protection of the Republic – then I feel it may be best for me to excuse myself.”

“Call you here to discuss it, I did not,” said Yoda. “Call you hear to forbid your interactions with him, I have.”

This time, the anger that welled up inside him was coupled with another feeling the Jedi prohibited: Sifo-Dyas was offended by the Council Leader’s order. Before he could respond, Yoda continued his command.

“If business there is to attend to with the Senator, deal directly with the Council he must.”

“What possible reason can you have to make this demand?” insisted Sifo-Dyas.

“Using you for his own gain, he may be.”

Now the human Jedi master added insult to the list of emotions he felt. “How weak do you think I am?” he asked. “Might I remind you, Master Yoda, that I am a chosen member of the Jedi Council? I have been practicing the Jedi Arts my entire life. You and I may not agree on all things, but I have always respected you. Need I ask the same of you?”

“Respect you, I do, Master Dyas,” said Yoda. “Outrank you as leader of the Council, I do as well.”

“Master Yoda, I –”

The little green Jedi Master continued unabated. “Know for a fact, I do, that in light of the recent action taken against Naboo, Senator Palpatine an army of the Republic supports,” said Yoda. “Told me, the Chancellor did, that discussions with him the Senator has had. Support from the Jedi, his case would surely help.”

Sifo-Dyas realized that over the last exchange he was no longer mindful of the dark feelings that clouded his responses. He had not been paying attention to the tone in his voice or the way his face flushed with resentment. Finally, once again fully aware of his feelings, he stood up from the tuffet he was seated. “Are you implying that I would be swayed to go against the Council’s repeated wishes? That I would disregard the majority disagreement with my case for such an army to protect the Republic where we cannot?”

“Implying something I am not,” replied Yoda looking up Dyas. “But concerned about Senator Palpatine’s intentions I am.”

“Master Yoda, if this move by the Trade Federation escalates, who will protect Naboo?”

“No reason have we to expect that escalate it will.”

“And the brutal murder of the head of the Banking Clan, a known adversary of the Trade Federation. A murder clearly by lightsaber.”

“No proof there is of murder,” insisted Yoda. “Less proof there is by lightsaber.”

“Master, you’ve discounted my visions. You’ve refused my requests to evaluate an army to protect the Republic. I fear we are at the beginning of the Prophecy.”

“Fear leads to the dark side, Master Sifo-Dyas,” said Yoda. “Be mindful your actions, it controls not.” The old master pushed himself off his tuffet and stood next to his human counterpart. Looking up at the man who was twice his height, Yoda waved for him to come down to his eye level. Sifo-Dyas bent down and took a knee in front of the venerable Jedi.

“Master Dyas, remember I do when found you we did. A small child you were. Stayed with me have your first words. Recall them do you?”

“I do. I was about three years old,” said Sifo-Dyas. “My parents were surprised at the Jedi arrival. I remember hearing you speaking to them from down the hall. After some discussion, they walked you into my bedroom where I was playing.”

“And the first thing you said to me was?”

“I knew you were coming.”

“Knew then I did that the gift of foresight you had,” said Yoda. “Discount your visions, I do not. And if beginning the Prophecy is, then nothing can we do to stop it.”

“But, Master Yoda, if a second war with the Sith is about to begin, we will need...”

“Prophecies tell of things that are to happen,” said Yoda. “Not of things that might happen. Considered, have you, that an army

will not combat the Sith? If a return of the Sith the Whills have seen, stop that the Jedi cannot.”

“We can prepare,” pleaded Sifo-Dyas.

“Prepared our entire lives we have been,” said Yoda simply as Dyas looked blankly back at him. “If prophesized something is, materialize it will. Unable to stop it are we. Outrun our future, we cannot. Accept it and respond we must.”

“That is where you are wrong, Master Yoda,” started Sifo-Dyas. “The Prophecy of the Whills is a warning against our complacency. Preparing to combat the Sith and protect the galaxy from their reign is our obligation as Jedi. An army of the Republic is not to destroy the Sith – that is the role we play. The army I seek is to defend the galaxy from the fallout of our war.” Sifo-Dyas stood up and looked down at Yoda. “That is why I will continue to voice my belief in a Grand Army of the Republic.” Sifo-Dyas walked toward the doorway of Yoda’s chambers.

“Heed my command, you must,” called Yoda as Dyas took a step out of the room. “Your engagement with Senator Palpatine I forbid. With the voice of the Council I speak.”

“I will be mindful of your wishes, Master Yoda.” Sifo-Dyas pulled his brown hood over his head to leave the temple. “But I will also do what I feel is right.”



CHAPTER 13

The night before the Boonta Eve Classic pod race, Anakin's mother, Shmi, offered her floor and a few blankets to the Jedi, the young woman and the Gungan to stay for the evening. "Traveling after the suns set is ill-advised," she warned them, and the travelers accepted her offer.

When they awoke, poorly rested, the next morning, Anakin was already outside at his pod, shining it up and prepping for the race. Shmi had set out some meats and fruit on the table for the group to share. Jar Jar made himself right at home and began to eat greedily, until Qui-Gon shot him a look that warned of being ungrateful.

"Tankey yoo," said Binks, as he sat fidgeting by the food that remained, fighting the urge to devour it all.

"The race starts when the suns begin their descent," said Shmi to Qui-Gon who was seated politely once again at the opposite end of the table. "Watto says we need to be there two hours before so we have some time before we leave."

“Good,” said Qui-Gon standing up. “I’d like to spend some time with your son, if you don’t mind. Coach him.”

Shmi smiled instinctually. She often wondered what Anakin’s life would be like if he had a father figure to complement her own parenting skills, and for a brief moment, she felt the fantasy of a life they would never know shimmer before her. Shmi looked away almost shyly and said, “I’m certain he’d appreciate it.”

The Jedi politely excused himself and left through the doorway to meet up with Anakin. Padme came to the table and sat down in the chair Qui-Gon had just vacated. “Thank you once again for your hospitality,” she said. “If there’s some way we can repay you, please let us know.”

Shmi nodded gracefully. “It was the right thing to do,” she said. “And I don’t expect any favor in return. All I ask is that you and your Jedi friend protect my son.”

“I am sure Qui-Gon has Anakin’s best interest at the front of his mind, ma’am,” Padme said.

“I’m sure he does,” agreed Shmi. “But the racers he’s facing today will not.”

* * * * *

Anakin was focused on a glob of grease that was marring one of the few shiny parts of his pod when Qui-Gon came around the corner. Artoo-Deetoo was parked next to the racer with a couple of flaps open on his cylindrical body allowing a multitude of thin,

precision arms to adjust and fine tune parts of the engine. See-Threepio was also nearby cleaning a fin with an oily rag.

“Good morning,” shouted Qui-Gon as he approached the boy, startling Anakin who was intently focused on removing the stain, causing him to drop the rag he was using. As he reached down to pick it off the sandy ground, his forearm grazed a protruding bolt, slicing into his skin and creating a cut about the length of his finger. He grimaced in pain and pressed the cloth against it.

“Hello, Qui-Gon, sir,” he forced himself to say through the sting.

“Let me take a look at that,” said Qui-Gon breaking into a jog to attend to the child’s injury. The Jedi bent down on one knee and took hold of the arm. “Stay still, Anakin. Let me clean this cut.” Qui-Gon pulled the communicator device off his belt and pressed the sharper back end into the boy’s wound. Anakin pulled away from the quick stab and looked harshly at the Jedi.

“Owch! What was that for?” the boy said.

“I just need to check your blood for infections,” Qui-Gon answered. Then he took some salve out of a tube on his belt, rubbed it on the cut and stood back up. “There we are. Good as new. I’ll be right back.”

“Where are you going?” asked Anakin.

“Sending the sample back to my ship. To get it checked.”

Anakin looked at his arm, which surprisingly immediately felt fine, shrugged and got back to work on his pod.

Qui-Gon ducked around the corner from the open area where Anakin's pod was parked. He held the communicator up to his mouth and summoned his apprentice. "Obi-Wan," he whispered.

After a moment the communicator hissed to life. "Yes, master," came the response.

"I need an analysis of this blood sample I am sending you," said Jinn pressing a button on the device in his hand.

"Alright," said Obi-Wan. "Wait one minute."

"I need a midichlorian count," said Qui-Gon.

"I had a feeling that's what you were looking for," said his apprentice. "Got it, running it now." Qui-Gon could hear some beeps and chirps on the other side of the channel and in a moment, Kenobi returned. "It's off the charts!" he said with pure surprise in his voice. "I've never seen a count this high."

"Run the numbers against the Council readings."

After a moment Obi-Wan returned: "It's higher than... than all of them. Even Master Yoda." There was a ponderous pause between them. "What does it mean?"

"I don't know," said Qui-Gon, looking up to notice that Shmi had been standing a few meters away the entire time. "I have to go." He clicked the communicator off and smiled stiffly at Anakin's mother. Her eyes squinted in question at the Jedi and before he could say anything to her, she turned and walked away.



CHAPTER 14

“Thank you for meeting me here,” said Sifo-Dyas. “If we met at your office or apartment, there would be a record of my check-in. And, well, I can’t afford that right now.”

“It *is* most unusual, Master Dyas,” said Senator Palpatine. “But then, these are increasingly unusual times.”

Shortly after meeting with Master Yoda, Sifo-Dyas struggled with how to handle the admonishment of his increasingly strong ties with the Senator. At the very least, the Jedi felt he needed to let Palpatine know that they were going to have to change the structure of their relationship and that they would no longer have direct access to each other – something Sifo-Dyas felt was best explained in person and in private. They had agreed to meet in the one place they both knew no one would follow them: on a landing platform in the Flats.

“I spoke with Master Yoda. He told me that you have had conversations with the Chancellor about the creation of a militarized Republic.”

“Why, yes. Yes, I have. With all that has happened recently, I am fully aligned with your concerns – if not for the same reasons,” said the Senator, allowing the pressure of the situation to color his words. “With no word from your Jedi ambassadors, I fear something terrible is happening on my planet and there is nothing I can do about it. If I am right, we are completely helpless against any sort of act of war.”

“Can I ask why you didn’t tell me?” asked the Jedi.

“Had I not told you?” said Palpatine with a convincing amount of shock. “I thought for sure I mentioned it in one of our recent meetings. Perhaps with all that is happening, I simply overlooked it.” He sighed.

“Overlooked it?”

“Come now, Master Jedi, I hope you don’t feel I am the type of man who would keep secrets from those I trust.”

“Do we have a mutual trust, Senator? Master Yoda has expressed concern over our interactions and your intentions. He thinks perhaps you are, what is the best political turn of phrase? ‘Leveraging our relationship.’” Palpatine wrinkled his brow to show uncertainty. “He thinks you may be using our friendship for your own gain.”

Palpatine smiled respectfully. “First of all, Master Dyas, I am honored that you consider our relationship one of friendship first. Second, I would say that we absolutely have a mutual respect. Bear in mind, I am a senator with a great responsibility to my planet and my people. You can believe me when I tell you that if

I wanted to *leverage* our friendship, I would be perfectly clear with my intent.”

“I should hope so, Senator.”

“My friend,” started Palpatine placing an arm on the Jedi’s shoulder and slowly leading him away from their individual shuttles parked on the platform. “I don’t fully understand the Jedi Council, but I fear they are becoming more insular, more *paranoid*. I know I am not the only one who feels that way, and I realize I’m not telling you anything you aren’t aware of when I say the Republic is beginning to... lose faith in the Jedi,” said Palpatine, locking a stare on Sifo-Dyas and waiting for a response.

“Now, Senator, I wouldn’t say we are becoming paranoid,” said the Jedi.

“No?” said Palpatine. “Then why are we meeting here in the Flats instead of in public or in my chambers?”

“That’s one of the other things I wanted to discuss with you. Master Yoda, as voice of the Council, has banned me from talking with you.” As the words came from his mouth, the Jedi felt the irony considering Palpatine’s assessment.

“That doesn’t sound paranoid at all,” laughed the Senator. “He forbade you from speaking with me? Why? If I did have intentions of *using* you for political gain, does he not have confidence in your ability to see it? You are the member of the Council with the gift of sight, am I wrong? Does he believe that

you would bend to my wishes? Master Dyas, I don't want to influence your perception, but I would take that as a lack of trust."

Sifo-Dyas once again felt the Jedi-prohibited feelings invading his psyche bolstered by the Senator's shared observation of a diminishing trust. He pushed the anger and humiliation from his mind, but what he could not let go of was the fact that Palpatine had also perceived an obvious disconnect between himself and Master Yoda. Perhaps that, he thought, was why he was forbidden from spending time with the Senator.

"I'm certain that is not the case," said the Jedi, doing his best to veil his agreement with Palpatine. "I think he is concerned that a kindred spirit in the desire to protect the Republic with an army will only..." he paused and pondered. "Fortify my position."

"You don't need me to tell you what's going on, Master Jedi," said the Senator paternally. "It is perfectly clear."

"But I can't be the only one who feels this way – that protection for the Republic is paramount."

"I'm sure you aren't," responded Palpatine. "In fact, I am certain of it. But I am the only one who currently has the Chancellor's ear. If ever there was a time to make the case, this would be it."

Sifo-Dyas felt the need to retake control of the conversation. "Senator Palpatine, if you wish to continue to advocate for an army in the Senate, that decision must be yours, and I am inclined to remind you that, at least for now, will not have support from the Jedi Council."

“Master Jedi, I don’t expect backing from the ‘guardians of peace and justice.’” Palpatine let the words hang in the air. “I also don’t assume you would put yourself in a position to go against the wishes of your Council, as long as you serve them. I also wouldn’t dream of asking you to speak on their behalf. When last we spoke, I asked how I could help you, and you told me you weren’t sure. I believe I can help you raise this army, even if the Jedi will not.”



CHAPTER 15

High in the blue sky, the twin Tatooine suns were reaching their peak when Anakin, his mother, Qui-Gon, Padme, and Jar Jar arrived at the Mos Espa pod racing stadium on the other side of town. Artoo and Threepio kept pace behind the group as they approached the “racers-only” area.

“They are with me,” said Watto to a security guard of the Nikto species, who stood at the entrance to the hangar. The Toydarian had been impatiently waiting for them to arrive. He had towed Anakin’s pod racer to the event, finalized the entry process, placed a few bets, and was starting to worry if they would arrive.

The entire area was abuzz with activity. The stands were filling up with spectators from hundreds of species, some of whom lived on Tatooine and many more who traveled to the planet just for this event.

Boonta Hestillic Shad’ruu was a warrior Hutt that had ascended to legend over the centuries, and Boonta Eve was a

holiday in his honor, which was celebrated on the desert world. Early on, the tradition held that games of chance were played by Hutt children to compete for gifts from the elders. It was not until recently that it evolved into yet another opportunity for the Hutt gangster clans to soak the locals for money by creating one of the largest pod racing events in the Outer Rim. Outlanders poured into the planet, and the Hutts benefitted from providing protection services, running gambling books, and the entrance fees and tickets for the Boonta Eve Classic. However, for better or worse, it was a festival that everyone from young to old enjoyed, and the pod race was the zenith of the proceedings.

“I want to see your ship right after the race,” Watto said, as he flapped his wings and kept pace with the tall human striding into the hangar.

“Patience, my friend,” replied Qui-Gon. “You’ll have your winnings before the suns set, and we’ll be far away from here.”

“Not if your ship belongs to me,” chuckled Watto. “I warn you: no funny business.”

“You don’t think Anakin will win?” said Qui-Gon, stopping in his tracks to look at the Toydarian.

“Don’t getta me wrongo,” said Watto. “I have great faith in the boy. He’s a credit to your race. But, uh, Sebulba there is going to win, I think.” He pointed over his shoulder to where Sebulba, the Dug with whom Jar Jar had an altercation the day before, was sitting next to his enormous pod racer. The Dug had goggles

above his eyes and was comfortably situated on a stool, while two twi-lek women attended to his nails and massaged his neck.

“Oh no!” said Jar Jar, accidentally being caught in the glance of the Dug. Sebulba pointed a clawed finger at the Gungan and chuckled accusingly.

“Why do you think that?” asked Qui-Gon.

“Why?” laughed Watto. “Are you serious? He always wins! I’m betting heavily on Sebulba.” The Toydarian continued chuckling as he flapped away from Jinn.

“I’ll take that bet,” called Qui-Gon.

Watto froze and then turned slowly to the human. “You’ll what?”

“I’ll wager my new pod against, say, the boy and his mother,” replied Qui-Gon.

As appealing as another bet on the race was, and as confident as he could be in Sebulba, the Toydarian was also wise enough to know when the payout was not fair. “No pod is worth two slaves. Not by a long shot.”

“The boy then,” Jinn rebuffed.

“Better. Closer. How about his mother? She’s still got many years in her,” Watto said with a sly snicker.

“The boy,” Jinn insisted.

Watto harrumphed. A pod for one slave was not a terrible bet, but the boy had more value to the junk shopkeeper than his mother. However, the lure of the wager was simply too strong for him to pass up. “We’ll let fate decide, huh?” he offered, reaching

into a pouch on his side. He pulled out a rudimentary six-sided cube made of japor, a local hard wood. It had three sides painted blue with the other three painted red. “Blue face up, we wager the boy. Red, it’s his mother.”

“Fair,” stated Qui-Gon.

Watto drifted closer to the ground, wings flapping, and rolled the cube across the sandy hangar floor. The Jedi waved his hand casually and reached out through the Force, wrapping the unseen energy around the cube. The Jedi tumbled it until it landed blue side up.

“Two out of three?” demanded Watto.

“We had a deal, my friend,” said Qui-Gon.

Watto barked something in Huttese. “You won this small toss, outlander,” he grumbled angrily at Qui-Gon. “But you won’t win the race. So it makes little difference!” The Toydarian fluttered away and past Anakin. “Better stop your friend from betting, boy, or I’ll end up owning him too.” The Toydarian disappeared into the bustling crowd assembling in the busy hangar.

Anakin watched as the Jedi master caught up to him and his mother. “What did he mean by that?”

“I’ll tell you later,” Qui-Gon said, patting the boy on his back.

They arrived at Anakin’s pod, sitting alone in a sea of experienced racers and seasoned professionals. While this was not Anakin’s first race, it was his first in this kind of environment. Every other competition his master entered him into was filled with local racers and was comparatively small stakes. Even

though he had been in this hangar half a dozen times before, it had never felt like this. The only other racer he recognized was his rival Sebulba. All the others were from off-world and had made the journey to be part of this major event. The boy thought this would make him nervous, but he was unexplainably calm.

“This is so exciting, Master Anakin,” said See-Threepio as they stopped to finalize preparations on the racer. “I am quite sure you’ll do it this time.”

“Do what?” asked Padme.

“Why, finish the race, of course,” responded the incomplete protocol droid cheerfully.

Padme turned sharply to Anakin. “You’ve never won a race?”

“Well, not exactly,” said the boy sheepishly. He then turned an angry glare on his robot.

“Not even finished?” continued Padme.

“Threepio is right,” said Anakin. “I will this time.”

Padme reeled around to look at Qui-Gon trying to conceal her disbelief.

“Of course, he will,” said the Jedi placing his hands on the boy’s shoulders. As his palms made contact with the boy, a vision of Anakin crossing the finish line with a face full of pod exhaust and sand flashed for a nanosecond in Qui-Gon’s mind. At the same time, the exact image flared across the boy’s mind’s eye as well. Before either the Jedi or Anakin could say a word about it to one another, a voice came over the comms system.

“Attention racers! It is time to make your way to the starting line! The race will begin shortly.”

“Well, let’s get going,” said Qui-Gon.

A tradition at the Boonta Eve Classic was to have each pod towed onto the starting grid by an eopie, a common quadruped that roamed the Hitakki basin and was the beast of burden for the Hutt clans that traveled as nomads during the time of the event’s namesake. White with a tapered snout and taller than the average man, it could wander the desert wastes of Tatooine for months without water. A diminutive alien creature led one of the beasts to Anakin’s pod, connected the eopie to a harness, and made its way to the starting gate.

Anakin’s mother kissed him on the head. “Good luck. I love you,” she said, and before she allowed him to see the tears in her eyes, turned away to make her way to the seating area reserved for guests of the race’s entrants.

“I have faith in you, Anakin,” said Padme, giving him a polite, royal hug. The boy’s eyes shined back at her and a huge smile creased his face.

“I won’t let you down, angel,” Anakin professed with the old space farer tone in his voice, which he would occasionally muster.

“Good luck, Ani,” said Jar Jar, giving an overemphasized thumbs up to the child pilot and quickly chasing down Padme, who was right behind Shmi.

As Anakin left the hangar with Qui-Gon, following his pod to the starting line, the enormity of the event struck him. The stands,

which were normally three-quarters empty, held thousands of spectators. Not a seat was empty, and everyone was cheering. Music blared over the address system, and an announcer introduced the racers as they entered the field. He was startled when he heard his name.

“And a late entry, Anakin Skywalker!” the nasally voice called. “A local boy from right here in Mos Espa.” The crowd erupted in applause, and Anakin waved as he passed some of the other racers. Their pods were shiny and well cared for. As their engines thundered in anticipation of the coming race, they also sounded bigger and more powerful than Anakin’s.

“No need to be nervous,” said Qui-Gon.

“I’m not, sir,” said Anakin. “I am going to win.”

As they approached Anakin’s pod, they passed Sebulba, who was soaking in the adoration of the roaring crowd. “And there’s Sebulba, last year’s winner and this year’s favorite,” said the announcer.

Anakin locked eyes with the Dug. “You won’t walk away from this one, Skywalker,” said Sebulba. “You slave scum.”

The boy returned a cold hard glare – a look that gave Qui-Gon pause. “Don’t count on it, Sebulba,” Anakin shouted back over the din of engines.

“You are eopie pudu, boy! You’re in over your head,” called Sebulba as a final word before crawling up into his racer. While the Dug’s pod was nearly the same size as Anakin’s, the two engines hitched in front of it were enormous. They were each V-

shaped, with the apex facing the center electrobinding, and were an obnoxiously bright-colored orange.

“Don’t let him bother you, Anakin,” said Qui-Gon as he lifted the boy up and dropped him into his pilot seat.

“Oh, he doesn’t bother me,” he said. “I just hope he survives so I can see the look on his face when I blast over the finish line.”

“Your confidence is admirable, Anakin. Beware it doesn’t turn into hubris.” Qui-Gon handed him his helmet and goggles.

“Yes, sir,” said the boy.

“Now, remember to concentrate on the moment. Feel. Don’t think. Use your instincts,” advised the Jedi Knight.

“I will,” Anakin replied and pulled the goggles over his eyes, nodded and then began flipping the switches and prepping the gauges for the race. The Jedi Master looked at the child with whom he was entrusting the fate of his entire mission and saw something... more. He could not decide if it was a vision, a hunch, or hope, but there was something about Anakin Skywalker.

“May the Force be with you,” said Qui-Gon, and he turned to join the others in their spectator booth.



CHAPTER 16

The pressure was mounting on the Chancellor. It had been too many days since the news had spread that the Trade Federation set up a blockade around the peaceful planet of Naboo, and there was no indication of what, if any steps, he was prepared to take as leader of the Galactic Republic.

“What more would you have me do?” Chancellor Valorum asked of the group of representatives, who sat around the desk in front of him. Holed up in his office for the previous twenty or so hours, he avoided calls and visits, only meeting with his most trusted advisor, Mas Amedda, who stood at his side now. However, he could not put them off any longer. A contingent of Senators virtually forced their way into his office, led by Sheev Palpatine, and were determined to gain some satisfaction. “I have formed the committee to look into the legislation that gave the Federation the right to take the action they have. Senator Palpatine, it was your bill. You know this was an option.”

The human from Naboo looked briefly at the senators that had joined him. A rotund Twi-lek male named Orn Free Taa, the three-eyed gran from the planet Malastare called Ainlee Teem, and Bail Antilles, a sixth-year human senator representing the planet Alderaan and a prince through marriage to their royal family, had all spoken out publicly against the actions of the Federation and had agreed to join Palpatine to encourage the Chancellor to do something. Even something outside of protocol, if necessary.

“And what of the rumored murder of Hego Demask?” asked Orn Free Taa, his voice a husky baritone.

“That is all just speculation, Senator,” scolded Valorum.

“Speculation that has not been flatly denied by the Banking Clan,” offered Teem.

“So, tell us, Chancellor,” started Antilles. “What are your next steps?”

Finis Valorum turned and sat down hard in his chair. “Senator Lott Dodd of the Trade Federation has not agreed to meet with me,” he said. “And, by rights, they don’t have to. They’ve done nothing wrong.”

“I suggest an exploratory mission to the planet,” said Free Taa.

Palpatine and Valorum exchanged glances. “I might recommend against that,” said the Senator from Naboo quickly. “At least until we hear from the committee assessing the legality of the blockade.”

“But, why wait?” asked Antilles.

“Who would we send?” said Palpatine. “There is no official security or investigatory force of the Republic.” He eyed the Chancellor. “Would Alderaan send an envoy?”

“Alderaan is peaceful. We have no military. We would need protection.”

“Exactly my point, Senator,” said Palpatine. “If the blockade is illegal, what recourse do we even have?”

“We would revoke their trade license,” said Teem.

“And that will dissuade them?” asked Palpatine. “Look, this isn’t the time or place to discuss the militarization of the Republic. However, when this is resolved, I do believe it is something about which we should have conversation.”

“That is an avenue I have grave concerns about,” interrupted Antilles.

“I understand, Bail,” said Palpatine. “And as I said, now is not a productive time to debate it. Once again, I need to turn to you, Mr. Chancellor. What can my planet expect you will do? It has been too long already.”

Valorum sighed. “I will attempt to reach the Trade Federation senator, one more time. Gentlemen, please understand, my hands are tied by the protocol this very system has created.”

“And while the system chokes on itself, Senator Palpatine’s planet is held hostage. This I cannot support. We need action, Chancellor. Naboo needs the Republic’s leadership,” said Free Taa. He paused, pulled in a labored breath and said, “The very

role of our government is in question as long Naboo is at the mercy of a Trade Federation blockade.”

The visiting senators all stood, defeated for the moment, but determined not to rest until a resolution was met. “Good day, Chancellor,” said Bail Antilles as he excused himself. Orn Free Taa and Ainlee Teem nodded and followed the senator from Aalderan out of the office but Palpatine stayed behind.

“Please, wait for me outside,” Palpatine said as the door sealed behind them.

“What the hell are you doing?” demanded Valorum as soon as he was sure they were alone. “You know we are yet to hear from the secret ambassadors we sent. The Jedi continue to prove they bring little value other than their antiquated mythology and alleged magic. I knew sending them was a mistake.”

“I am quite aware of the lack of response from the Jedi,” said Palpatine. “But you know as well as I do that, politically, it is expected that I demand action from you. Once that loud mouth upstart from Aalderan started speaking out against the Federation, I was forced to respond. The reality is, he’s not wrong. My people are in jeopardy. Something must be done.”

“I know,” said Valorum. “I know.”

“So, between us, two old friends, what is your plan?”

“Honestly?” he said looking up at Palpatine. “I am not entirely sure. The committee on the legislation will report back next week. The —”

“Next week?” said Palpatine incredulously. “By then it will be too late.”

“We don’t know that, Sheev,” said Valorum. “Conceivably, by then it may be a moot point. The Federation could withdraw.”

“Or they could start killing the people of Naboo.”

“Do you really think the Federation would stoop to such a level?” asked Mas Amedda after remaining silent for the entire meeting. “Frankly, the Neimoidians are cowards. It’s not in them. They are motivated by money, not power.”

Palpatine made his move to leave the office. “One person’s motivation is another person’s leverage. Without word from the Jedi, and with communications disrupted, we do not truly know what is happening on my planet. I am nearly done waiting for the Republic to take action. I am prepared to start taking matters into my own hands. I can make quite a bit of noise in the Senate.”

“But sending the Jedi ambassadors was your recommendation,” said Valorum almost desperately, as he sensed he was losing his control of the situation. “My friend, we must see that through.”

“I have a singular mission, Chancellor. I will do what I must to fulfill my obligations.”

“Is that intended as a threat, Sheev?” called Valorum, as Palpatine made his way toward the door.

“Not at all, Finis,” he said turning to him with his patented smile. “It is courteous advice from an old friend.”



CHAPTER 17

Nineteen podracers, lined up in five rows, revved their engines at the starting line as traditional, triumphant Boonta Eve music played from the stands. The start/finish line was below a natural stone arch, which stretched across both sides of the canyon from which the racing arena was built. The crowd grew louder in anticipation of the beginning of this year's event.

“Welcome to the Boonta Eve Classic!” shouted the announcer's shrill voice over the loud speakers. The voices of the spectators roared with excitement. “As a reminder, this is a three-lap event through the Mos Espa Circuit. Racers will head from our arena into the Waldo Flats, deal with the dreaded Melta Drop to the Crater Valley, before entering Beggar's Canyon, and then fighting it out along the Dune Sea. From there, they will make the final turn back toward our amphitheater, but not before navigating the various caves, caverns, crags and craters that await them on their way back here to the Hutt Flats and into our arena to pass you, our wonderful race fans and patrons!”

“Sounds very dangerous,” said Threepio who stood behind Shmi and the outlanders in the open-air box from where they would watch the race. Qui-Gon looked at the boy’s mother and gave her a reassuring smile.

“Was he nervous?” she asked.

“He’s fine,” assured Jinn.

“The whole thing is barbaric,” whispered Padme nervously.

The announcer continued. “Remember, the rules are: there are no rules. All the pods have been thoroughly examined by officials, and there is no artificial intelligence assistance in any of the racers. No offense to our droid friends.” Some in the crowd laughed. “The first racer who successfully navigates the route and crosses the start/finish line three times will be declared the winner.” The crowd erupted again in cheers. “Someone will walk out of the arena today with the title of Boonta Eve Champion!” The crowd yelled with approval. “Some of you will not walk out of here at all,” the announcer said solemnly, but the fans shouted louder than they had the whole day.

Shmi squinted and breathed hard through her teeth. Padme moved closer to Anakin’s mother and rubbed her back encouragingly. “He’ll be fine.”

“Competitors!” called the announcer. “Prepare to race!”

* * * * *

On the field, Anakin wriggled in his seat and ensured he was comfortable. He adjusted his goggles, pulled on his helmet, and finally laid both hands on the two-gripped handle bar that would navigate his podracer. As the announcer came to the end of his preamble, he allowed his pod to rise slightly in preparation to bolt forward.

The only human was in the second row of racers. To his left was a large aquamarine colored racer driven by a snaggle toothed Vulptereen. On his right, a horned Nosaurian from the planet New Plympto was preparing to race in a very small pod with enormous engines. Directly behind him, a Sneevil irritated his engines, and in front of him was his nemesis, Sebulba. The other dozen-plus racers were all anxiously awaiting the three-bell countdown to the start.

Comfortable in his cockpit and eager to begin, Anakin stared at the three numbers written in Huttese at the top of the archway and waited for the countdown to begin. Just before the first number lit up, he sensed its glow. Then the knell that came with it. His eyes closed, and in his mind, he saw the second number light up, and the arena echoed with bell number two. Anakin snapped open his eyes and watched as the third number ignited, and in unison with the gong of the bell, he pulled back on the accelerator of his pod.

Nothing.

His engines, which had just been idling smoothly, overloaded with his abrupt yank on the energizer. They sputtered to a stop as

the three rows of racers behind him blew past and onto the Waldo Flats stretching out beyond the arena. Quickly, Anakin flipped some switches and banged the far side of his dashboard with his other hand.

“Oh, looks like young Skywalker has stalled,” called the announcer. “And Quadrinaros is having engine trouble too.” Anakin looked over and saw another racer having similar problems. Although the other racer had a crew of pit droids that came running out onto the track to help identify and fix the problem.

Anakin powered down completely. His pod went down to the ground and his engines rebooted – all the while losing valuable seconds in the race. Anakin reignited his start process and heard a tremendous explosion. After realizing that, fortunately, it was not his racer, he looked to his left to see Quadrinaros’ pod erupt in flames. Anakin did not have time to notice if the ill-fated pilot survived, as his own vehicle roared to life, and he was thrust back into his seat as he started to shoot forward.

Blasting through the archway, Anakin could still make out the competition ahead through the heat, haze, dust and smoke of the open Waldo Flats. With Quadrinaros out, there were now seventeen competitors left, and they were all ahead of him. He pulled back again on the accelerator and hit his maximum speed on the straightaway.

In the pack ahead, some of the racers began to separate as they pushed into the first turn and over the Melta Drop down into

Beggar's Canyon at the end of the short Crater. Sebulba saw the first entry to a narrow passage as an opportunity to eliminate one of his competitors. He banged his pod into the engines of a racer from Malastare that was encroaching on him from behind. Swerving into the huge ship sublight engine, he tapped it just enough with the tail of his pod to push it a few meters left, and it scraped the front end of the craggy rock formation they were entering. The racer lost control and spun wildly, taking out three other racers as they tried to avoid him at the entrance. The Dug laughed to himself and maintained the lead.

By Anakin's count, there were now a dozen racers to compete with... plus Sebulba.

After watching the crash ahead of him, he considered himself lucky to have had a delayed start. Had he gone out with the rest of the group, he would have been in the middle of the cluster, but from here, he could easily navigate his first entry into the canyon.

His racer was fast. Anakin had focused on modifications to the sleek fighter engines he selected for his pod, and expanding on the skills he had to build and modify, he also knew how to make his racer better. He put the fins on the front intake and back exhaust on the cylindrical engines, both to improve handling at the higher speeds he was able to attain and to cut sharp directional changes on the track.

Anakin emerged from Beggar's Canyon and was a few meters behind the slowest members of the group ahead of him. In the Dune Sea, since his racer was sleeker, he was able to hug the

inside of the track and over take the rear three. One tried to bump him on his way past, but he was able to sling below his opponent's pod and they missed him, tapping the hardscrabble basin floor and bouncing wildly out of control. One more down.

The boy pilot made a conscious decision to slow down as they entered the maze, before the first run at the Hutt Flats, to allow himself to ease through the obstacles. He watched as two more racers hit stone pillars that rose from the last challenge before the unobstructed run to the arena.

Anakin was comfortable with last place as he jetted through the open arena to the cheers of the engaged crowd. Sebulba was the leader – as expected – but he felt confident he could catch him, if he could survive the natural barriers that littered the course and the attacks of the other ten racers.

The second lap began similarly to the first. Sebulba flashed his vents at a racer that tried to squeak past him in the middle of Beggar's Canyon, causing his opponent to collide headlong into a wall, bursting into a blazing ball of fire with no chance of survival. Miraculously, no other racers were taken out by the crash, but the cluster of racers started to straighten out more into a straight line.

Across the Dune Sea, once again, Anakin made a move, but as he blasted past two racers into seventh place, he heard a rattling coming from the front of his right engine. Trying to put his worries out of his mind, he focused on the upcoming labyrinth. He lowered the throttle as he entered the maze for the second time

and made every pitch and yaw with precision. Anakin was not sure whether he had such control due to his experience with the track or because of the strange sense of what was next, which he would feel if he concentrated – similar to the sensation he felt when he moved droid parts into place through the air. His mother called it magic, but he thought it was a lot like what he had heard in stories of what the Jedi would do.

The rattling from his engine continued as he burst onto the Hutt Flats and past two more racers. There were three racers between himself and Sebulba, as they came through the arena for the second time.

Two of the pods in front of him began to tighten up on each other as the grouping popped down over the Melta Drop into the Crater. The sudden dip in altitude caused one of the pods to swing a bit to the right as it settled back into its pattern, but it was too close to its rival. Anakin hit the accelerator to press hard forward to maintain altitude. In his mind, he saw that the two racers were about to crash wildly. His pod flew above the two racers, as they skidded toward each other and then spun apart with an explosion.

There were a few racers behind him, and one between him and the dastardly Dug ahead. The three racers formed a tightening single file line into Beggar's Canyon for the final time. The pod directly in front of him had huge fin-shaped engines and was piloted by a member of the Xeto race, known for multiple arms and legs and long thin necks. Anakin could see the second-place racer bending down, straining to keep his slender throat low

against his dashboard, while his spider-like arms pushed and pulled the multiple instruments to pilot the racer.

Anakin held his place behind the Xeto as he heard an explosion behind him, signaling another racer met his demise in the Canyon. The three leaders jetted out into the Dune Sea. Once again, Anakin took his racer to the inside part of the track to make up valuable seconds. The Xeto did the same, blocking him from making his planned push past. Sebulba swerved back and forth, not allowing either of his closest competitors the space they would need to pass him.

Frustrated, Anakin focused intently on the Xeto as they headed for the last labyrinth for the final time. He saw the fin-shaped engines blur and rise up in his mind, while his eyes showed him nothing but straight, controlled movement. Anakin squeezed the throttle and made his way below the racer in front of him, though there was no opening... yet. As he was about to hit the Xeto's engines they rose several meters off the ground. Whether the Xeto was avoiding him or was already planning to make that move was irrelevant to Anakin, as he blasted past the only racer between him and Sebulba.

The human was directly behind the Dug, as they navigated the maze of stone pillars and outcroppings. When Sebulba jerked left, Anakin followed tightly. When he swam right, Anakin mirrored his move. From a distance, one would have thought they were piloting one long pod racer as Anakin drafted behind his archrival.

The boy heard the rattle from his right engine begin again. This time much louder. Anakin and Sebulba, followed closely by the Xeto, blasted out of the stone warren and into the final stretch. They had reached the Hutt Flats for the final time and were barreling toward the arena. Anakin had one last level to push for in his engines and made the decision to go around Sebulba on the left side.

He jabbed the handlebars forward and twisted the throttle. His pod racer whined and alarms on his dash lit up, alerting him that it was overheating. Anakin ignored them, realizing he was within sight of the finish.

As he passed Sebulba, they glanced at each other. Sebulba seemed to laugh as Anakin finally squeaked out in front. The Xeto had fallen back, leaving only two pods competing to cross the line.

Anakin could see the arena and the crowd, as his engines were driving hard in front of Sebulba's. As the boy's cockpit reached even with Sebulba's bright orange engines to his right, the Dug released a hatch and attempted to flash his vents again on the boy. Anakin was prepared for it and yanked a lever that gave his pod a quick swerve outward by pulling the front flaps on his engine out for a quick moment. He avoided the damaging heat and radioactive wind, but he lost a few meters on Sebulba who had now pulled even with the boy.

The rattle in the engine closest to Sebulba suddenly stopped and something appeared to break loose. As a piece of metal flew

from his engine, Anakin recognized it as a hydrospanner – the one Jar Jar had dropped when he was shocked by the electro binders the day before. Anakin did not realize it was still stuck in the machinery when they left for the race. The tool spun backwards and connected with Sebulba’s snout. The Dug squealed in pain. The human straightened his own racer just as the Dug reached for his bloodied face and let go of the controls of his pod.

Anakin wanted to look behind to watch Sebulba’s racer spin out of control, but he knew he had to maintain focus on the last several kilometers of the race. Had he turned, he would have seen the Dug’s pod slide across the desert floor and his electrobinders shut down. Although Sebulba survived, he would not win the race. The Xeto easily averted the stalled Sebulba and pressed to catch the boy. But there was no chance.

Anakin kept his eyes on the arena entry and crossed the finish line to the roars of the welcoming crowd, his face smeared in racer exhaust and Tatooine dust.



CHAPTER 18

Darth Maul brought his ship, the *Scimitar*, slowly and easily down to the surface of the desert world of Tatooine. He knew the approximate location on the planet where Queen Amidala's ship transmitted the automated receipt of the message which was sent from the Neimoidian leaders of the Trade Federation. Just as Darth Sidious had predicted, her Nubian cruiser replied with the galactic coordinates of its whereabouts and the sector on the planet where they had landed. All he had to do was pinpoint the location, and he would make his move to capture her and kill the attendants who were with her. He hoped they were Jedi.

The Sith Lord pressed some buttons on the wall behind his cockpit, and a hatch opened in the side of his oversized fighter. He walked out the back on the extended gangway and around to where the ship had opened up to reveal a one-man speeder. He pulled it from the hold, and it hovered next to him.

Next, he walked to the edge of the cliff on which he had landed and scanned the horizon with macrobinoculars that he had

taken from inside the ship. From this vantage point, he could see the bustling Mos Espa spaceport and the surrounding areas. There was no indication of the Queen's ship through visually scanning, so he returned to the cockpit of the *Scimitar*.

A couple more clicks of keys on the dashboard in front of him, and he heard a humming noise from outside the ship. Three ball-shaped probe droids disconnected themselves from the side of the vessel and began their portion of the mission: find the Queen's ship and report back. It would take too long for Maul to go into the city himself and manually search for any trace of Amidala. Instead, these remote droids would search all spaceships in the surrounding area until they came across the J-Type Nubian that escaped the Naboo system. When they did, they would send a signal back to the *Scimitar*, and Darth Maul would then make his move.

The Zabrak sat back down in the pilot's chair at the front of the fighter and waited. He closed his eyes and meditated, letting his body fill with darkness and hatred in preparation for what could be his first encounter with a Jedi.



CHAPTER 19

Shmi watched from her booth above the crowds as throngs of admirers rushed her son’s pod racer. Tears of pride welled in her eyes and leaked down her cheek. Padme, instinctively, hugged Anakin’s mother.

“I can’t believe it,” said Threepio. The droid’s circuits processed the probability that he could win and compared them to the fact that he did, signaling the surprised yet cheerful tone in his vocoder.

“Mesa so happy!” whooped Jar Jar exuberantly, and he broke into a dance.

Padme and Shmi spotted Qui-Gon, who had quickly made his way down to the track and through the gathering mass of spectators to receive – and protect – Anakin. He pushed his way past various shouting aliens and humans and sensed, through the Force, that the boy was worried, as well as elated. There was fear and anxiety emanating from Anakin’s direction as the crowds began to press in on him. The Jedi Knight worked his way roughly

through the hundreds of beings that had congregated tightly around the winner of the Boonta Eve Classic.

“Anakin!” shouted Qui-Gon.

The boy had pulled off his helmet and was standing on the seat of his open-air pod. He was straining to see his mother in the box at the top of the lower section of seats, while at the same time trying to process the adulation that was being thrust upon him. He barely heard his name called by a familiar voice, and he was able to locate Qui-Gon working his way toward him.

When the Jedi finally made it through the crowd, he grabbed Anakin under the armpits and hoisted him into the air and placed him on his shoulders. The fans went wild with cheers, and Qui-Gon could feel Anakin’s apprehension subside.

“Where’s my mother?” he asked.

“She’s making her way down from the box with Padme,” said Qui-Gon. Jinn felt the fear evaporate from the child, replaced by pure happiness. A smile dominated his grease-stained face, and he yelled at the top of his lungs in victory.

An opie came by with a small cloaked alien who latched Anakin’s pod to its side, and they dragged the racer back to the garage. The Jedi and Anakin made their way to the edge of the crowds and to the bottom of the stands where they were greeted by Shmi, Padme and Jar Jar.

“Mom! I did it!” shouted Anakin, as Qui-Gon drew him down from his perch on his shoulder and placed him in his mother’s waiting arms.

Through her tears, Shmi whispered, “It’s so wonderful, Ani. You’ve given hope to those who have none.” She squeezed him tightly. “I’m so proud of you.”

“Great job, Ani!” called Jar Jar.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have some business to attend to,” said Qui-Gon searching the surrounding stands for Watto’s box.

“We owe you everything,” said Padme, and Anakin’s face went flush. She kissed him on his soiled forehead and threw her arms around Anakin and his mother. He had never felt so much joy in his life.

Qui-Gon saw Watto floating in a private viewing box positioned a few spots down from the Hutts. He bounded over the short wall at the front of the stands and ran up against the flowing crowd. As he arrived at the spectator section where the Toydarian flapped his wings, the junk dealer saw him and attempted to push his way out the door at the back of the box. The Jedi leapt up into the lounge and confronted Watto.

“You!” started the blue winged creature. “You swindled me. You knew the boy was going to win. Somehow you knew. Do you know how much I’ve lost?” He fluttered close to Jinn in attempt to intimidate him. It did not work. Qui-Gon returned the aggression with a smile.

“Whenever you gamble, my friend, eventually you’ll lose,” he said. “Bring the parts to the pod hangar, and I’ll come to the shop later so you can release the boy.”

“You can’t have him,” said Watto indignantly. “It wasn’t a fair bet.”

“On a world like this, your word is your currency. Perhaps you’d like to discuss this with the Hutts. I’m sure they can settle this.”

“They will side with me, outlander,” spat Watto. “They don’t even know you.”

“Ah, but what damage will that do to your reputation?” asked Qui-Gon. “Is one slave worth risking your standing as a reputable dealer and gambler?”

Watto looked away, then looked down. He shifted his eyes, and then finally brought his hand up to his stubbled chin. “Take him,” he said finally. “I don’t know what you want with some little boy, but who am I to ask. There’s nothing special about him, you know.”

“That is where you are wrong, my friend,” said Jinn as he headed out the door. “I’ll be at your shop when the first sun sets.”

* * * * *

Artoo-Detoo beeped happily as they arrived at the Nubian cruiser. He led the procession of the Gungan, Padme, Qui-Gon, and an eopie towing a large, two-meter square panel device that was the replacement hyperdrive that Watto had promised and delivered. The gangway yawned open on the side of the sleek silver ship and

both Captain Panaka and Obi-Wan Kenobi came down to greet them.

“Your highness, I am so happy to see you’ve returned. And safely,” said Panaka.

“Captain,” she said acknowledging him with a slight head nod.

“Your highness,” said Kenobi trying to suppress a smile.

“Master Jedi,” she said in return. Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan exchanged glances.

“Padawan,” reminded Obi-Wan. He turned to Qui-Gon. “Glad to see you back as well, Master.”

“I do have to run back to Mos Espa. Some unfinished business. I won’t be long.” Jinn said.

Kenobi looked quickly at Jar Jar and then back to his master. “Why do I sense we’ve picked up another...” Obi-Wan paused to find the right word that would not get him scolded by his teacher. “Life form?”

“It’s the boy who is responsible for getting those parts,” Jinn said. “You get this hyperdrive installed. The droid can help you.” Artoo beeped and pushed its way past the men and into the ship.

“Yes, master. It won’t take long.” Obi-Wan turned and followed Artoo up the plank. Panaka ushered the Queen into the spacecraft, followed by Jar Jar who paused halfway up.

“Yousa wanten me to be goin with you?”

“No, Jar Jar,” said Jinn. “You stay here. And stay out of trouble.”



CHAPTER 20

Qui-Gon entered Watto's shop, and the Toydarian was waiting for him.

"I didn't release the boy yet," said Watto. "Wanted to make sure you were coming back."

"I am a man of my word," replied Qui-Gon. "Are you?"

Watto reached behind the counter, grabbed a box with buttons on it and began to enter the sequence to disable the chip inside Anakin, which kept him from leaving the planet. "So," started Watto. "What's so special about this boy?"

"To be honest, I am not sure. I just know that being a slave to a ship parts dealer on a desert planet is not the best use of his, shall we say, skills."

"The fact that he's a human and won a pod race says quite a bit about him. Makes him harder to give up. So, what say you? What can I deal you for him?"

“He doesn’t belong to me,” said Qui-Gon. “I didn’t win him from you. I made a wager with you to free him. His decisions are his own now. I don’t own him.”

“You and your outlander damn fool ideals,” scoffed Watto. “Do what you want. All I can tell you is that if he stays here with me, he can make a lot of money.”

“And if he comes with me, he has a chance to change the galaxy.”

Watto laughed at the optimism of the human, pressed the last of the buttons, and the box chirped signaling Anakin’s chip was disabled.

“There you go,” said Watto. “Just please leave my planet as soon as you can. And don’t come back.”

“On that you can depend, my friend,” said Qui-Gon as he turned to leave the shop.

The Jedi strode purposefully down the dusty street toward Anakin’s home. When he arrived, he knocked on the door, and Shmi met him at the door.

“Hello,” Qui-Gon said. “May I come in?”

“I thought you’d left,” said Shmi.

“Not yet. I had to take care of a few things,” he said. “Is Anakin here?”

Anakin jogged into the main area of their hovel and welcomed Qui-Gon with a smile and, “Yes, I am!”

Qui-Gon pulled a bag of coins from his robe and handed it to the boy. “Here, I sold your pod.”

“You sold it?” asked Anakin not sure if he should be angry or glad.

“You won’t be needing it.”

Anakin looked up from counting the coins he had just received. “What?”

“Anakin has been freed,” said Qui-Gon simply.

“Wait, what?” said the boy. His mother reached for a chair at the table and dropped into it.

“You are no longer a slave,” Qui-Gon responded.

Shmi was a mass of emotions. She was ecstatic for her son, confused by how it happened and not sure at all what Qui-Gon’s words meant for her.

“Did you hear that, Mom?” squeaked Anakin.

Shmi was stunned. “I did. That’s wonderful, Ani. Now you can make your dreams come true.” She looked up at Qui-Gon. “Will you take him with you? Is he to become a Jedi?”

“If that is what he wishes. Our meeting was not a coincidence,” Qui-Gon said. “Nothing happens by accident.”

Shmi nodded silently.

“You mean I get to come with you on your starship?” asked Anakin excitedly.

Qui-Gon knelt down in front of the boy, took him by the shoulders, and looked him deep in the eyes. “Anakin, training to become a Jedi is not an easy challenge,” he said. “And if you succeed, it is a hard life.”

“But I want to go,” said Anakin. “I’ve had dreams of becoming a Jedi.”

“I’m sure you have,” said Qui-Gon.

“Can I go, Mom?” Anakin turned to his mother.

Shmi was choking back tears. There was no indication she had been freed, and she feared her son was about to leave her. “Anakin, this path has been placed before you. The choice is yours alone.”

The young boy looked at Qui-Gon and then back at his mother. “I want to do it,” he said resolutely.

“Then pack your things,” said Qui-Gon standing up. “We haven’t much time.”

Anakin yelped with happiness and gave his mother a hug before heading to his room. And then it struck him: Qui-Gon had not mentioned if his mother was coming with them.

“What about Mom?” Anakin asked. “Is she free too?”

Qui-Gon’s face took on a solemn state. “I tried to free her too, Anakin. But Watto wouldn’t have it.”

“But –” said Anakin, his mouth hanging open. “You are coming, aren’t you, Mom?”

Shmi inhaled deeply. She quickly resigned herself to what was best for her son. “Ani, my place is here. My future is here. Things change, and it’s time for you to let go and take advantage of this miracle.”

“I don’t want things to change,” Anakin said.

“Oh, my sweet boy,” she said putting her hand on his head. “But you can’t stop change any more that you can stop the suns from setting. Besides, I’ve always told you a slave’s life is not for you.” They stared at each other for a long moment until the pain became too much for Shmi to bear. “Now go. Hurry.”

Anakin turned and ran into his room to pack a bag. He didn’t own much. He threw an extra shirt, pants and shoes into a backpack, then grabbed some trinkets from around his room. Reaching up, he flipped Threepio to the on position.

“Oh, hello there, Master Anakin.”

“Well, Threepio, I’m free.” There was a completely unemotional tone to his voice. As much as he loved the process of building Threepio, and programming the pseudo-emotion detector, he always knew that the droid was just a machine; a tool to do its master’s bidding.

“Free?”

“Sorry I didn’t get to finish you. I need you to take care of my Mom. I’m leaving now. But I’ll see you again, sometime.”

“Leaving?”

“Yeah, but I’ll make sure Mom doesn’t sell you.”

“Sell me? Oh my.”

Anakin came out of his room and met Qui-Gon and his mother standing in the room silently. “Meet me outside,” said Qui-Gon and the boy followed his instructions.

“Thank you,” Shmi said. “This is such a gift.”

“I will watch after him,” said Qui-Gon. “You have my word.”

“I know. I don’t know why, but I just know.”

“Will you be all right?” the Jedi asked in a low, soothing voice.

“I will be. That boy is my life,” she said and could no longer hold back the tears.

“Nothing happens without reason,” said Qui-Gon. “I can’t tell you what this means for you, but I can tell you that you are the mother of a special boy. I have a feeling your son has a much larger role to play than I’ve yet seen.”

“I believe you are right,” she said. She smiled sadly and urged him toward the door. “You need to get going.” The door opened, and Anakin was waiting for them.

“Come on, Anakin,” said Qui-Gon, as he turned to walk out of the town and back to the Queen’s ship.

After a few steps, the weight of the finality of leaving his mother flooded Anakin’s every thought. He broke into tears for the first time ever in his life, that he could recall. The streams of emotion lined his cheeks as he turned back to Shmi, who stood by the door.

“I can’t do it, Mom,” he said running into her arms. “I just can’t.”

She held him tightly and kissed his forehead. “Anakin, you must. It’s not easy – for either of us – but you must fulfill your destiny.”

Anakin stepped back and looked his mother in the face. “Will I ever see you again?”

“What does your heart tell you?” she said.

“I hope so,” he said. He closed his eyes and tried to look into the future, but there was no clear image. “Yes, I guess.”

“Then we will see each other again,” she said and smiled through tears.

Qui-Gon fought the urge to quicken Anakin along, because there was some value in letting the boy release his emotions. Once he started Jedi training, he would be taught to detach himself from all emotional connection. Qui-Gon considered that he was bringing this boy, who displayed a selfless heart, into a world where he would be forced to close himself off. It was Anakin’s selflessness that would make him a powerful Jedi, he believed.

“I will come back,” Anakin said. “I will free you, Mom. I promise.”

“I believe you will, son,” she said. “Now, be brave and don’t look back.”

Mother hugged son for the last time, and he turned to leave with the Jedi.



CHAPTER 21

Senator Palpatine had been waiting in the foyer of the Jedi Council chambers for far longer than he was used to waiting for anyone. He paced the floor until finally the doors opened, and he was urged into the grand meeting room by the Jedi Squires who manned the entranceway.

“Master Jedi,” he began, as he strode purposefully into the grand hall. “I was hoping I would not have to come before you to ask for information on your ambassadors, but I am quite uneasy about the fact that no one has heard from them since –” He looked around the room and saw two empty thrones. “I’m sorry, aren’t there normally twelve present on the Council?”

“Ordinarily, yes,” said Mace Windu. “Master Dooku has been delayed on his mission, and unfortunately, Master Sifo-Dyas was unable to attend this evening.”

“I see,” said Palpatine cautiously scanning the Council. “Regardless, I come to demand some sort of information on the

Jedi, who have been sent to my planet. And I wonder if you have a perspective on the murder of Hego Demask.”

The Jedi Council members exchanged glances and murmured among themselves. “The situation with Hego Demask, a mystery remains,” said Yoda finally. “No evidence is there that murdered he was.”

“Come now, Master Yoda,” scoffed Palpatine. “I understand there was security footage of his body.”

Yoda inhaled deeply. “Rumors. Conjecture. No evidence presented has there been.”

“I can’t help but feel that the Council is turning a blind eye to this situation. It’s not a coincidence that he is not only missing, but a strong opposition of the Trade Federation.” Palpatine paused and assessed the group of Jedi Masters around the room and tried to read their response. “I wonder if *my* life is in danger.”

“Would you like additional security, Senator?” asked Master Plo Koon.

“I am fine, thank you,” he replied with a tight smile. “More importantly, why haven’t we heard from your envoy? I am officially at the end of my patience and must make my next move.”

“Senator Palpatine,” started Ki-Adi Mundi. “Did you not come to us seeking help? Did we not put ourselves at risk to assist you in your time of need?”

“I’m sorry, Master,” said Palpatine with a tinge of sarcasm seeping into his voice. “I have always believed that the Jedi were

the guardians of peace and justice. I didn't realize I was inconveniencing the Council by asking for help when the Republic would not."

"You know very well that we do all that we can to keep peace in the galaxy, but for you, we went outside the normal channels and procedures," said Mundi calmly. "The very request for our assistance was bordering on illegal."

"You do understand, my people are in danger. I have waited long enough. I will be asking for a special session of the Senate tomorrow afternoon, if we do not have any further information from your Jedi."

"Ask for your patience, we must," said Yoda. "But stop you, we cannot."

"Master Yoda," started Windu. "I am not inclined to disagree with you, but we must demand that Senator Palpatine do no such thing until we convene with the Chancellor. Consistency in our motivations will be of the utmost importance."

"Do whatever you need to, Jedi. While I do not envy your position, I must have the Senate's help in removing the Federation from my planet's orbit. If it means going over the Chancellor, I will. If it means putting the public's trust of the Jedi at risk, I will."

"Unfortunate your position is," said the green Jedi master. "But understand the Council does."

Palpatine seemed almost surprised by Yoda's response, but he had accomplished his goal. He was now clear to bring his case

before the Senate. He nodded and bowed shallowly to the Council and walked out of the chamber.

“Master Yoda,” started Mace Windu. “May I ask why you are not pushing back on the Senator?”

“Sometimes best it is for things to run their course. Too close to this, we have been. Bigger challenges, I believe lie ahead.” Yoda shook his head and harrumphed.

Outside the chamber, Palpatine rushed down the hallway and out to his speeder, which was waiting for him on the platform just outside the Jedi Tower. He crawled onto it and was chauffeured back to his apartment. When he arrived, he strode quickly past the guards that waited by his doors and into his Coruscant home. He removed his formal robe and made his way to his desk where he was going to create an official request for a special session of the Senate.

“That was quick,” said a voice from somewhere in his office.

“Who’s there,” asked Palpatine startled.

From behind the door to his office emerged Jedi Master Sifo-Dyas.

“How did you get past my guards?” pressed the Senator.

“I’m sorry, am I not welcome?”

“Of course, you are. I just...”

“Jedi powers. You wouldn’t understand.”

“To be sure,” said Palpatine. “Actually, I am happy you are here. Please, take a seat.”

The Jedi walked across the room and sat in the chair before the Senator.

“Tomorrow, I am going before the Senate,” continued Palpatine. “They need to act, and the Jedi response has been slower than expected. I am sorry to put you and the Council in this position.”

“If the Jedi don’t take action, Senator,” said Sifo-Dyas solemnly. “I am not sure how much longer I can remain a part of it.”

Palpatine stared expressionless at the Jedi across from him. He stammered and then found his words. “Master Dyas, I... I’m not sure what to say.”

“There is nothing for you to say, Senator. I just thought you should know. You have helped open my eyes to the current state of the Jedi.”

“Well, I never intended to urge you to leave the Council.” Palpatine’s mind kicked into political positioning mode and quickly realized that if Dyas did give up his seat on the Council, he would have no direct access to the Jedi. And with the potential of disenfranchising the Jedi by going before the Senate with information about the plan to investigate the situation ahead of official Republic support, he would lose an important political ally. “Are you sure that is something you’d really want to do?”

“Senator, they asked me to abstain from the meeting you just requested.” There was urgency in Sifo-Dyas’s voice. “They didn’t tell me they were having an audience with you specifically,

but when I checked your official itinerary through the public record, I saw that you were in attendance, and I was dismissed. They are showing a lack of faith in me, and this is something I cannot tolerate.”

“I see,” was all Palpatine could muster. “Well, you’ll be happy to hear they didn’t try to stop me from going before the Senate.”

“I’m not here for information on the perspectives of the Council, but I do have only one question for you, Senator.” Sifo-Dyas looked into Palpatine’s eyes. “Was Master Dooku back from his mission?”

“Funny you should ask,” said Palpatine pouring on every ounce of his political charm. “It was one of the first things I noticed when I entered the chamber. Both you and Master Dooku were absent. Is there something unusual about that?”

“Ordinarily, I would say not. But, between you and I, Master Dooku and the Council have had some disagreements of their own recently. I wonder if he’s been delayed intentionally.”

“Now, Master Dyas, I dare say you are sounding as paranoid as you are accusing the Jedi of being.”

“Perhaps, Senator,” the Jedi said. “But you are only paranoid if you are wrong.”

“Too true, my friend,” said the Senator. “Now you are sounding like a politician.”



CHAPTER 22

The Jedi and the boy walked in silence for almost all of the thirty-minute trek on foot back to the Queen's ship. Over the last several minutes, Qui-Gon had quickened his pace, sensing something was tracking them. Then suddenly, the Jedi broke into a jog.

"Qui-Gon, sir, wait," called Anakin as the J-Type Nubian was finally in sight. "Slow down, I'm tired!"

Jinn decelerated and turned around in time to see a shadowy figure in a one-person speeder bearing down on them.

"Anakin, drop!" he shouted at the boy.

The boy dove down to the sand as the black vehicle buzzed over top of him with a rider in a black cloak piloting it aggressively toward Qui-Gon. Instinctively, the Jedi ignited his lightsaber as the rider leapt off his mount.

Spinning into the air off his ride, Darth Maul switched on a single blade on his lightsaber, and as the Zabrak made his descent over the top of the bearded man in a brown cloak, he made a

vicious down-chopping motion. Qui-Gon raised his blade and blocked the attack. For the first time in a thousand years, lightsaber met lightsaber in combat.

Anakin looked up from his prone position on the ground. “Anakin, get to the ship!” shouted Qui-Gon. “Tell them to take off!” The boy scampered along the ground before breaking into a full sprint and into the waiting ship.

Darth Maul continued his relentless attack, swinging powerfully at the Jedi, who was only able to maintain a defensive position. The Sith thrashed at him from all directions, and the Jedi deflected each blow with expert timing.

On board the Queen’s cruiser, Captain Panaka and Ric Olie watched with awe as the two warriors battled. Obi-Wan rushed to the bridge sensing his master was in distress.

“Qui-Gon’s in trouble,” said Panaka.

“He’ll be fine,” said Obi-Wan.

Anakin raced into the ship and was met by Padme, who was standing at the top of the gangway. She reached out to hug him, but he rushed past her into the cockpit.

“Qui-Gon says to take off,” said Anakin to the strangers piloting the ship.

“Over there,” said Obi-Wan. “Keep the hatchway open and fly low. We’ll pick him up.”

Ric Olie expertly followed the Padawan’s command, bringing the ship down toward the combatants, raising dust and blaring engine noise. Sunlight from the setting Tatoo II glared off the

bottom of the mirrored silver vessel and flashes from the lightsaber clashes mixed in the washy reflective surface.

Qui-Gon Jinn had never faced such a powerful opponent. Even in his training with Master Dooku, who was believed to be the most gifted swordsman in all the Jedi Order, he had not engaged in such ruthless and articulate battle. His adversary, in black robes and red and black skin, came at him with a red bladed lightsaber using techniques and movements he had only read about in the Jedi texts. He tried to find an opening to gain an advantage and strike back, but he spent each moment anticipating and defending the next assault.

From the corner of his eye, Qui-Gon saw the huge silver cruiser circling in. He moved his defensive posture to ensure his back was facing the ship to allow himself a move into it with a single leap when the time was right. Maul saw it as an opportunity to make a move on the Queen, who he noticed in the breezeway of the ship.

Maul pushed toward Qui-Gon with each defensive position the Jedi took. The Sith was gaining an advantageous position, and Jinn felt it. Qui-Gon took one hand off his lightsaber handle and used it to gather the Force and push his opponent back for a moment. Darth Maul was so centered on his parries and physical attacks, he was not prepared to defend against that kind of assault. The push made Maul lose his footing for a brief moment, and he swung through open air, missing his mark.

Jinn used this brief second opening to leap backwards and up onto the plank. His boots caught the edge of the platform and he gained his balance quickly.

“Okay, go!” shouted Obi-Wan, upon seeing his master was onboard, albeit barely. Jinn stumbled backward into the ship, and as it closed the gangway and made the turn toward the sky, he fell, exhausted onto the steely floor. Anakin and Kenobi rushed over to the Jedi Master, who breathed heavily, regaining all his faculties.

“Are you alright?” asked Anakin, as Artoo-Detoo watched over the trio of humans on the floor.

“I think so,” said Qui-Gon with a smile. He wiped his forehead clear of sand and sweat.

“What was that?” queried Kenobi.

“I’m not sure,” replied his master. “But he was well trained in the Jedi arts. My guess is he was after the Queen.”

“The Queen?” said Anakin with a crooked look on his face.

Qui-Gon laughed. “Your friend, Padme, is a very important person and the reason we are on this mission.”

The boy continued to look slightly confused. So much had happened in the last half hour of his life. He had been freed from a lifetime of slavery, boarded a spaceship for the first time, witnessed a Jedi in battle, and now was told the beautiful young woman he had met was some form of royalty.

“Well, what are we going to do about it?” Anakin asked, mustering his best seasoned space pilot voice.

“We will be patient,” said Qui-Gon in his best teaching voice. “It’s a Jedi trait.”

“And this is the boy you were telling me about?” asked Obi-Wan dubiously.

“Yes, he is,” said Qui-Gon. “Anakin Skywalker, meet Obi-Wan Kenobi.” The boy held out his hand, and the Padawan shook it.

“Are you a Jedi too?” asked Anakin. Obi-Wan nodded affirmatively. “Pleased to meet you, sir!”

Qui-Gon pushed himself up off the floor and entered the cockpit of the ship, while Anakin made his way back to the droid hold.

“Set the coordinates for Coruscant,” Qui-Gon commanded. “Do not send a signal until we enter the system. Although I’m sure they will know we are on our way, thanks to our friend in black.”

“You think he’s with the Federation?” asked Obi-Wan.

“I don’t know where he’s from. What I do know is that he was shrouded in darkness. I felt cold on the desert floor when I battled him, and his weapon was the kind I’ve only read about. I have a bad feeling about this.”

Anakin had found a corner to sit in and gather his emotions. He was flooded by a contradiction of elation and loss, and he felt a chill in his body unlike any he had ever felt in his entire life. Padme found him and bent down to speak to him.

“Are you alright?” she asked sweetly.

“I’m just cold,” he said, hoping she did not see the tears welling up in his eyes.

She stood up, quickly went to her quarters, and returned with a blanket to wrap him in. “You come from a warm planet,” she said. “A little too warm for my taste. Space is very cold.”

Anakin sensed a similar weariness in her. “You seem sad,” he said.

“I’m just a little... worried,” she said. “The people on my planet are suffering.”

“And you are a queen?” interrupted Anakin. “You didn’t tell me.”

“Anakin, I was on a strange world. There was no reason to take the risk. Besides,” she said. “You liked me anyway.” Her smile filled him with warmth. He returned it.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “That’s true. I’m sorry, why are you worried?”

“I have to do something to help my people. I will probably have to go before the Senate and beg them to intervene. I’m not sure that is going to happen.” She looked down, and Anakin could see the burden in her eyes.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small carved piece of wood on a long loop of string. “I made this for you the night before the race,” Anakin said. “So, you’d remember me. I’m glad I’m getting the chance to give it to you.”

He held it up and placed it around Padme’s head.

“It’s lovely,” she whispered.

“It’s a japor snippet,” he said. “It will bring you good fortune. Sounds like you could use it.”

“Thank you. It’s beautiful, but I won’t need this to remember you by,” Padme said. “Many things will change when we reach the capital, Ani. But I will never forget what you did for me, my friends and my people. You will always be very special to me.”

She wrapped her arms around him and took him in a maternal embrace. “I won’t forget you either. But…”

“You miss your mother, don’t you?” Padme whispered.

She felt his head on her shoulder bob “yes” and knew that he refused to look up, so she wouldn’t see him crying. Padme let the boy sob silently and secretly in her arms, before she kissed the top of his head gently and he fell asleep, exhausted from the life changing events of the day.

PART III: THE FATE OF NABOO

*"Even the brightest Light
can still be broken*

*Creating shadows of confusion
Without clarity there is only chaos
And from chaos, Darkness rises"*
—Journal of the Whills, 14:852



CHAPTER 1

Senator Palpatine pulled on his ceremonial Naboo cape and addressed himself in the dressing mirror of his bedroom on Coruscant. It was deep blue velvet with dark stitched flourishes and golden piping. The collar came up high on the back of his neck, and it flowed stiffly to the ground at his feet. He wore a dark ruffled shirt, his pants tucked into his boots, and his cuffs puffed out of the end of the arms of his robe. He straightened the neck on his top and mentally prepared, as he had a thousand times throughout his career, to represent his homeworld in the halls of the Galactic Republic.

But today would be the most critical day in all his years as senator. Today, he would strengthen alliances, make enemies, and risk every step he had taken to this point. His primary job as senator on Coruscant was to look out for the best interests of the people of Naboo, whom he was elected to represent. However, if choreographed just right, there were openings being presented to advance himself while doing “what was right.” Making any bold

moves at this moment in time would either work to his advantage or burn all the cache he had built up.

The day before, he had explained to the Jedi Council and to his nearest Jedi confidant that he would be taking his planet's case before the Senate. A day before that, he had forewarned the Chancellor, his oldest friend on Coruscant, that he would have to take whatever steps were necessary to ensure the safety of Naboo, even if it meant breaking the bargain he had built among the Jedi and Chancellor Valorum's office to send an unauthorized envoy to the planet. He was mindful to reach out through all the appropriate channels to call in some favors, and he was able to schedule an emergency session of the Senate to deliver on his promises.

As a last resort – one he was willing to take – he was willing to break the news publicly that the Jedi and Chancellor had agreed to go around the appropriate channels to investigate the Trade Federation blockade before all the accepted avenues and committees had run their course. He was certain, that even if it was at his request – which, of course, it was – it would still create turmoil in the Senate. It would bring the issue to light at the highest levels and some sort of action would have to be taken, both in response to his planet's needs and to address the failures of the bureaucracy.

Sheev Palpatine ran a comb through his white hair, practiced his smile and took a strong, deep breath. "We are ready," he said aloud, although he alone stood in the room. He turned and strode

out of his bedroom and into the sitting area of his apartment. He made his way across the room toward the door. The entry slid open, and he was greeted by two Republic Centurions, who would escort him to the Galactic Senate.

As he was about to walk out into the Coruscant morning sun, a tone chimed from a speaker in his apartment, signaling an incoming transmission. For a moment he considered ignoring it, but the tone indicated it was coming in on official channels. The Centurions heard it as well and stopped in their tracks. Palpatine would have to take the communique.

“Please excuse me,” he said through a tight smile and closed the door.

The signal came again, and he tapped a few buttons on the console that was part of a low table in the center of the room that overlooked the cityscape. A hologram flickered to life above the tabletop and began speaking immediately.

“Senator Palpatine?” said a woman’s low voice. She appeared in full royal regalia from head to toe. White makeup obscured her young face, with the ceremonial red dots on each cheek. Queen Amidala was in her red headdress and matching gown. “I must speak to you immediately.”

“I’m here, my Queen,” he said unexpected to hear from her. “I can’t tell you how overjoyed I am to hear your voice and see you. Are you alright?”

“I am fine, but our people need us.”

“Where are you? What happened to the ambassadors? I have so many questions,” said Palpatine.

“We have just entered the Coruscant System and will be landing shortly. I need to speak to you at once. The Trade Federation has landed a large-scale invasion army on our planet. I narrowly escaped with the help of the Jedi.”

“An invasion?” said Palpatine incredulously. “But they – I mean, I knew there was something terribly wrong when our transmission was broken.”

“I will explain more when we meet. We will land at the Senate building within the hour. I want the Chancellor there when I arrive,” she commanded.

“Your timing is impeccable, your highness,” Palpatine said. “I was on my way there now to plead our case to the Senate. I hadn’t heard from you or the ambassadors and decided to take action myself.”

“We can discuss your response later, Senator,” she scolded. “Right now, I have a story to tell the Senate, and any action you were planning to take will be bolstered by the horror I have seen.”

“Oh my,” said Palpatine. “I was afraid this was where this was going. I am so happy you are safe.”

“Meet me at the Senate Complex in an hour. We will discuss the details when I arrive.”

“Are the Jedi with you?” prodded Palpatine.

“They are. Master Qui-Gon Jinn is to be commended for leading the mission and saving my life.”

“That is a relief, my Queen,” the senator said. “Alright, I will see you soon. Again, I thank the gods that you are safe.” There was no reply from Padme Amidala before her holographic image disappeared.

Senator Palpatine stood silently alone for a moment to process what he had heard and to plot how he would use it to navigate the political morass of the hearing he had requested. With a semblance of a plan in mind, he turned quickly and exited his apartment.

Striding swiftly to his speeder, he made demands of the Centurions who escorted him. “I want the Chancellor on my commlink as soon as we get to my shuttle. He will need an escort to our position. We will meet Queen Amidala as she lands, and we do not want anyone outside of myself and Valorum to know. Do I make myself clear?” The guards nodded, and by the time he arrived at the landing platform at the Senate Complex, all the orders had been executed.

* * * * *

Anakin stood next to Ric Olie, who was seated in his captain’s chair piloting the J-Type Nubian cruiser across the lower atmosphere of the planet. Ever since they arrived in the system, the boy had been at his side, observing each move the pilot made and asking question after question.

“Coruscant,” began Olie. “The entire planet is one big city.”

Anakin had not only never been on an interstellar spaceship before, he had never even imagined what a world like Coruscant would look like. The jutting buildings reminded him of Beggars Canyon, except there were no large open areas to break into. Hundreds of thousands of speeders, ships, and personal transports buzzed across the skyline in controlled chaotic patterns.

They came in near a huge domed building that seemed a full five kilometers wide. From the center of it, hundreds of spaceships were coming and going. Halfway up the side of the dome, hundreds of landing platforms poked out like the spiky horns of a Tatooine sand turtle.

“That looks like Chancellor Valorum’s shuttle,” said Ric pointing to a platform just ahead of them. “And that is Senator Palpatine waiting for us.”

Queen Amidala sat silently in her chambers. Obi-Wan stood guard and Qui-Gon watched their approach from the back of the cockpit. Captain Panaka flew co-pilot and was sending security clearance codes. The large silver vessel twisted slightly and hovered next to the platform where Palpatine was standing. A large arm extended from the side of the Senate building and magnetically sealed against the cruiser and kept it from moving.

“Here we are,” shouted Olie.

“I can’t believe it,” whispered Panaka.

Qui-Gon tapped Anakin on the shoulder and urged the boy to follow him.

“Stay near me. Do not stray,” said Jinn.

“I won’t, sir,” Anakin replied.

“Obi-Wan, please escort her highness,” the Jedi said.

“Yes, master.”

The door to Padme’s chambers slid open and out walked the Queen they had first met and seen on their briefing holos. She was noble in the way she carried herself, stoic in her gaze.

“Padme?” said Anakin unable to remain silent.

She broke her form for a brief moment to flash him a smile and then quickly regained her stately posture.

“Anakin, you must show respect,” Qui-Gon whispered.

“But – ”

“Not another word,” said Jinn.

Captain Panaka took up a position to her left and Kenobi to her right, and they both accompanied her down the gangway to the landing platform. Jar Jar, Artoo and Anakin followed behind Qui-Gon, who was positioned behind the Queen.

The air on Coruscant was windy and warm and filled with the constant sound of rushing airspeeders and spacecraft. Senator Palpatine stood next to Chancellor Valorum, who had exited his shuttle just before the Queen’s ship had docked.

As Amidala set foot on the metalcrete platform, both the senator and chancellor bowed respectfully. Centurions lined the walkway between the Nubian and the awaiting heads of state. Queen Amidala nodded, and they both stood at attention.

Palpatine could not help himself. He stepped quickly to greet the young woman he had hand selected and groomed to be queen.

Minding the protocol, he avoided the informal hug that he so desperately wanted to give her.

“It is a great gift to see you alive, Your Majesty,” the senator said. “With the communications breakdown, we had become very concerned. I’m anxious to hear your report on the situation.” He stepped to the side and gestured toward his counterpart on the platform. “May I present, Supreme Chancellor Valorum.”

Finis stepped forward, took the Queen’s hand, and kissed it as a gesture of respect. “Welcome, your highness. It is an honor to meet you in person,” he said.

“Thank you, Supreme Chancellor,” she intoned in her formal octave and accent.

“I must relay how distressed everyone is over the current situation,” continued Valorum. “We’ve called a special session of the Senate to hear your position.”

Amidala and Palpatine exchanged quick glances. The Queen’s look was to question the accuracy of the remark, and Palpatine’s intended to contradict it.

“There is a question of procedure,” interrupted the Senator. “But I feel confident we can overcome it.”

Palpatine led the Queen toward the Senate building as Valorum dropped behind. Qui-Gon introduced himself to the Chancellor.

“Thank you for meeting us here, your honor,” said the Jedi. “I must speak with the Jedi Council immediately. The situation has become more complicated.”

“How so?” asked Valorum.

“I’m not entirely sure,” said Jinn. “My Padawan and I will have to take our leave at once.”

“I understand. I hope to receive a full report from your mission by nightfall.”

“I will do my best,” offered the Jedi, and he turned to stop Obi-Wan and Anakin in their path.

“What now, Master?” asked Kenobi.

“You and I must report to the Council,” stated Qui-Gon. “Anakin, I need you to stay with Jar Jar and Captain Panaka and stay out of the way of the Queen. She has important business to attend to. As do I. I will be back for you very soon, I promise.”

“Alright, Qui-Gon, sir,” said the boy nervously.

“Okeyday!” said Jar Jar.

Qui-Gon and Kenobi boarded one of the waiting escort shuttles and ordered it to take them to the Jedi Temple. Anakin and the Gungan caught up to Panaka, just as the group were entering the Senate chamber.

Valorum and Palpatine led the Queen to the senator’s office and offered a side chamber to the rest of the travelers to freshen up and dine on a freshly prepared table of food. Amidala took a seat in the center of the room across from Palpatine’s desk. The Chancellor sat on a couch at the side of the room, and the senator took his place in his office chair.

“So,” started Palpatine. “What is the current situation?”

“I cannot speak for the current situation,” started Amidala. “What I can tell you is that shortly after the Jedi ambassadors arrived, the Trade Federation began a full invasion of Naboo. Thousands of battle droids and countless heavily armed tanks and transports landed on the far side of the planet and made their way to Theed.”

“That’s impossible,” said Valorum. “The Federation doesn’t have an army.”

“What reason would the Queen have to lie?” spat back Palpatine.

“I didn’t mean to imply —”

“Enough bickering, gentlemen,” said Amidala. “I am only reporting the facts. Now, if you’ll allow me to continue.”

“Please, go on, highness,” urged Palpatine.

“Upon their occupation of Theed, my staff and I witnessed them murder more than one brave citizen before taking the palace.” Palpatine stared back in disbelief. Valorum put his head in his hands. The Queen continued. “They captured me, Governor Bibble, Captain Panaka and a handful of other attendants.”

“Wait,” said Palpatine. “Where are they?”

“I don’t know, Senator,” she said. “We were rescued by the Jedi and the Gungan on our way to an internment camp, and when we left the planet, Governor Bibble and the others courageously volunteered to stay behind.”

“Do you know if they are alright?” queried Valorum.

“I don’t know, but I fear the worst.”

“How long ago did you escape?” Palpatine asked.

“A few days ago. Our ship was attacked breaking the blockade, and we had to stop for repairs before we could make it here.”

“Attacked? This is an outrage!” shouted Palpatine. “If this doesn’t incite the Senate, then nothing will.”

“Senator Palpatine,” started Valorum. “You know as well as I do that we cannot simply go before the Senate with accusations as damning as this without proof.”

“Proof?” squawked Palpatine. “The word of my Queen ... and the Jedi?”

“The Jedi won’t testify, you know that.”

“We will still maintain our appointment with the Senate this afternoon, Chancellor,” said Palpatine. “And we will bring this information before the Republic. Let those that don’t take action at least take responsibility for inaction on the public stage.”

“I will have no more of this political wrangling,” said Amidala. “The Republic must take action. Now, I have remarks to prepare. Please, allow me some time.”

“Yes, your highness,” said the Chancellor, standing up and bowing. “I am glad to see you are safe. I am hopeful we can resolve this quickly and without further bloodshed.” He quickly exited the room. Palpatine watched and waited for the door to close behind Finis Valorum.

“Padme,” he said, standing and walking around the desk to embrace her. She sat coldly still as he placed his arms carefully

around her. “You’ve been through so much and have handled it so well.”

“Thank you, Senator, however I don’t need your pleasantries. I need your help.”

“Of course,” he said.

“I need you to put your skills as a statesman to work. I need you to make them act.”

Palpatine smiled sadly. “The Republic is not what it once was,” he said. “The Senate is full of greedy, squabbling delegates. There is no interest in the common good. I must be frank, there is very little chance the Senate will act on the invasion. They didn’t act on the blockade.”

“The Chancellor didn’t give up hope.”

“If I may say so, your majesty, the Chancellor has little *real* power. He is mired in baseless accusations of corruption. The bureaucrats are in charge now.”

The Queen was visibly disappointed. “What options do we have?”

“Well,” started Palpatine cautiously. “Our best choice may be to push for the election of a new Supreme Chancellor.” He paused. “One who will take control of the bureaucrats. One who will insist on justice. If things do not go as we would like, you may want to be prepared to call for a vote of no confidence in Chancellor Valorum.”

Amidala seemed repelled by the thought. “Hasn’t he been our strongest supporter?”

“He has,” said Palpatine. “But where has it gotten us? Our only other choice would be to submit a plea to the courts.”

“The courts take even longer to decide things than the Senate,” Amidala said exasperated. “Our people are dying, Senator. We must do something quickly to stop the Federation.”

“To be realistic, your majesty,” Palpatine said returning to his seat. “I think we are going to have to accept Federation occupation for the time being.”

“That is something I cannot do,” she said firmly.



CHAPTER 2

Darth Maul was livid. His first encounter with a Jedi did not go exactly as he had envisioned it. He had the advantage. His strikes were aggressive and had the Jedi on the defensive, but he fled. The Jedi chose the cowardly avenue and ran away from the fight, by leaping onto the Queen's escaping spaceship and did not see the battle through. *Typical of the Jedi*, he thought. *Flee the fight rather than finish it.*

After he had gathered his speeder and returned to *The Scimitar*, Maul contacted his master and told him that the Queen and the Jedi had escaped. To his surprise, Darth Sidious was barely surprised and not at all angry. "I want you to go to the Naboo System," the Sith master had said. "Wait with the Neimoidians, and the Jedi will come to you."

Maul had no choice but to obey his master's orders. By the time he brought his ship in to land just outside of Theed, he had been obsessed with analyzing every move from the short duel with the Jedi. What went wrong? What went well? What bothered

him most was that while he dominated the Jedi as a swordsman, he allowed himself to be swept up in the battle enough to lose sight of the obvious move to use the Force and push him off his balance. It was not strong enough to knock him down, but it created an opening. If the Jedi had not been so focused on the weakling way out, he could have used that moment to defeat Maul. The Zabrak was committed to making sure that this would never happen again.

The Scimitar powered down, and he stood up to leave the ship. The door at the back slid open, and he walked out into the morning sun of Naboo. The sky was blue with white wispy clouds. The air was clean and cool. Maddeningly so. This environment did not match his state of mind.

As he strode into the city, he ignited his lightsaber. He swirled it around his body instinctively. Four battle droids took note of the approaching figure and made their way to greet and question him. When they were within striking distance, Maul mindlessly slashed through them. No more nuisances. After his encounter with the Jedi, he realized that days of skulking through side streets were over.

With the destruction of four droids, alarms began to sound around the city. A young couple of Naboo citizens and their daughter, Tilian, were being detained by the droids that Maul struck down, and they assumed he was there to liberate them. The little girl raced toward the being in black, working her way out of her parent's grasp. Quickly, they caught up to her and held her

close, looking at the blade-wielding stranger. Maul glared at them and a let a smile creep across his lips, and the couple and their child held still.

“Come here,” he hissed and waved his free, gloved hand. “Behind me.”

The parents of the young girl inched closer commanding their daughter to stay behind and wait. When they were within a few meters, he swung his laser sword swiftly through them both in one stroke. The girl froze and screamed louder than the blaring alarms in the square.

More battle droids emerged from the side streets and encircled the Sith mercenary, as Tilian turned and ran down a side street, ignored by both Maul and the robot soldiers.

“I will destroy you all. It is best that you give me a wide berth,” he told them evenly. He was seemingly nonplused by the two humans that lay dead at his feet or the smoldering battle droids behind him. Inside, it was fueling his anger and bloodlust. After his perceived defeat by the Jedi on Tatooine, he would not lose focus again.

As the crowd of battle droids increased in number, Maul broke into his instinctive pacing. Back and forth, visualizing the path through with the most efficient destruction. Then, suddenly, the droids paused their progression, and one with a maroon stripe spoke.

“The Viceroy is expecting you,” it said. “Follow me.”

Maul paused his march and inhaled. He took a moment and then allowed the droid to lead him to the palace with the hole blasted into it in the square. The Sith glowered at all who looked at him. His presence alone brought an unease to the streets. He followed the droid up the stairs and into the throne room where the Neimoidian Trade Federation leader sat.

“Lord Sidious told me you would join us,” said Nute Gunray. “We are honored by your presence.”

Maul said nothing. He pulled his hood back over his head and stood silently in the middle of the chamber.

“I expect after your journey, you might like some refreshments,” offered the Viceroy.

Again, Maul returned the offer with silence.

“Alright then,” the Neimoidian said. “May I ask then why you are here?”

“I am here to ensure you don’t disappoint my master again,” Maul growled. “And to destroy the Jedi when they return.”

Gunray felt his blood run warm with nervousness. He had watched on the security cams as this walking weapon cut down droids and humans with ease and precision. His presence in the chamber contributed considerable weight to an already unsteady situation.

“We are happy to have you,” said Gunray, ever the diplomat. “We are at your disposal should you need anything.” The Neimoidian slumped back into the throne and eyed his guest with a deep distrust.



CHAPTER 3

All but one chair in the Jedi Council chamber was occupied. There were rumblings amongst the Council about the whereabouts of Master Dooku. Not only had he not returned from Sullust, but he had not reported in with his status. As a Jedi Master, he was not obligated to maintain a constant appraisal of his location, but it was expected. And as his mission was allegedly a fairly simple labor dispute negotiation, some of the members were concerned.

But the other events happening of late led to Dooku's leave of absence seeming less important. Another time, it would have been the one of the most important topics of conversation before the Council, but there was a great disturbance in the Force. None of them admitted it – save for Master Sifo-Dyas – but all of them had noticed it at one level or another.

Over the last several days, a peaceful planet had been blockaded by the Trade Federation, and the Jedi had agreed to

send an envoy on behalf of the Naboo people at the request of their Senator, without following the traditionally-approved political channels. The two Jedi on the unsanctioned mission had also gone unheard from until just an hour before they convened here. Before they could command Master Qui-Gon Jinn to report on his findings, the Jedi himself had requested this emergency session of the Council.

Adding to the disarray were the events at the Montas Complex. While the Jedi were away on Naboo, the head of one of the Federation's fiercest rivals, Hego Demask the Second of the Banking Clan, was allegedly murdered – some believed by a Jedi weapon.

Qui-Gon Jinn was a powerful and well-respected Jedi Master. He had trained under Master Dooku and was often considered to take a seat on the High Council, but Master Yoda continually led a delegation that did not believe he was Jedi Council material. For better or worse, Yoda believed that Qui-Gon was a little too rogue. He would make decisions based on his gut versus procedure. He would follow his instinct rather than logic. This did not sit well with the eight-hundred-year-old master who considered instinct the close relative of emotional attachment and thus, was on the dangerous edge to the dark side of the Force.

“Welcome back, Master Jinn,” said Ki-Adi Mundi. Qui-Gon and his apprentice stood in the center of the room and were prepared to be addressed by the Council. “Padawan,” he said,

acknowledging Kenobi. Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan bowed slightly in reply.

“Matters have grown increasingly complicated,” said Qui-Gon. “In short, the Trade Federation has launched an invasion on Naboo, people have been killed, and their blockade is nothing short of an interplanetary act of aggression.”

Sifo-Dyas drew a deep breath and his eyes involuntarily squeezed closed. Mace Windu looked at him and waited for his old friend to speak. He did not.

“Unexpected this is,” said Yoda. “And most unfortunate.”

“And the Queen?” asked Ki-Adi Mundi. “How did she escape?”

“When Obi-Wan and I arrived in Theed, we happened to intercept her being escorted to an internment camp by the Federation droid army. We freed her from her captors and were able to escape the blockade,” he said. “But not without taking serious damage from Federation starships.”

“The Federation ships were armed?” asked Mace.

“One was for certain, and it also had hundreds of droid fighters,” Qui-Gon answered. “All the Naboo fighter pilots escorting us were lost, and we barely made it past the blockade. With a leaking hyperdrive, we were able limp our way to Tatooine to repair the ship.”

“And you were there for several days, it would seem. Why didn’t you report from there on what you had seen on Naboo?” asked Mundi.

“I felt it best not to send a signal that could tip our location,” Jinn replied. “The Queen was at large.”

“Understand, the Council does,” said Yoda. “But realize you must, the pressure it put on the Senator.”

“My friends, I think we have larger events at play,” said Jinn. “I believe the Force led us to Tatooine.”

“Go on, Master Jinn,” said Depa Billaba leaning forward in her throne. Sifo-Dyas brought his hands up in a triangle under his chin.

“I was ambushed by somebody... something as we left Tatooine. A figure in black robes wielding a red-bladed lightsaber. He was trained in the Jedi arts.” Qui-Gon paused, well aware that what he was about to say was not to be taken lightly. “My only conclusion can be that it was a Sith Lord.”

“Impossible,” said Ki-Adi Mundi forcefully. “The Sith have been extinct for a millennium.”

Yoda slumped back in his chair, and Sifo-Dyas sat straight up.

“I do not believe the Sith could have returned without us knowing,” said Master Windu.

“Difficult to see, the dark side is,” said Yoda somberly.

“Am I the only one in this chamber who is not surprised at all to hear this?” said Sifo-Dyas suddenly unable maintain his silence. “With all due respect, Master Yoda, the dark side is not difficult to see if you don’t ignore it.”

“Mind your tone, Master Sifo-Dyas,” warned Plo Koon.

“I will not,” said Dyas indignantly. “For how long have I warned of my visions? For how long have I implored this Council to consider what I have seen?”

“Discuss this we will not in open session,” commanded Yoda with a tap of his cane.

Qui-Gon looked to Obi-Wan who nodded and left the room. The Padawan knew it was inappropriate for a learner to be present in the midst of a Council meeting if he was not directly questioned. This assembly had clearly begun to become contentious, and this was no place for him. While Kenobi turned and left, Jedi Master Jinn stood his ground and did not move.

“Please excuse us, Master Jinn,” said Mace Windu. “You have brought us information that must be processed among the Council. If there is nothing further, you are free to leave. We will use all of our resources to unravel this mystery and discover the identity of your attacker.”

Jinn did not move.

“May the Force be with you,” stated Windu as a more persuasive dismissal.

Still, Qui-Gon stayed still in the center of the Jedi Council Chamber.

“Master Jinn,” started Yoda covering exasperation. “More to say have you?”

Sifo-Dyas sensed there were more revelations to come from Qui-Gon and leaned in, awaiting his reply to the Council leader.

“With your permission, my master,” started Qui-Gon. “I have encountered a vergence in the Force.”

“A vergence you say?” said Yoda skeptically. “Too much time studying the Jedi texts, perhaps you have spent.”

A murmur of laughter rippled through the Council. “Talk of the Sith returning seems to not be a big enough revelation for Master Jinn today,” said Ki-Adi Mundi. “Now he speaks of other pieces of The Prophecy.”

“Let him speak,” reprimanded Sifo-Dyas. “Master Jinn deserves your attention, if you won’t give him your respect.”

Mace Windu glared at Sifo-Dyas. “Master Sifo-Dyas is right,” he said. “Even if he seems to have forgotten common decorum. Go on, Master Jinn.”

“Thank you,” Qui-Gon said. He turned his eyes to Sifo-Dyas. While not on the Council, Qui-Gon was a high enough ranking Jedi Knight to have heard conversations about the visions Dyas had shared with the Council. Jinn shared Dyas’s beliefs about why the Council – especially Yoda – discounted Sifo’s visions: because he coupled the conversations about them with a plea to prepare militaristically for what they foretold. As a Jedi who relied on feeling, Jinn placed great trust in what Dyas’s gift showed him, but he also knew that discussing any form of martial solutions with the Council put him at an immediate disadvantage. The Jedi chose to use the Force as a guide and, as such, tended to act as though events seen through visions were inevitable. This frustrated Dyas, and if he was being honest, Jinn as well.

When Sifo-Dyas realized that Qui-Gon was looking his way, he spoke up. “Are you speaking about a vergence around a person?”

“Yes. A human boy,” Qui-Gon said. “We discovered him on Tatooine. After spending time with him, and against my preference, I ran the blood test. His cells have the highest concentration of midichlorians I have ever seen in a life form.”

“What made you think to check him?” asked Sifo-Dyas with genuine curiosity in his voice.

“I believe he was conceived by the Force,” said Jinn. There were audible gasps from some members of the Council. “I spoke to his mother. She told me there was no father and that she carried him.”

“The Chosen One,” said Sifo-Dyas with surprise.

“You are referring to the Prophecy,” said Mace Windu. “To the one who will bring balance to the Force.”

“You believe it is this boy?” Ki-Adi Mundi said dubiously.

“Well, Master Mundi, I don’t presume – ”

“But you do,” said Yoda. “Revealed your opinion is.”

“All I request is that the boy be tested,” Jinn responded.

Mace Windu, Yoda and Ki-Adi Mundi exchanged glances as if discussing something with one another without words.

“Trained as a Jedi you request for him?” Yoda asked.

“Finding him was the will of the Force,” Jinn pleaded. “I have no doubt of that.”

“Bring him before us then,” said Mace Windu, as if resigned to the idea rather than in agreement.

“I will get him and bring him back at once,” said Jinn with a bow. He turned and left the chamber to retrieve Anakin Skywalker from the custody of the Queen.



CHAPTER 4

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan had come to retrieve Anakin, so the boy knocked on the door to the Queen’s chambers one last time. The entry slid open and Captain Panaka appeared in the doorway.

“Master Qui-Gon has come to take me to the Jedi Temple to start my training... I hope,” Anakin told him before he could even utter a greeting. “I’m not sure if I’ll get to see Padme – I mean Queen Amidala – again, so I was hoping I could say goodbye.”

“I will tell her for you,” said Panaka coldly. “She’s very busy, but...” He seemed at a loss for words speaking to a child. “But I’m sure her heart goes with you.” Of course, Panaka had no idea how much that turn of phrase might mean to the boy, and a wide smile enveloped his face.

“Thank you, Captain,” Anakin said respectfully, before racing off to join the Jedi.

Panaka sealed the door shut and returned to Amidala in Naboo’s designated senatorial office where she was in an intense meeting with Senator Palpatine.

“Now, Padme,” continued Palpatine. “There are a few very important last things to remember. First, there is a very high likelihood that the situation on Naboo – no matter how grave – will not be readily accepted by a large number of systems. As odd a play as it is for the Federation to blockade our planet, invasion is even more, er, irregular. The Galactic Senate does not respond well to the unexpected.”

“But our people are dying, Senator.”

“I know that. You know that. But for the bureaucrats, it is a very hard concept to even comprehend. In a way, I almost admire their strategy. It’s such an outrageous move, if it wasn’t happening to us, I am not sure *I* would believe it.” Padme shot him a puzzled and distressed look. “Oh, your highness, I am not saying I approve of it. It’s just, well, never mind. Perhaps I’ve spent too much time here on Coruscant.”

“What else do I need to know, Senator?” she pushed.

“If we are to accomplish anything in that sort of environment – assuming I am right about the lack of support we may get – extreme political measures may be needed. I will signal you if we enter that territory. That is where we may need to make our boldest play.”

“Senator, this is not a game of Sabacc. There are consequences larger than the political warfare at stake here,” Amidala pushed.

“I understand completely, my Queen. And I am here to guide you through, so that we can achieve our objectives. I’ve been at

work here in the capital since long before you were even born. Let me help you in the Senate halls, and you will lead our people safely from this nightmare. And when we emerge, you will be the greatest Queen Naboo has ever known.”

“That is not my goal, Senator,” she said feeling frustrated by his focus on politics. “I will lean on your expertise, but I will do what I feel is right.”

“Of course, your highness. Now, I think it’s time for us to go.”

* * * * *

The Galactic Senate Hall was enormous. One thousand twenty-four systems were represented in the vast domed chamber when it was at full capacity. Each system was afforded a cluster of six seats that were set into a comfortable hovercraft that attached to the Senate walls at a point connected to the office of their system. When a system was given the floor, their hovercraft would detach from its socket and float toward the center of the grand hall to be clearly visible to the entire collection of delegates. Each craft was fitted with various equipment ranging from voice amplifying systems, voting computers and translator boxes.

Additionally, the Supreme Chancellor had his own hovering stage that sat a total of eight beings, which boarded at the top of the dome from within his office. When the Chancellor was present during a session, it floated in the center of the massive, inverted bowl-shaped hall during all proceedings.

When Amidala and Palpatine opened the door from their office, they boarded their hovercraft with Captain Panaka, took their seats, and looked around the great hall at the Senate session that had already begun.

“We must have gotten their attention,” said Palpatine. “It’s unusual to have this much attendance. For most sessions, it’s only about one-third full.” She nodded and absorbed the majesty of the Republic. Every known sentient species from almost every planetary system was represented. Some so large in size, they had to have modifications made to their hoverseats. Others so small they stood on the front edges of theirs. Some hairy, some scaly, some a combination of features. Remarkably, many seemed humanoid and many systems were represented by humans.

“Why do some of the seats have multiple species in them?” she asked, noting that there were several hovercrafts which were representing an individual system, but had two or more species in them.

“Many systems have multiple races that need representation,” Palpatine replied casually, as he made eye contact with a nearby Senate seat and waved politely.

She considered his comment for a moment when a troubling thought settled on her. “How come we don’t have a Gungan on our bench?” she asked.

“Excuse me?” Palpatine said ruffling his forehead.

“The Gungans,” she said. “We share a planet with them. Why don’t they have a voice in the Senate?”

“Oh, come now, your highness,” he said dismissively. “They don’t even speak to us, why would they need to be heard here?”

Amidala stared at the Senator and watched as he performed in his element, smiling at other representatives, gesturing politely, winking at some, and deliberately ignoring others. She stood up, pushed her way past Panaka, and back into the office of the Senator. Working her way through the door to Palpatine’s office, she crossed the hallway to the official Naboo consulate receiving room.

She entered the room expecting to see Anakin and Jar Jar, but only saw Binks.

“Where’s Anakin?” she asked, slightly distressed.

“Hesa gone,” Jar Jar told her. “Went to da Temple wit da Jedi. Hesa goin be a Jedi Knight mesa tinks.”

“Oh, alright,” she said seemingly disappointed. “Well, I’m sure he will do well. No matter. I’ve come here for you, Jar Jar.”

“Mesa?”

“Yes, I’m appointing you Senator.” He pointed to himself and mouthed some silent response. She opened a nearby closet, rooted around for something for him to wear and pulled out a crimson cape that probably belonged to Palpatine. “Here. Wrap yourself in this.” The Gungan followed orders, took the mantle and placed it awkwardly on his shoulders. Amidala pulled it on him tighter, straightened it out and brushed off any wrinkles.

“Howsa mesa look?” he said smiling.

“You look very... important,” the Queen said. “And you are. Now, come with me.” The Gungan held his head high – still unsure what was happening – and walked proudly behind the Queen across the hallway, through Palpatine’s senate office, and onto the hoverplatform in the great hall.

“What the hell is... *he* doing here?” said Senator Palpatine unable to hide his contempt.

She was taken back by the utter and, she had hoped, uncharacteristic disdain in his voice. “The Gungans are as much at risk as our people, Senator,” she insisted. “They deserve representation in this matter, if not all matters of the Republic.”

“I wonder if you’ve considered whether or not the Federation was even aware of their presence on Naboo,” Palpatine whispered in a sharp, scolding tone. She had not, but before she could put another thought against it, an announcement echoed throughout the great hall.

“And now, the Chair will recognize the Senator from the sovereign system of Naboo,” came Mas Amedda’s powerful voice. The Supreme Chancellor’s hovering box hung in the epicenter of the Senate.

Amidala watched as Palpatine expertly tapped some buttons on the screen at the front of their hovercraft, and the vehicle released from its docking station on the wall of the dome. They floated effortlessly several meters forward toward the center of the rotunda.

“Supreme Chancellor, delegates of the Senate,” began Palpatine, expertly and clearly at ease in this environment. “A tragedy has occurred which started with the taxation of trade routes and has now engulfed our entire planet in the oppression of the Trade Federation.”

Across the dome, another hovercraft pulled out of its socket and began floating toward the center of the hall. It was full of Neimoidians, but it was not the representatives from Cato Neimoidia. It was Senator Lott Dodd exercising his position as representative for the Trade Federation. “This is outrageous,” he shouted. “Let the record show that the Trade Federation objects to the Senator’s statements.”

Valorum turned toward Lott Dodd and his delegation. “The Chair does *not* recognize the Senator from the Trade Federation at this time.”

“Return to your station,” demanded Mas Amedda who stood at Valorum’s side.

Reluctantly, the Federation’s pod slid back toward their position.

“Thank you, Chancellor,” continued Palpatine. “To present our allegations, I present Queen Amidala, our recently elected head of state.”

Queen Amidala stood from her seat to a smattering of applause from different parts of the arena. “Honorable representatives of the Republic,” she started in her most royal voice. “I come to you under the gravest of circumstances. My

homeworld, the peaceful planet of Naboo, has been invaded by the droid armies of the Trade Fed – ”

“I object!” shouted Lott Dodd as his pod floated once again toward the center of the dome. “What proof does she have? This is incredible.”

“Proof?” said Palpatine incredulously. “The word of my Queen should be proof alone.”

“Unacceptable!” shouted Dodd.

“Gentlemen,” urged Valorum. “The floor belongs to Queen Amidala. Let her finish her testimony.”

“Not if it is built on lies!” barked Dodd.

“You are bordering on contempt,” responded Mas Amedda in his darkest voice.

“The only proof I have, other than the murders I witnessed with my own eyes, is this recorded message that my personal cruiser received from our acting leader, Governor Sio Bibble, after I barely escaped the planet with my life,” Amidala said and nodded toward Palpatine, to signal he should start the hologram from Sio Bibble.

“...death toll ... catastrophic ... bow to ... wishes ... contact me ...” echoed throughout the Senate chamber multiple times as murmurs rumbled through the Senate, some in disbelief, others in horror.

“It’s a fake!” shouted one delegation. “Clearly edited to look like a distress call.”

Then more shouts filled the hall before a cacophony of differing perspectives created complete disorder. Jar Jar surveyed the vast sea of alien species from around the galaxy shouting and jeering and gulped a hard swallow.

“Wassa happening?” the Gungan asked Padme. She looked at him and he could tell by the look in her eyes that it would best for him to sit down and remain silent.

“Silence!” called Mas Amedda, after more than a minute of bickering across the platforms.

“I demand to know who is represented on the Queen’s platform,” said Lott Dodd.

“I am joined by Senator Jar Jar Binks, a representative of the Gungan people who share our planet,” Amidala stated. Again, there were shouts and an outbreak of questions, comments and general disarray in the chamber.

“Order!” bellowed Amedda once again.

After several minutes, calm was restored and Queen Amidala spoke again. “Honorable representatives, you must see that Naboo needs your help,” she implored. “The Trade Federation has gone too far.”

“We would gladly welcome a commission be sent to Naboo to ascertain the truth,” offered Dodd.

A third hovercraft detached and moved toward the Chancellor’s pod. “The Congress of Malastare concurs with the honorable delegate from the Trade Federation,” said the squeaky

voiced, three-eyed Gran. “A commission must be appointed to investigate the allegations.”

Valorum was flustered. He turned to his advisors and whispered intensely in an impromptu counseling session.

Senator Palpatine muted their booth’s microphone and leaned in to speak to his Queen. “Enter the bureaucrats, the true rulers of the Republic,” he said. “Malastare is a powerful player here, and on the payroll of the Trade Federation, I might add. This is where Chancellor Valorum’s strength will be tested. Or worse, disappear.”

“The point,” began Valorum somewhat halfheartedly. “The point is conceded. Will you defer and allow a commission to explore the validity of your accusations?”

Amidala was suddenly seething, but she maintained her composure to address the congregation of Senators. “I will not defer,” she said firmly. “I have come before you to resolve this attack on our sovereignty now. I was not elected to watch my people suffer and die, while you discuss this invasion in committee.”

There were eruptions of applause in support of her statement and her bravery, and there were an equal number of shouts attacking her perceived lack of respect for the Chancellor and the process.

Several pods detached from their walls and floated toward the center creating even more chaos.

“What does this girl know about how the Senate works?” demanded the representative from the Sullust system.

“She’s a child!” shouted a Chadra-Fan Senator from Anoaat.

“Order!” shouted Mas Amedda. “There will be order now!”

“Senator Palpatine,” started the Chancellor. “Will you please assist your Queen in the processes of the Senate?”

“I already have, your honor,” Palpatine replied. His response was met with more shouts and claps of laughter.

“There will be order,” shouted Mas Amedda one more time. “Or this session shall be adjourned.”

“That’s exactly what the Trade Federation wants,” whispered Palpatine to Amidala. “You must speak now, or any action will be further delayed.”

“What shall I do?” she asked.

“Be bold, Your Majesty,” he said.

Mas Amedda began to speak again over the rolling thunder of voices throughout the chamber. “If the delegation from Naboo has nothing further, then we shall call this session to a close.”

“I do have one more item to present,” Amidala called quickly.

There was a sudden and unexpected hush among the senators and their attendants. “Yes?” urged Amedda.

“If this body is not capable of action,” she began after a hard swallow. “Then I suggest that new leadership is needed. I move for a vote of no confidence in Chancellor Finis Valorum.”

Gasps of disbelief shuttered through the rotunda then, suddenly, a chant of “Vote now!” began to rumble and build to

thousands of voices in unison. Valorum was stunned. He found his chair behind him and sat down slowly. The process of the Republic's political system was always very predictable, but the impact of a massive questioning of his ability to lead was shocking. It was not something he ever had expected, least of all from the delegation from Naboo. Valorum felt betrayed, and for the first time in his political career, he had no plan for how to handle this blow.

Palpatine fought back a smile and observed the entire Senate devour the intrigue his Queen had just thrown into the ring.

“Order!” bellowed Amedda, who suddenly felt as though that was his only task today.

“What now?” asked Amidala.

“Now, they will elect a new Chancellor,” cooed Palpatine. “A strong Chancellor. One who will not let our tragedy continue.”



CHAPTER 5

“Go on ahead. Obi-Wan and I will meet you inside,” Qui-Gon told Anakin.

“Yes, Qui-Gon, sir,” said Anakin as he trotted down the landing platform and into the Jedi Temple.

“The boy will not pass the Council’s tests – or their requirements. He’s too old,” pleaded Obi-Wan to his master.

“Anakin will become a Jedi,” said Jinn. “I promise you.”

“Please do not defy the Council, Master. Not again.”

“I shall do what I must, Obi-Wan.”

“If you would only follow the code, you would be *on* the Council. They will not go along with you.”

“You are skilled in the Force, but you have much to learn, my young apprentice,” said Qui-Gon. “Do you think it was coincidence that we were forced to land on Tatooine, and that the only place we found what we needed to complete our mission was in the shop where Anakin was? Do you think it’s blind luck that

when a child possibly born of the Force was discovered, a Sith Lord appears for the first time in a thousand years?”

“Master, even the Council isn’t convinced that what you faced was a Sith.”

“You are smarter than that, my Padawan. I know you are. If not a Sith, then what was that?”

“I don’t know, Master,” said Obi-Wan. “But if even Master Yoda isn’t sure – ”

“Master Yoda is very logical, but he’s not willing to follow his instincts,” said Qui-Gon. “That is what separates he and I.”

“And that is also what keeps you off the Council,” said Obi-Wan.

“See? I told you that you were smart,” laughed Qui-Gon. “Listen, I have concerns about the closed-mindedness of the Council. I don’t have the power of sight that Master Sifo-Dyas does, but I do put credence in his conviction. We must place faith in the Force, and let it guide us, but we mustn’t miss our call to act. Who are we to defy the path that has been laid before us? If we accept the gifts it gives us as Jedi, we must also accept the responsibility we have to follow its commands.”

“I understand, Master,” said Obi-Wan obediently. He was not sure he fully did, but he trusted his master deeply.

Qui-Gon placed a paternal arm on Obi-Wan’s shoulder and urged him toward the entrance to the Temple. “I don’t wish to defy the Council, my Padawan,” he said. “But I must follow the Force.”

The doors slid open, and they found Anakin walking from statue to statue of Jedi Masters gone by that adorned the lobby. “How long have the Jedi been around?” asked the boy.

“For over a thousand generations the Jedi have been the guardians of peace and justice in the Republic,” said Obi-Wan proudly.

“That is a very long time,” said Anakin sounding impressed although he was unable to comprehend the enormity of the years. “What came before them?”

“That’s a very good question,” said Obi-Wan.

“What comes after them?” asked Anakin innocently.

“That is a better question,” said Qui-Gon. Obi-Wan slyly passed a look to his master that implied he thought it was quite a strange question to ask. Jinn saw it but opted against a response.

They walked down a long hallway lined with more sculptures. Anakin was astonished by the number of Jedi Knights, Padawans, and scholars that roamed the corridors each seemingly on their own mission.

“How many Jedi Knights are there?”

“There are nearly ten thousand of us,” said Qui-Gon. “All around the galaxy.”

“And they all come here?”

“When they are called,” said Obi-Wan. “But most make their homes on other worlds. Only Jedi Masters and Padawans live in the Capital.”

They continued deeper into the Temple. “Over there is one of the training rooms,” said Qui-Gon pointing to his right. He gestured to his left. “And this entire area is the Jedi Archives. All of the information we’ve collected through the millennia. Planets, people, conflicts. It’s all in there.”

Finally, they arrived at the doors to the chamber of the Jedi Council.

“Now, Anakin, show respect,” whispered Qui-Gon. “Speak when spoken to and only do what is asked of you.” Anakin had not considered what he was going to see or what he would have to do. All Qui-Gon had told him that he was being taken before the Jedi Council.

The entryway split and spread open allowing them to walk inside.

Jedi Masters from different races and species sat in chairs in a large circle around the room with windows that filled the walls and overlooked Coruscant. Yoda, the green Master with pointy ears and white wispy hair, spoke first. “Welcome back, Master Jinn,” he said. “Obi-Wan.”

Jinn and Kenobi bowed politely in response while Anakin took note and followed their lead. While the green Jedi used the word, there was very little “welcoming” in the greeting.

Sifo-Dyas narrowed his gaze and watched the young boy’s every slight movement. As all the Jedi around the room did, he reached out through the Force to feel for a sign, a vision or even a warning about him. What Dyas sensed in the room was a strange

sensation that he had never felt in the Council chamber before: fear. He attributed it to this child, believing that it was not an unusual emotion for any being coming before the Jedi for the first time.

“And this must be Anakin Skywalker,” said Mace Windu. Anakin took note of his deep, almost dark, glare. “Welcome.”

“Thank you, sir,” Anakin responded respectfully.

“Master Jinn believes strong in the Force you are,” continued Yoda. “Brought you here to be tested, he has.”

“I know, sir,” said Anakin.

“If you are ready, we will begin now,” said Ki-Adi Mundi.

Qui-Gon stepped behind Anakin and put his hands on the child’s shoulders. “He is,” he said.

Mace Windu leaned to his side and picked up a small electronic screen on a handle, tapped a few buttons and an image appeared on its face of a planet with a set of rings.

“What am I seeing here?” asked Mace Windu.

“A planet,” said Anakin.

Windu tapped the screen and another image appeared to him.

“A tree,” said Anakin, correctly identifying it. Windu nodded and pressed on. “A ship,” the child continued, allowing boredom to settle into his voice.

“Correct,” said Mace, and before he pressed the screen Anakin spoke again.

“A cup,” Skywalker said. Then Mace saw a cup appear on his display. “After that, an animal of some sort, followed by a blaster

pistol.” Windu touched the device he held, and an image of a Corellian Hound showed. He continued the program and a DLT-19 heavy blaster rifle appeared. Mace said nothing but looked silently at Yoda.

“He got them all,” said Sifo-Dyas. “Didn’t he?” Windu and Yoda sat stoically.

“This is my test?” said Anakin almost disrespectfully. “I passed? It’s just a parlor game. I made money on the streets playing these things.”

Qui-Gon smiled and Obi-Wan tried not to.

“How feel you?” asked Yoda.

Anakin wrinkled his nose, unsure of what sort of response was expected. “Cold, sir,” the boy said.

“Afraid, are you?” pressed Yoda.

“No, sir,” Anakin replied.

Sifo-Dyas brought a hand up to his bearded chin.

“See through you, we can,” warned Yoda.

“Be mindful of your feelings,” said Mace Windu.

“Your thoughts dwell on your mother,” added Ki-Adi Mundi.

Anakin was stunned that his feelings were exposed. In fact, he *was* thinking about his mother – how he worried about her already and was truly afraid he would never see her again. The child from Tatooine physically pulled back and remembered what Qui-Gon had told him about responding when spoken to. Not sure if this was another test, he responded. “I miss her.”

“Afraid to lose her, I think,” said Yoda, jumping on the rawness of the comment.

Anakin, once again unable to camouflage his initial response, spat back, “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Everything,” countered Yoda. The elder Jedi Master leaned forward. “Fear is the path to the Dark Side of the Force. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering.”

“I sense much fear in you,” said Ki-Adi Mundi.

“I fear nothing,” retorted Anakin. “I never have.”

“Fear physical danger, you may not,” said Yoda. “Fear of loss, more dangerous is.”

“I believe we’ve seen all we need to,” Mace Windu interjected.

“I can do more than just guess pictures, you know,” Skywalker said. “I can make things move. I can see things before they happen.”

Qui-Gon furrowed his brow at Anakin, and the boy realized he had spoken out of turn. Skywalker pursed his lips and stood silently.

There was a long silence among the Jedi Masters before Ki-Adi Mundi finally broke the quiet. “The Force is strong with him.”

“His presence is powerful,” said Sifo-Dyas.

“He performed perfectly on the visual test,” added Mace Windu.

“He is to be trained, then?” said Qui-Gon.

There was a pause. “No,” said Mace simply. “He will not be trained.”

Anakin scowled unknowingly at Mace Windu, who caught his glare and returned it.

“Too old, he is,” said Yoda.

“He is the Chosen One,” appealed Qui-Gon. “You must see it.”

Sifo-Dyas began to speak, but Yoda cut him off. “Clouded, the boy’s future is.”

“It is his destiny,” said Jinn.

“Is it?” asked Yoda. “Nowhere in the Prophecy does it say the Chosen One a Jedi is.”

“So, you agree that he is the one the Prophecy foretold,” stated Jinn.

“Impossible to say,” said Sifo-Dyas. “Yoda is right, his future is not clear. There is a sudden sense of... ambiguity.”

“We did not find Anakin by accident,” said Qui-Gon. “He was meant to be discovered.”

“Then why not earlier, did we find him?” argued Yoda.

“Maybe the time was not right,” replied Sifo-Dyas.

“I will train him, then,” declared Qui-Gon resolutely. “I hereby take Anakin Skywalker as my Padawan learner.” Anakin turned his head and looked questioningly at Qui-Gon. Obi-Wan slumped, momentarily unsure what this would mean for him before regaining his stature quickly.

“An apprentice, you have, Master Jinn,” said Yoda. “Impossible to take a second.”

“The Code forbids it,” chimed in Mace Windu.

“Obi-Wan is ready for the Trials,” Jinn said.

“I feel I am ready,” said Kenobi eagerly.

Yoda smacked his cane on his throne. “Our own council will we keep on who is ready,” he said.

“He is headstrong, and he has much experience to gain, but he is capable,” continued Jinn. “There is little more he can learn from me.”

“Now is not the time for this discussion,” said Windu. “Your mission is continuing. You will be the ward of Queen Amidala and her escort as needed. She may be the key to unravelling the mystery of the dark presence of whom you spoke earlier.”

“The Sith,” corrected Jinn.

“Still unclear that is,” said Yoda.

“Report back to the Queen,” said Ki-Adi Mundi. “And be prepared, as your presence may draw out her attacker.”

“As you wish,” conceded Qui-Gon. “I will complete my mission.”

“Dismissed, you are,” said Yoda. Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan, and Anakin turned and exited the Chamber as directed. The doors sealed behind them, and Sifo-Dyas spoke up immediately.

“If the boy was born from the Force and his power is as strong as it seems – although, clearly very untrained – then there is reason to believe he is the Chosen One.”

“Proof we need of his abilities,” replied Yoda. “Strong in the Force, he is. The Chosen One he may or may not be. Shrouded in darkness, many things are.”

“Master Yoda, what more evidence do we need that we are in the time of the Prophecy?” begged Dyas. “The Sith have returned, and the Chosen One has come forward.”

“We do not know that Master Jinn was attacked by a Sith,” said Mundi.

Sifo-Dyas was feeling tension build inside him. “Why must the Council continually dismiss what I have foreseen? What are you afraid of?”

“Afraid?” barked Yoda. “There is no fear on the Jedi Council.”

“When that boy came in, I sensed a veil of fear fill the Chamber. I was certain it was from him, but by the time he left, I sensed no ill-emotion from him other than perhaps over-confidence and impatience. But the fear remained like a pall over this room.”

“What are you saying, Master Dyas?” accused Mace Windu.

“I suppose I am saying that I am concerned about the direction the Council is heading. That it is becoming clearer to me that bureaucracy has not only gripped the Senate, but it is taking a place here, in our midst. The great Jedi before us would trust their feelings. This Council is afraid of what their feelings might mean.”

“Strong statements, you are making, Master Dyas,” said Yoda. “Perhaps restrain yourself, you should.”

“Perhaps,” said Dyas standing from his throne. “I am excusing myself to meditate on my feelings and on the issues before us. I want to be on record as saying, now more than ever, I believe the Prophecy is upon us and the Jedi Council must act.”

“Duly noted, Master Sifo-Dyas,” said Ki-Adi Mundi.



CHAPTER 6

Jar Jar Binks sat in a couch near Senator Palpatine's desk, playing with a decorative stone orb he had found on a table nearby, while Artoo-Detoo sat quietly recharging his battery. Queen Amidala, meanwhile, paced the floor of the office in the Senate building waiting for his return. Sheev Palpatine had been called into a meeting from some committee, about something related to the vote of no confidence for which she had called. She was out of her depth when it came to matters of politics and Republic procedure, and she was not entirely confident that her decision to make such a provocative move was correct. But Amidala trusted Palpatine. He had helped her find her way into government, had taken her under his wing throughout the election process on Naboo, but seeing him in action, here in the Capital, he seemed like someone she did not know – at least as well as she believed she did.

In the time she had spent alone in the office, she began formulating her next move. Unless Palpatine miraculously

returned with news that the occupation of her planet had been ended, she was certain she would need to return to Naboo to not only take any steps she could to end the conflict, but she felt a responsibility to be on-world with her people and face the same fate they did. Escaping to the Core Worlds during a crisis was not how she believed she should execute her duties as their Queen.

Suddenly, the door to Palpatine's office slid open. Captain Panaka entered, flanked by Obi-Wan Kenobi, Qui-Gon Jinn, and Anakin Skywalker.

"Your highness," offered Qui-Gon. Kenobi bowed, and Anakin smiled half-heartedly.

"Master Jedi," she replied.

"The Council has asked that Obi-Wan and I continue to serve and protect you until such time that the conflict on your planet has subsided," said Jinn.

"That is very generous. Your service is appreciated," she said.

"It is an honor, your majesty," said Obi-Wan.

"I may need to return to Naboo," she said. "I hope your assignment allows you to escort me home."

"It is our duty to ensure your safety wherever you go," said Jinn.

"Excellent," she said, as the door slid open once again, this time revealing Senator Palpatine sporting his broad, classic smile. "Good news, Senator?"

“Your highness,” Palpatine said with a bow. “It is my pleasure to tell you that I have been nominated to succeed Valorum as Supreme Chancellor. A surprise, to be sure, but a welcome one.”

“Congratulations, Senator,” said Amidala flatly. Immediately she wondered if her role in this nomination was orchestrated from the moment she arrived on Coruscant – or even before that. “If it will put an end to the suffering of our people, then I offer my sincerest support and encouragement.”

“If elected,” Palpatine started, “I promise to quickly resolve the conflict on our world and to put an end to corruption in the Senate.”

“Who else has been nominated?” Amidala asked, fighting to not comment on the Senator’s quick and ready adaptation to campaign speak.

“Bail Antilles of Alderaan and Ailee Teem of Malastare,” he replied. “I feel confident our *situation* will generate a strong sympathy vote for us. I will be Chancellor.”

“I admire your confidence,” Amidala said. “However, I fear that by the time you have control of the bureaucrats, Senator, there will be nothing left of our people... our way of life.”

“I fully understand your concerns, your majesty. Unfortunately, the Trade Federation has taken possession of our planet. I’m just glad you are here and safe.”

Her mind was made up by the Senator’s apparent disconnection from the situation at hand. “Senator, you haven’t

seen what I've seen on our planet. You've been here playing politics."

"Your highness, I –"

"This is your arena, Sheev," she said informally. "I must return to mine. I've decided I'm going back to Naboo."

"Going back?" Palpatine asked in disbelief. "But your majesty, be realistic. If you return, they'll force you to sign the treaty, if they don't kill you first."

"I will sign no treaty, Senator," she said. "My fate will be no different than that of our people. Captain Panaka, ready my ship."

"Please, Padme," pleaded Palpatine. "Stay here, where it's safe."

"If I may, your highness," interrupted Qui-Gon. "If you return in your starship, they will blast it out of the sky as soon as you return. Might I suggest another transport?"

"The Jedi is right," said Panaka. "What do you have in mind?"

"I can secure a mid-sized Jedi ship," said Jinn. "We can leave within the hour."

"You are encouraging this madness?" said Palpatine. "I thought the Jedi were wise."

"With the Jedi at my side, Senator, perhaps we'll be able to negotiate an end to this madness," she said.

"You've always been an idealist, my Queen," Palpatine said. "I only hope it isn't your undoing. I cannot force you to remain here, but I do wish you would reconsider."

"I will not, Senator," she said.

“Then I can only wish you the best of luck,” Palpatine said solemnly. He turned to Qui-Gon. “The Trade Federation will try to destroy her.”

“I assure you, I will not let that happen,” Qui-Gon promised.

“Captain, you are coming with us,” said Amidala. “Ric Olie will pilot the shuttle. And I will need Jar Jar as well.”

“I take it you have a plan, your highness?” Jinn asked.

“I do. I’ll tell you on the way,” she said. The Queen paused, looking at young Skywalker. “What will become of Anakin?” asked Amidala.

“He will come with us. I made an obligation to his mother to protect him as well,” said the Jedi Master. Anakin smiled excitedly.

“And just as soon as we arrived, we are off again,” said Obi-Wan. “I’ll secure a shuttle.”



CHAPTER 7

Nute Gunray anxiously watched out the window of Theed Palace. It had been a few days since he had been contacted by Sidious, and the recent arrival of the Zabrak sent by Sidious was making Gunray nervous. While waiting for his next orders, Lord Maul would either pace the palace or meditate in the throne room, and while neither of those activities interfered with the occupation of the city, his very presence was unnerving.

As the Neimoidian stared onto the courtyard, he was interrupted by a battle droid. “Viceroy, you are receiving a communication from Coruscant.” The droid opened its hand and both Darth Sidious and Senator Lott Dodd appeared in hologram.

“Lord Sidious, it is an honor to speak to you again,” said Gunray, hoping he did not sound like he was groveling.

“Is the planet secure?” hissed Sidious.

“Yes, my lord. We have squashed any pockets of resistance we could find. We are in complete control.”

Lott Dodd spoke up: “What about the Gungans?”

“I am afraid I don’t know what you are talking about,” replied the Viceroy.

“While on the Senate floor, Queen Amidala was accompanied by a member of the Gungan species,” said Dodd. “They are a colony of primitives that live below the ocean surface.”

“Primitives should be no concern to us,” boasted Gunray.

“That may be the case, Viceroy,” said Sidious. “But her alliance with the Gungans is an unexpected nuisance.”

“I will send a portion of the droid army out on patrol beyond the city limits,” the Viceroy said. “If there are any out there, we will find them.”

“If you see even one of those vile creatures,” said the Sith Lord. “I want it destroyed.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“My sources also have reason to believe that the Queen is returning to Naboo to negotiate a settlement,” said Lott Dodd.

“Excellent,” responded Gunray. “That will play right into our plans. She is too inexperienced.”

“When her ship arrives, I want you to let it land,” said Palpatine. “She will come to you in the palace. I am sure she is not expecting my apprentice. He will make sure she does not escape this time.”

Gunray swallowed hard. “Yes, of course.”

“Contact me when you have her in custody,” ordered Sidious. “Do not fail me, Viceroy.”



CHAPTER 8

When they left Coruscant, the travelers boarded a nondescript Mu-Class shuttle. Ric Olie quickly picked up the nuanced differences between the J-Type Nubian he was accustomed to flying and the more utilitarian interstellar craft. Anakin sat in the co-pilot's seat beside Olie, fascinated by his every move.

Although it was not fancy or what the Queen was accustomed to traveling in, the craft did have a small mess hall with a round table surrounded by chairs where she, Captain Panaka, and the two Jedi gathered to discuss the strategy they would employ once they landed. Jar Jar rooted through the drawers looking for food, only to come up empty.

“As soon as we land, the Federation will arrest you and force you to sign their treaty,” said Panaka.

“I agree,” said Qui-Gon Jinn. “I’m not sure what you wish to accomplish by this.”

“I will take back what is ours,” she said simply. “Besides, we will not be landing in the capital.”

“There are too few of us,” Panaka pleaded. “Your highness, we have no army.”

“And I can only protect you,” Qui-Gon said. “I cannot fight a war for you.”

“I just need you to get me safely to the Viceroy,” Amidala said.

“What, may I ask, is your plan?” Qui-Gon pressed.

“Jar Jar Binks,” the Queen called. He stopped his fumbling and looked at Padme silently mouthing a response. “I need your help.”

Obi-Wan rolled his eyes while Panaka shifted impatiently in his chair. Qui-Gon simply waited to hear what Amidala had in mind.

“Yousa Highness?” the Gungan said, making his way over to the table.

“I will need you to contact your people,” she said. “I need you to make them aware of the threat they face.”

“They are aware, Your Highness,” said Obi-Wan. “When we met with them, they didn’t seem to care.”

“Upon our visit to Coruscant, I may have increased their risk. I would not be able to live with myself if I did not at least alert them to the new danger.”

Jar Jar brought his hands to his face in worried concern.

“The Gungans are no threat to the Federation, and we don’t have time to seek them out to warn them,” protested Panaka.

Qui-Gon squinted at the Queen for a moment, reading her reaction to Panaka's objection.

"I need you to let them know," continued Amidala. "An invasion of Otoh Gunga may be imminent. Will you do that for me, Jar Jar?" she asked.

"Mesa tryin' Yousa Majesty," he stammered. "But mesa no tinkin' it make-a any difference."

"What is your leader's name?" Amidala asked ashamed she did not know.

"Issa Boss Nass," Binks said.

"Artoo-Detoo," she called, and the droid's power circuits clicked on. Its domed head spun slowly toward the Queen, and it chirped an affirmative reply. "I need to create a message. Jar Jar, I would like you to stand with me."

Queen Amidala pushed herself up from her chair and made her way to an open area in the room in which they were all seated. The Gungan took his place by the Queen's side. "Mesa not knowin' what yousa doin'," he said. "But, um, okeyday."

She nodded at Artoo to begin recording, and something began to whir inside him. The Queen began her message.

"Honorable Boss Nass. My name is Padme Naberie Amidala, and I am the elected ruler of the humans, who live on the surface of our shared world of Naboo. I regret that I have never spoken to you before, but I fear forces beyond our control require us to speak now. Although we have not always agreed, our two civilizations have lived together in peace for a thousand years. As

you are aware, the Trade Federation has invaded our planet and seized control of the settlements on land. I have reason to believe that, through my eagerness to ensure the Gungan representation in the Senate as it relates to the invasion, I may have exposed your civilization to risk.

“I named Jar Jar Binks a senator, and he accompanied me in the Senate when I pleaded our case to the government of the Republic. As a result, the Trade Federation, having taken control of the surface, may now seek to tighten their grip on Naboo and attempt to destroy your great city. There is little I can offer to assist you, but I have an obligation as co-inhabitants of our beautiful planet, to warn you of the danger you may be in. I throw myself on your mercy.”

Queen Amidala dropped to one knee and continued her communication. “I beg your forgiveness for unintentionally exposing your people to harm. While I cannot protect you militarily, I commit to you that I will seek to negotiate an end to this hostile annexation. And when our planet is free, I will work to unite our two great societies.” She paused, bowed her head, and Artoo ended the recording.

The Queen turned to her captain. “I need your holoprojector,” she said. Panaka took a small device from his belt, handed it to her, and she inserted one end of it into the droid. Artoo whistled and ejected the communicator back into her hand after loading her message on it. She stood up and handed it to Jar Jar. “When we land, it is vital that you present this to Boss Nass.”

“But, mesa no allowed backey in Otoh Gunga.”

“When they view this message, you may be hailed as a returning hero,” she said smiling at him. “Thank you, Senator Binks.”

Jedi Master Jinn looked at the Queen and then to the Gungan. “I would like you to follow the Queen’s guidance on this,” said Qui-Gon to the Gungan.

Jar Jar blinked and look back and forth repeatedly at Jinn and Amidala, before finally breathing in deeply. “Mesa your humble servant,” said Binks to the Jedi master. Qui-Gon nodded appreciatively at Jar Jar.

“I am sure there is more to your strategy,” said Qui-Gon turning back to Amidala.

“There is, Master Jedi,” she said authoritatively. “We will land outside the city and send Jar Jar on his way. We will use the tunnel system to enter the palace. Captain Panaka will create a diversion so that you, Obi-Wan, and I can make our way to the Throne Room to capture the Viceroy.”

“And the droid army?” asked Jinn.

“We will run whatever fighters we have left on automated flight systems to attack the droid control ship. We can do that, right Captain?”

“Depending on how many fighters are left, we may be able to send a couple dozen droid piloted fighters into combat. I’d be happier if we had human pilots,” Panaka lamented.

“A well-conceived plan,” said Qui-Gon. “However, there is great risk. Your fighters may not be able to penetrate the shields, and they will be greatly outnumbered. Not to mention that even without the entire droid army, the Viceroy will be well guarded.”

“And there’s an even greater danger,” piped up Obi-Wan. “If the Viceroy escapes, he will return with another, even larger droid army.”

“You promised Senator Palpatine no harm would come to me,” she said with a smile. “Do your part, and I’ll do mine.”



CHAPTER 9

A scream penetrated his mind and pierced the vision that Sifo-Dyas saw, as he meditated in his quarters. When he returned from the Council meeting and began his introspection, he tried to reach out to the boy that was brought before them. Not to contact him, but to find him and evaluate more of what he could see, if anything.

The Jedi Master sat alone atop the tuffet in his empty room. As soon as he closed his eyes, he felt himself pulled metaphysically out of his body. He quickly found and connected with a presence he believed to be young Skywalker. The galaxy spun past him, and a beam of invisible light guided him. It had to be this child. He could almost see Anakin's face. Almost. He was not sure if he remembered its every detail. Sifo saw the boy speeding through time and space, seeing the figure at different ages and in different places. The Master saw him on a desert world, in a metallic fortress, on a moving platform among fire and flames, and at various times wielding a blue blade. The only

constant was the inability to truly see the face of the specter in the Force.

Then his vision dramatically switched to the war he had foreseen at other times. He felt battles on the land of a red skied world erupt, a thousand fighters darting in and out of crowded space combat, and all of it shrouded by a darkness. He saw red saber blades swinging at the vision's protagonist and heard beasts roaring. Everything that swirled around this presence was vicious and aggressive. Rarely, however, did he feel the center of his focus being aggressive itself.

Sifo-Dyas felt himself getting closer to the living Force and reached out to touch it. Then he heard the scream. It was blood curdling, and it came from within the spirit he was focused on. It was loud and yet distant. It was the aural equivalent of the most horrific pain Dyas could imagine. He felt it himself and was snapped out of the meditation.

Dyas sat out of breath and physically exhausted in his room, where he started the mystical journey. Even though he felt his stamina was depleted, he attempted to reconnect. He closed his eyes tight again and physically held out his hand. Suddenly there was a flash of light, then deepest dark, then there was cold. He was surrounded by a dramatic chill that started at his fingertips but quickly enveloped his whole being. The vision did not return, but all he could see and feel was darkness – a void of black. For the first time that he could remember, he was afraid.

His heart began to pound, and he tried to pull himself out of the meditative state, but something had gripped him and would not let him regain consciousness. Although trapped in this swirling ethereal blackness, he was fully aware of his surroundings. Sifo-Dyas could feel the cloak on his back ruffle in the chilled air around him, and he tried to physically feel for his lightsaber on his belt. As he reached down for his blade, an even colder, invisible hand grabbed his, and a voice ripped through the air that only he could hear.

“This is not your battle,” it said. The voice was as dark as the lack of sight he was experiencing. It was clear, but somehow, unable to be heard. “You have failed, Jedi.”

Sifo-Dyas pushed back against the unseen hand. With his vision blackened, he was unable to be sure if there was a physical presence in the room with him or if this ghost traveled on the Force.

He struggled to raise his other arm, and when it got to chest height he blindly pushed through the Force as powerfully as he could muster. The dark, unseeable hand slid away, and with the freedom from restraint, Sifo-Dyas grabbed his lightsaber. Still trapped in the dark, he lit the blade and swung swiftly in front of him. The Jedi Master felt nothing hinder his lightsaber blade while struggling to regain physical sight. He leapt up onto the ground he hoped was in front of him.

“Show yourself!” he shouted. “Is this the Prophecy?”

The darkness began to lessen around him, and light bled through the black, creating a hazy vision of his own room. Once again, the deep mysterious voice filled his mind. “You have seen too much. Now witness this.”

Again, a cold, physical push came at him, this time from behind. He fell forward, and he felt his lightsaber hit something – probably the tuffet – on the way down. Dyas switched it off, as it was pulled from his hand. The light that had begun to improve his sight vanished, and again he was in swirl of inky black.

Suddenly a crystal-clear vision appeared before him: A sea of soldiers in gleaming armor stood at attention across a seemingly endless plain beneath a dark sky. The percussion of an uncountable number of warriors’ foot falls echoed in his mind as they marched in unison as if on display. Sifo-Dyas tried to speak, but his throat was dry and closing.

It felt as though he was staring at the scene for minutes, assessing the size, formation, and any details his mind could collect, but in reality, it was a mere nanosecond, a glimpse at... something. The vision disappeared, replaced again by cold darkness.

Sifo-Dyas felt the oppressive invisible force on his body, pressing him to the ground. The voice hissed in his mind one final time. “You are too late. It has begun...”

Then immediately he was released, the blackness evaporated, and his sight returned. Dyas shook his head and allowed his eyes to adjust to the daylight that was flooding his chamber. His tuffet

was cleaved in half, his lightsaber hilt was several meters away, and the window of his room was blown out. There was shattered glassteel on the ground, and a breeze from the Coruscant afternoon rushed in.

The fear he felt while in his vision did not leave him.



CHAPTER 10

“We’ll come out of hyperspace low and at the northern pole of Naboo,” said Ric Olie to Captain Panaka and the Jedi, who had gathered in the cockpit of the Mu-Class shuttle. “If I remember the configuration of the blockade, that’s our best chance to sneak by. We’ll just have to hope the coordinates in the navi-computer are up to date or, well...”

“Or what?” asked Panaka cautiously.

“Well, let’s just say we won’t know if they weren’t right, because we’ll be vaporized when we hit the planet,” Olie said.

“That’s not what I wanted to hear,” the Captain replied.

“No need to worry,” said Qui-Gon. “The Jedi archives are the most accurate in the galaxy. There isn’t a system we don’t know everything there is to know about.”

“Might I remind you about hubris, Master?” said Obi-Wan with a smirk.

“Thank you, Obi-Wan. I will be mindful.”

“Strap in, boys,” said Olie. “We’ll be planet side in two minutes.”

At the back of the shuttle, Anakin was cleaning Artoo-Detoo. Not because the droid needed it necessarily, but because it kept the boy’s mind occupied. He was feeling guilty for leaving his mother on Tatooine. When the Jedi Council told Master Jinn that he was not going to be trained, he wondered if he left her behind for nothing. He wondered if it was wrong to put himself ahead of her. He tried to take some solace in her constantly telling him that she believed a slave’s life was not for him. What made it worse was that he had no way of returning to her. He was at the mercy of the Jedi custodian who was now taking him into a war zone.

Anakin was also feeling confused and overwhelmed. Padme, the young woman with whom he felt a strange connection, was not just a random person. She had concealed that she was the Queen of an entire people embroiled in a conflict, which involved an invasion by a droid army. Not to mention, he became the first human to win a pod race, earned his freedom, and was whisked away from a backwater world on the Outer Rim to the Capital of the Republic, where he met the Supreme Chancellor himself and was presented to the Jedi Council.

There was an additional thought which swam amongst his anxieties: the Jedi referred to him as “The Chosen One” more than once. There was some prophecy they talked about, a blood test, and the phrase “Born of the Force.” All of these things, he was certain, had to do with the strange abilities his mother had told

him to hide. But most pervasive among his feelings was that he was still very far from home and his mother.

Jar Jar interrupted Anakin's focus, and the boy welcomed another distraction.

"Yousa lookin' sad," said the Gungan.

"Not sad so much, Jar Jar," Skywalker said. "More like uncertain."

"Mesa knowin' dat feeling, Ani. Da Queen asken me to be goin' back home wit a maxi big mission. But mesa not sure mesa be welcome back."

"I don't know a lot about your planet," Anakin said. "But it sure sounds like you've got some big problems."

"Ya. Da bombad machaneeks been doin' da yoomins bad harmin'. Da Queen say she's afraid they goin after da Gungans next."

"That's only part of your problem, Jar Jar. You have to work together, if you're all going to survive this. From what I gather, your people and hers haven't been on good terms for a long time."

"Oh, well, ya. Dere's dat," said Jar Jar smiling.

"Take your jump seats," came Ric Olie's voice over the ship's announcement system. Anakin hopped up and sat on a bench that pulled down from the wall and connected his seat belt. Jar Jar sat beside him and fumbled with a strap until the boy helped him. Artoo-Detoo whistled and rolled to a panel on the floor near the rear entrance, extended an arm from his torso, and he was magnetically sealed to the surface.

Panaka gripped the padded arms of the co-pilots chair tightly. Obi-Wan peered eagerly out the cockpit window, and Qui-Gon closed his eyes and listened to the buzzy hum of the engines. Olie watched the streaky star lines of hyperspace and observed the navicomputer countdown to their arrival. And then, the stars disappeared and directly in front of them was the white polar ice cap of Naboo.

Olie quickly took manual control of the shuttle and guided it lower into the atmosphere, until they were just above the line of icebergs which jutted out of the northernmost ocean on the planet. Master Jinn opened his eyes, smiled, and stood up to retrieve the Queen.

“Her highness wants us to land on the shores of Lake Paonga. We’re going to land about twenty kilometers south of Theed,” said Panaka.

“On it,” said Olie. “Never flown one of these before, but it’s not too bad.”

“I’ll tell the Jedi you approve,” said Obi-Wan.

Within ten minutes, they had jetted south on a very low trajectory and buzzed over the massive lake, which connected the Capital City to the great oceans. After another few minutes, they found a clearing to land the ship. The shuttle folded its wings up on its side and touched down solidly on the surface.

The travelers stood from their seats, and Panaka opened the ship’s gangway with a hiss. The ramp touched the ground, and everyone exited the craft.

Queen Amidala no longer wore her statesman regalia. Instead, she was dressed again in the military garb she wore on Tatooine, but now she had a blaster at her side, which she had found with several others in the storage hold of the shuttle. She handed a blaster to Captain Panaka, as she passed him coming off the ramp. “We’ll need these,” she said. Padme offered a blaster to Qui-Gon.

“We’ll be fine,” he said tapping the lightsaber hilt on his belt.

“Captain,” she called and tossed him a second gun. “Can’t hurt.” He caught the gleaming silver pistol in mid-air and attached it to his belt.

“I thought for certain the Federation would’ve spotted us,” said Obi-Wan to Jinn.

“If they have, we haven’t much time,” Qui-Gon said.

“Mesa ready to be doin’ my part,” said Jar Jar, loping toward the group and addressing Padme.

“Jar Jar, you are extremely brave,” Padme told him. “You will always be welcomed in my court. And I believe that when you deliver my message to Boss Nass, you will be welcomed back to his.”

Binks was unpersuaded. “Mesa hopin’ yousa right,” he said. “No matter what, it is my duty, as Senator, to do da Queen’s bidding and da request of da yoomin who saved mesa life.”

“You will find that duty and honor are often tightly linked,” said Qui-Gon. “You were meant to play a larger role in the galaxy, my friend. I am releasing you from the life debt.”

For a fleeting moment, Binks considered that those words also meant he was free of the obligation to complete the mission for the Queen. Jar Jar's stalked eyes darted around his surroundings as he considered what Qui-Gon had done for him. It was along these shores, albeit much further south, where he first encountered the Jedi who saved his life and the connection was not lost on him.

"Well," Binks said lifting his head high. "Mesa on my way."

"Bye bye, Jar Jar," said Anakin. "Good luck!"

"May the Force be with you," said Qui-Gon.

"Thank you, Senator Binks," offered the Queen. "The Gods smile upon you."

The Gungan nodded, checked the pouch on his pants to ensure he had the datastick with the message, and walked without hesitation into the lake.

"Alright," started Padme. "No time to waste. Let's get going. Captain Panaka, there's an access point to the catacombs somewhere along this shore, isn't there?"

"Yes, your highness. Less than a kilometer north, I believe."

"Then let's get going," Padme said and started her way along the rocky shoreline.

* * * * *

Nute Gunray sat impatiently in the throne room as he had for days. The invasion had met with little or no resistance, and since

they began their occupation, there was relative peace under the martial law in place. Several of his droid troop garrisons had been sent to patrol the perimeter of Theed on the lookout for these Gungan creatures he was warned about, but there was no report back of any engagement. If he was being honest, he was not really sure what would happen next.

The Viceroy had followed the orders of Darth Sidious to the letter. He established the blockade, attempted to eliminate the Jedi, and locked down the planet's surface. When the cloaked man gave him this mission, he promised that it would lead to an improved financial position for the Trade Federation, an elimination of the trade route tax, and further socioeconomic power for his people. There were times over the last several days when the Neimoidian considered that perhaps he should have asked for more in return, if not more clarity in the outcome. But he also realized that he acted out of fear at many points along this deal. The only thing Neimoidians feared more than losing wealth or power was dying. There was an old maxim throughout the galaxy that said, "A Neimoidian would give up everything to keep his credits, but he'd give up his credits to keep his life."

The fact that Sidious had dispatched his apprentice to maintain a presence in the Naboo capital made Gunray realize he was truly a servant of his benefactor. This was no longer a mutually beneficial relationship, it was a full-fledged enslavement. There was no extracting himself from this bargain.

He would either execute it and benefit or die. And the latter was not an option.

Gunray's solitude was splintered when a droid monitoring a computer system spoke up. "Viceroy, a ship has penetrated the blockade. A Mu-Class shuttle."

"Let it land," said Darth Maul. Gunray had almost forgotten he was still in the room.

"I give the orders here," said the Viceroy. Maul glowered at him in response, furrowing his tattooed brow. "Let it land," Gunray conceded.

"Roger roger," said the droid.

"Send a garrison to retrieve them," ordered Nute.

"No," growled Maul. "They will come to us. Let them."

There was an awkward silence in the room.

"Viceroy? What is your order?" buzzed the droid.

Gunray churned inside. He looked at Rune Haako in hopes that he would provide a point of view. Haako said nothing and unperceptively cowered.

"Cancel my order," the Viceroy said finally. "But double my security detail."



CHAPTER 11

“Master Windu?” asked Sifo-Dyas, as he hesitantly approached his fellow Council member in the great Jedi Archives in the Temple. “May I have a word with you?” Dyas had gone looking for the man he had known the longest as a Jedi, in the hope he could confide in him what he saw while in meditation and he found him studying in the library. Mace looked up from the table where he was reading, with a cocked eyebrow at Dyas.

“You may, Master.”

“I don’t know where to begin,” said Dyas, taking the seat across the table from him. “I need to tell you about the vision I had just after the last Council meeting.”

“Master Dyas, we are all well aware of what you’ve seen, and with all that is happening around us, I think it may be time for you to focus on the now and not some ever moving future.”

“When, Master Windu, would you say is a good time, then?” Dyas tried to mask his tone and control the frustration, which had been building up.

“You know you aren’t making any friends on the Council, don’t you?”

“I’m not on the Council to make friends.”

“Listen,” started Mace sternly, but in a hushed whisper. “The Council senses a darkness shrouding everything we do. This unseen veil that has settled on all of us has not gone unnoticed. As a result, it is important that we don’t act irrationally, without facts.”

“Without intent,” said Dyas.

“What are you trying to say, Master?” asked Windu.

“There are two kinds of hope,” Sifo-Dyas started. “There is the kind that assumes there is nothing you can do to impact the outcome of your destiny, but you remain optimistic that it will end well. Then there is the kind that drives you to action.”

“And you are saying the Council, with all of our wisdom, is being too passive.”

“I am,” Dyas admitted. “What could possibly make you think they are responding otherwise?”

Windu’s expression changed from skeptical to fatherly. “Where does that leave you?” he asked.

“It leaves me with no choice but to act. Even as the Council seems unwilling.”

“Sifo, there are too many mysteries,” said Mace dropping the formalities. “The identity of the attacker that Qui-Gon faced. The alleged murder of Hego Demask. The invasion of Naboo. This boy who some among the Council believe to be the Chosen One.”

“And while you and the rest of the Council see these things as mysteries, I see them as proof that what I’ve seen is coming to pass.”

Mace squeezed his eyes shut and drew a deep breath. “If that is so, then soon enough, it will become the evidence that the Council needs to take action.”

“And by then,” said Sifo-Dyas standing up. “I fear it will be too late.”

“Fear is a dangerous emotion for a Jedi, Master Dyas.”

“It is also the source of paralysis on the Council. You are all too proud to admit it. Tell me you didn’t feel fear in the Chamber,” whispered Dyas intensely leaning back into the conversation. “That boy wasn’t afraid, the Council was. Afraid that perhaps I am right. Perhaps the Chosen One was among them and that could only mean that the events of the Prophecy have begun. Maybe some were even afraid that they are too late.”

“You are bordering on heresy, Master,” warned Windu.

“I cannot stand by while what I have seen becomes reality. And I will not be remembered as one of the twelve Masters who let the Jedi fall.”

“These are strong words,” said Windu. “It sounds like you must decide if you wish to continue on the Council. I believe your gift of sight is an important part of this Council, but I believe your impatience in our response is troublesome. I would ask that you consider how you will reconcile that.”

“It weighs upon me every day, Master Windu.”

“Do you wish to tell me what you saw in your latest vision?”
said Windu sympathetically.

“You’ve already shown me it won’t make a difference,”
Master Sifo-Dyas said and strode swiftly out of the Jedi Archives.



CHAPTER 12

Jar Jar faced the Great Gateway to Otoh Gunga and, as he had the entire journey back to the Gungan city, considered swimming away to his place on the shores of Lake Paonga. No one would know. He was not told to report back to the queen, so there was no expectation from the humans, and there was a very good chance he would not be welcomed back inside the plasma bubbled walls of the city. However, the words of Queen Amidala echoed in his mind, that if he did not deliver the message to his people, there was a chance the droid army would find and destroy them. This was something he could not bear, and it was the only motivation he could lean on.

He pushed his way through the plasma and emerged inside the grand entryway to the underwater city. Immediately, he was met by a Gungan patrol on the backs of Kaadu. It was not that long since he had been sent on his way with the Jedi, and while there were thousands of Gungans living Otoh Gunga, Jar Jar was easily recognized by his clothes, his height, and his reputation.

“Jar Jar!” shouted the first security guard. “Yousa no allowed back.”

“Mesa know,” said Binks with a hint of sadness. “But mesa have maxi big mission to give dis to Big Boss Nass!” He held out his hand, and in it was the data projector with a hologram of Queen Amidala already playing.

“Gimme dat,” said the second patrolman, and he took it from Jar Jar’s hand. Even though Jar Jar towered over the average Gungan, his lack of physical coordination made stealing the device simple. Binks panicked.

“No!” he shouted. “Dats mui mui important! Mesa bring dat to Boss Nass!” Like so many times before, he began to stutter and shake. The first guard poked him with his staff.

“Yousa comin’ wit ussen,” said the sentry.

“Yousa take me to see Boss Nass,” said Jar Jar.

“Oh, wesa takin’ yousa to him,” said the Gungan guard. “And itsa gone be yousa last visit.” The other guard with him laughed heartily, and they pressed him along.

When they arrived at the bubble where Boss Nass was located, they entered and pushed Binks into the center of the chamber. Jar Jar had been in this room twice before, and both times he was banished from Otoh Gunga. Boss Nass looked down at Jar Jar and clicked his tounge in admonishment. “Yousa very, very stupid Jar Jar. Yousa pushin’ my limits too far.”

“Boss Nass, sir,” stammered Jar Jar. “Mesa on a mission for da queen of da yoomins.”

The guards and Boss Nass broke out in laughter. “A mission?” said the guard. “For da queen of da yoomins? Yousa be more stupid dan even wesa tink.”

“It’s true. Mesa know mesa not be coming back here. But da queen is scared dat bombad machaneeks be coming to get us. Shesa sendin you a message.” Jar Jar looked toward the sentry who took the projector. “Show him!”

“Show him what?” laughed the guard.

“Da ting dat mesa bringin’ from da surface.”

The guard looked at Boss Nass and gestured that he thought Jar Jar was crazy. “Mesa no knowin’ what yousa talking about.”

Jar Jar got angry. He began to shake.

The second guard started laughing. “Awe, Jar Jar. Issa yousa gone get mad?”

Boss Nass laughed. “Hesa knowin’ better. Hesa in no position to be mad.”

“Yousa havin’ da ting mesa bringin’ from da queen!” shouted Binks, with an unabridged passion that he never knew he had. “Now yousa givin’ it to me!”

The guards continued to snigger and point at Binks. Suddenly, Jar Jar ran toward the guard that held the device. He was still mounted on his Kaadu, but Jar Jar leapt as he reached him, diving, and tackling the guard off his mount. Boss Nass stopped laughing and recoiled, while the other guard watched in stunned disbelief.

Jar Jar straddled the guard and pinned his arms to the ground. “Yousa give it to me!”

“Da pouch, da pouch!” said the guard terrified. Jar Jar used his brute strength and size to pull the guard’s two arms together over his head and held him down with one hand. With the other, Jar Jar fished inside a pouch on the guard’s belt and found the small metallic portable holoprojector.

“Yousa either very brave or more stupid dan wesa tink,” said Boss Nass.

“Mesa not stupid,” said Binks standing up with the device in hand. “Wesa warrior. Wesa proud people and da queen tinks wesa in danger. Mesa no comin here if mesa not tinkin maybe shesa right.”

“Bring it to me,” said Nass.

“Mesa seen what dees machineek do,” said Binks. “Deysa took da yoomin city wit ease.”

“Wesa not yoomins,” said Boss Nass, as Binks turned over the holoprojector.

Boss Nass tapped a button and the message from Amidala began to project. He sat in silence and let it play while he stared at it thoughtfully. He remained silent for a few moments after the hologram finished.

“So,” Nass started, looking at Jar Jar. “Yousa senator now?”

Binks smiled sheepishly and nodded his head. Boss Nass laughed dismissively.

“Shesa throwin’ herself on mesa mercy?”

“Dats what shesa said,” replied Binks.

“Yousa tinkin’ da yoomins in trouble?”

“Mesa knowin’ dey are, Big Boss Nass. Mesa seen it wit my eyes.”

Nass brought his burly hand to his chin. “Wesa no be beaten by machineek. Mesa not yet sure what wesa doin’ bout dis. In da meantime, Binks,” he paused. “Yousa stayin’ here until mesa decide.”



CHAPTER 13

Artoo-Detoo navigated the forest floor as best as a three-wheeled astromech droid could and kept up with its human keepers. The journey had taken many hours, and they were slowly making their way to what would be an entryway to a series of catacombs, which led to and from the Royal Palace. Panaka and Ric Olie guided the way, with Padme and Anakin followed closely by the two Jedi.

“The access point is just up here, I think,” called the Captain, gesturing toward a rock outcropping at the top of a small hill.

“What will happen to Jar Jar?” asked Anakin.

“I don’t know,” said Padme. “But my only hope is that he can deliver the message, and it does its job.”

Falling slightly behind, Obi-Wan turned to Qui-Gon. “Do you think the Queen’s plan will work?”

“It seems risky, but I sense there is more reason for us to be here than just to free her people.”

“I don’t understand,” Kenobi said. “That seems like quite enough.”

“The Force has put us on a path, Obi-Wan. We must trust where it takes us.”

“Let it control our actions?” he asked.

“Partially, but remember you are in command. One can put their faith in the Force, but a Jedi is not its servant. It is a delicate circle.”

Obi-Wan nodded, and they continued for a moment in silence, before the younger Jedi spoke up again. “I’m sorry for my behavior, Master. It was not my place to disagree with you about the boy.”

“Belief in one’s convictions, I believe, is a good trait for a Jedi to have,” said Jinn.

“And I am grateful that you think I am ready for the Trials.”

“My young apprentice, I believe you’ve already begun them,” Qui-Gon said.

“Master?”

“Teamwork, isolation, fear, anger, focus, instinct, forgiveness, and protection,” said Jinn. “The eight steps of the Trials. You will be judged on how you have faced these things. Be mindful of the trials of fear and anger. You already have proven yourself in the others.”

“Thank you, Master.” While Kenobi was honored by his master’s confidence in him, there was a certain foreboding in his warning.

“You’ve been a good apprentice, Obi-Wan, and you are a much wiser man than I,” continued Jinn. “I foresee you will become a great Jedi Knight.”

Tired from their longer-than-expected-journey, the group trudged to the top of the hill. At the pinnacle, there sat the ruins of an ancient civilization. Before the humans had arrived, the Gungans maintained cities both under the water and on land. These collapsed stone remains were from an ancient temple to their gods.

Artoo beeped, whistled, and rolled quickly past the humans and over to an enormous carved stone Gungan head that had fallen sideways on the ground. Covered in moss, it was several meters in length and stared lifelessly across the horizon. The droid came to a stop at the side of the sculpture, extended a metallic arm from its torso, and connected to a data port covered in vines and overgrown vegetation. The end of the arm found the socket and spun left, then right, then left again. Artoo warbled, then pulled the connection out. Suddenly, a door concealed perfectly in the stone slid open at the base of the neck of the fallen stone Gungan. The door was only a meter and a half high, and it clearly led down below the surface.

“I’m sorry, your highness,” said Panaka. “I’m afraid there really is no graceful way to get in.”

“I’m not worried,” said Padme, walking past him and crawling into the entry. Panaka and Obi-Wan came in right

behind. Anakin was about to climb in when Qui-Gon grabbed his shoulder.

“Master, Qui-Gon?” said the boy.

“I need you to get Artoo into the tunnel,” he said.

“How?”

The droid stood perpendicular to the ground and then rocked back and forth until it fell forward, onto the forest floor with an electronic whimper. “Anakin, get him in,” ordered Jinn.

“But he’s too heavy,” said Skywalker.

“Is he?” said Qui-Gon, as he bent down and crawled into the tunnel himself.

Anakin stood and assessed the situation alone in the forest with a fallen droid. First, he bent down and pushed the droid as hard as he could, but with its weight and the rocky surface, the only thing that happened was he scraped the paint off a small section on the side of Artoo, while it whistled angrily at him.

“C’mon, Artoo,” he said. “Give me some help.”

The droid replied with some irritated beeps.

He realized what he had to do. Anakin stood and lined up with the droid between him and the open stone door. Out of habit, he looked carefully around to make sure he was alone. Closing his eyes, the boy held up his right hand and allowed the tingling sensation, which he could sometimes muster, to flow through him. He felt the warmth begin in his shoulders and flow down his arms, and he could almost see the energy emanate through his extended hand. Artoo then lifted a few inches off the ground. It

chirped cautiously and rolled its domed head to point its single black “eye” toward the child. Anakin then lifted his left arm and carefully used the energy to push Artoo, dome first, into the opening effortlessly. When the Artoo unit was completely inside, he gently rotated the robot so that its domed head was upward and placed it with wheels on the ground. The droid let out a gleeful whistle followed by a cautious bleep.

Anakin was tired, but he quickly crawled into the doorway. What he saw when he entered was an opening into a rock walled tunnel that was dimly lit with inset fixtures at seemingly random intervals down the ceiling. Olie, Panaka, Padme, and Obi-Wan had started their way down the passage, but Qui-Gon Jinn was waiting for Anakin.

“Impressive,” said Qui-Gon to young Skywalker. “Most impressive.”

Anakin shrugged it off. Jinn put an arm around him, and they caught up to the group, walking cautiously down the tunnel.

“I sense a something,” said Obi-Wan.

“I do, too,” said Jinn, and he jogged to the front of the group. Both Jedi pulled their lightsaber hilts from their belts, but did not ignite them. The sound of Artoo’s servo motors echoed off the stone walls, and they heard the sound of footsteps around the bend. “We wait for them,” Jinn advised.

Panaka and Padme raised their blaster pistols and waited. They were looking down the tunnel, and fifteen meters ahead of

them was a sharp bend to the left. Their eyes were fixed on the turn.

“Who’s there?” called an unseen female human voice.

Qui-Gon held up his hand to the group he was there to protect, indicating that they should not reply.

“We hear you!” the woman said again. Her head peered around the corner. Panaka recognized the helmet she wore as a member of the Royal Guard. The captain could not resist.

“It’s me!” Panaka shouted. “Captain Quarsh Panaka of the Queen’s service.”

The woman who called to them, and five other members of her contingent, came out from around the corner tentatively, with blasters drawn.

“We are glad to have found you,” Panaka said.

“How do we know who you are?” the woman who led them asked.

“You have to trust me,” he said.

“We don’t have to trust anyone,” she replied.

“We can trust him,” said one of the woman’s armed party. A teenaged boy lowered his blaster and walked toward Panaka. “That is Captain Panaka.”

“Gregar?” asked Panaka. “Is that you?”

“It is, uncle,” said the boy. There was a palpable sense of relief among both groups as Panaka hugged the young man.

“Your highness,” said Captain Panaka. “May I introduce my nephew, Gregar Typho.”

“A pleasure to meet you,” Padme said. “I didn’t know your nephew was in the Royal Guard.”

“I didn’t either,” he said looking hard at Gregar.

“He and about thirty others have joined our resistance,” said the woman, who led the group. “There’s only a handful of us putting together some rebellion to the robot army. I am Oti Trinta.” Trinta took a reverent knee, and the other five, including Typho, did the same.

“You are all very brave,” said Padme. “And we couldn’t be happier to have found you. These are Jedi Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan Kenobi. My personal pilot, Ric Olie, and our new friend, Anakin Skywalker.” Artoo beeped indignantly at not being introduced.

“It is an honor to meet you,” said Trinta standing once again. She was battle hardened. All of her men looked like they had not slept for days, but their perseverance was almost physically evident.

“Tell us more about this resistance group,” said Jinn.

“Most of us are from the volunteer security force. Twelve of us are pilots, and the rest are brave civilians fighting for what’s right,” offered Trinta. “Like your nephew, Captain.” She smiled.

“If you are willing to join us,” said Padme. “We could use you. We are headed back to the Palace to reclaim our city.”

“With all due respect, that’s very ambitious, Your Highness,” Oti Trinta said. “There are several hundred droids in the palace alone. Never mind the thousands on the streets.”

“We have two Jedi,” said Padme, glancing at Obi-Wan, who returned a smile. “Thirty resistance fighters, an obligation to our people, and a plan. Battles have been won with less.”

“We are at your service, of course, my Queen,” said Trinta.

“How far are we from the palace from here?” asked Qui-Gon.

“It will take the better part of a day to get to the exit from here. This particular tunnel will take us to the foot of the Royal Hangar,” answered Typho.

“That will work to our advantage,” said the Queen. “We’ve walked up from the shores of Paonga. Might I suggest we rest before we make our way to the Palace?”

“Agreed,” said Panaka. “We will leave just before dawn. Do you have any provisions?”

“Half a kilometer in, there are some storage rooms we’ve been using as barracks, and what few supplies we have are in there, too,” Trinta relayed. “Let’s head there and hole up for the night.”

“Thank you,” said the Queen.

“And maybe then you can tell us what the rest of this plan is,” Trinta said.



CHAPTER 14

The Senate was in an uproar. Almost every seat was filled as no one wanted to miss their opportunity to be a part of this unprecedented event. Every system wanted to ensure they cast a vote elect a new Supreme Chancellor. Each of the three candidates were scheduled to make their case to be selected as the next Chancellor. Bail Antilles of Alderaan and Sheev Palpatine of Naboo had just completed their campaign speeches and Ainlee Teem of Malastare pressed the appropriate buttons on his hovercraft to float into the center of dome.

“Honorable delegates,” he began. He was a member of the Gran race, easily recognized for their three stalked eyes, their triangular ears and their muzzle shaped nose and mouth. “The sovereign system of Malastare is grateful that I have been nominated as a candidate for Supreme Chancellor. Our world plays a critical role in the delicate socioeconomic balance of the Republic. Our fuel resources are vast, and our position along the trade routes is convenient, to say the least. If I were to ascend to

the role of Supreme Chancellor, it would not just benefit the beings who make up our world, but it would put us in a unique position, as it relates to the current Trade Federation taxation dispute. Very few worlds are impacted as much as ours is by the command the Federation has on the hyperspace shipping routes.”

Murmurs rippled across the delegation, some in agreement while others were dissenting.

“It is for this reason,” Ainlee continued. “That I am withdrawing my candidacy from consideration.” Voices erupted around the arena. Thousands of beings gasped, cheered, booed and shouted at the revelation.

“Order!” shouted Mas Amedda, Chancellor Valorum seated by his side. “Let the Senator from Malastare conclude his remarks!”

“Thank you,” Teem said. “It is not without some hesitation that I have come to this decision. However, I ask that, if you were planning to cast your vote for me...” he paused. “I urge you to cast it for Senator Palpatine from Naboo.” Again, disorder erupted.

Palpatine stood up in his hovercraft and smiled his famous smile. He nodded toward Ainlee Teem and waved regally to the crowd. Bail Antilles stood up furiously at his bench.

“It is unconscionable for the Senator from Malastare to endorse a candidate in this way, in this forum,” called Antilles.

“It is not illegal,” said Amedda.

“This is outrageous!” called Lott Dodd.

“Let the record show that Ainlee Teem is to be removed from the ballot,” called Amedda.

On all the screens in all the hoverpods, Ainlee Teem’s name disappeared. There were only two choices to vote for now.

Chants of “Vote now!” began in the great chamber until all but a few delegates joined in.

“The Senate will now take a vote,” called Amedda. “You will have eighteen minutes to place your vote on the screen in front of you. Take the appropriate time, as once your ballot has been cast, it cannot be changed. One vote per system as is the custom!” Below the two names on the ballot, a countdown timer began. “We will adjourn for twenty minutes, and when we return, the results shall be shared.”

Palpatine tapped his screen, cast a vote for himself, and then turned to wait in his office. This would be a long twenty minutes, he presumed.

To his surprise, when he entered his senate apartment, there was someone standing behind his desk looking out the full-wall window at the speeder traffic that zoomed by. Against the light of the day, the cloaked figure seemed dark and mysterious.

“I’m leaving the Council, Senator,” said Sifo-Dyas turning his attention from the window to Palpatine.

“It is a pleasure to see you, Master Dyas. That is a very important decision, Master Jedi,” said Palpatine. “And while I would be happy to continue this discussion, you must certainly be

aware that I am awaiting the results of an election that could have me named the new Supreme Chancellor.”

“I am very aware of it,” Dyas said. “I’ve come to wish you well and to say goodbye. I am not sure what will happen when I resign my position. You have been a close advisor, and dare I say, a friend.”

“I am honored,” said Palpatine. “And I can’t thank you enough for your confidence as well as assistance during this unspeakable invasion of my home.”

“I only wish it was of more help,” said the Jedi.

“It has been more impactful than you know,” said Palpatine. “With that in mind, might I suggest you wait to resign from the Council until we hear the results of the election.”

“I don’t see a connection, Senator.”

“I trust you didn’t hear my campaign speech,” said Palpatine, with a sly smile. “I committed to ‘better protection’ of worlds that cannot defend themselves. In a more powerful position, I may need an advocate for such things on the Jedi Council.”

“I appreciate what you are saying, Senator,” said Dyas, feeling slightly uncomfortable in the political situation he was suddenly thrust into. “However, I’m not sure I – ”

“Let’s not discuss it now,” said Palpatine. “I haven’t even been elected ... yet. Think of it as one last favor to me. Don’t make any rash decisions until we can speak again.”

“I will not promise you that, Senator. But I will consider it.”

“That’s all I can ask, Master Jedi.” A bell rang calling all the delegates back into the Senate Chamber. “Well, here we go.”

“May the Force be with you, Senator,” said Sifo-Dyas.

“Thank you,” Palpatine said, as he walked back through the doorway and to his Senate hoverpod.

The chamber filled up quickly. Many senators had not left their pods, while others stepped away only for a moment.

“Honorable delegates,” started Mas Amedda. “The results of the election have been tabulated. Of the one thousand and twenty-four systems, one thousand and twenty have cast votes. The Senate of the Galactic Republic has selected a new Supreme Chancellor by a margin of eight hundred and four to two hundred sixteen. This is a clear majority vote for Senator Sheev Palpatine of the Naboo System!”

Cheers filled the Chamber, with a smattering of boos and hisses. Lott Dodd of the Trade Federation separated his hovercraft from the wall and floated toward the center of the arena.

“This is unfair. The process has been disrupted,” he shouted. But no one responded or replied. His pleas were drowned out by shouts of support as Chancellor Palpatine’s hoverpod glided toward the middle of the Galactic Senate Chamber.



CHAPTER 15

The Great Naboo Ocean lined the eastern shore of Theed, the Capital City. On the south side of the city was an enormous rolling hill of flowing green grass. The Royal hangar was on the western side of the southernmost walls of the city and looked out over the Green Hill. Somewhere, off the southwestern edge of Theed, a door slid open from the ground and out of it peered a member of the Naboo Royal Security Force.

“We’re clear,” called Oti Trinta. “Let’s go.”

Over thirty resistance members, bolstered by Captain Panaka and Ric Olie, two Jedi, a young boy, a droid and a queen, made their way out of a hole in the ground that the door created and stayed as low as they could in the tall grass.

“We will make our way to the hangar,” said Panaka. “All of your pilots need to jump into fighters, and we’ll put all that remain on droid control. We need to take out the droid control ship orbiting the planet, if we are going to keep the city after we capture the Viceroy.”

“It won’t be easy,” said Olie.

“From there, we take the rest of troops and the Jedi with us to the Throne Room,” said Padme.

“If we even get close to the Viceroy, we’re going to have to face the entire droid army,” said Trinta.

“We have no other options,” said Padme. “That is why the pilots cannot fail.”

The battalion of Naboo resistance fighters crawled across the ground until they made it to the nearest city wall.

“Feels like I’ve been here before,” said Obi-Wan to Qui-Gon.

With their backs pressed hard against the fortification that lined Theed, they inched toward the hangar bay opening. Gregar Typho was at the front of the line and peered around the corner.

“Hey,” said Typho pointing toward the other side of the city walls. “It looks like they’re leaving.”

Padme, Trinta, and Qui-Gon looked around the corner to see what Typho was referencing. Thousands of battle droids marched with blaster rifles held across their chests and in neat order out of the city, in the direction of the Green Hill through the same archway that the Jedi had rescued the Queen days before.

“Where are they going?” asked Padme.

“Are they abandoning the city?” Trinta probed.

“Not likely,” said Jinn. “There’s a few tanks with them as well. Looks like they are on the offensive.”

“Well, now’s our chance,” Padme said.

The group broke toward the open hangar.

“I sense something, Master,” said Obi-Wan.

“I feel it too, Obi-Wan.”

The Queen signaled to the troops to follow her, and they made their way single file into the hangar bay. They were greeted by a dozen battle droids. Instantly, the resistance fighters opened fire. Once the humans committed to the battle, four Droidekas rolled in and unfolded their legs, then fired up their shields and began to shoot at the group. Two of the militia volunteers were struck by laser fire and killed instantly.

Jinn and Kenobi ignited their lightsabers and began deflecting laser bolts from the destroyer droids to protect the Queen and the others. Qui-Gon turned to Anakin. “Find cover and stay safe. Take Artoo with you. Stay together.”

Anakin and the droid made their way to the side of the hangar bay near some of the fighters.

The last of the battle droids was picked off, but the Droidekas kept the Jedi occupied.

“Pilots, you know what to do,” said Trinta. Avoiding laser blasts from the Droidekas, Ric Olie and the twelve pilots ran to the closest ships, climbed the ladders to the cockpits, and threw on the helmets that sat in the seats. Panaka ran to a panel on the wall and ordered droids to take their position with the other half dozen fighters. Astromech droids – all similar in shape, but different in color from Artoo-Detoo – rolled out of a corner door and aligned themselves under both the piloted and unmanned ships. When they rolled below a fighter, they were sucked up into

it and automatically connected to the navicomputer. Their domed heads stuck up from a hole carved into the swooping design of the N1. All twelve ships fired up their engines and zipped out of the bay. As soon as they were clear, another dozen fighters scrolled down the wall from above on a conveyor system.

“Can we send them up too?” asked Padme.

“If we have enough droids,” replied Panaka, while he tapped a second button. Eight more astromechs trundled toward the nearest fighters, aligned themselves below them and were swept up into their ships. Again, they swooped out of the hangar on their way to join the rest of the fighters, leaving four droid-less ships on the hangar bay floor.

“Better than nothing,” said Padme.

“Not by much,” mumbled Panaka.

Anakin watched as the destroyer droids kept his Jedi friends occupied, making them essentially human shields. “Looks like a standoff,” he said to Artoo, who swiveled around the boy. “I’ve got an idea.”

Anakin climbed up a ladder and into an empty N1, and Artoo whistled a warning, rolling quickly toward him. When the robot got close to the ship that Anakin had entered, it identified Artoo’s signal and began to draw the astromech toward it. Artoo beeped in complaint. Within moments, the N1 had locked onto Artoo and sucked the robot up into the ship and began the flight preparation sequence.

“Anakin! What are you doing?” shouted Qui-Gon.

Artoo twittered. “He told me to stay safe,” Anakin told the droid. “This seems safer than any other place in here.” The fighter whirred to life, and Anakin pressed some random buttons on the dash in front of him. One button released the flight yoke which housed a trigger. Anakin compressed it with his thumb, and blue blasts of laser fire came from the wings. He heard the engines roar to life from the back of the fighter. Again, Artoo beeped a warning.

“I don’t know, Artoo. See if you can make it so we can turn toward the droids.”

Artoo replied with a bleep and a whistle, and the ship began to hover off its gear. Anakin twisted the yoke and was soon facing the Droidekas. Again, he pulled the trigger, and one by one, he blasted them into pieces. The fighter, however, continued on autopilot, taking Anakin and Artoo unwittingly into the atmosphere.

“Was Anakin in there?” asked Obi-Wan.

“He’ll be fine,” said Qui-Gon. Kenobi shook his head, unsure if his master was saying that to assure his apprentice or himself.

“I can fly a fighter and cover him,” offered Obi-Wan.

“I’m going to need you here,” said Jinn. “The Force is with him.”

With the droid threat eliminated, the Queen reassembled the volunteers. “We’ll take the back entry to the throne room,” she said. “This way.” The company of resistance fighters jogged in behind Queen Amidala and headed toward a set of blast doors on

the back wall of the hangar. As they reached them, they slid open and standing in the center of the opening was a hooded figure dressed in black from head to toe. His yellow eyes practically glowed as he glared at the group.

“We’ll handle this,” said Qui-Gon from the back of the crowd, instantly recognizing the ominous presence as the Sith he fought on the desert world.

“We’ll take the long way,” said Amidala leading the garrison to the opposite corner of the hangar. To everyone’s surprise, the figure did not make a move against her. He let her head off without any attempt to keep her from leaving.

Darth Maul pushed the hood off his head exposing his yellow horns. Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan pulled off their outer brown robes and dropped them to the ground, as the Sith pulled his lightsaber hilt from his belt. Maul held it horizontally in front of him, and red blades extended from either side.

Kenobi’s blue blade flared to life, followed by Jinn’s in green. Maul swirled his lightsaber, and Obi-Wan made the first move.



CHAPTER 16

Jar Jar was handed a suit of Gungan armor that fit him too snugly, a helmet that was a little wobbly on his head, and a weapon he had never fired. He was conscripted into the Gungan army and about to embark on his first mission.

General Ceel was commanded by Boss Nass to lead the Gungan army to the bayside, just below the great hill that flanked the human city of Theed. Legend held that this was the site of the famous meeting between the humans and the Gungans a thousand years ago, which led to the tenuous coexistence they shared in the present day. From there, the General and Boss decided to take the high ground outside the city and draw the Trade Federation out. They realized they would have a better chance to defeat the invasion force, if they did it on open land. In the human city, the droids would have an advantage. If the Gungans waited for the droid armies to find them underwater, they would risk too much collateral damage to Otoh Gunga. They placed their bets on

outnumbering them on an open battlefield and would invite the invaders into a fight by presenting themselves in plain sight.

Three thousand Gungan warriors surfaced from the water at the base of the mountain known to the humans as Theed. They marched with plasma-based weapons in hand and without hesitation to the top of the rocky side, emerging on the top of the Green Hill. All of their weapons were ancient technology from a simpler time. Some Gungans rode the backs of Kaadu while some drove enormous Fambaa, four-legged prehistoric monstrosities that carried shield-generating equipment on their backs. There were rustic catapults pulled by beasts of burden, accompanied by wagonloads of weaponized plasma balls to be hurled at enemies.

As they reached the peak of the Green Hill, Ceel held up his hand to call his army to a halt. He fearlessly walked along the front line of the troops and arranged them strategically. The four shield generators were interspersed along the line, so they could protect the entire army as they stood waiting for what would come next.

“Starten up da shields!” he shouted. The same plasma mechanics that went into creating the bubbles inside Otoh Gunga were applied to the battle shields. One Fambaa had a plasma cannon on its back while a second carried an array generator. The canon fired a stream of plasma and the array dispersed it overhead, creating an umbrella-like plasma dome, which stretched out in a twenty-five-meter radius from above the Gungan forces to the ground. The other three sets of Fambaa did

the same, so that the entire army was under the protection of plasma and no laser fire could penetrate the forcefield. “Here come da machineek!”

From their vantage point at the top of the hill, the Gungans watched the army of white battle droids begin their egress from inside the city. They watched as droids formed their tidy groups and marched in an orderly mechanical fashion through the archway and toward the hill. Several robot fighter ships swooped overhead and opened fire, only to have the laser bolts absorbed by the plasma shield. The ships took a second pass to no avail and then continued on into space above them.

“Now wesa waitin’” said General Ceel.

* * * * *

Nute Gunray sat uneasily in his throne, as the multi-legged platform it was on walked around the room. Rune Haako stared out the palace window, watching as battle droids continued to group together and march out of the city.

“Viceroy, our initial count is three thousand one hundred and eighteen Gungans,” said a droid, who was monitoring computer equipment on the side of the throne room. “They appear to have sixteen large beasts carrying machinery and several other primitive weapons.”

“How many droids do we have in the city?” asked Gunray.

“Four thousand two hundred twenty-six.”

“Send thirty-five hundred total troops and all of our tanks,” the Viceroy ordered. “Reposition battalions in the camps to keep the prisoners.”

“Our battle algorithm has already responded, and we have begun our march on the enemy.”

“Are you telling me we don’t even control the droid army?” asked Haako, astonished.

“You may override certain commands,” replied the droid.

“I want five hundred battle droids in the palace protecting me,” ordered Gunray.

“Negative,” came the buzzy reply. “I am authorized to maintain a maximum of one hundred droids on security detail.”

“I insist,” shouted Gunray.

“That does not compute,” said the droid, as the irritating personality circuit kicked in. “I am authorizing one hundred droids at stations around the throne room.”

“Prepare my shuttle for emergency evacuation, if needed,” responded Gunray.

“Affirmative. Droid-controlled shuttle is prepared. In the event that evacuation criteria are met, your shuttle will be available for flight.”

“Unbelievable,” said Haako. “This deal is getting worse all the time.”



CHAPTER 17

In the shadow of the Jedi Temple on the hidden surface of Coruscant, and far below the thousands of levels of buildings and structures that make up its surface, lay a squat pyramidal structure. Darth Sidious's shuttle, navigated by a black, shiny modified protocol droid, worked its way down nearly seven kilometers of platforms, through lines of shuttle cross-traffic that became increasingly sparse as the level numbers decreased, and touched down on the rust-colored soil next to the building.

The shuttle door yawned open, and Darth Sidious, Lord of the Sith, walked slowly down the plank. The air this close to the surface was cold and tasted of metal. Nothing moved in the still air, and the only light came from lamps on the shuttle. Sidious approached the building and found the entrance. With a wave of his hand and drawing upon the Force, he slid the door open and entered slowly.

Dimly lit, the building was one square room. A fire burned in a round stone hearth at the center of the chamber, creating dancing shadows on the walls. Shelves lined the perimeter, which held artifacts of Sith history. Crystals, pyramid-shaped holocrons, lightsaber hilts, written texts, and masks from bygone Sith Lords cluttered the mantles in disheveled fashion. Someone had been here recently and had rifled through the relics.

Darth Sidious and his master, Darth Plagueis, had built this makeshift Sith Temple several years before. It was a place of which only Sidious and his master were aware, and it was created as a sacred location for them to meet, train and, more importantly, increase the intensity of a Sith presence on Coruscant. Ideally, this would disrupt the pure use of the Force in the Jedi Temple that existed above them. It was insignificant enough to not directly expose the Sith, but it harvested enough dark energy to provide interference and perhaps hide their existence.

Something moved in the corner of his eye, as Sidious tried to identify if any of the items on the shelves had been taken or damaged. In a corner of the square room, where the light had not been able to touch, a shadow moved weakly on its own. Then a thin voice sliced through the air.

“Lord Sidious,” it whispered. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

The Sith Lord turned his full attention to the darkened corner and reached out through the Force to identify it. “Lord Plagueis?”

A cough was followed by a feeble laugh from the area the voice had emanated. “It is,” it said.

Sidious grabbed the nearest lightsaber from the shelf to his right. If his memory served, he believed it once belonged Darth Tenebrous, his master's master. Sidious pressed the ignition and a crimson beam emitted from the hilt, shedding an eerie red cast toward the corner where he heard the voice. What he saw was more horrific than he had imagined.

Darth Plagueis was in a pile on the floor. His head was seated in a metallic collar connected with screws to his torso. His eyes, normally deep set, were drawn even more concave into his skull and were covered in a milky glaze. His arms and legs were strewn next to his torso that was still torn in two. Sinewy shreds of skin and exposed inner organs glistened in the lightsaber glow, barely connecting the halves of his body. The Muun looked like a broken child's doll, thrown carelessly into a toy chest.

"You're alive, my Master," said Sidious taking a knee in reverence, laying the lit saber on the ground next to him.

"Barely," said Plagueis. "I have trouble maintaining consciousness." His eyelids drooped, and he seemed to pass out and into sleep. Sidious heard a clatter in his master's throat indicating life, if not cognizance. As he watched, Plagueis's eyes flickered open again.

"I am disappointed in you, Lord Sidious," the Muun hissed and continued, as if he had not lost consciousness moments before. "Not because you tried to kill me. But because your apprentice failed. Had you been a better teacher, I would not still

be here. You have neglected your obligation to impart all your knowledge on him.”

Sidious smiled and stood up. “But that is where you have failed, my Master,” he said. “You have shared all you know with me, and now I have no further use for you.” Plagueis faded and then, seconds later, returned to consciousness again.

When he awoke, Plagueis coughed as Sidious subtly used the Force to press on the Muun’s throat.

“Palpatine has ascended to Supreme Chancellor, and the Child of the Force has been discovered. Everything is proceeding as I have foreseen. The time of the Prophecy is upon us,” said Sidious.

Darth Plagueis closed his eyes again and fell into a deeper sleep, coerced into slumber through an unseen power pressing on his weakened, exposed lungs.

“Now, my old Master,” cooed Sidious. “You will die.”

The Sith Lord jutted his hands out in front of him and angrily expelled blue lightning from his fingertips, drawn from the dark Force that surrounded him. The electric waves engulfed Plagueis’s body, and it convulsed involuntarily as the shockwaves coursed across him. Sidious’s eyes widened, and a grin engulfed his face, as he continued to pour more power out of his hands and into the defiled body of his master. Sparks crackled across Plagueis’s flesh, and small areas began to spark into tiny fires.

The Muun was able to push open his eyes and stared in horror at his apprentice, as lightning crackled across his face. Smoke began to expel from his mouth and the open wounds and gaps in his body. Sidious cackled and continued to dispatch blue lightning mercilessly onto the Muun, even as the Sith Master's face peeled away from his skull. Plagueis's exposed organs popped grotesquely and burst into flame. Plagueis tried to scream, but there was no air to rattle across his burning vocal cords. Within another moment, what was left of his entire being was fully engulfed in fire.

At last, with one final discharge, Sidious ended the attack. He watched for several minutes as the flames grew and receded, leaving only ash, bones, and the metal collar that had been attached to the Sith Lord from Muunilist.

“Now, you are but a Sith relic, Lord Plagueis,” said Sidious. “Your bones will be all you will be remembered by.”

Sidious waited for the flames to burn out completely before unceremoniously kicking the fractured and charred remains of his former master deeper into the unlit corner of the crude Sith temple.



CHAPTER 18

Obi-Wan Kenobi harnessed the Force and leapt over the black-robed attacker so that he was behind him and Qui-Gon Jinn was in front. The double-bladed lightsaber that Darth Maul wielded, coupled with his intense connection with the Force, allowed the Sith to defend both sides at once. As Obi-Wan chopped downward, Maul raised an end of his crimson saber to block. As Qui-Gon swung forward, the Sith knocked the blade away.

Maul rotated within the battle and worked an angle so that he was able to get both Jedi to follow and stand before him. Their attacks came swiftly, and the Sith waited for an opportunity to switch from defending to attacking. Kenobi slashed down to Maul's left, while he sensed Qui-Gon lifting his blade to double the offensive. Maul jumped into the air and was able to land a kick to Jinn's face, pushing him off the attack. The older Jedi stumbled backward to the hard floor, and as he did so, the Sith walked deeper into the palace.

Kenobi followed and pressed the attack, while Maul patiently maintained the defensive posture, continuing his path back toward another large double door. While Kenobi advanced, Maul pointed a free hand at the controls to the doors, and they slid open revealing a large entryway to a large plasma refinery at the far side of the palace.

During the time since he arrived at the Royal Palace, Maul had wandered the grounds and discovered the nearly dormant, but still complex, plasma refinery and power generator station just off the hangar bay. It was comprised of long, several meter-wide tubes of active plasma extraction, which ran deep into the planet's surface and up to the top of a silo several hundred meters tall. Each of the six tubes was surrounded by multiple platforms that would allow inspection when the plant was active, with entryways on both sides. He studied their intricacies, so that he could prepare to trap his opponents or at least outmaneuver them, and now they were following him to exactly where he wanted both Jedi.

Qui-Gon pushed himself quickly off the ground and wiped the blood from his nose. He sprinted quickly to join Obi-Wan in the fight. As he arrived, the Sith once again leapt, this time knocking down the Padawan. Jinn increased the intensity of his attack and swung with controlled fervor at Maul, who deflected his blows with alternating sides of his double-bladed saber. Kenobi rolled along the floor and popped up ready to attack again.

As both Jedi came at Maul from the left and right, the Sith had backed up completely into the refinery. Catwalks extended to and from the six plasma tubes, leaving a seemingly bottomless pit below them. As Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon pressed the attack, Maul hurdled backward, somersaulted in the air and landed on a platform across from the Jedi, separated by the chasm. All three combatants breathed heavily as they eyed each other and assessed the situation.

Jinn darted his eyes at Obi-Wan, who picked up the signal. In unison, they found a wave in the Force and leapt across the empty space between platforms, landing on the two-meter-wide platform on either side of Darth Maul. The Sith pushed up his blade and deflected the initial attacks. As the blue and green Jedi lightsaber blades clashed with the red Sith's, sparks flew, and the whirring hum of the laser swords echoed throughout the cavernous chamber.

Again, Maul was on the defensive. He was deflecting attacks from both sides, and his plan to lure the Jedi to a place where he could control the pace was working, but Maul knew it would require patience. Through the Force, he could predict where the blows would land from the two skilled opponents, keeping them at bay for the time being.

He saw another opening as the assaults came furiously from the seemingly tireless Jedi. The Sith whirled a round-house kick, striking Kenobi in the chest and knocking the younger Jedi backwards. Obi-Wan's feet stuttered beneath him and finally

came to a stop on the edge of the walkway on which they were fighting. The sole of his boot slipped on the threshold, and he began tumbling down off the side of the platform.

Time seemed to slow as Kenobi watched his lightsaber blade switch off and the hilt tumbled down. In his mind, he saw it land on a pathway twenty meters and three catwalks below him. Then it happened with him, bouncing hard off his right shoulder just as his saber clanged around him. He slid in his landing and off the edge of the new catwalk he had fallen onto, but he was able to grasp just enough to keep himself from falling further.

While Kenobi gained control on the edge, Jinn and Maul continued their battle. The Sith was growing tired from defending against two assailants, and as a result, Qui-Gon was able to press a harder attack. Jinn's green lightsaber blade hacked down in successive motion, while Maul protected himself with his. Then as he did on Tatooine, Jinn pushed the Sith backward with the Force, only this time with more power.

Maul tumbled backward and off the side, down about six meters before landing on his back on the platform below. Jinn quickly followed and jumped down to continue the pressure. As soon as Qui-Gon's feet hit the ground, Maul kicked upward, again striking the Jedi in the face, giving the Sith a moment to jump back to his feet and continue the melee.

Obi-Wan pulled himself up on his elbows and pulled his lightsaber handle to him through the Force, as he stood up and

watched his Master fighting with the Sith on the walkway above him.

Darth Maul peeked quickly over his shoulder to ensure he was on one of the paths he wanted to be. Thirty-five meters behind him was one of the service doors which led to a control chamber. If he could lead Jinn into it, he could seal it off and keep the other Jedi at bay. While the Sith was confident he could defeat as many Jedi as he could face, there was honor in a strong strategy which gave him an advantage. And Jinn was all too eager to follow his lead.

Maintaining his defensive posture, the Sith deflected swing after swing from the older Jedi. With each parry, Maul would inch backward getting closer to the opening at the end of the ramp.

Obi-Wan watched and finally felt strong enough to leverage the Force and jumped straight up to the walkway where his Master was fighting. The two warriors were a few dozen meters ahead of him and were heading into the opening in the wall, which glowed with the same pink hue as the plasma tubes that lit up the chamber. Kenobi broke into a sprint to assist Jinn.

As Maul backed up to the opening, six opaque shield doors, each separated by two meters and made of glowing plasma, individually switched off, allowing the battle to continue. Jinn swung his blade ferociously at the Sith, all the while pushing his opponent backward. Maul stepped into the next chamber past the sixth gate when the plasma doors reactivated.

Jinn became trapped between final two doors as they activated and was unable to reach Maul. Kenobi arrived at the end of the walkway in time to be locked out completely. He watched through the distorted panes of plasma as his Master resigned himself to the situation and took a knee to meditate on his next move. The Sith knocked his red blade against the plasma, forcing sparks to fly from the contact point, but unable to slip through the shield to reach the kneeling Jedi. Maul switched off his lightsaber and began to pace back and forth as he had so many times before.

Kenobi stood and waited. He ignited his blue lightsaber and hopped on the balls of his feet waiting for a chance to rejoin the battle. Jinn gave his mind over to the Force and waited for the doors to reopen while Maul walked back and forth menacingly.

As a preset timer released the doors, Jinn jumped up from his prone position and relit his blade charging hard at the Sith Lord. Maul quickly ignited both blades of his sword and met Jinn's first attack.

Kenobi bolted forward as soon as the gates released. He was almost through when they shut again automatically. The Padawan was one doorway away from helping his Master, but all he could do now was watch as the Jedi and Sith dueled expertly and with an intensity that the galaxy had not seen in over a thousand years.



CHAPTER 19

Jar Jar stood among the lines of Gungan warriors. He was a head above his peers, giving him a clear view of the array of military around him. His stalked eyes blinked nervously, and he gulped hard after the enemy fighters opened fire and quickly gave up the attack, rebuffed by the plasma shield. Binks was relieved that the screen did the job it was designed to do, but that did not put him at ease. The army of robots continued to march up the hill toward them. He could not count how many there were in total but, visually, it seemed like a similar figure to that of the Gungans.

Several tanks emerged from the city, behind the trudging droids, and quickly caught up with the massive army. The droids paused and then repositioned themselves. In perfectly orchestrated maneuvers, thousands of robot soldiers arranged themselves in blocks of several hundred, while tanks took up positions between the groups. After they settled into their new formation, they once again began their march forward.

“Steady,” urged General Ceel.

“Steady,” shouted Captain Tarpals, who rode his own Kaadu at the front of Jar Jar’s garrison.

A single group of about one hundred battle droids pulled away from the rest and drew closer to the Gungan shield. Sounds of clanking footsteps muted by the lush green grass permeated the air until they got within one hundred meters of the Gungan shield. Then, they stopped.

“Steady,” Jar Jar whispered to himself. He held his atlatl tightly in his hand. All the Gungan militia were outfitted with a projectile weapon, which generated a plasma ball at its top to be hurled at enemies or smashed into them at close distance, then instantly regenerated another ordinance. Jar Jar had only ever used an atlatl when he was a child. His father taught him how to fire one recreationally between fishing expeditions.

The front line of Gungan soldiers were equipped with handheld plasma shields. They were activated as they took defensive positions.

A single droid, of the one hundred or so that had assembled in front of them, stepped forward, held up its metallic clawed hand and, in a buzzy, nasal tone, said authoritatively, “Open fire!”

In an instant, the air was cluttered with red laser bolts fired from the battalion of battle droids. Each round was absorbed by the plasma shield and rendered useless. After a minute of constant fire, the droid in front ordered the others, “Cease fire!”

Then three Trade Federation tanks hovered forward and paused. Again, the droid leading the troops raised his hand and

pointed at the Gungan army. Huge cannons on the tops of the tanks began to unload even more powerful laser fire, but it, too, was absorbed by the plasma shield. After several rounds, the battle droid leader signaled for the tanks to halt.

The droid army seemed to pause. There was no movement and an eerie stillness about the thousands of robots in the field ahead of them. Jar Jar shuffled his feet nervously. General Ceel shouted something, but Binks did not hear what he said. He watched the catapults the Gungans had brought with them rolling through the ranks to a different position. The height of the plasma shield was lowered but still covered the entire army.

“In position!” shouted one of the Gungan infantry who was leading the catapults into place.

“Loaded, sir!” called a second Gungan.

General Ceel surveyed the battlefield. He was over one hundred years old, his skin was gray, and his whiskers were long. He had studied the techniques of generals before him, but no Gungan had been in full scale battle since before the humans arrived on their planet and at least seven hundred fifty years before anyone in this army were born. However, in the event that war was to come, the Gungans were ready. Those who were in the military studied, practiced, and prepared, as they were a proud people, who would defend their underwater kingdom to the death.

“Ready!” ordered the Gungan General.

The Gungan gunners who manned the catapults pulled levers, and the arm and bucket lowered to ready position.

“Aim!” Ceel called.

Slight adjustments were made across the line.

“Fire!” shouted Ceel.

All twelve catapults released in harmony. The shield had been lowered so that the buckets that held the weaponized plasma could break through the top of the generated plasma dome and fire their payload at their attackers. One-and-a-half-meter-wide globes of pink-blue plasma discharged from where they were seated, were flung across the battlefield, and exploded in a fiery liquid when they hit something solid. Most of the projectiles hit the battalion of battle droids, which had separated and led the Federation army’s position. Some hit the ground and erupted in puddles of flame. When the last ball hit, only a handful of battle droids remained standing. The rest were in pieces on the grass.

The Gungan army cheered.

The Trade Federation battle droid army advanced.

Once again, in a terrifyingly automated fashion, the droids marched into new positions, pulling away from the city walls and moving toward the Gungan shielded ranks. Three thousand white robots holding blaster rifles to their chest moved into a narrower group, fifty across and sixty rows deep. The tanks joined the dance as well, flanking both sides of the column.

Captain Tarpals pulled his Kaadu alongside Jar Jar and looked him in the eye. “Ouch time,” was all he said.

Binks began to bounce anxiously from foot to foot. The other trained soldiers around him stood still but visibly ill at ease. “Wassa happen now?” squeaked Jar Jar with a stutter.

“Wesa gone see,” said Tarpals. “Mesa tinkin now is da time wesa fight.”

The battle droids continued to move forward in precision sameness. Each soldier’s foot rose and fell at the same time as every other. It was not an army so much as it was a war machine.

* * * * *

Inside the palace, a transmission was coming in for Viceroy Nute Gunray. As it had over the last several days, the lead communications battle droid stomped across the room to the Neimoidian, held out its metallic hand, and a hologram of Darth Sidious fizzled to life.

“Yes, My Lord,” said Gunray. Each engagement with Sidious was growing increasingly tense.

“What is the current status on the planet?” demanded Sidious.

“A Mu-Class shuttle entered the system, and at your command, we allowed it to land. Unfortunately, by the time our troops arrived at the landing site, there was no sign of them. It may have been a decoy.”

“Not likely,” spat Sidious. “It is more likely the Queen is finding her way to the city. She is more foolish than I thought.”

“Your associate, Lord Maul, has already made his way into the palace to hunt down any invaders who may attempt to infiltrate.”

“Excellent,” said Sidious.

“Also, the primitives you spoke of have risen from the sea. We are sending more troops to meet this army assembling on the hill outside the city limits.”

“Well done,” offered Sidious. “Do whatever you must to keep them out of the capital.”

Gunray made no attempt to share that the droids seemed to have gone into some automated battle algorithm. He decided he would take credit for this apparently intelligent strategic maneuver. “I have your permission to proceed then, My Lord?”

“Wipe them out,” hissed Sidious. “All of them.”

“As you wish,” the Viceroy said with a slight bow as the hologram faded out.

* * * * *

The hoard of battle droids moved closer to the pinkish shield that separated them from the Gungan army. They inched forward and suddenly, again stopped. One droid, a commander of some sort as indicated by a stripe on its torso, stepped ahead and toward the shield.

“Corporal,” it buzzed. “Check it out.”

“Roger, roger,” said the subordinate and walked forward. It pressed its clawed hand forward to touch the shield, and in proof of the computerized hypothesis generated by the battle droid’s artificial intelligence system, it pushed through the plasma, sending a signal back to the control ship. It received a reply to push its entire self into the shield. It did and without harm, and it passed through the plasma membrane that protected the native Gungans.

“Fire!” shouted Ceel.

Several Gungan infantry swung their atlatls toward the single battle droid that entered the shield. Plasma balls splashed on its head and trunk, breaking it into several pieces. Some Gungans cheered, but the solitary victory was short lived as the droid army began to move toward the Gungans. They pressed into the plasma and into what became a shielded massacre as the droids opened fire.

The battle droids were able to fire their blasters at a faster rate than the Gungans could shoot their more primitive atlatls. Within moments of the entrance of the robots, dozens of Gungans lay dead on the ground.

“Firing da catapults!” shouted Ceel.

With the order, the plasma balls flew at multiple droid targets across the battlefield, destroying various sections of marching droids. But the droids were completely undeterred. Those that were not demolished by a plasma explosion continued their march toward the Gungans.

Under the dome of the shield, the Gungan army was in disarray. As the Federation droids moved in attack patterns based on calculated odds and pre-programmed strategies, the Gungans were facing not only a better equipped enemy, but a much more organized one. Even with the best training, the Gungan warriors were not prepared for an onslaught like this.

Jar Jar watched as fellow Gungans fell to the ground, wounded or dead. He was not even able to fire his atlatl as his panicky fingers could not find the trigger. Tarpals was shouting orders from atop his mount, but Binks could not hear a word he said above the deafening sound of explosions, laser blasts, and screams of agony.

The droids continued their carnage. Some fell when hit by the occasional plasma ball, but most just marched, fired, and pushed on. Hundreds of lifeless Gungan bodies littered the field, and Jar Jar was frozen with fear. Most of his fellow soldiers that entered the battle at his side had dispersed and ran away in panic.

Suddenly, Binks could hear Captain Tarpals's voice more clearly and the galloping of his Kaadu's feet behind him. "Run, Jar Jar! Run!" he shouted.

Tarpals had put himself between Jar Jar and a handful of approaching battle droids. "Retreat to the water, Jar Jar!" he yelled. "Go!"

It was only then that Binks realized that that was where all his counterparts were headed in a mass withdrawal from the battle.

"But, yousa goin' too?" called Jar Jar.

“Mesa goin’ when yousa – ”

Suddenly, Tarpals was slammed to the side and tumbled from his Kaadu. The animal kept running, but the Captain landed hard and lifelessly onto the grass. A smoking hole smoldered in his side as the Gungan winced in pain.

Jar Jar squealed and then fell at his Captain’s side. Not sure if he had been hit himself, Binks looked up to see an approaching battle droid lower his rifle, taking aim at him.



CHAPTER 20

Queen Padme Amidala was flanked by a dozen armed militia, Captain Panaka, his nephew Gregar Typho, and the leader of the resistance, Oti Trinta, as they settled under an unlaunched fighter. With the Jedi occupied with the mysterious figure in black, her plan had to be adjusted.

“Do you have any intelligence on the palace?” asked Padme.

“We know there are – or were – about a hundred battle droids in front of the palace. But with all of those troops exiting the city, I wouldn’t be sure,” said Trinta.

“I wouldn’t gamble on finding out. I would recommend we use the tunnels that will take us into the throne room from here in the hangar,” said one of the militia, clearly familiar with high-level security clearance.

“If we go through the tunnel, we’ll end up in the back of the throne room. If it is crawling with Federation droids, we’ll be Cottlefish in a barrel,” Panaka reminded them.

“We’ll split up,” said Padme. “Oti, take half of the troops and go through the tunnel. Wait for my signal. When we arrive, you enter the throne room and create a distraction. Panaka, Typho and the rest of the volunteers will go back outside and break in through the living quarters.”

“It’s risky,” said Trinta. “But I like it.” She checked the communicator on her belt, tapped it and ensured that hers and Padme’s were connected.

“Alright, let’s go. There isn’t much time,” said Padme.

Oti Trinta took her battalion and rushed toward the corner of the hangar, unlocked the tunnel and started to make their way toward the throne room. Amidala, Panaka, Typho and four volunteers broke toward the open side of the hangar and into the Naboo daylight. From where they stood, they heard the unmistakable sounds of battle between the Gungans and the droid army. Panaka pointed at fire and smoke atop the Green Hill.

“Well, now we know where the droids were headed,” said Typho.

The small band made their way around the corner where they had snuck into the hangar before and stayed close along the city walls. Within a few minutes, they were at the area of the palace that was the Royal Living Quarters.

“You forgot to mention the windows are about five meters above our heads,” said Gregar.

“You didn’t ask,” said Padme with a smile. “You’ve got a grappling hook on that belt, right?”

Gregar nodded, pulled a small silver box from his waist and handed it to the Queen. She looked at it for a moment before Panaka took it from her hands. “Your Highness? May I?” he offered.

“Of course.”

Panaka effortlessly handled the device and fired the hook straight into the air, where it connected with a stone awning reaching out above the windows. “Do we have any more?” the Captain asked.

Three of the four volunteers pulled similar devices from their utility belts and followed the same action that Panaka had just executed. There were five ropes hanging from the awning attached securely into the steelcrete. Panaka, Typho and Padme grabbed a rope and started scaling the wall, pulling the cord for leverage. Two other security force members joined them, while two more waited below on guard.

When they reached the windows, they paused. “Gregar, can you break the glass?”

“With pleasure.”

The young security volunteer pushed back from the wall with a strong squat in his legs. He swung out, away from the building and came barreling in toward the pane of glass. His back connected, and it shattered all around him as he tumbled into the room. The two guards followed, crashing out additional glass, and then Padme and Panaka glided in behind on their ropes.

Typho was bloodied. His face had taken a few shards of glass in the crash, and he could not open his right eye. “I’ll be fine,” he told his uncle. “Let’s just keep going.”

“You won’t be alright,” said Padme maternally tending to Gregar’s wounds. “And you are a danger to yourself if you continue on. Keep your blaster and wait in here. We’ll come for you when this is through.” The other two security guards made their way into the room from the ground, and Padme instructed them to stay with Panaka’s nephew. They reluctantly agreed.

“Your father’s going to kill me, you know,” said Panaka with a chuckle, realizing his nephew’s injuries were serious, but he would survive.

“Go finish the mission and give him a chance to,” said Typho.

“You are brave, Gregar,” said Padme. “I won’t forget this.”

Padme, Panaka, and the two additional security guards quickly slinked out of the door to the living quarters and into the passage that connected two major sections of the palace. They surveyed the wide-open hallway with a gleaming arched ceiling. Amidala motioned toward the end of the hallway with her gleaming silver blaster pistol.

“Beyond those doors is the receiving room,” whispered Panaka. “Then the Throne Room is across the other side.”

All four of them stooped low and half-crawled down the vestibule, ducking for cover behind each enormous marble column. They reached the last pillar and heard the clanking of metal feet coming toward their position. Padme pushed her back

against the wall and signaled for Panaka and one of the guards to take a post on the other side.

The metallic footfalls came closer, and Panaka counted two shadows, cast by the approaching droids onto the floor from the sunlight, which poured into the palace. He held up a pair of fingers and then pointed to the open area in front of them.

As soon as the battle droids came into view, Padme opened fire and, with two quick shots, hit them each in their torsos, knocking them to the ground.

“Where’d you learn to shoot?” asked Panaka, clearly impressed.

“Would you believe me if I said it was part of my coronation preparation?” she said.

All four of them made their way to the large double doorway, which led into the receiving room foyer. They stopped before opening the doors.

“We have no idea what’s behind those doors, M’lady,” said one of the security guards.

“Then we better be ready for anything,” she said. Panaka nodded at her and she returned the gesture. They each pulled on one of the doors and hid, two a side, behind them.

“What was that?” they heard in the nasally buzz of a battle droid.

“Check it out, lieutenant,” said another similar voice.

“Roger, roger.”

Padme waited tensely, pulling her blaster up to her chest. Her paired militiaman readied his weapon as well. Six battle droids exited the room and marched right past them down the hall. Padme pulled the trigger on her blaster.

Her first shot missed, but her second caught one of the droids in the back of the head. It fell forward as the others turned to face the source of the attack. All four humans quickly volleyed shots at the droids, and three more fell to the ground before the others opened fire.

One blast from a Trade Federation droid whizzed past Padme's ear and struck the guard beside her. He fell lifeless to the hard marble floor. The Queen continued to shoot and hit another battle droid.

Panaka and his partner were able to take aim and destroy the last two robots. Padme and Panaka looked at each other in troubled silence. They heard the doors to the throne room open up followed by the metallic banging of droids streaming out. Captain Panaka peered around his door to see if he could get a count of the battle droids and was devastated to realize it was too many to count in a quick glance. He returned his eyes to Padme and shook his head remorsefully.

Frustrated and defeated, Padme did the only thing she could if she hoped to help her people. She placed her blaster on the ground, kicked it out into the hallway and stepped out from behind the open door with her hands held over her head. "Throw

down your weapons,” she said to Panaka and the surviving resistance fighter. “They win this round.”

Panaka and the guard followed Padme’s orders and stepped out with their hands above their heads. Quickly, six battle droids trotted past them and took up a position behind the prisoners. Twelve more droids stood at the entry to the Throne Room, and all were holding their weapons aggressively toward the remaining Naboo resistance fighters.

The battle droids marched their captives forward into the Throne Room. Inside were another twenty-five robots with rifles in hand. Viceroy Nute Gunray sat upon his walking throne and drove it toward the insurgents.

“Your little insurrection is at an end, Your Highness,” he said feigning pity. “Time for you to sign the treaty and put an end to this senseless debate in the Senate.”

“I’ll die before I sign a treaty,” she said.

“That’s fine,” said Gunray, as if resigned to a preconceived notion. “Then so will all of your people.”

Behind the Viceroy, Padme saw Oti Trinta and her garrison on their knees, hands behind their heads and blaster rifles trained on them.



CHAPTER 21

On the other side of the plasma shield door from where Obi-Wan Kenobi stood, he saw his master and the Sith Lord exchange lightsaber blows. The chamber in which they found themselves was round, about fifteen meters wide, and it encircled a huge hole in the floor that, when active, was a ventilation shaft for the generator. The chasm was in the direct center of the room, and the floor on which the two duelers fought was about three meters in width, giving them enough room to move, but no room to make a mistake.

Kenobi inhaled and exhaled roughly and watched the battle intently.

Darth Maul swirled his double-bladed weapon in front of him, blocking swings from Jinn's green blade high and low. Where the Sith battled from a protected, defensive posture from the hangar to their current position, now he was able to go on the offensive and push back on the Jedi.

Jinn found for every chop he took against this mysterious figure in black, he also had to parry in return. The two red blades seemed to defend and attack with each movement. Quickly, Jinn changed his pattern and swung low in succession, causing Maul to protect himself twice and left an opening to step apart for a moment.

From the moment Qui-Gon charged into the battle after the plasma gate opened, he had been locked in intense combat. It was physically tiring. Jinn brought his saber up with two hands to his side in a position and studied his attacker.

Blood red skin covered in black battle tattoos were visible on every inch of his head as well as ten sharp, yellowed horns. It was clear to Jinn that this being was physically strong and mentally focused. His eyes stared with a burning intensity into the Jedi, and his teeth were jagged and angry. While Jinn was covered in his own perspiration and overheated from the intensity of the battle, there was a palpable cold air that swirled around the black robed monster. Never in his life had Jinn looked upon so much hate or felt the tangible presence of the dark side of the Force. It was an adulterated, pure evil.

Maul glowered at Jinn. “Come, Jedi,” he hissed. “With your young boy, at least you were a suitable opponent. But alone, your powers are fragile, untested. Without an enemy the Jedi have become weak.”

An ancient Sith lesson taught that not only was there power in tapping into one’s own hate and anger, but through mastery of

the Force, a dark side user could pull that energy and bolster his own from another's hostility. It was not uncommon for a Sith to goad his opponent to build aggression from a shadowy part of their being and use it to strengthen their own power.

Jinn did not respond. He reached out through the Force to try to sense a next move from Maul, but the darkness that emanated from the Sith clouded his vision. Qui-Gon's eyes were focused on the physicality of his opponent, looking for a tip-off of an advance.

Maul stared into Qui-Gon's eyes. "I've waited my whole life to kill you, Jedi," the Zabrak growled. "But you will only be the first."

The Sith snarled and moved forward on the attack. He spun his double-crimson blade and was blocked left, then right. Jinn found an opening and chopped straight down toward the Sith with both hands, but Maul pushed his weapon up, and one of the red blades clashed with the Jedi's in defense. The power from both blades locked together created a crackling hiss and the hum of their power sources increased. The Jedi Master attempted to pull his blade back with intention to swing low, but the Sith Lord pushed through the Force against him, as Jinn had done to him twice before, forcing the Jedi backwards for a split second.

As Jinn's lightsaber released from Maul's, the dark Force user thrust both his arms forward, slamming the hilt of his double-bladed weapon into Qui-Gon's face, briefly stunning the Jedi. With this opening, Darth Maul rocked back onto his anchoring

foot, pulled his twin laser sword back, then thrust one of the ends forward into Jinn's torso. The red energy blade sank through the Jedi's body with ease, and when Maul pulled it out of him, Jinn fell to his knees with a loud, concussive thud. His unlit lightsaber clattered on the floor beside him.

Maul turned away immediately to face Kenobi, and Qui-Gon Jinn fell forward, his face hitting the cold hard floor, and his body curling around him.

Obi-Wan watched in horror as his master tumbled lifelessly to the ground. All he could do was shout, "No!" as loudly as he could. It was the first and only response he had, but it was quickly followed by a feeling he had never had in his life: anger.

Maul returned to the energy door, which held the raging Jedi. The Sith paced left to right preparing to face his next foe. He smiled at the young Jedi. "Good," he whispered. "That feeling is hate, my boy. Use it."

Obi-Wan began to bounce like an athlete in place. He ignited his lightsaber and wrinkled his face, fighting tears and the darker emotions he had been trained to stifle.

Maul continued to pace and stretched out with his feelings to taste the sweet darkness that began to brew within the Jedi behind the plasma gate. He swirled the double blades and then, the doors released, allowing Kenobi to charge from his pen with passion and pain. The Sith Lord expertly defended himself from the flailing, aggressive slashing of the Jedi, and a second duel began.



CHAPTER 22

Anakin was surprised when the N-1 starfighter was released from its wall mount. He was glad that it gave him the opportunity to help clear the palace hangar of the oversized and shielded laser blasting droids for his friends, but then he became acutely aware that he was not in control of the ship. Artoo twittered and beeped a warning from the droid slot behind the cockpit, and Anakin saw some sort of translation of the robot's electronic language appear on a small screen in front of him.

“Autopilot?” squawked Anakin. “Try to override it.”

Artoo whistled back.

The yellow and silver sleek fighter rocketed out of the hangar bay, picked up speed, and crossed the large Green Hill that skirted the walled city of Theed. Looking out the cockpit to his left, he saw a battle on the hill. Droids, tanks and a huge plasma shield were intermingled with smoke, lasers and bodies from both armies.

“Any luck, Artoo?” the boy asked. The astromech responded with a panicked sounding series of electronic tones. The ship pulled up its nose and headed toward the clouds. Within moments, the front of the ship glowed briefly, as it passed through the atmosphere and entered outer space.

Anakin’s emotions shifted wildly between nervousness and awe. As a boy who only dreamed of leaving his dusty, backwater planet, to be behind the yoke of a starship entering space was difficult to comprehend. The empty black of space was darker than anything he had ever imagined, and the green-blue planet below him seemed to be glowing in the light of its system star. It was almost too beautiful for his young eyes to take in.

His moment of appreciation was quickly shattered as Artoo blasted some more electronic notes into the cockpit. “Got it,” Anakin said, grabbing the helmet from the floor and putting it loosely on his head. “Don’t think it’ll make much of a difference.”

The engines whined and buzzed as he grabbed the flight stick. He pushed it left and right, but it had no influence on the ship’s trajectory. Anakin looked down at the flight dashboard and tried to remember anything that Ric Olie had taught him, but in this moment, it was just green, red and blue buttons and screens on a dark yellow background. He took notice of a circular readout to his right, which displayed triangles and circles moving around in chaotic streaks of light. From a corner in his vision, he noticed flashes and fire in the distance, then heard distant radio chatter on the headset built into the floppy helmet on his head.

“Look, Artoo,” he said. “There they are. That’s where this autopilot is taking us.”

The droid and the boy zoomed toward the battle. He saw all of the Naboo fighters buzzing around one of the enormous circular ships. When they had arrived on Naboo, he remembered hearing Obi-Wan or Qui-Gon calling them “Federation Cruisers” or something. He recalled hearing Padme say that the job of the pilots was to “take out the droid control ship.” The boy assumed this was it. Anakin could count four or five in the area, but all of the N1s were focused on just one of them – the one that was firing back at them.

As they got closed to the battle, Anakin not only noticed the Naboo starfighters, but took note of dozens of other H-shaped ships that seemed to be actively firing back at them. Finally, he heard a voice clearly on the headset.

“This is Ric Olie. The deflector shield is too strong, and those Vulture ships are everywhere.”

And before he realized it, Anakin was in the middle of the battle. Federation Vulture fighters circled around and started heading toward him. Instinctively, the boy pressed the trigger on the flight yoke and picked off two as they flew over his cockpit.

“This is tense,” he said quietly. “Artoo, get us off this autopilot or it’s going to get us both killed.”

The droid beeped a response that, even electronically, sounded stressed. Then a moment later the screens on the dashboard flickered, and they went from a dark blue to a brighter

yellow. Anakin had not realized he was pulling the yoke hard to the left and when the screens came online, the fighter banked hard to the side.

“Autopilot is off! You did it, Artoo!”

The droid hooted electronically, and an interpreted phrase appeared on Anakin’s dash.

“Go back?” said Anakin. “Something tells me they need us here, Artoo.” The droid whistled in protest, but Anakin regained control of the fighter and pressed into the fray.

As he swung in closer to the Federation ship, he noticed large turbo laser cannons were also firing on the Naboo fighters from the surface of the cruisers. His proximity to the Lucrehulk made it easier for him to avoid the slower cannons, but he had picked up six droid fighters on his tail. He had begun figuring out the controls, and he spun the ship wildly left, then right, throwing the pursuing attackers off his trail. Two of them, attempting to follow him, tipped into each other, which sent them zinging into the large battle ship. The surviving Vultures kept on him.

“I know, we’re in trouble,” he said to a warbling Artoo. “Hang on!”

He pulled back on the fight stick, and the N1 shot straight up, away from the Federation cruiser. Two of the droid ships were hit by friendly cannon fire, and the two remaining fighters kept close to him. He shut off his engines for a second and floated freely in space as the two droids whizzed by.

“Just like pod racing,” he said. Anakin fired his weapons and struck both of the enemy fighters before switching his engines back on. He flew past the exploding droids and brought his fighter back around.

Anakin whirled back toward the Federation battleship and opened fire, but nothing connected. As Olie had said over the radio, the shields were too strong. Even with concentrated, repetitive ordinance, the ship’s plasma protection was not letting anything through.

Cries from panicked pilots rattled through the headset in his helmet. He heard some voices warning other pilots of incoming fire, others shouting out their position. Some of the pilots cried out for help as they spoke their last words before being blown out of the sky by droid fighters. It was audio chaos, but Anakin did his best to concentrate.

He pulled up and away from the Federation craft and sped up to get some distance from the battle. Closing his eyes, he tried to “see” something with the power his mother had cautioned him about using; to find a pattern among the disorder of the battle and a way to break through the Federation shield. Anakin heard another voice but was certain it was not in his helmet.

“*Anakin,*” it said. “*Feel. Don’t think. Use your instincts.*” Skywalker thought it was Qui-Gon’s voice, but that was impossible. Those *were* the words the Jedi told him before the pod race. Perhaps it was a memory. The boy reached out and felt a sudden pressure in his chest, and he let go of the yoke as the

ship began to drift. Artoo blurted a stream of notes, snapping Anakin back to awareness.

“Qui-Gon’s in trouble,” Anakin said. “We’re going back, Artoo.” But before he could regain control of the fighter, he felt a sense of direction in his mind. There was no voice attached to the words that formed in his subconscious, but it was clear to him what he needed to do. The disembodied guidance felt like a clear, yet unseen, broken transmission that he could not physically hear.

“Your friends ... droid ship ... from within ... subvert the shields ... they will die ...” The phrases had the clarity of being whispered in his ear, but the distance of something that could not exist.

Anakin gripped the flight yoke and turned back toward the Federation droid control ship. Laser cannons opened fire and a new squadron of droid fighters picked him up on their scopes. Artoo whistled loudly in excited caution.

“I can’t see what you are saying, Artoo, but I’ve got an idea. Hold on!”

Within a second, he was back to pulling close to the surface of the Lucrehulk. The Federation cannons unwittingly assisted Anakin’s flight path as he skimmed low across the surface, weaving between them and other instruments that jutted off the ship. One of the Vultures crashed into a radar dish and one spun off an antenna. Cannon fire nipped one of the other fighters while Anakin powered forward.

“Are we below the shield?” asked Anakin.

Artoo responded with an affirmative sounding beep.

“Okay, hang on tight!”

He controlled the N1 expertly as he came around the far side of the C-shaped Federation battle ship, near the gaping maw that housed the hangar bays. Anakin saw things ahead of him before they were visible. He careened around cannon embankments, observation domes, and laser fire. He made it to the end of the arm and saw the hangar bay across the gap, when suddenly his ship was rocked.

“We’re hit, Artoo!” The astromech let out a wild electronic scream. They came sailing across the opening of the C-shaped battle ship and began spinning wildly. Anakin did not panic. He closed his eyes and relied solely on the images in his mind’s eye to guide him. The ship flattened out as the boy pushed the flight stick with his eyes squeezed shut. He opened them back up just in time to witness their entry into the hangar bay. With the damaged fighter, however, he was not able to make the abrupt stop needed and instinctively pulled slightly back on the yoke.

The N1 skidded across the open bay floor, knocking into several white battle droids, through some standing vulture droid fighters, and into a huge doorway at the back of the hangar. They had come to a rest in a large open engine room.

Artoo whined and the fighter’s engines shut down.

“I think this is where we want to be, but everything’s overheated,” Anakin said flipping switches indiscriminately. His astromech chirped, and the boy looked up in the cockpit to see a

battalion of battle droids trotting toward his fighter. “This is not good,” he said.

Artoo kept beeping and humming when suddenly, the dashboard lit up again.

“Yes! We have power!” Skywalker shouted. “Shields up, Artoo!”

The front of the N1 shimmered for a brief moment while the shields came back to life. The engines whined as they came back on line and Anakin pulled the trigger on his flight stick. Laser bolts flew from the front of the fighter and blew away a dozen of the oncoming battle droids.

Anakin felt the ship rise gently from the floor, and he took control of it again. Battle droid blaster fire was absorbed by the shields, and the boy ignored his robot attackers. He slowly spun the fighter around and faced it toward the giant engine generators, which he saw in the room.

“Give me torpedoes, Artoo,” he said. The droid whistled an affirmative “yes, sir!”, and Anakin opened fire. It seemed that the N1 was equipped with eight torpedoes, all of which Anakin dispatched into the reactor.

From the chatter in his helmet, Anakin heard his fellow pilots astonished by the Federation ship’s destruction.

Anakin turned his fighter around and faced the hangar bay exit just as formidable fire began to engulf the engine room. “Full power, Artoo!” he shouted. He pushed the thrusters forward and

stayed just ahead of the fallout, blasting into space and away from the Lucrehulk that had begun to blow apart.

The boy looked over his shoulder and saw pieces of the Trade Federation control ship start to fall away toward the planet surface in flames. Laser fire from the Federation droid fighters suddenly ceased and their engines disengaged. Anakin heard cheers from the other human pilots as the Federation Vultures floated like inert space trash around the exploding Neimoidian Lucrehulk.



CHAPTER 23

Jar Jar Binks put his hands over his eyestalks and waited for the battle droid to fire a laser bolt from its rifle into him. His Captain had been shot down while commanding his troops to retreat, and Jar Jar hesitated in confusion. Had he moved quicker, perhaps Tarpals would still be alive. Had Tarpals not arrived and put himself in harm's way, Jar Jar surely would have been the recipient of the blast. But now, it seemed, Captain Tarpals's death would be just another one on a battlefield of many Gungans, as the Federation army robot prepared to execute Binks.

Binks was convinced it was the severity of the situation and the fear that made the moments drag on. He imagined it was the interminable wait for the trigger to be pulled that gave him time to reflect. And then he heard shouts from Gungans all around him. Perhaps he was just at the end of the line of those to be killed. The air suddenly filled with the sound of metal clanging all around him, followed by solid pounding on the ground. Finally, he gave

in to his fear and pulled a hand away from his eyes to see what was making the noise.

When he looked up, there was no rifle barrel pointed in his face. To his surprise, battle droids lay scattered on the ground across the Green Hill, and tanks left tears in the grassy field as they skidded to sudden stops. The Gungan troops were embracing in relieved celebration. The droid army simply stopped in their place and malfunctioned.

“Deysa fallin’ to da ground!” Jar Jar heard one of the Gungan soldiers nearby bellow with disbelief.

Jar Jar stood up and brushed himself off. The plasma shield above him dissipated, and he looked up into the sky. He peered through smoke above him, which had lilted over from the battlefield, and saw one of the lights in the sky that appeared days ago – before he left on his adventure to the desert planet and the capital of the galaxy – flash brightly, then disappear with a twinkle in the blue.

While many around him continued to celebrate, Jar Jar realized that Captain Tarpals was one of the last casualties of the battle. He was killed trying to save his battalion from the Trade Federation among them, Jar Jar himself.

Binks fell back to the ground and began to heave a sob over the body of his Captain. His tears ran for Tarpals and then, as he looked across the Green Hill, for the one thousand dead Gungan warriors scattered among the droids that killed them. The battle

was over. The battle was won. But the cost was gruesome and unfathomable.



CHAPTER 24

Kenobi slashed at the Sith Lord with all he had, and every single blow was blocked with ease. There was a passion behind his attacks that was exhilarating to the Padawan, but he was distracted by the teachings against such feelings. His mind was flooded with foreign emotions. There was anger at the Zabrak, who struck down his master. There was fear that he would not be able to overcome this cunning warrior. Finally, there was a never-before-felt freedom to allow these spirits to move him, and it felt wrong and powerful at the same time.

Almost mockingly, Darth Maul stood flatfooted and deflected Kenobi's assaults. He bared his jagged teeth in a cruel smile at the young Jedi, as his red blades swirled between them. Maul could sense the anger, fear, and pure aggression flowing from his opponent and basked in the darkness.

"Your anger gives you power, Jedi," hissed Maul. "Let it out. Use it."

Obi-Wan was struck by Maul's words. The Padawan knew he was dangerously close to the Dark Side of the Force with every swing and struggled to avoid it. He also realized now was not the time to be obsessed with a lesson in dark versus light, because if he lost his concentration for a moment, this Sith would strike him down.

Kenobi decided to make one more fervent press on the Zabrak. He made attempts to swing the green blade of his lightsaber straight down in a chopping motion from the left and from the right, but they were each rebuffed. After several attempts, he came down low and swung upward at the Sith's blade which was held at chest level. Obi-Wan caught the hilt of Maul's double-bladed weapon, slicing it in half. One of the blades discharged and Darth Maul threw it down the hole that dominated the center of the chamber while bringing the remaining side back up in defense. Obi-Wan knocked the Sith blade to his left and kicked him in the chest, knocking him to the hard floor.

Maul scampered backwards away from Kenobi and leapt back up onto his feet. Then he broke out into an ugly, breathy laugh. "Oh, I see you becoming a powerful Sith Lord," he said insultingly. "Harness those dark feelings, Jedi."

Kenobi paused. He felt a moment of shame as he looked over at his master, lying motionless on the ground several meters away. All of Qui-Gon's teachings were being forgotten in the heat of his first real battle. He switched off his blade and took a step back from Maul.

Darth Maul did the same, pressing a button on his splintered lightsaber handle, causing the blade to disappear. “Your master is dead,” Maul said, his voice changing to seem almost sympathetic. “He was your teacher, I presume. You will need someone to complete your training.” With his gloved free hand, he pointed to and tapped on his own chest. “Join me, Jedi.”

Kenobi’s chest heaved. He was physically exhausted, and his mind was racing.

“You are at least considering it, aren’t you, boy?” Maul taunted him. “Imagine. If I am strong enough to kill your master, what can I teach you?”

Obi-Wan squeezed his open fist and, in the other hand, felt the metal hilt of his lightsaber rolling in his palm.

“I feel the conflict,” said Maul. “What better honor to bestow upon your dead master than to continue your training under the Sith Lord who slaughtered him?” The Zabrak laughed. Not only was there poetic justice in his offer, but it would also allow him revenge against his own master, Lord Sidious, who had deceived him.

Obi-Wan ignited his lightsaber and burst forward at the Sith.

Maul fired up his blade as Obi-Wan somersaulted over him. When the Jedi landed behind him, Maul spun to face him but, with one blade, he was quickly put into a defensive posture. Kenobi swung rapidly at the Zabrak but was still unable to land a blow. Maul was physically stronger than Kenobi and by holding a single blade in one hand, each parry was returned forcefully.

Obi-Wan worked his way forward and was able to put Darth Maul's back to the plasma gate. If he could pin him to it, he would have an advantage. However, Maul also saw an avenue and took a step back, held his blade at chest height and used his free hand to harness the Force.

Pushing forward, Maul invisibly struck Obi-Wan, and the Jedi flew backward, dropping his lightsaber as he tumbled toward the open vent shaft. Kenobi's blade switched off as it hit the ground, and he realized he was no longer on solid ground. He began to plummet into the bottomless tube, but he was able to find a cooling nozzle that jutted from the wall and grabbed onto it, two meters below the floor level where he was just fighting a moment before.

Kenobi hung onto the spigot with both hands and looked up to the surface. Darth Maul came to the edge and looked over to see if his prey was gone. "You survived, Jedi," he called, and his voice echoed sickeningly off the chamber walls. "I can save you. The choice is yours." Maul paced for a moment from side to side. The Sith came upon Kenobi's lightsaber hilt and casually kicked it down the tube. It clanged off the walls as it dove past Obi-Wan and into oblivion.

The Padawan eased from frantic to calm. He knew Qui-Gon would tell him to act on instinct and not think too much. He would advise him to let the Force present the path. Kenobi looked for a way to free himself of the situation. He considered letting go and falling from his perch to see where the chamber let out. He

thought about using the Force to pull his foe down with him. But neither of these options seemed like the right choice.

His concentration was interrupted by Maul's voice again. "Come now, Jedi, don't let your power go to waste." The Sith Lord squatted on the edge of the chasm and looked down at Kenobi. "Think of what two of us could do." Obi-Wan squirmed on the post he held onto, refusing to make eye contact with the Sith. He looked away from Maul and toward his fallen master.

Obi-Wan closed his eyes and reached out through the Force. As he had so many times before, a clear path of light appeared in his mind's eye through the darkness.

Darth Maul was growing impatient. He stood up and began swinging his lightsaber blade in a downward arc, sparking it against the edge. Fiery chunks of the floor's edge cascaded down over Obi-Wan's head. "Time's up, Jedi," he taunted. "Make your choice."

Kenobi opened his eyes and stared hard at Maul. The Sith Lord looked back, tilting his head and sensing the Jedi was about to move. Obi-Wan pulled on the Force with all he had and soared straight upward over Darth Maul's head. In the same motion, he drew Qui-Gon's lightsaber to his hand, from the floor beside his fallen master, and ignited it as soon it reached his palm. Maul spun around to face the Jedi, but before he could bring his weapon up in defense, Obi-Wan Kenobi swung the lightsaber with both hands through the mid-section of the Sith Lord. Darth Maul was

cleaved cleanly in half by the Jedi weapon, and he felt no immediate pain.

Pure incredulity filled his face as Maul looked into Kenobi's eyes. A thousand thoughts suddenly flooded his mind at once: from disbelief that he had been bested, to the unpreparedness for his journey to end here, and finally to failing his mother. He tried to speak, but his legs gave out below him, and his torso tumbled backwards into the pit from which Obi-Wan had just leapt. His lower half followed a second later, bouncing brutally down the metal walls of the shaft. The last thought he had, before everything went black, was a more focused hatred than he had possessed before. There was a revulsion in his being for the Jedi, who had defeated him and was now watching him plummet away into a deep, dark pit.

Once the Sith had fallen so deep he could no longer be seen, Obi-Wan turned his attention to his master. He rushed to Jinn's side, rolled him over, and placed his head in his lap as he sat down. To his sweet surprise, there was still some life left in Qui-Gon.

"It's too late," the Jedi Master wheezed.

"No," was all Kenobi could say.

"Obi-Wan, listen to me," Jinn said. "I am proud of you, my apprentice."

"Quiet, Master. Save your strength."

"There is a holocron I was given in Jedha," Qui-Gon was straining to speak. "In my quarters, you must find it."

“Shhh,” said Obi-Wan fighting tears.

“It can never fall into the hands of the Sith. And you must study it as I have. There is more to learn from it than I have. Do you understand?”

“Yes, master,” Kenobi said.

“And, Obi-wan, promise me ... promise me you will train the boy.” Jinn’s eyes closed and his already weak breathing became more shallow.

“Yes, master,” said Kenobi urgently. “I promise.”

“He is the Chosen One... he will bring balance.” Kenobi felt his master’s body shake as he drew in a final breath. “Train him.” Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn’s head fell heavily to its side in Obi-Wan Kenobi’s hands. The Padawan expected to feel sadness, but instead he felt resolve and a distant feeling that, although his master had passed, he was not alone.



CHAPTER 25

The throne room was in shambles. Dozens of battle droids marched around the chamber, others keyed into computers, and there were blaster holes in the walls and décor. There were robots on guard at the entryways, and others came rushing in from the hallway. Padme's heart sank as she looked around what once was a beautiful testament to a civilization, which took pride in peace and art, and was now a smoldering homage to uninvited war. A droid with a crimson stripe on its torso advanced on the Queen and Captain Panaka from behind and pushed them crudely toward the Viceroy.

“And now, Your Highness,” began Gunray victoriously. And then he stopped. His expression changed. His mouth dropped open in surprise, and his red eyes blinked hard.

Battle droids stopped in mid-step, causing them to lose balance and fall hard onto the marble floor. The robot guards at the walls lilted forward and crashed head first, while others

simply slumped over. A droid at the computer terminal buzzed a final word: “Sir...”

“What is going on?” shouted Gunray.

Padme smiled at Panaka.

Rune Haako ran over to one of the computer screens against the wall and tried to read it. There were flashing lights and characters crawling urgently across screens, but they meant nothing to the Neimoidian.

“I can’t read this!” Haako said flustered.

Panaka lowered his hands and strode confidently across the room to the wall of computers. None of the droids moved, and Gunray looked at him in stunned horror. The Captain looked at the readouts and started to laugh.

“Looks like *your* insurrection has come to an end,” he said.

“What?” muttered Gunray. “But that’s impossible.”

“According to this, your flagship is no longer on the scopes. Shows up destroyed. No control ship. No droids. No army.” Panaka bent over and picked up a blaster from one of the fallen battle droids and tossed it to the other Naboo militiaman, then grabbed another one, throwing it to Padme.

The Queen lowered the blaster rifle and pointed it at Nute Gunray. “Now, Viceroy,” she started with a satisfied curl to her lips. “We will discuss a new treaty.”



CHAPTER 26

In the distance, Jedi Master Sifo-Dyas watched the night sky of Coruscant sparkle with millions of shuttles and speeders. From the platform on which he stood in the middle of The Flats, the skyline of the Capital seemed to stretch to infinity. He could barely make out the Capital District's mushroom-shaped Senate Hall and the twinkling spire of the Jedi Temple that stood at its side. There was a dark presence in The Flats that Sifo-Dyas attributed to the polluted air, the poor illumination, and the bone rattling, constant roar of machinery powering the planet's city-covered surface.

One of the lit shuttles drew closer and closer before becoming clear. The craft approached the platform, rotated and settled down neatly beside the T-6 on which the Jedi had arrived. It was clean, simple, and there were no discernible markings on the outside of it. A door in the back of it unsealed and became a gangway. Then he saw the man he had met so many times before walk down the

plank to meet him, but now, he was no longer a Senator. He was the Supreme Chancellor of the Galactic Republic.

“Master Dyas,” Palpatine started, as he came to the end of the walkway and onto the platform. “Thank you for meeting me.”

“The pleasure is mine, Chancellor.”

“It feels so unseemly to meet here again, but I would prefer that our meeting remains... confidential.”

“I understand,” said Sifo-Dyas

“Is it still your intention to leave the Jedi Council?” led Palpatine.

“It is. There are complications, but more evidence supporting my vision has come forward. Now, more than ever, I believe we are in the time of the Prophecy.”

“Then the timing of our meeting could not be better,” the Chancellor said. “I am leaving within the hour to go back to Naboo. The Trade Federation and my Queen seem to have come to an agreement.”

“But the Jedi Ambassadors told us the Federation was occupying the planet with an invasion army.”

“We haven’t yet completed a full investigation of the situation, Master Jedi. All I know for certain is that I have been asked to return home to finalize whatever arrangements need to be made to put an end to the dispute.”

“I don’t fully understand,” stammered Sifo-Dyas.

“Which brings me to the favor I need to ask you,” continued Palpatine smoothly. “Before you revoke your position as a member of the Jedi Council.”

The Chancellor pulled a data card from his pocket and handed it to the Jedi.

“What’s this?” asked Dyas.

“It’s a fulfillment of my promise, Master Jedi. To my commitment and belief in you and your vision.”

Sifo-Dyas stood silently.

“It is the coordinates for the planet Kamino and an order for a clone army,” said Palpatine. “I would like you to travel to the system and place the order for me in person. I can think of no one more appropriate than you to deliver it.”

“Thank you... I think. Why wouldn’t it come straight from you?”

“A clone army will take many years to complete, and it will take me just as many to convince the Senate that we need one,” said Palpatine. “The invasion of my planet will not be the last act of aggression by an outside force on a defenseless system, but it is still not enough to make a case today. Besides, I can’t simply walk into my new position and demand we militarize the Republic. I’m a democratically-elected senator, not a tyrannical emperor.”

“I am not sure it should come from a Jedi Master,” protested Sifo-Dyas.

“The Kaminoans are a very ... unique people. They keep to themselves. They are secretive – they make clones for goodness’ sake! They won’t start work on such a large order unless they are convinced it is from the Republic. And, as I just pointed out, I am not yet able to place it myself. Who better than the Republic’s greatest ally, the Jedi, to place the order on my behalf?”

“This seems quite unusual, Chancellor.”

“These are unusual times, my friend.” Palpatine turned away from the Jedi Master. “If you are unconvinced that a great war is imminent, then you can hand the data card back to me, resign from the Council – or stay – and we will never speak of this again.”

“But, I –”

“But I know you, Master Dyas. You have conviction. And you have the opportunity to fulfill your primary obligation as a Jedi Knight: to protect the Republic against evil, whatever form that may take. It would be quite a noble end to your career on the Council.” The Chancellor paused. “Unless, of course, you’ve lost faith in your gift of sight.”

There was a long, uncomfortable silence. The Jedi processed the prospect that lay before him. There was now an opportunity to achieve his personal crusade of building an army to protect the Republic from the war that he foresaw. Finally, he spoke: “Will I remain anonymous?”

“The Kamino cloners are discreet to a fault,” promised Palpatine.

“Then I’ll leave at once, Chancellor. When I return, I will step down from the Council.”

“I respect your decision,” Palpatine said. “However, I could use you as an advisor if you were to maintain your post.”

“Chancellor, I have always done what I feel is right. If I betray the Council in order to do so, then I no longer can, in good conscience, be seated among them,” the Jedi said. “I’ve long since lost my faith in them, and they have shown that they no longer believe in me.”

“You are an honorable man, Sifo-Dyas,” said Palpatine with all the dignity of his new position. “Your Republic and your Chancellor thank you.”

Master Sifo-Dyas bowed shallowly, turned and boarded his T-6 shuttle. He sat at the controls, entered the coordinates, and left for the Kamino system on his last mission as a Jedi.



CHAPTER 27

Early morning light poured across the floor of a cavernous sitting room in the Palace at Theed. “Sorry, I am to hear of Master Jinn’s fate,” said Yoda, as he limped with his cane across the floor in front of Obi-Wan Kenobi. “One with the Force, he now is.”

The leader of the Jedi Council, Mace Windu, and Ki-Adi Mundi arrived at the Naboo Capital within two days of the liberation of the planet. Chancellor Palpatine was due to arrive later that day. Before the mundane activity of settling the political and legal actions that arose from the occupation of the planet, the Jedi would prepare a ceremonial funeral pyre for the fallen Jedi Master. Once the service was completed, they would pick up the issues at hand and act in an official capacity for the Republic, submitting a report about what had happened on the planet. This was the bureaucratic role the Jedi had become, and it was exactly the kind of mission which would have made Qui-Gon uncomfortable.

“He was a wise Jedi,” said Mace Windu.

“And a good friend to the Council,” said Ki-Adi Mundi.

“I was lucky to have studied under him,” Obi-Wan Kenobi said mournfully.

“Considered Master Qui-Gon’s last words to the Council, we have. Confer on you the title of Jedi Knight, the Council does,” said Yoda.

“You have proven yourself in all aspects of the Trials,” said Mace Windu. “Your teamwork with Qui-Gon is legendary.”

“Thank you, Masters,” Kenobi said bowing.

“But agree on you taking this boy as your Padawan learner, I do not,” Yoda harrumphed.

“Qui-Gon believed in him,” pleaded Obi-Wan.

“He may be the Chosen One,” said Ki-Adi Mundi. “But he is too old to begin the training.”

“And grave danger I see in his instruction,” added the senior Jedi.

“While I am honored by your bestowing the honor of Jedi Knight upon me,” said Kenobi. “I gave Qui-Gon my word. I will train Anakin. Without the approval of the Council, if I must.”

“You certainly have learned Qui-Gon’s defiance,” said Mace with a smile.

“Need that, you do not,” Yoda offered.

“Who would you have him train with?” asked Obi-Wan. “I was there when he surfaced. Qui-Gon was meant to teach him – he made a commitment to the boy’s mother. It is convention that the closest Knight to a fallen Jedi inherits his Padawan.”

There was silence from the three Jedi Council members as they exchanged glances with one another. Yoda wrinkled his nose and squeezed his eyes shut. “Not to be taken lightly, the danger I foresee with this boy,” said the elderly green Jedi. “A serious responsibility his training will be, if the Chosen One he is.”

“I understand, Master,” said Obi-Wan.

Yoda exhaled acquiescently. “Agree with you, the Council does. Your apprentice, Skywalker will be.”

Obi-Wan bowed in gratitude to the Council members and left the room. When the oversized doors closed, Mace Windu turned to Yoda. “There is no doubt that the mysterious warrior that Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon faced was a Sith.”

“Always two there are,” said Yoda solemnly. “No more, no less.”

“A master and apprentice,” Ki-Adi Mundi added. “One to hold the power, the other to crave it. The Rule of Two.”

“But which one did Obi-Wan destroy?” pondered Windu aloud.

“Put this in the official record, we will not,” Yoda instructed, as he hobbled out of the room.

* * * * *

Padme was becoming Queen Amidala in preparation for several important events she had that day. She looked in the mirror, at home in her royal bedroom, and assessed the makeup laid out in

front of her. Normally, she would apply a thick layer of white to hide her face and protect herself from broadcasting her feelings, when her skin flushed under the pressure of negotiation. The red dots she would paint on her cheeks represented the tradition of her people when they flourished on Grizmalt a thousand years before, and her ceremonial garb was designed to demonstrate she held a position of power over those around her. After all the events of recent days and weeks, she decided to forego formality and present herself to those who elected her in a way she chose. There was no shame in the inexperience of her age, and she felt she had hardened herself enough to forego masking her face.

She applied the red circles to her cheeks to honor those that came before her, but she left the white face paint in the container. Instead of reaching for a high-frilled formal gown, she put on the uniform of the Naboo Volunteer Security Force. If they were brave enough to wear it to protect her, she would celebrate them by dressing like those who were willing to die for her.

As she pulled the maroon leather coat on, a knock came on her door.

“Come in, please,” she said.

Anakin Skywalker slowly pushed the door open and peered into the room.

“Your Highness?” he said sheepishly.

“Please, Anakin,” she said. “I’ll always be Padme to you.” He smiled and walked into the room.

“Chancellor Palpatine has landed. He’ll be here soon.”

“Thank you, Ani,” she said. “And once again, I can’t thank you enough for your bravery and amazing piloting skills in destroying the droid control ship. You are a hero here on Naboo.”

“It was just like pod racing,” Anakin said with a tinge of pride.

“Well, without you, many more Gungans would have been killed, and I would be in an internment camp somewhere or worse. I will be forever grateful and will never forget you.” Padme waved him over to her and wrapped her arms around him in the most welcome embrace he had ever had. It reminded him of how his mother held him. When he left Tatooine, he believed he would never feel that way again.

The moment was shattered as Sheev Palpatine burst into the room.

“My Queen!” he bellowed. “So good to see you safe!”

“It is nice to be seen as such,” she responded. “Congratulations on your election... Chancellor.”

“Your boldness has saved our people, Your Majesty,” Palpatine deflected insincerely. “It is you who should be congratulated.”

Padme could not help but notice a new distance between her and her former mentor. While they always played formally to one another when they were not alone, this seemed somehow different.

“Congratulations, Chancellor, sir,” said Anakin.

“And you, young Skywalker. Your fearlessness against the Federation battle ship will become legend here on Naboo and

around the galaxy. We will watch your career with great interest.” Palpatine tousled the boy’s hair and looked at him like a proud father.

“Esqueeze me, miss Queen,” came a familiar voice at the door.

“Jar Jar!” said Amidala. “Come in, please.”

“Mesa proud to introducin’ Big Boss Nass,” the Gungan said, as his people’s leader entered the Queen’s chamber with a presence that was a delicate mixture of hubris and caution.

“Yousa Highness,” Nass said in a deep, rumbling voice.

“Boss Nass, may I introduce Supreme Chancellor Palpatine. Our former senator,” the Queen said.

Palpatine looked at the Gungan monarch with a thinly veiled discomfort. “It is my pleasure,” he said as politely as he could muster.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a promise to keep,” said Queen Amidala to Palpatine, and she bowed deeply before Boss Nass.

* * * * *

Night had fallen on Naboo. In a small, private ceremony, Anakin, Obi-Wan, Padme, Jar Jar, and Panaka lit torches under Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn’s body. The three Jedi Council members looked on solemnly and as the fires crackled, the only tears that were shed came from the Queen and the boy.

“A Jedi musn’t cry,” whispered Obi-Wan to Anakin. “Take strength from having known him.”

“What will happen to me now?” asked Anakin wiping the tear from his cheek.

“The Council has given me permission to train you,” said Obi-Wan to his new apprentice. “You will become a Jedi. I promise.”

There was hope in the guarantee that Obi-Wan made. There was also uncertainty and excitement in the sudden realization that he was about to begin a life in service to the Jedi Order, as well as optimism that today he was a learner, but tomorrow, he could be the master – a much better path than was laid before him only a day ago. It did not make the pain of losing Qui-Gon go away, nor did it quiet the fear he felt, being so far away from the simple slave’s life he had on Tatooine with his mother just days before. As much as he wanted to trust Obi-Wan Kenobi, a part of him remembered, from experience, that promises were fragile things and even with the best intent, they were easily broken.

The boy watched the funeral pyre spark around the fallen Jedi and followed the paths of ashes as they escaped the fire and rose high into the night only to disappear forever. While taken by the simple beauty of his master’s final goodbye, he was determined that this would not be his fate. Anakin Skywalker’s spark would never fade.



EPILOGUE

*“SON comes before darkness falls
Wise and foolish ignore the calls
For when revealed the seer is blind
The LIGHT ahead is left behind”*

—Journal of the Whills, 9:612

“Your Highness,” started Chancellor Palpatine, crossing the Throne Room to Padme Naberie Amidala, who was looking thoughtfully through the enormous glass window at her battle-scarred city. “I’m afraid I must leave at once. It seems the leader of the Banking Clan has stepped down abruptly. Reports are it has something to do with my ascension to my current position or some such nonsense. I must attend to it swiftly.”

“But, Chancellor,” protested Amidala. “There’s still so much to do here.”

“The Trade Federation has agreed to leave –”

“Agreed to leave?” Amidala pushed back in shock. “Is that how this is being presented?”

“My Queen, you must understand the ramifications of how this is handled in the Senate,” Palpatine condescendingly explained.

“Are there no consequences to the murder of my people? To the thousand Gungans who still lay dead on the Green Hill?”

“There is a delicate balance to the economy – to all things – in the galaxy,” he started. “It pains me to say it, of course, but the death of hundreds of sea dwellers is insignificant next to the impact on billions of beings throughout the Republic. These things must be handled with care.”

“That is unconscionable, Sheev,” she pleaded. “I had hoped you would be a kinder leader.”

“My Lady, there will be sanctions, of course, and fines paid to Naboo. I will be sure of that.”

“And what about the Sith warrior the Jedi faced?” she asked harshly.

“The Jedi have said nothing of that to me,” Palpatine said. “Besides, the Sith are an old legend. Even if it were true, I am sure no one in the Senate would believe it.”

“This will not stand, Chancellor,” she promised. He smiled politely at his former progeny.

“Which reminds me, Your Majesty: you will need to select a new Senator to ensure Naboo’s voice is heard,” Palpatine said. “I now serve a different capacity.”

* * * * *

On the planet Geonosis, the sky was yellow and the rocky cliffs, which made up most of its surface, were red giving the entire planet a glowing, orange hue. Long stretches of canyons wormed their way throughout the rocky surface of the world. Their stony walls were dotted with cave outposts, which acted as entry points to thousands of kilometers of underground caverns that housed the bug-like Geonosian civilization.

In a remote cavern near the end of a fifty-kilometer gorge that housed the battle droid factories, a gleaming, golden interstellar shuttle touched down undetected. Inside the hangar bay, gleaming pillars were carved into the walls, clashing stylistically with the natural cave mouths that led deeper into the planet.

A human man with a gray beard and sharp, hardened features stepped confidently from the hatch that had split the back end of the shuttle to become an egress. He wore a deep blue cape with a jeweled clasp. On his belt, hung a curved lightsaber hilt.

In the shadowy corner of the cavern, a voice called out. “Welcome, Master Dooku,” said the dark-hooded figure stepping forward.

“Lord Sidious,” said the bearded gentleman in a deep and regal voice. He bowed before the obscured cloaked figure. “I bring good news from the moons of Bogden. I have found the

template for your army: a ruthless bounty hunter with skills matched only by his discretion.”

The Sith Master emerged completely from the darkness and into the dim illumination of the hangar to stand before the genuflecting human. “Excellent,” he hissed. “You continue to deliver on all that I ask of you.”

“What is thy bidding?”

“Bring this bounty hunter to the Kamino system. The cloners will be expecting him,” commanded Sidious.

“Yes, Master,” Dooku said obediently.

“You have done all that I have asked of you, my apprentice. You continue to demonstrate your loyalty even as you serve our enemy. Kneel before me.” Sidious placed his hand above Dooku’s head as he knelt down. “The time has come. The Force is strong with you.” Opening his eyes, he stared hard at the man kneeling before him. Sidious searched Dooku’s mind and felt him resisting the exploration with blinding light. A dark smile came to Darth Sidious’s lips. “Henceforth you shall be known as Darth Tyranus.”

“Thank you, my Master,” said the newly named Sith, standing before his new master.

“When you return, you are to eliminate all records of the system from the Jedi Archives before you leave the Order.”

“I understand, Lord Sidious.”

“Everything is proceeding as I have foreseen. Complete this mission, and then wait for my next orders on Mustafar.”

“As you wish,” Darth Tyranus said and turned to board his shuttle.

* * * * *

Jedi Knight Obi-Wan Kenobi delivered his Padawan, Anakin Skywalker, to the quarters in which he would live for the next cycle around the Coruscant sun, as he started his training. The boy’s education would be unique, as he was beginning at an older age than most Jedi. Obi-Wan was told by Yoda not to mention the Council’s discussions of the Sith or the boy being the Chosen One to any of the Jedi instructors, or anyone else he may come in contact with.

After keeping his commitment to his master’s dying request to train young Anakin, there was one task left for him to complete. Obi-Wan said goodbye for now to his Padawan and made his way to Qui-Gon Jinn’s quarters. When he arrived, it was just as Jinn had left it before quickly boarding the *Radiant VII* to begin his last mission. As he entered, Kenobi felt his master’s presence permeate the simple room.

He was drawn immediately to the humble chest of drawers that all Jedi kept in their quarters. Kenobi felt as though he almost heard his Master’s voice urge him toward it, but dismissed it to acclimating to the sudden loss days before. Again, as if he had been told exactly what steps to take, he pulled open the drawer

and reached to the back, underneath a brown cloak folded neatly inside.

The cold metallic holocron was there. He took it in his hand and closed the door to Qui-Gon's room. The Jedi Knight held it in the palm of his left hand and hovered his right hand above it. The golden metal, black-streaked and glassteel box floated an inch above his palm and light leaked from its sides. The corners of the cube spun and separated, hanging in the air. Then the holographic image of a Jedi Knight projected from the heart of the container and into the middle of the room.

Flickering blue light displayed the appearance of Qui-Gon Jinn. "My apprentice," the image of his former master said. "Held within this holocron are ancient secrets that the Jedi Council may not be ready for and the Sith must never learn. On your pilgrimage to Jedha to find your kyber crystal, I was chosen by the Whills to receive these teachings. As I record this entry, I still have much to learn, but I sense my time is short. I have been tasked with studying lessons that the Jedi might find unnatural but are critical to our survival. The lesson held within this box will teach of how to live beyond death. How to commune with the Force. You must learn what I have not. You must live beyond our line."

The image faded, and Obi-Wan waved his hand to close the holocron. He placed the cube in a pocket of his robe and sat down on one of the tuffets that adorned the humble room. Kenobi closed his eyes and reached out to feel something, anything swirling in the living Force that surrounded him.

“May the Force be with you, Master,” Obi-Wan said, and he became flush with the feeling of isolation and obligation to his destiny.