



FEDERATION HOSPITALITY

Dark. Cold. Desolate. Space was many things to many people, and very few considered it something to be cherished. To most, it was just another place to transport oneself throughout the galaxy, and that's what the small frame of the *Radiant VII* was doing as it soared through eternity with its destination of Utapau directly in front of it. The *Consular*-class space cruiser had been painted red so potential enemies would recognize its diplomatic immunity granted by the Senate of the Galactic Republic, although that never stopped some enemies from taking shots at it.

Even though the ship was one of great importance, its size would not have been an indicator of it. The cruiser was unable to fit many people, far less than most other cruisers of great diplomatic importance. Instead, a great deal of the ship was attended to by droids that did not require normal living facilities. Many of the droids also served as body guards, and half of the sentient crew also served as guards.

As the vessel approached the blue-white terrestrial planet, a great deal of the planet was blocked out to those in the cockpit by the hulking mass of the *Lucrehulk*-class battleships blockading it on the orders of the corporate Trade Federation. The titanic crafts were nearly three kilometers in diameter and shaped like flattened disk, in the middle of which was a sphere that held the vessels bridge and reactor core. The disk itself was broken in the front to make room for entrances to two enormous docking bays, one of which was supposedly prepared to welcome the *Radiant VII*.

In the cockpit of the *Consular*-class Republic vessel was Captain Maoi Madakor and her co-pilot, Lieutenant Antidar Williams. They had both served together during a battle in the Yinchorri Uprising one year earlier, and Madakor personally requested Williams as her co-pilot once she was given command of the *Radiant VII*. Behind them stood two imposing figures, one an elderly Jedi Master and his younger companion, a Jedi Knight. The Republic crew knew little about the situation that the two Jedi were headed into, although they had been told that the Neimoidian-controlled Trade Federation was outraged by the prohibition of slave labor by Republic corporations in non-Republic territory. In order to try to repeal the recently passed law, the Neimoidians blockaded the helpless Utapau, hoping that it would cause the Republic to cower to the Federation's demands.

Because the noble and eternally respected Knights of the Jedi Order were the well-known guardians of peace and justice in the Republic, the Republic's Supreme Chancellor Finis Valorum dispatched the two Jedi as ambassadors in the hopes of resolving the conflict. The rhetoric of the Senate had done nothing for the situation other than drown out the cries for rescue and hinder the diplomatic efforts, so it was understandable to the crew why Chancellor Valorum would call upon the Jedi to serve him, although they assumed it was not Senate-sanctioned as their voyage to Utapau was classified at the highest levels of government.

"Captain," the Jedi Master quickly interjected, breaking the thoughts of the crew as they were snapped back to attention, "tell them we wish to come aboard immediately. Then contact Chancellor Valorum on the secure frequency and tell him that we've arrived."

"Aye, sir," Madakor said with a slight, affirmative nod, and within a matter of minutes she received the confirmation signal from the Federation vessel and sent the message to the Chancellor's office on the capital world of Coruscant.

With the vessel making its way towards the lead blockade ship more rapidly, the two Jedi lifted their heads from the veil of shadows that they had been cloaked in, allowing the crew to see the faces of Jedi Master Jar Jar Dooku and Jedi Knight Obi-Wan Kenobi. Dooku, who had been Obi-Wan's master when Obi-Wan was an apprentice, was the taller of the two, and he was seventy standard years old. Obi-Wan, by comparison, was only thirty-three. Both had beards, Obi-Wan's golden brown and Dooku's bright white, although Obi-Wan's hair had grown out longer than Dooku's.

Obi-Wan looked out the forward window with a degree of hesitancy; ever since they had dropped out of hyperspace thirty minutes earlier, something had not felt right. It was as if there was a disturbance in the Force telling him to be wary of some sort of phantom menace in the very near future, and that it was something that no one could stop. Obi-Wan knew full well that he would be chided for doing so, but he could not help but raise his concerns to his former teacher and bitter companion.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Obi-Wan said with a worried sigh.

"I sense nothing," Dooku rebuffed coldly and without any hesitation, causing Obi-Wan to feel that Dooku had not even tried to see the situation from the Jedi Knight's point of view.

"It's not about the mission," Obi-Wan continued, ignoring Dooku's belittling tone. "It's something...something elsewhere. Something elusive. I can't quite figure out what it is."

"You're centering on your anxieties again," Dooku scolded. "Keep your concentration in the here and now where it belongs or else you won't be able to effectively carry out this mission. There are times and places for sensing the future, and this is not it."

"Perhaps if you had taught me to be mindful of the Living Force when I was your apprentice," Obi-Wan retorted with a frustrated tone, "I would not have to focus on my so-called anxieties."

"Know your place, Obi-Wan," Dooku said coldly, starting at him directly in the eye to showcase his disappointment as he used to do while they were master and apprentice.

Obi-Wan wanted to roll his eyes, but he knew that it would only worsen a constantly tense situation between the two of them. Obi-Wan awkwardly walked in front of him in the

cramped cockpit, seeing the maze of battle cruisers and the lush, green and blue sphere of Utapau hanging against the heavens. The planet gave off a very peaceful image and aura, but that was raped by the steel beasts that had placed their grip on the world. Nevertheless, although he had some apprehension about space travel, space itself was very serene to him, and he felt a sense of calmness that many other Jedi felt when looking into the heavens.

In space, it was as if Jedi slipped into the future and gazed as far as the Human eye could see and saw a vision of the worlds and stars, and all the wonders that could be. They believed that the Force, the energy field binding and penetrating all living beings, was infinite, and so its universe must have been too. It caused the excellence of the Force to magnify and the greatness of existence was made manifest; the Force was glorified not in one, but in countless stars and celestial masterpieces; not in a single planet, a single world of sentients, but in trillions upon trillions of them. Space was an infinity of worlds, and so far Obi-Wan relished every moment of it.

After a few minutes of docking procedures, the beauty of space was replaced by the image of a shimmering blue force field protecting the entrance to the lead battle cruiser's docking bay. In an instant, the field dropped, allowing the *Radiant VII* to slowly and carefully enter the small gap that led to the main docking bay. The battle cruiser's tractor beam took hold and guided the cruiser into the bay where the magnetic clamps locked the vessel into place. Not wanting to waste any time, the two hooded Jedi began making their way through the bowels of the cruiser towards the main hatch.

Believing it would help in the negotiations that they were about to engage in, the two Jedi had studied the recent history of the Federation quite extensively. It was a shipping corporation and cartel that had deals with countless technological and manufacturing planets within its sector of the galaxy to build its own battle droid army, and because of the army the Federation was able to maintain a monopoly over a large amount of trade routes. Their influence in the Republic was also unprecedented, gaining them a purchased seat in the Senate currently filled by Lott Dodd. Originally controlled by a directorate, the Neimoidian people took full control under it under Viceroy Nute Gunray, who appointed his own puppets. It was Gunray who had been the most vocally outraged over the slave laws, and the Republic believed the blockade was meant to be seen as an example to those who opposed him.

Ready to depart, the Jedi waited for the hatch light to turn green to signal that they could leave the *Radiant VII*, and once it did the door was opened and the exit ramp lowered. At that point, they stepped into the bright light of the docking bay, which was somewhat ironic considering the dark and dreary situation they had found themselves in. A few meters from the ramp, a silver protocol droid stood waiting for them and approached.

"I am TC-14 at your service," the droid said in Neimoidian, which the Jedi understood through the use of their universal translators. "We are currently following standard procedure for diplomatic guests. Please wait here for a few brief minutes while escorts are sent down to greet you in-person."

Dooku, having been standing in front, nodded in acknowledgment. The two Jedi then turned to one another with grins, as they both found it amusing that such a sophisticated droid would be used by the Neimoidians. The Federation was never known to favor elegance or beauty, and protocol droids had a great deal of both. Rather, the Federation was known to favor simple droids such as their lethal B-1 combat droid series. Knowing how arrogant

Neimoidians were towards their language and Galactic Basic Standard, they were also not surprised to see the droid speaking Neimoidian.

While they were waiting, Obi-Wan and Dooku took notice of their surroundings. The docking bay was unpopulated with actual life, but it was bustling with many forms of droid technology. B-1s roamed the bay, guarding whatever their masters felt was necessary to guard, and a few droid star fighters also rested overhead. The docking bay itself was a mesh of silver and gray, though they could not see the entire bay as it curved around and seemingly spanned the entire outer portion of the craft. Considering the forces that the Federation had amassed, that did not surprise the Jedi in the least.

Obi-Wan glanced at his former master, noticing that after only two minutes the aging Jedi was becoming impatient. It was a trait he had frequently come to associate with Dooku, and one Obi-Wan felt was unbecoming of a Jedi of Dooku's stature. Born on Dantooine, Obi-Wan had been taken by the Jedi Order from his young settler parents, and he was trained alongside other Padawans his age by Jedi Grandmaster Yoda. He had a brief relationship with fellow apprentice Siri Tachi when he was nearly thirteen, but nothing came of their forbidden relationship as Siri and her master were transferred to the School of Hidden Wisdom on Baltimn. Nevertheless, he cherished the time he had with her, even during his pre-apprentice studies with notable masters such as Cin Drallig, one of the greatest lightsaber duelists of all time. Obi-Wan's abilities with the Force and the blade made him somewhat arrogant during his youth, but under Yoda's guidance he was able to become more humble and reserved.

Despite his potential, when Obi-Wan neared the age of thirteen, it seemed he had little chance of becoming a Jedi Knight as a master had yet to select him; younglings who were not selected by a master to be trained by thirteen were assigned to the Jedi Service Corps. When Obi-Wan found out that Dooku was going to be visiting the Jedi Temple to find an apprentice, Obi-Wan had a fierce duel with one of his competitors, a Zabrak named Bruck Chun, to draw Dooku's attention, although the fierce offensive caused Dooku to pass over him due to Obi-Wan seeming too dangerous. The rejection caused Obi-Wan to be assigned as a miner on Bandomeer in the Jedi AgriCorps, but fate seemed to give him a second chance when Dooku also traveled to Bandomeer for a mission on the same ship.

En route to the planet, the future master and apprentice realized that Dooku's old Padawan, Xanatos, had set a trap for Dooku and was plotting to assassinate him. Obi-Wan helped him avoid being killed, which let Dooku see that Obi-Wan was worthy to be his Padawan. Despite the seemingly good start, Obi-Wan and Dooku ended up having very different views on the nature of the Jedi Order and its relationship to the Supreme Chancellor and Galactic Senate, as well as the nature of the Force itself. This caused an inordinate amount of strain in their relationship, and Obi-Wan's training often became awkward, or downright tense and ferocious. Even so, the Stark Hyperspace War that had ended seven years before the Utapau blockade proved that, when necessary, they could be each other's strongest ally and that they could work together in most situations.

"How do you think Gunray will respond to Chancellor Valorum's demands?" Obi-Wan asked curiously, breaking the silence that had awkwardly been created between them.

"These Neimoidians may be ruthless and heartless, but they're still cowards when you apply the right pressure," Dooku told him after pondering the question for a moment, eventually repeating what he had read in the Republic's data files earlier in the voyage. "The negotiations will be short."

The bridge of the Federation vessel was massive; six large windows adorned the front which let the commanders within the bridge keep watchful eyes on their fleet, and the planet that rotated quietly behind them. Dozens of Neimoidians and droids were stationed at a line of computer consoles in front of the windows, with the commander, first officer and honored guests having large seats behind the consoles. The rest of the bridge was a pit of computers and blinking lights where dozens of droid workers sat and controlled the guidance and weapons system, as well as maintained the signal that powered all of the Federation battle droids in the area.

Trade Federation Viceroy Nute Gunray stood on the main walkway of the bridge in front of a large viewing monitor, just beside his most trusted adviser Rune Haako. Both were Neimoidians of normal appearance, with green sickly faces and large black eyes. Neither had hair, and large ceremonial hats sat atop their heads, with matching robes flowing down to the ground around their shoulders.

Gunray had been a member of the Federation for years, starting as a trade officer, and quickly advanced in rank when he helped force the Pulsar Supertanker Corporation out of the Federation. Gunray was given the empty seat on the directorate and served as the Senator of the Trade Federation, and he was able to aggressively force the Republic into letting the Federation expand its army with help from former Eriadu Senator Ranulph Tarkin.

Many suggested that the Viceroy acted like a coward during the Stark Hyperspace War, where he supported a Republic offensive against Iaco Stark and the Stark Commercial Combine after the group bombed Federation bacta tankers in the Outer Rim. Others, however, gave Gunray the reputation of being ruthless and cold blooded due to his ordering the assassination of Jedi Master Tyvokka, an act which he furiously denied in public. This and more gained him the position of Federation Viceroy, although for a time he did not have full control over the corporation due to the powers of the directorate.

"What?" the now-sole leader of the Federation asked TC-14, who was speaking to him over the monitor, with a shout in his native Neimoidian. "What did you say?"

"I said the ambassadors are Jedi Knights, I believe," TC-14 responded in the cold metallic voice of a non-personalized protocol droid.

"You said the Jedi would be kept out of this!" Haako shouted. "Now they're here to force us into a settlement. We'll lose our trade franchise because of you!"

"I will speak with Lord Maul," Gunray rebuffed, a chill creeping down his spine at the mere mention of the dark one's name. "Distract them while I contact him."

"Have you lost your mind?" Haako insulted, a bold move for someone who was nothing more than a mere puppet. "Those Jedi can twist your mind and turn your own private thoughts against you. Send the droid."

On the monitor, TC-14 bowed in agreement, and the image faded away as the droid prepared to return to the Jedi ambassadors. Gunray turned around and made his way to the holographic generator on the far side of the bridge. He always hated having to contact Lord Maul, a self-professed Dark Jedi Master; the dark one spent most of his time on board the Federation command vessel in the chambers that the worker droids had constructed for him

in the bowels of the ship, but certain times called for the advice of their self-appointed superior officer.

Within moments, the generator kicked in and the shrouded and hooded face of Maul appeared as a blue computer-generated image. Very little was known about Maul, but his face told Gunray everything he needed to know: Maul had no ideals, simply hatred. The dark lord's face was covered in red and black tattoos, and the bulges emanating from the top of his pitch black hood indicated that he was a horned Zabrak. To some, Maul looked like the devil of Hell spoken of in Corellian mythology, and that was enough to worry many of the timid Federation commanders.

"I told you never to interrupt my meditations," Maul growled at Gunray, as well as Haako when the latter approached the generator. "This had better be worth my while."

"It is, my lord," Gunray assured in as calm a tone as he could muster. "The ambassadors sent by Chancellor Valorum are Jedi. They are here to force us into a settlement."

"I am well aware of this," Maul informed them with a sadistic grin that told the Neimoidians that he had known that the ambassadors would be Jedi for quite some time.

"You knew?" Haako demanded to know. "You didn't tell us they would be Jedi. You've betrayed us!"

"You seem more worried about the Jedi than you are of me, puppet," Maul laughed, the noise created from doing so sending terror into Haako's heart. "I am amused."

A subtle smile remained on Maul's shrouded face. Gunray understood by that and by Maul's comments to Haako that the dark lord was a man to be feared. Gunray glanced towards his chief associate with an angry gaze that pierced Haako's eyes and caused him to back down from his tirade, eventually leaving the area so Gunray could continue the conversation without interruption. Haako, however, remained close enough to hear what Maul had to say, not wanting to give up his right to be at least somewhat included in the conversation. After everything he had done for Gunray and the Federation, he felt he deserved at least that much.

"What will you have me do?" Gunray asked the dark one in a consciously submissive tone.

"The Jedi have arrived earlier than I expected," Maul informed him, much to Gunray's surprise. "We must accelerate our plans. Begin landing your troops."

"Is that legal?" the Viceroy asked.

"I will make it legal," Maul rebuffed coldly and without hesitation. "Let the Jedi do what they need to do. They are crucial to our plans."

As the hologram disappeared, Gunray breathed a sigh of relief. He had first come into contact with Maul two years earlier, and they became allies when Maul promised to make Gunray the sole leader of the Federation, as well as unlimited expansion for the Federation's army. Gunray accepted the offer and one year later, during a summit on Eriadu, the Federation battle droids guarding the directorate opened fire on the members, all of whom were not Neimoidian. All of the directorate members were killed save for Gunray and Senator Dodd, both of whom were conveniently absent, and after the assassination Gunray filled the empty seats with his puppets. After the passing of the slavery laws, Maul once

again rendered assistance in planning the blockade, which Gunray felt had so far been a tremendous success.

Although Maul had given his orders, the Viceroy had other ideas and motives. He would surely follow the order to begin landing troops on the surface, as that was the moment he had been waiting for since the invasion was planned, but he would not let the Jedi live. His concern was regaining the right to use slave labor in the Outer Rim, not the concerns of Maul and whatever his intentions were with the Jedi. Being the businessman he was, Gunray was worried about the corporate bottom line, and he would not simply sit by and watch as his own interests were threatened by Maul's outside influence.

The docking bay began feeling colder than it previously had as Obi-Wan anxiously awaited the arrival of their escorts. Normally, he would have been somewhat more patient, but he was beginning to join Dooku in becoming frustrated with the wait. Obi-Wan wondered what the Viceroy was up to, and the Jedi Knight's thoughts drifted towards the files they had been given on Gunray. The Viceroy, and the rest of the Federation hierarchy, may have been ruthless, but he was also extremely cowardly when it came to external threats. Had he somehow found out that Obi-Wan and Dooku were Jedi, Gunray could have perceived their arrival as a threat, possibly confirming the elusive feeling that Obi-Wan had felt before the ship docked.

"Is it in their nature to make us wait this long?" Obi-Wan asked somewhat worriedly.

"No," Dooku told him, the feeling of worry being mutual between them. "I sense an unusual amount of fear and deception for something as trivial as a trade dispute. Fear in situations like this leads to rash decisions and bold action, and both of those would prove threatening to us."

Obi-Wan could not help but agree with his former master, giving him the feeling that there was a much deeper plot in the works than just a simple blockade. He could not help but wonder what the Jedi Council would think when they heard of his suspicions. Many of the twelve members, save specifically for Qui-Gon Jinn and Silas Lasek, did not usually take criticisms of their initial investigations very well. It was the pitfall of the Jedi becoming comfortable and complacent following the extinction of the Lords of the Sith a thousand years earlier.

The Jedi Knight's fears were seemingly confirmed when he felt another strange, haunting disturbance in the Force, its source very close by. He looked over to Dooku who had a somewhat distressed look on his face, although he could tell the Jedi Master was straining to hide it more effectively than Obi-Wan would have been able to. Within seconds, however, both of them knew what the other was thinking, and they quickly put their hands on their belts.

In the blink of an eye, an explosion rocked the area, sending the two Jedi to the ground skidding towards the wall. They immediately covered their face, protecting themselves from any debris that was flying their way, and after a few moments they looked up to see what was left of the *Radiant VII* burning in the docking bay. The Jedi leapt to their feet and pulled their lightsabers off of their belts. Obi-Wan had a standard hilt with an azure blade, and he had nearly mastered the defense combat form of Soresu. The hilt was primarily a silver shaft where the crystals that operated the device were placed, and black areas throughout the hilt gave it some character while the red activation button rested three quarters of the

way up the shaft. At the bottom were six cubical spikes that Obi-Wan felt added additional character, symbolizing that he was peaceful and elegant yet unpredictable.

Dooku, on the other hand, used a far less common and nearly unused style of hilt for his emerald blade, which made him even better known throughout the Jedi Order. The curved hilt of old-style fencing had been used thousands of years earlier during the Order's golden age, and it allowed for more precise movements and increased flexibility during combat. The style also proved to be a challenge to opponents, as the user of the blade would be able to strike at different angles than a normal hilt allowed.

Both Jedi looked around the bay as they heard a slight hissing noise and realized that the battle droids that had been nearby were noticeably absent from the area. At first, they could not ascertain where the noise was coming from, but as they whipped around they watched as gas began to slowly flood the room. The flow of gas increased as more poured out, and it was clear to them that they were about to be victims of a desperate assassination attempt. Obi-Wan knew that they had to survive to report such events to the Jedi High Council, as it would prove that there was more to the situation than had originally met the eye.

"I'd say this mission is past the negotiation stage," Obi-Wan quipped under his breath.

As the two Jedi held their breaths, the yellow-green glass still flowing from the vents, a squad of B-1 battle droids formed up on the other side of the door. The heads of the B-1 line were designed specifically to look like the skull of a dead Neimoidian, and the intent of the Federation was to use the models to frighten an enemy. The droids were also color-coded based on their programmed skills and on their ranks.

The lead battle droid, designated Green One for the assassination of the Jedi, reacted as the holo-emitter it was asked to carry lit up and beeped. At first, the droid raised its blaster, thinking that it was one of the Jedi. It quickly realized, however, that the noise was coming from its own device, and as it activated the holo-emitter the shimmering blue holographic image of Nute Gunray appeared.

"They should be dead by now," Gunray hissed. "Eliminate whatever is left of them."

"Acknowledged," Green One said in Neimoidian as the hologram faded away, after which he quickly turned to one of the other droids. "Check it out, Green Six. We'll cover you."

Green Six acknowledged the order and slowly began to make its way towards the door. As the droid approached, it activated its bio-scanners so that it would be prepared for if anything came from within. As the droid cautiously opened the door, the deadly yellow cloud flooded the hall, and the droids cocked their weapons as the smoke moved through the gray steel corridors. Suddenly a humming noise could be heard, and two blades flew out from the smoke, slicing down two droids before flying back into the cloud.

"It's them!" Green One shouted. "Blast them!"

Within a nanosecond, the droids had raised their weapons and shots rang out into the room. Each shot was deflected back with a graceful and artful ease and skill as Obi-Wan and Dooku deflected the attacks. They emerged from the smoke and quickly began cutting down the droids in front of them. One by one, the droids fell to their Jedi assaults. Green One attempted to back away from the fight, as it knew that Gunray was watching its holo-transmissions through its sensors from the bridge of the ship. As it prepared to contact its master, however, Obi-Wan's blue blade sliced through its neck, effectively destroying the

droid and cutting off the bridge's link to the small skirmish. Like an unstoppable force, the two Jedi had worked in unison, destroying each of the droids that had been sent to kill them.

The Jedi's ears caught wind of a metallic sound rolling down the hall on their right side, and they realized that destroyer droids, more advanced than B-1s, were being sent after them. Deciding to flee, Dooku and Obi-Wan thrust their hands forward as if to grab hold of the air around them and made their way into a deep, albeit brief, concentration. Subtly twisting their wrists, they drew the powers of the Force into themselves like a waterfall flowing freely over the Organa Falls of Alderaan. When the power reached its peak, they manipulated the Force and the universe around them, unleashing its power as they burst into a superhuman run throughout the halls; the destroyer droids were left to try and ascertain the location of the Jedi Knights that they had lost.

At the end of the long hall, out of sight of the destroyers, the two Jedi slowed their run, not wanting to waste their energy for too long considering they would need a great deal of it to escape the ship alive. They rounded a corner, hoping to find a way off of the ship, but instead they were confronted by a much larger threat: dozens upon dozens of B-1 and destroyer droids standing in front of them, with even more rolling and marching in from behind and from doorways to the side. They were effectively surrounded, but to make matters worse Gunray himself arrogantly strode through the line of droids to see the Jedi face to face. It was clear to them that when protected by well over one hundred droids, Gunray felt no reason to be afraid. He believed the Jedi had been backed into a corner, and that gave him the confidence he needed to confront them.

"Nice escorts," Obi-Wan sarcastically remarked, partially out of a need to push the Viceroy's button and partially out of a desire to showcase Gunray's deceit. "You sure are the hospitable type, aren't you?"

"I wanted to make sure that the negotiations were as comfortable for you as possible," Gunray quipped as a retort, still not speaking in Galactic Basic due to his beliefs on the superiority of Neimoidian. "I trust you enjoyed your stay here."

"It was splendid," Dooku nodded with a grin. "We really must do this again sometime, but right now we must be going."

Dooku turned to Obi-Wan and let out a faint cough to get his attention. Obi-Wan turned and saw Dooku playing with his beard, and it took him a moment to realize that the Jedi Master was speaking in code. Dooku was indicating a precise command by stroking his beard and tapping his eye lids, one that Obi-Wan had learned many years earlier during the Stark Hyperspace War. It would be a challenge to carry out, although they had been in worse situations before so he was confident that they would be successful once again.

"Kill them!" Gunray shouted, prompting the droids to raise their blasters.

"Not today," Obi-Wan forcefully rebuffed before thrusting his lightsaber into the ground.

With Dooku following suit, the two Jedi spun in place and cut two swaths in the floor. The circular holes quickly gave way and they fell to the next level, tucking and rolling to avoid being injured. The battle droids on the floor above them opened fire through the hole, but as Obi-Wan and Dooku anxiously ran they were able to make it out of range. That, however, did not change their situations, as a small squadron of battle droids burst out of a nearby security center, immediately firing upon the ambassadors.

"It never ends..." Dooku muttered with a sigh, his age beginning to catch up with him.

Getting back into the fray, Dooku joined Obi-Wan in cutting down the half dozen or so droids that emerged to meet them. Noticing the extensive security camera network being displayed in the security room on a dozen different screens, the two Jedi forced passed two other droids and cut down the remaining security droids stationed in the brightly lit security center. Deactivating their lightsabers, Obi-Wan quickly ran to the door and shut it, although he did not have the codes to lock it. In the interest of quick improvisation, Obi-Wan grabbed a blaster from one of the fallen droids and shot out the locking console, which would hold any droids on the other side out of the door out of the security center, at least for the time being.

"Can you find your way through their network?" Dooku asked as Obi-Wan was sitting down in front of the computers, not knowing much about Obi-Wan's computer skills.

"I should be able to," Obi-Wan told him. "What am I looking for?"

"We'll know it when we see it," Dooku said, which did not reassure Obi-Wan as he took that to mean that Dooku was also attempting to improvise.

Obi-Wan scanned numerous images throughout the ships, but it took him a few minutes to reach a video feed that caught their attention: thousands upon thousands of battle droids and dozens of hover tanks and troops transporters being loaded onto large troop transports to land on the planet. The Multi-Troop Transports especially caught their attention; also called MTTs, the transports were capable of carrying over one hundred battle droids each. A rack would extend from the face of the transport, allowing the droids to be deployed directly into combat if need be. The face of the transport was reinforced with case-hardened metal alloy studs and was designed to smash through enemy walls to reach its target.

"It's an invasion army," Obi-Wan gasped, having not anticipated such a course of action.

"This is an unusual move for the Trade Federation," Dooku expressed, also having been caught off guard by the impending invasion. "We must warn Queen Arcadia and contact Chancellor Valorum."

"Maybe if we ask nicely," Obi-Wan suggested, "we could hitch a ride with our friends in that landing bay."

"Agreed," Dooku said, much to Obi-Wan's surprise. "We'll stow aboard separate ships and meet on the surface. Maintain communication silence until we reach the planet."

"Understood," Obi-Wan acknowledged.

"Now find the fastest way to get there," Dooku told him, prompting Obi-Wan to immediately begin searching a map file that showed the layout of the vessel, although he noticed Obi-Wan looking up near the ceiling. "What is it?"

"There," Obi-Wan said, pointing to a vent on the far side of the room. "That bay is only one floor below. We can use the ventilation system to get there undetected."

Dooku let out a faint chuckle, happy to see that the simplicity of something such as a ventilation system would be able to help him avoid being shot at anymore. He made his way

over to the vent and Obi-Wan shot up from his chair behind him, and the two started to force a few loose chairs over towards the vent. Dooku was the first to stand up, and Obi-Wan helped him up. Although Dooku would not admit it, he needed the boost due to his age, but he was too proud to acknowledge it.

"I'll see you on the planet," Dooku said as he began to crawl up to vent. "For our sakes, let us hope that we aren't wrong about this course of action."

"You were right about one thing, though," Obi-Wan told Dooku with a smile. "The negotiations were short."

"I'm sorry," Dooku coldly replied, stopping dead in his tracks after Obi-Wan's comment, "but were you trying to be funny?"

"I beg your pardon?" Obi-Wan asked, confused as to what Dooku was attempting to insinuate.

"Save your humor for someone else," Dooku told him as he rolled his eyes and began crawling through the cramped, dusty shaft.

Obi-Wan was not far behind him, although he was sure to give Dooku enough room to where they were not bumping into one another. Obi-Wan felt somewhat defeated by the fact that his former master had brushed him off once again, but he knew that he had to concentrate on the mission and put his disappointment behind him. It was something he frequently had to do, and he always tried to look past Dooku's remarks and try to see that his former master only wanted what was best for him. Unfortunately, however, Obi-Wan generally came to feel that such ideas were only wishful thinking.

Infuriated that he had underestimated the Jedi, Gunray returned to the bridge where he would await further word for them. He immediately began to pace the walkway once he arrived, but was interrupted when Maul's dark presence silently but terrifyingly made its way onto the bridge. It did not take a genius to figure out that Maul, a tool and weapon of absolute hatred and corruption, was entirely displeased with him, and Gunray knew for a fact that death tended to fall upon all those who wronged the dark lord.

"Viceroy," Maul hissed, causing Gunray to jump as he spoke, "I commanded you not to interfere with the Jedi."

"Yes, my lord, yes you did," Gunray told him, "but I thought - "

"Who are you to think?" Maul growled, albeit calmly and somewhat artfully for someone who claimed to be a Dark Jedi Master. "Your sole purpose here is to do what I tell you, and for betraying me you will be punished immediately. I am temporarily in full command until you return...if you return."

Maul raised his hands, and two of his guards immediately stepped towards them and grabbed the Viceroy forcefully by his shoulders, dragging him out of the bridge screaming and pleading in agony to be spared. Maul had specific punishment techniques that he used for certain levels of failure, and he was to be sure that Gunray received one of the more severe ones for nearly derailing a plan that had been in motion for years. Though he

despised taking command, preferring to keep to his meditations and dark studies, Gunray's stupidity would force him to acquiesce and assume control over the fleet.

"My lord," a crew member shouted from the bit below Maul, "there's an incoming transmission from the planet."

The dark one nodded his head and the view screen before him came to life, revealing the face of Queen Sabé Arcadia of Utapau. The Human queen, who was twenty-five years old, was tall and slender, her regal elegance showing as she sat on her throne. Arcadia was dressed in a long, pinkish purple robe, one that was more casual than formal in terms of traditional royal clothing on the planet. Her long brown hair fell freely from her head to just below the shoulders, flowing down her beautiful face. Normally a woman who always had a smile on her face, the tense situation caused the queen to stare at Maul with a look of grim determination and resolve.

"Queen Arcadia," Maul said as he bowed, faking respect for someone he would just as soon kill were it not for the specific plans for the invasion, "I'm honored that you've graced me with your presence. It is a great pleasure."

"You will not be so pleased when you hear what I have to say, Lord Maul," Arcadia said, brushing him off immediately to let him know what her position on the situation was. "Your blockade of our planet has ended."

"I was not made aware of such a failure," Maul said in jest, knowing where she was going with her comments. "If I look behind me, I am certain that I will still see dozens of Federation vessels in position around your planet."

"I have been given word that the Senate will be voting on the blockade in a matter of days," Arcadia informed him, much to his amusement.

"And you know the outcome already?" Maul asked in a quip. "With foresight like yours, it's a wonder why the Republic even bothers to hold votes."

"Enough of this pretense!" Arcadia shouted, although she quickly retreated and regained her composure. "I am aware that the Chancellor's ambassadors are with you now, and that you've been commanded to reach a settlement."

"I know nothing of any Jedi," Maul told her, noticing her surprised reaction at his consciously made slip of the tongue. "You must be mistaken."

"We'll see," Arcadia said with certain finality, although still processing why he would show his hand by mentioning the Jedi, "but the Federation has gone too far this time."

The queen ended the transmission from her end, and as the picture faded away, Maul turned from the screen with a grin. However, he could tell that the crew did not share in his amusement. Once more emboldened by what he perceived to be a betrayal on Maul's fault, Haako stormed towards him, his chest puffed up and his confidence having risen.

"You told her that the Jedi were here!" Haako shouted. "Now she knows that you were lying about the ambassadors."

"I am well aware of the repercussions of my choice of words, puppet," Maul informed him, "but it was a purposely made slip-of-the-tongue."

"But - "

"Trust me, Rune Haako," Maul said, his yellow-red eyes piercing the Neimoidians as Maul leaned in closer, "everything is proceeding exactly as planned."

With the queen's suspicion level raised, Maul assumed that they would neglect monitoring what was happening in orbit and begin deliberating over their next course of action. This prepared Maul to give the Federation exactly what they wanted: a surprise invasion of Utapau. First, the Federation would have to ensure that all communication on the planet was disrupted. Only then would the helpless world be cut off from the Republic, and only then would the planet be Maul's for the taking. It would be a glorious day indeed.