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ESCAPE

War was a dirty business. The people of Utapau learned very quickly that they were beyond fortunate for not having been touched by an outside war since the Mandalorian invasion of Ogana during the Great Sovereign Crusades, a cataclysmic war between the Republic and the Third Sith Empire. It had been over thirty-five hundred years since that war, so no one on Utapau had been able to fathom the untold consequences that bloodshed of that magnitude could have.

That all changed in only a matter of hours.

Boundless columns of battle droids marched down the main roads of Ogana. STAPs and droid starfighters flew overhead, and MTTs stood guard outside of the city. Under orders direct from Lord Maul, no one was to leave or enter the city. The dark one hoped that it would prevent the Jedi from reaching the queen, but little did he know that the Jedi were rapidly approaching in the rivers instead.

The city of Ogana was one of many on the planet. One thousand years before the Federation first laid their treacherous eyes on Utapau, the city was engulfed in a long and difficult civil war with other settlements. It wasn't until the reign of King Jafan in Ogana that the conflict ended, the settlements unified and Ogana became the capital. The Humans of Utapau existed in peace with one another from that point forward.

Ogana had a unified and harmonious architectural structure, which came about after strict planning and extensive rebuilding from the Mandalorian invasion millennia earlier. If one was to stand at the highest point in Ogana, they would have been able to see the city stretch out towards the horizon. It was a vast architectural triumph with high stone walls, gilded green domes, peaked towers and sculpted archways. Sunlight reflected off of the surface of the roofs, and the architecture was a companion to the lush green world. The immense flow of the waterfalls kilometers away allowed for a soft and distant backdrop for anyone who took the time to listen for the beauty of the planet.

It didn't take much for that beauty to be raped. Battle droids and destroyers made their way into each building and pulled out the citizens from within. All throughout the streets, people were herded into packs and brought towards the edge of the city. There was mass confusion and panic. People were shouting in fear, not knowing how to handle what was happening.

One woman lost her calm demeanor and turned to face her battle droid guard, grabbing its metallic neck. In a pre-programmed defense maneuver, the battle droid designated as Blue Seven pulled the trigger on its blaster and the woman fell to the ground. The people in the area screamed and huddled together, hoping that there would be protection in numbers. In the end, they had little choice but to continue down the streets at the droid's orders.

On the outskirts of the city, various structures were taking shape while under rapid construction from droid workers. They were large, fenced in concentration camps with barrack buildings and guard towers visible even from the furthest quarters of the city. The camps would be used in the subjugation of the city, and more camps would be constructed in the rest of the planet's settlements to house those citizens as well. Battle droids would herd numerous people into them, the droid's emotionless faces and programming not allowing them to show remorse for their actions.

Just outside of the royal palace, the claw-footed landing legs of a *Sheathipede*-class transport shuttle touched down on the streets. Manufactured by Haol Chall Engineering, the ship was shaped like a soldier beetle to frighten enemies. The craft was flown by an automatic pilot so the cabin space could be increased, and it was only used for planetary travel or to ferry passengers to and from starships in orbit.

The engines on the transport deactivated, prompting a hatch on the port side to unlatch itself from its hold and allow the docking ramp to descend towards the stone ground. Nute Gunray limped down the ramp, with Rune Haako just behind him. The Viceroy was bruised, battered and forced to walk with a cane as his leg had been broken by the torture at the hands of Lord Maul. If anything, it taught him not to openly disobey the Dark Jedi again.

Gunray grimaced at the pain from the torture, but he couldn't help but chuckle at the Federation's swift and resounding victory over such feeble people. He took in the fresh air of the morning, having tasted nothing but the cold and metallic stench of space travel for months. While Utapau was certainly different than his home world of Cato Neimoidia, a much moister yet temperate world than this, Gunray could feel a sense of calm on the once-peaceful world. It put his mind at ease, and the soft gentle breeze of the morning helped him forget about the pain that he endured hours earlier. As OOM-9 approached, however, the Viceroy quickly remembered why he had landed on the planet in the first place.

"Viceroy," OOM-9's robotic voice called out, "we have captured Queen Arcadia."

Before Gunray could respond in glee, his attention turned to the grand staircase at the foot of the palace, resting only a dozen or so meters away from him. Queen Arcadia, her advisers and handmaidens all emerged from within and began making a descent down the stairwell towards the streets below. Each of them was held at gunpoint but a battle droid, and they all did their best to show a lack of emotion in the interest of professionalism. Gunray could see through their veiled disguise, though, and could very clearly see the worry that was subtly etching itself across their faces. Appearing strong in the face of adversity was noble, yet also foolish in such a situation.

Arcadia bit her tongue to avoid gasping. Hordes of her people were being pushed through the streets like animals towards their cages. She had watched the horror of the siege that was now ending from her throne room, desperate to find a way to end it all while knowing it was far beyond her power. Panaka and his men had tried to mount a defense, but Arcadia called them back. She knew it was a futile resistance when her forces were so severely outnumbered, and she wouldn't be able to live with herself if she had ordered them to their

deaths.

"We've brought you out of your chambers for one purpose, your Highness," Gunray told her once the royal party finally arrived in the streets.

"I was not 'brought' anywhere, Viceroy," Arcadia denied, her tone cold and harsh. "This is *my* planet and I do not recognize any authority other than my own."

"It's bad enough that you cut off all communication," Sio Bibble said before anyone could respond, his normally peaceful tone far more aggravated than the queen's, "and it's bad enough that you pretended that your blockade was legal, but to land an army here and occupy us? How will you explain this barbaric act to the Senate?"

In his decades of politics, Bibble had never seen anything quite like the invasion of his planet. He was a learned man, a philosopher and an outspoken pacifist, but he did fully recognize that there came a time when one would have to defend the sovereignty of their planet from treacherous acts such as this. As the Governor of Ogana, he offered sound advice to both Veruna Arcadia and, for the last few years, Queen Arcadia as he sat at the head of their respective Advisory Councils. He dealt with regional representation on a daily basis, also meeting with town officials from Ogana. Many felt it would be a boring job, but he couldn't think of anything else he would rather do.

"The queen and I will sign a treaty," Gunray replied, his voice ripe with sarcastic arrogance as he knew full well that any such treaty would be a sham passed as being legal. "It will legitimize our occupation here. I have assurance that it will be ratified by the Senate."

"A treaty?" Bibble shouted, his anger reaching a boiling point and the disgust in his voice becoming uncontrollable each time the Viceroy spoke. "In this blatant act of war?"

"I will not cooperate," Arcadia insisted without a hint of fear in her voice, although her confident demeanor truly masked the grave fear that she felt beneath the surface.

"Now now, your Highness," Gunray said confidently, "I have heard stories of your compassion. In time, the suffering of your people will persuade you to see our point of view in this matter."

As Gunray spoke, Arcadia winced as she heard a scream coming from the distant corners of the city. She couldn't bring herself to wonder who was screaming or why, knowing that the truth would undoubtedly help to bend her resolve. That was something she simply couldn't allow. In the face of such dreadful danger, she couldn't afford to have her will broken by someone as slimy as the Viceroy of the Trade Federation.

"Do what you want," Arcadia defiantly commanded, fully aware of the repercussions that such a statement could have.

"If that is your wish," Gunray said with a nod as he turned towards the droid OOM-9. "Process them, Commander."

"Acknowledged," OOM-9 replied, rotating towards another battle droid. "Red Five, take them to Camp Four."

The battle droid nodded its metal head in affirmation. Red Five and its fellow battle droids gathered Arcadia and her advisers into a smaller group before moving them towards the

concentration camps. Gunray's reddish orange eyes followed them away. He couldn't help but find himself filled with immense satisfaction. Things were going perfectly for him, save for the unfortunate session of torture. Soon, his plans would be complete and the Republic's anti-slavery law would be overturned. It was only a matter of time.

It wasn't until walking through the city square that Arcadia realized the magnitude of the situation they were in. The plaza was littered with hundreds of battle droids and tanks. Droid starfighters landed and took off like clockwork, refueling before heading towards other settlements. Arcadia knew that New Centrif had been one of the first to fall, and Panaka had told her only a few minutes earlier that Harte Secur and Spinnaker had also fallen to the Federation's might.

The queen lowered her head in shame as she walked, realizing the mistakes she had made in both policy and personal judgment. She wanted to admit that, despite his misguided reasons, her father was right when he made the decision to expand the planet's security forces, but something was keeping her from fully accepting that reality. She wanted to believe that the negotiations could have been different and it was more her own failing than diplomacy's failing, but part of her still yearned to say that if she had trusted in her late father's judgment then the invasion might have been repelled.

Departing the plaza, the group turned down a side alley that would take them to Camp Four. Despite being under construction, enough of it was completed to house a few hundred prisoners. STAPs hummed overhead as they passed back and forth. The group couldn't see them, but their enlarged shadows were cast against the sides of the building. They weren't an imminent threat, but it reminded the queen and her advisers that the droids were everywhere they could imagine.

Suddenly, Red Five brought the group to an abrupt stop, going silent and motionless for a few moments. A man, draped in a brown robe and hood that obscured his face from the view of the droids, stood directly in their way. He looked only at the ground, prompting the droids not to perceive him as a threat for the time being. The entire group stared at him for a moment, all of them trying to ascertain what exactly the man was doing.

"I'm looking for Queen Arcadia of Utapau," the figure said, his voice ripe with sarcasm as he raised his head to give them a clear view of the face of Obi-Wan Kenobi.

The queen shifted uncomfortably, fearing that Obi-Wan was an assassin sent to kill her. His mysterious actions caused all of the advisers, including Panaka, to become slightly agitated, as they also felt that the queen was being targeted for assassination. Of course, Arcadia's visible lack of comfort was an indicator to Obi-Wan that he had found the queen, so he smiled wryly as he prepared his next move.

Without warning, Obi-Wan threw his hood behind his head. His hand stretched outward as he called his lightsaber into it with the Force, activating it as soon as the metal touched his palm. The Jedi Knight dove into the air and gracefully somersaulted forward, slicing through Red Five with his blue blade like butter. As Obi-Wan cut down battle droid after battle droid, Dooku and Jar jumped down from a breezeway overhead. Dooku ignited his emerald blade and Jar brandished an electropole he had taken from the bongo, which they had abandoned in the rivers less than an hour earlier.

Arcadia watched as the three rescuers fought, cutting down more and more droids in a matter of seconds. Just as the Jedi were butchering the last of the droids, Arcadia turned suddenly and saw a tank pull up at the edge of the alley and rotate its tank towards them.

She tried to scream out as she turned away, but it was too late. The tank shot its cannon and a large red bolt of energy flew past her and into the building beside her. The queen was thrown down another, smaller alleyway and could begin to smell the stench of charred corpses. She knew instinctively that some of her advisers and handmaidens had been killed, but she wasn't about to let herself collapse in despair.

Having landed on her stomach, the queen abruptly turned back over, only to find that she was staring up the barrel of a gun being held by a battle droid. She dove away, landing on her stomach again and bracing herself for the cold, stinging blast of the droid's weapon. Instead, she heard the unexpected sound of electrified metal, followed by a light thump on the ground below her. The queen once again turned back over, finding Jar standing above her after having used his electropole to destroy the droid.

The Gungan reached out his hand, helping Arcadia to her feet. The queen looked at him strangely, having never seen a member of his species before. Even stranger was the look on Jar's face as he held her hand for a moment. He noticed a large ring on her finger, one that had a familial crest that Jar knew he had seen before. The rounded-off arrowhead shape was familiar to him, but he didn't know why. It would likely come to him in time, but for now he had more important matters to worry about.

"You're a Gungan, aren't you?" the queen asked, which Jar replied to with an affirmative nod. "What's your name?"

"Jar Binks," the Gungan told her as he turned back around, walking towards the rest of the group where the Jedi had successfully destroyed both the droids and the tank that nearly killed the queen.

"The prince?" Arcadia asked, the name familiar to her. The question promoted Jar to stop and wonder how the queen even knew who he was, although he did not turn back around.

"How do you know me?" Jar asked. He was able to trust some Humans, such as Obi-Wan, but the fact that the planet's Human leader knew him was cause for some concern. He wanted to overcome the prejudice that he naturally held against the queen, but for now that was impossible.

"I once heard my father mention you," Arcadia replied. "Why is the Crowned Prince of the Gungan Empire in Ogana?"

"I haven't been a prince for a long time," Jar said scornfully, "but I'm sure you and your father knew all about that."

Arcadia cocked an eyebrow, her face showing the insult that Jar had thrown at her. She had no idea why, but she could tell that he was bitter. She had never encountered him before so she knew well enough that it was not because of her, but it wouldn't have surprised her if her father had wronged the Gungan somehow.

"Your Highness," Obi-Wan called out when he spotted her, running towards her with the other Jedi and the queen's entourage. "We must leave the streets immediately."

"Who are you?" Arcadia asked, suddenly much more hopeful than she had been before the Jedi and his group had come to save her.

"My name is Obi-Wan Kenobi," Obi-Wan told her before motioning towards Dooku, "and this

is Jar Jar Dooku. We are Jedi Knights and ambassadors for the Supreme Chancellor. You've already met our Gungan friend, I see."

"Your negotiations seem to have failed, Ambassador," Governor Bibble scoffed.

"The negotiations never took place," Dooku retorted, prompting a great look of concern on the governor's cracked and aging face. "It's urgent that we make contact with Coruscant."

"They've knocked out our communication," Captain Panaka said as he stepped forward from the crowd of guards. He had been far too distant from the queen's proximity and it nearly caused her death when the tank arrived. He would not make that mistake twice.

"Do you have a transport?" Obi-Wan asked.

"In the main hangar," Panaka pointed out, motioning to a nearby entryway. "This way."

Panaka quickly led the group through the entryway and into a secured building, or at least one that seemed secure. After a few series of halls, they arrived just outside the hangar bay, and the queen's royal vessel was noticeable immediately. The J-type 327 Utapauan royal starship was a craft reserved for use only by the sovereign people of the planet. With no weapons, the small silver starship perfectly embodied the glory of the royalty and the noble spirit of the common citizens of Utapau. The glory of the design was perverted, however, by the sight of over two dozen battle droids guarding it and the starfighter pilots that had worked in the bay.

"There's too many of them," Panaka whispered.

"That won't be a problem," Obi-Wan exclaimed, nodding to Dooku who shrugged off the comment and shook his head at what he felt was Obi-Wan's continued displays of arrogance.

"Your Majesty," Dooku interrupted, "under the circumstances I suggest you come to Coruscant with us."

"Thank you, Ambassador," Arcadia respectfully declined, "but my place is with my people."

"They will kill you if you stay," Dooku said bluntly, forceful enough that the guards became worried for the queen's safety even more than they had previously.

"They wouldn't dare," Bibble objected, outraged at the suggestion.

"They need her to sign a treaty to make this invasion of theirs legal," Panaka informed the Jedi. "They can't afford to kill her."

"There's something else behind all of this," Obi-Wan told them. "There's no discernable logic in the Federation's move here. Our feelings tell us that they will destroy you."

"They can kill you and appoint another ruler," Jar Jar reminded them as he spoke up from behind Obi-Wan, "one who *will* sign their treaty."

A flash of alarm washed across Bibble's face. The governor held no true prejudice against the Gungan people, but he had always heard that they were arrogant and selfish. It came as a surprise to him to see Jar Jar make such a bold yet more than likely true suggestion, but

he was glad that the suggestion was made. Bibble had almost demanded that the queen stay on Utapau, but his instincts suddenly told him that the Gungan was right.

"Perhaps he's right," Bibble told the queen. "Our only hope may be for the Senate to side with us. Senator Palpatine will need your help. I'll stay behind and help maintain order in the Council of Governors. They'll need us to keep the planet from falling into complete chaos and disarray."

Arcadia momentarily turned away, keeping her thoughts and her emotions to herself. She had to think hard about whether she wanted to leave her people for the capital of the Republic. One of the first things she had told herself when she succeeded her father was that she would never abandon her people under any circumstances, but the question in her mind was whether or not she would truly be abandoning them by leaving. She may not be on the planet if she left, but she would be in a place where she could actually try to save their lives. Utapau, unfortunately, was not that place. Coruscant, on the other hand, might very well have been. It was her only option and she had no choice but to take it.

"Then I'll plead our case to the Senate in person," Arcadia decided, much to the dismay of many of her guards and handmaidens that still followed behind her.

Bibble acknowledged her decision, not needing to say anything as he knew Arcadia could tell that he had absolute confidence in her ability to convince the Senate of their plight and to reverse it. Stepping forward, the governor pushed a button next to the door and the hangar bay entrance slid open. The entire group, sans the governor, walked through and Bibble watched the queen intently. He knew that it could be the last time he ever saw her, but if there was one thing he knew for sure it was to never underestimate an Arcadia.

"We'll need to free those pilots," Panaka reminded them as they walked through the hangar, pointing to the group of pilots being held on the ground by the battle droids. The pilots weren't needed for their trip to Coruscant, but they would be useful later if a retaliatory attack was launched.

"I'll take care of that," Obi-Wan told them, walking towards the pilots as Dooku led the rest of the group to the droid guards at the starship's boarding ramp.

"Halt," the lead guard, designated Yellow Fourteen, monotonically stated as Dooku approached it. "State your intentions."

"I'm an ambassador for Supreme Chancellor Valorum," Dooku told the droid, "and I'm taking these people with me to Coruscant."

"You're under arrest," the droid shouted, its pre-programmed orders telling him to either arrest or kill the Jedi ambassadors per Nute Gunray's recent orders.

The droids didn't even have an opportunity to draw their weapons as Dooku's blade came to life and cut them down. On the other end of the hangar, Obi-Wan dispatched the droids that were guarding the pilots, who jumped to their feet and quickly ran into the halls away from the gunfire. The guards and handmaidens boarded the ship, followed by the queen and Jar. Dooku and Obi-Wan momentarily stayed behind to deflect the laser bolts being fired at them, but they too ran aboard as soon as everyone else had done so.

The ship's ramp closed just as the vessel thrust itself out of the hangar, making its way through the blue, sunlit sky towards the blockade in orbit. They bid farewell to Utapau as

they rocketed towards the darkness of space, the pilot arcing the ship towards the imposing cluster of Federation battleships standing between the queen and Coruscant. The pilot, Ric Olié, couldn't help but be concerned, and nor could the two Jedi or Panaka as they entered the cockpit.

Sensor lights and alarm warnings on the pilot's console began to have a near seizure, each one screaming for them to turn around and avoid being blown into the oblivion by the Federation vessels. The Jedi, but more so Obi-Wan, knew that they would survive, or at least were hopeful that they would. Obi-Wan couldn't imagine that the Force would have brought them this far in the mission only for everyone, especially the queen, to die in vain. There were tremors of the dark side, but he couldn't imagine that it would overpower the light side in such a blatant manner.

"This is where the fun begins," Olié quipped, although he had no time for laughter or even the slightest bit of amusement as the alarms started to give him a headache. "Hang on!"

Dozens of deadly lasers bolts flew at them, many of them pummeling the bow of the ship. The craft rocked back and forth, the sensation sickening to those inside. Olié tried to fly with evasive maneuvers, but it was hard to keep a ship of that size and design moving so erratically. He had practiced in combat simulations dozens of times, but Olié found that the real thing was far more challenging than he would have thought.

One group of cannon fire continued to slam into the center of the ship. An explosion ripped through the hull, but a force field automatically covered the hole it made. Still, the damage had been done, and the shield generator had weakened over seventy-five percent. The ship's structural integrity was beginning to fail, and it would spell certain death for all aboard if the shield generator wasn't fixed. They would be a sitting duck for the blockade vessels to rip through.

In the main droid holding area, an alarm that Olié had sounded started to flash. Half a dozen astromech droids activated on command and rolled out of their stasis units towards individual tubes that sucked them out of the craft and onto the hill. It was only a matter of seconds before the droids were blasted away one by one, which even the seasoned Olié hadn't anticipated. The small and maneuverable droids were incredibly skilled at working on the ship, but not under these conditions.

Each droid worked diligently and quickly for as long as they could, feeling no fear in their metallic and pre-programmed computer shells, but they were nearly all blown away. Finally, only one remained, the rest being blown away in a cloud of shattered metal and fiery debris. The crew in the cockpit watched through a view screen, figuring that the situation was hopeless and that they would all perish.

The small blue and white R2-series droid, only waist high, was designed to work around space vessels as a diagnostic and repair unit, and so far he was the only one of the droids who was successfully completing that mandate. Just as all hope seemed lost inside the ship, the droid managed to connect the final relays and activate the shield generator. The droid turned to see the blockade before letting out a worried beep and heading back into the ship.

"Power's back!" Olié exclaimed in hopeful excitement. "That little droid did it! He bypassed the main power drive. Deflector shields are at maximum."

"Move in close," Dooku commanded, suggesting a maneuver he had once performed during the Stark Hyperspace War. "Hug the hull of the battleship. They won't be able to hit us

without hitting themselves.”

The ship dove in close to the hull of the battleship, flying only a few meters above it. The ship it flew over couldn't fire as the royal vessel was too close, and the other blockade crafts ceased their fire. It wouldn't do them any good to destroy one of their lead vessels just for one craft from the surface, especially when they had no idea that the queen was aboard it. They may have had a hunch, but without conclusive evidence it wasn't worth the risk.

Finally, the vessel rocketed past the blockade ship and blasted into hyperspace. Olié had already programmed the coordinates to the far end of the system, where they could compose themselves and set a course for Coruscant. Olié turned to his controls to get an idea of how bad the damage was, while Obi-Wan stepped up beside him and began looking through the star charts on a smaller monitor. The diagnostic on the ship's systems took only a few moments, and despite Olié's best hopes something was terribly wrong.

“There's not enough power to get us to Coruscant,” Olié said with a sigh, slamming his fist into the console in anger and disgust. “They hyperdrive engine's leaking.”

“We'll have to land somewhere to refuel and repair the ship,” Dooku said, he too becoming more and more frustrated, even more so than usual, as the situation continued.

“Tatooine,” Obi-Wan mentioned, pointing towards the planetary info on his small viewing screen. “It's a desert world and probably our safest option. It's small, out of the way, poor. The Federation has no presence there.”

“How can you be sure?” Panaka asked, for some reason doubting Obi-Wan's knowledge.

“It's controlled by the Hutts,” Dooku told the captain as Obi-Wan stood back upright. Dooku had been to Tatooine once before on a mission to capture a wanted bounty hunter who had murdered a Jedi. The mission was a success, although he had hoped never to return to that desert rock.

“You can't take the queen there,” Panaka shouted, furious that the Jedi would even suggest something he found to be so blatantly stupid. “The Hutts are gangsters. If they discovered her, then it - ”

“Then it would be no different than landing on a system with a Federation presence,” Obi-Wan reminded him. “That severely limits our options. The benefit of Tatooine is that the Hutts are not looking for her, which gives us the advantage here.”

Panaka rolled his eyes as the ship dropped out of hyperspace into the edge of the Utapau system. The Jedi's logic was flawed, and Panaka knew it. Even so, he knew that they wouldn't back down from their positions, and the queen would likely trust the much-touted “wisdom” of the noble Jedi Order. There was little use in him trying to change the situation they were about to head into. All he could do was make sure that the Jedi didn't get the queen killed. Whatever happened to the Jedi, though, was not his concern.

“Set course for Tatooine,” Obi-Wan ordered.

Olié had already started to program the coordinates for Tatooine as soon as the Jedi mentioned, figuring it was their best option as well. When the navigational systems completed the computations, Olié finished programming them into the helm and brought the ship back into hyperspace where it blasted towards what would hopefully be safe refuge

on the desert planet.

For the first time, Nute Gunray looked into the throne room in Utapau's royal palace. He had been on the surface for hours, but he had other administrative matters that required his attention. As he stepped inside, he understood exactly why the throne room had the reputation it did across the planet. Magnificent ancient tapestries hung from the walls, and numerous busts of rulers from the House of Arcadia lined the hall leading to the entryway.

Setting his cane aside, Gunray slowly rose onto the seat of Utapau's power, letting the warm sun's rays grace his neck from the window behind him. It was amazing how quickly things had changed, and not just changes in power. The last he had seen the queen, she was being escorted to the concentration camps. Not even thirty minutes later, he received a report that she had disappeared and might have made it past the blockade.

No sooner had he thought about how Lord Maul would take the news did a holographic image of the Dark Jedi appear before him. Gunray knew that Maul would not be pleased for allowing the queen to escape, especially after he had already failed her earlier. If there was one comfort the Viceroy had, however, it was that he was on the surface and Maul was in orbit. There would be no immediate punishment for the failure.

"Report, Viceroy," Maul said in his usual cold tone, but he allowed his eagerness to manifest itself in his voice.

"We control all cities in the north, Lord Maul," Gunray told him, masking his fear over the impending admission of losing the queen, "and we're headed towards other settlements."

"Destroy all high ranking officials," Maul ordered. "Do it slowly and quietly, except for Queen Arcadia. Has she signed the treaty?"

"She has disappeared, my lord," Gunray hesitantly admitted. "One cruiser escaped the blockade, as I'm sure you know."

"The Jedi?" Maul's irritated voice asked, although the question was more rhetorical than anything else. "Find her immediately. That treaty must be signed now."

"The ship's out of our range," Gunray said. "It's impossible to locate."

"Maybe for you," Maul laughed with a sadistic grin as the hologram faded back into the nothingness it came from, leaving the Neimoidian Viceroy to ponder exactly what Maul meant.

Rune Haako, on the other hand, knew exactly what it meant. Maul himself would look for the queen wherever she was hiding, which boded well for the Federation. Maul would not be able to interfere for what could be days, so they would be free to further their own interests rather than those of the Dark Jedi Master. It was exactly what they had been waiting for.