



OTOH GUNGA

Humans were interesting creatures. They would go through time worrying away their lives while fearing the future, discontent with the present and unable to take the idea of dying. But as Arcadia's father used to tell her, things like worry, doubt, and fear were the enemies that would slowly claw away at the Human soul and bring even the strongest of people down to the ground and turn them into dust before they finally died from what they had feared for so long.

The queen could feel herself turning into dust.

Panaka had insisted that she stay in her throne room for protection. She had nothing to do but sit in fear or watch out the enormous panoramic window in horror as the Federation tanks rolled through her streets. It was an outrage, but she could do nothing about it. Droids stomped on the grounds her family had fought to defend for centuries, raping the once-noble Utapau existence. She wanted them to be punished, but there was nothing she could do. The entire planet was completely helpless; their enemy may have been the Trade Federation, but their peaceful ideals had yet to act as their friend.

"Your highness," Panaka called out, standing next to a computer console on the far side of the room. "You'll want to take a look at this."

The queen nodded solemnly, turning away from the window just as more troop transports pulled through the nearby town square. Arcadia lethargically sauntered towards the security captain, wanting nothing to do with what he was about to tell her. Nothing anyone could say would bring any happiness. Nothing anyone could say would bring back the dead.

"What is it?" the queen, impatient and angry, asked.

"We received a message from New Centrif," Panaka told her. "Pulling up now."

Arcadia looked away, trying to catch a glimpse of what was happening outside before the message appeared, but Panaka was too quick. She immediately looked back at the image on the view screen, her jaw dropping at what she was seeing. Mayor Arruinada, whom Arcadia admittedly did not know that well, was nearly drowning in her sweat, a nervous wreck from whatever was happening. The queen's stomach tied itself in knots. She prayed

for it to not be true, but she knew what was happening.

"Queen Arcadia," the distraught and overwrought New Centrif mayor began, "this is Mayor Arruinada of New Centrif. As we...city...armies of the Trade Federation. They are...destroy...unications array...all planetary communication. We...man power..."

The signal fell dead, and in Arcadia felt sick. Even though the communications was all that went down, she knew in her gut that the mayor and most people in the small outlying settlement were dead. Every one of those deaths was another failure on Arcadia's part, and it was becoming unbearable.

How am I going to live with myself after this...?

The young queen let out a sigh and leaned against a thin wooden pillar beside her. She clasped her hands together, her eyes looking downwards in thoughts and prayers for the continuing mess she had gotten herself into. All over the planet, people were suffering. It was all because she had decided to get involved with galactic affairs. Senator Palpatine had nothing but the best intentions when he suggested it, but she wished he had never asked. Too many were dead, Arruinada included. The mayor had given up her life to warn the government that the droids were coming, but that message had to have been recorded hours earlier. It was too late at this point.

Arcadia's face was one of beauty - but, as with all beauty, there were those that could sully it. The Federation caused her beauty to be replaced by expressions and features of obvious worry and fatigue. She hadn't slept for days. The sorrow she felt was immense. There was no way she knew of to move forward away from her sorrow, but for the sake of her people she would have to.

How long do I have to be counseled by my soul when my heart is filled with nothing but sorrow? How long will it be hung over me?

Just as she was ready to get back to work, the queen was thrown forward into a wall. Panaka jumped atop her for her protection, and other guards were thrown crashing through the windows to the grounds below. The fall would kill them instantly. A horrid explosion had rang out, scattering all of them. The queen looked up in anger as she saw bits of limbs and clothes near the shattered door from where some of the guards had been scattered. Insult was added to history when a squadron of battle droids stepped over them, pointing their guns at the queen and her advisers.

"Target captured," the lead battle droid said to the others. "Begin processing."

Emerging from the thick mass of trees and plants, Jar and the two Jedi finally arrived on the shores of the Aquarian Ocean. The indomitable and seemingly endless span of water seemed to race after the sun that was resting high above the horizon, creating a dazzling yellow reflection that painted itself across the faint blue sea. Some men would travel great lengths to admire the height of mountains or the wonders of the stars, but to so many others, including the Gungans, it was the mighty billowing sea that was the most impressive.

Jar stopped as his feet touched the wet sand, the waves coming in and out around his legs. He inhaled deeply and took in the crisp salt air, listening to the birds sing and the nearby

creatures go about their daily routines. There was nothing better than the ocean for him, especially now after having been away from it for nearly two years. It would be difficult for him to return home after so long, but he had to help his new friends.

"Friends" was a term he used loosely. Obi-Wan seemed decent enough, but Jar had listened to Dooku's mocking remarks for hours, even though the Jedi Master thought he was being coy. The comments served to fuel Jar's natural anti-Human instincts, instincts that he had taught himself to ignore long ago despite all of the problems that Humans and Gungans had with one another. It was useless to live in the past, even though Dooku served as a constant reminder that the past was much closer to him than he believed.

Gungans were the native species of Utapau. The Humans didn't come until much later, around the end of the Jedi Civil War nearly four thousand years earlier. A Republic monarch called Elsinore den Tasia, from a distant and long forgotten world, sent an explorer across the galaxy and the explorer discovered Utapau. The Humans settled the planet, and cultural differences caused a great deal of tension between the Gungans and the newly settled Humans.

Open conflict between the two species was rare, but they did engage in a civil war that sent the Gungans to the bottom of the sea, allowing the Humans to rule the surface. The act, while causing much more tension between the two races, did serve to unify the Gungan cities into a stronger alliance, but prejudices developed that cut off the two species from each other entirely. Trade agreements lasted for a few years, but quickly died away.

"How much longer?" Dooku asked as the two Jedi met up behind Jar, the aging Jedi Master doubling over the catch his breath after having walked for so many hours.

"We're going underwater," Jar said hesitantly, wondering what type of response it would elicit from Dooku. "I hope you can hold your breath."

It took him a moment, but Dooku's eyes flickered with frustration when he realized Jar's last comment was pointedly directed at the Jedi Master. He didn't think his opinion of the Gungan could get any lower, but Jar seemed intent on proving him wrong. Jedi were always taught to respect all life forms, regardless of what they were, but after so many years of seeing lower life forms get in his way, Dooku had enough of that teaching.

Jar took a deep breath before stepping further into the water. It was freezing to Humans, but to Gungans it gave a cool and refreshing sensation that seemingly replenished a much desired nutrient that hadn't been consumed for two years. As the cool tingling that crept up his spine slowly subsided, he took in one final whiff of the salt air and dove head first into an oncoming wave that arched high above the water before crashing down onto the shore. As the sea was momentarily calm, Jar stuck his head back up from the water, just as the Jedi were preparing their breath masks.

"My people don't like outsiders," Jar told them frankly, "so don't say I didn't warn you if you go in expecting hospitality."

"Don't worry," Obi-Wan quipped, thinking about his brief stay on the Federation ship as he was about to fasten his mask, "this hasn't been our day for hospitality."

As another wave came, the three travelers dove within and began their descent down through the waters. Jar swam gracefully, extending his arms longer and faster than the Jedi were able to. The Gungan felt right at home, but after only a few minutes the Jedi began to

feel the strain of the swim and the pressure of the water. It was more uncomfortable for Dooku, but the thirty year old Obi-Wan was also having his fair share of trouble with the pressure. The Force could only do so much to aid against physics.

They angled steadily deeper as they swam, and the light was drifting away at an uncomfortably rapid rate. Obi-Wan kept looking behind him, hoping that the light wouldn't keep disappearing, but he knew it was futile. Turning to Dooku, Obi-Wan could see the lack of amusement written across his old master's face, and the Jedi Knight couldn't help but share in the sentiments. The swim was taking too long, and Obi-Wan didn't know how much more ocean pressure the two Humans could take. It was hard to have second thoughts about what they were doing, considering the alternative meant traipsing around the woods with the Federation, but Obi-Wan was coming very close.

Then, before they realized how close they were, a blinding white flash overcame them from ahead, glowing brighter than the two Jedi were prepared for. Obi-Wan instinctively shut his eyes, and when he opened them again he realized how foolish it was. The ocean's salt water trapped itself inside his eyes, and it stung in a small yet annoyingly noticeable amount of discomfort. The white aura in front of them was still all-consuming, but they were able to start making out figures in the light.

At last, after minutes of being surrounded by the inescapable luminosity, Otoh Gunga came into their view. The city was a vast web of hydrostatic bubbles, bubbles which kept the water out while allowing life forms to enter through. Anchored to an underwater cliff, the city's bubbles were interconnected, each one allowing passage to numerous other parts of the city. Each bubble was distinct, and the Jedi were beginning to make that out, as well as the Gungans that were going about their lives inside of the complex.

Jar swam faster to reach the main bubble, and positioned himself upright before slowly gelling through the bubble. Obi-Wan and Dooku glanced at one another, sharing a mutual intrigue and worry as they were unable to determine what was going to happen when they too entered the city. Following the Gungan's lead, the Jedi swam through the bubble and emerged standing on the other side, somehow only slightly damp.

Light poured out from all directions of the platform that the three now stood upon, as well as the walls of the bubbles which let out more of a glow than an actual burst of light. The air was breathable, which the Jedi had been somewhat concerned about, and as they began to descend from the platform they found that their clothes were drier than they expected. They assumed that it was from passing through the bubble, but there was no way to be sure. What they could be sure of, however, was that Jar's warning was correct. The Gungans clearly did not like outsiders. The scattering of the Gungans in the area and their cries of alarm told the Jedi that much.

"Home sweet home..." Jar mumbled in his native tongue as he watched his nearby brethren whisper to themselves and continue to scatter.

"Hey you!" a raspy, inhospitable voice called out before Jar could even begin to admire the city he once called his home. "Stop right there!"

Jar jolted in shock as he heard the voice, spinning around to look into the eyes of the darker-skinned, rougher looking Gungan who approached on an aquatic mount. Jar's eyes grew narrow in anger as he saw the mounted Gungan, having had a tense history with him in the past. It was this particular Gungan who had helped to exile Jar so many years ago. It was this particular Gungan who helped set Jar up and cause his banishment. It was an act

that could never be forgiven.

"You," Jar nearly growled. "I demand that you - "

"You're not in a position to demand anything, Binks," the Gungan shouted in a sharp and mocking tone, making a pointed and not so subtle jab at the fact that Jar no longer held his royal title. "You're going to the council, and you're looking at a lot more than banishment this time."

Obi-Wan and Dooku looked at one another, realizing that the reception was colder than they had expected. While Jar had warned them not to expect any warm welcomes, they didn't expect to be confronted by the guards and brought before the Gungan High Council in such a manner. While the council was their destination, they had hoped to arrive more peacefully than being escorted by armed guards. It didn't necessarily put a kink in their plans, though it significantly altered their perception of the Gungan's views on outsiders.

"And just who are you?" Dooku asked, directing his query at the mounted Gungan.

"He's *Captain* Tarpals," Jar interrupted in disgust as Tarpals dismounted, "a mercenary hired by the High Councilor to do his dirty work. He's scum masquerading as an honorable officer."

It came out of nowhere, a punch that slammed into Jar's stomach like a charging kaadu. Jar grabbed his gut, the artificial salt wind of the city completely knocked out of him. His knees buckled and he crashed to the ground, having been unprepared for the force of the other Gungan's fury. Jar looked up at the rogue captain looming above him, a certain anger flickering in the aggrieved prince's eyes as he did. Tarpals had brought so much pain into Jar's life that part of him wanted to wrap his hands around the captain's neck and squeeze the life out of him, but his morals caused him to stay his hand.

"Strong words coming from an exile," Tarpals scowled, grabbing an electropole weapon from his mount.

A long, pointed spear, the electropole derived its name from its charged tip that emitted a distinct electric charge when placed in close proximity to another object. While an insulated hand-grip protected the wielder from the electric effects, the shock of an electropole could pack a serious amount of punch, and Jar knew it was not a weapon to be trifled with. His resolve stiffened, however, reinforced by the anger within him. He would not back down now.

Like a kettle of Ansionian tea brought to a sustained boil, all of the pent up rage and frustration that were coursing through the exiled prince's veins rose to the surface. Just as the electropole came crashing down towards him, he put up his arms in a cross and blocked the descending weapon, knocking the other Gungan to his feet and tearing the pole from his hands. Jar brought it towards Tarpals's neck, but Tarpals kicked his legs outward, knocking Jar backwards. The captain planted his wide, webbed feet onto the ground, using them as a base to lurch forward and whip back up on to his feet in a manner not dissimilar to a suddenly uncoiled spring.

Another guard approached, but Tarpals didn't give him the chance to help. The Gungan captain ripped the guard's pole away from him and swung at Binks in a wide arc, the electrified tip crackling loudly as he did so. Jar's eyes bulged from their eyestalks as he ducked to avoid what could have been a fatal blow to the head. He bolted back up, angling

his arms and the pole straight up to deflect another attack by Tarpals. With a swift precision, Jar pushed the pole back and rotated his wrist to prepare for his first attack.

Emboldened by the captain's tenacity, Jar spun around like a dancer at the Galaxies Opera House performing a pirouette, finally stabbing forward only to have his attack deflected. He surged forward with a duck and slash, catching Tarpals by surprise. As the electropoles collided, sparks flew and the electricity crackled. Tarpals reversed his pole for a swift parry of Jar's weapon, but instead their weapons and arms locked together in a tug of war that could have resulted in either of their deaths if their blades hit the right spots.

Tarpals stood resolute, firmly gripping the pole with his right hand above the left. The pole angled up and away from his left side, held across his body in a common enough pole-arm stance. In fact, it was too common, and Jar realized this. Just then, Jar saw his opening. It was a risk, but what he could gain from it was tremendous. Finally, he let go, not just of his pole but of his rage, his hope, his fear of exile. All of it fell with his pole, tumbling to the ground in a manner that caught Tarpals off guard. As the captain looked down, Jar's left foot flew forward with a snap and kick, colliding with Tarpals's arms. The captain lost the grip on his own pole; as the upper part flew out of Tarpals's right hand and back towards Jar, the exiled prince lunged forward, planting his extended left foot near Tarpals's right shoulder while grabbing the upper end of the pole with his right palm.

Holding steady, Jar reached his left hand out and grabbed Tarpals by the earflap, using his right hand to press the tip of the electropole onto Tarpals's throat. Tarpals completely lost his grip on his pole, finding himself totally at Jar's mercy. Tarpals squirmed in agony, his eyes stricken with fear that Jar would have his revenge and take the captain's life, but Jar had no interest in doing that. Tarpals grabbed the pole, hoping to force it out of Jar's grip, but the exiled prince was determined not to let the captain go. He pulled the weapon against Tarpals's neck even harder, ensuring that Tarpals would not be able to worm free without inadvertently killing himself. Tarpals was forced to crouch down, although he was not fully kneeling.

"Drop your weapons," Jar shouted, his voice cracking as he gave the order to the small crowd of anxious guards that had gathered near and around him. "Drop them now."

The guards had no desire or intention to comply, but Tarpals's eyes told them to obey. He had no interest in dying, especially at the hands of someone he despised as much as Jar. Besides, Tarpals knew that Jar's grip on him was not rock solid; all locks could be broken. The captain simply needed to wait for the right time before making his move, and then he would be able to finally bring Jar one step closer to the punishment that the prince deserved.

The two Jedi, on the other hand, stood in stunned silence. Dooku nearly had to reconsider his opinion of Jar. For the few hours he had known the Gungan, Dooku thought he had no skill and no use whatsoever, although for a moment he felt that he was clearly mistaken. Of course, he would not allow himself to be wrong. The new information he had about Jar's abilities was justified with the thought that primitive creatures living in swamps would have to be physical in order to survive from other predators. Obi-Wan, though, was also surprised. He didn't doubt Jar's intelligence like Dooku had, although the Jedi Knight's wide eyes and cocked eyebrow still spoke to the fact that he had not seen the combat skills coming.

Finally, after a few moments of silence, Tarpals found his opening. Jar, arrogantly believing that he had defeated the Gungan captain, loosened his grip on Tarpals's ears and pulled the

electropole back a few inches away from the captain's neck. Not hesitating, Tarpals dropped his knees to the ground, causing Jar to inadvertently release his grip on the captain's ears. With Tarpal's head safely away from the electropole, he used his moment of opportunity and surprise to dive forward. Landing on his stomach, he kicked his feet outward into Jar's gut, forcing the exiled prince to the ground.

Tarpals leaped to his feet, running over to where Jar landed. The captain kicked Jar's electropole, which had fallen out of his hand, off to the side, all while sticking his hand out so one of his guards could throw another electropole to him. Tarpals caught the pole and leaned down, pointing the electrified end of the pole at Jar's neck in a moment of reverse déjà vu. Jar made little effort to fight back, rubbing his head after hitting it hard on the steel floor below him.

"You're good, Binks," Tarpals said, his confidence having returned to him now that the exiled prince had been bested, "but I was always better."

Jar scoffed weakly at the stinging comment. He wanted desperately to become angry and to kill the captain, which he had desired to do for some time, but it would have been a mistake. Jar remembered well what his father once told him: he who angers you conquers you. Tarpals had already proven he could do that, so Jar felt no reason for it to continue. He would go before the council and hear what they had to say.

Seeing the defeat in Jar's eyes, Tarpals pulled back on the electropole, albeit somewhat hesitantly. The captain snapped his fingers, and in an instant a guard approached Binks and placed a pair of hand clamps around his wrists. Two other guards did the same for Obi-Wan and Dooku, the latter of whom considered putting up a fight before deciding that he was in no condition to do so considering the strain that had already put on him. He too accepted the fact that the council would be their next venue, and it was something that Obi-Wan, on the other hand, was counting on. The road to Ogana had to carry them through the chambers of the Gungan High Council, as it was their only means of escape.

Gunray stumbled and fell back onto the side of his desk, his face bruised with rivers of dark blood pouring down all sides of his sickly green head. His large eyes were inflamed like balloons, a side effect of the sheer force of Lord Maul's anger and hatred. Gunray should have expected such torture after he willingly and openly defied the orders of the Dark Jedi Master, but even the pain was not enough to cause him to admit to a mistake. He still worried that the Jedi would disrupt the Federation's plans, and he had little faith in Maul's abilities as a commander. That was one thing, however, that he knew not to say out loud lest the torture become death.

The Viceroy coughed, thick patches of green blood flying outwards as projectiles onto the durasteel floor below him. The Neimoidian struggled to get back to his feet, but Maul was relentless. The Dark Jedi picked the viceroy up by the shoulders and struck him in the gut with his knee, sending Gunray to the ground once more only to loop and see Maul's cloaked frame towering over him. Gunray wailed in pain as he grabbed his aching muscles, the cries furthering Maul's enjoyment.

The Dark Jedi Master stood firm, his resolve resolute. All he wanted was a simple, albeit forced, apology from the Viceroy, yet Gunray was reluctant to admit any sort of mistake. Maul had no idea why, but it mattered very little to him. The torture amused him and was always disappointed when a session had to end when a victim caved. He was particularly

pleased to be able to torture Gunray, something he had wanted to do to the petty annoyance for many, many years.

Maul looked down at the cowering Neimoidian and saw in his eyes the fear that he had seen in so many previous victims. In order for such fear to manifest, Maul always need a dramatic display of force and a mock psychological imbalance to make the victim fear that he was insane and could kill them at any second. It wasn't all that hard for him to pretend. In fact, he enjoyed every moment of the insanity, as it allowed himself to fully unleash his rage upon those he despised.

Gripping the edge of Gunray's desk with all of his strength, Maul forced it off of the floor and threw it against a wall. The display let out a loud and ear-piercing crash of distorted and twisting metal as it impacted, the nails-on-a-chalkboard screech caused even Maul to wince. The impact on the wall knocked Gunray's portraits and ancient relics off of the cold silver plating, the viceroy putting his hands to his ears to dull the noise.

The Viceroy stumbled forward towards the broken desk, using it to prop himself up. Maul nearly went in for another blow, but he stopped himself as Gunray looked as if he wanted to say something. Anything Gunray could say at that point would amuse Maul, so he was willing to let the Viceroy state his piece for just a short moment.

"Do you think you are brave for this, Maul?" Gunray asked spitefully. "Coming in here and fighting someone? Brave men don't torture one person who can barely mount a defense."

"Bravery doesn't exist," Maul proclaimed with a laugh as he moved in closer, forcing Gunray back up against the mangled desk. "It's an illusion created by men who wish to anoint themselves as kings. But at the first sign of trouble, these supposed noble men will do anything for one little answer."

"You're disgusting," Gunray said, spitting at Maul's feet.

"You're one to talk," Maul said, ignoring Gunray's show of disrespect. "Look at you, forcing a blockade on a planet, and for what? Because the glorious Republic told you that you can't own another man's life? Because it hurt the bottom line? Maybe I am disgusting, but at least I'm not a hypocrite."

Gunray, fumbling on the twisted metal as Maul moved closer, did his best to stand up. In his mind he was screaming in absolute fear and he knew Maul could sense it with the Force, but he fought as hard as he could to make sure that his exterior lacked a look of fear. Even if Maul knew about the hidden fear, Gunray could at least show a strength and resilience that was, admittedly, out of character for him and most Neimoidians.

"You surprise me, Gunray," Maul told him, backing off to let the Viceroy stand up a bit straighter. "You Neimoidians are usually cowards. I would've broken any of your men an hour ago, but you've held on. Why?"

"I don't fear you," Gunray lied, his voice cracking from the trauma to his throat.

"You're a damned liar," Maul said in retort. "I can see it in your eyes, and I know you know it. What you don't realize is that all eyes tell a story, and that story is fear. Fear attracts the fearful and those foolish enough to believe that they're fearless. It brings out the strong, the weak, the innocent and the corrupt, such as yourself. Fear is my strongest ally. It tells me everything I need to know about a victim. Would you like to know your story, Gunray?"

"Go to Hell," the Neimoidian spat weakly, barely able to get the words out through his bloodied mouth as the blood continued to stream out.

Maul smiled, giving an out of character gesture of his own by patting Gunray on the shoulder. That hospitality, though, quickly faded. Maul lifted his leg and spun around, his foot impacting the Neimoidian's face. Gunray fell to the side and let out a loud and deep moan as the pain began to become unbearable. Maul doubted that the surprisingly resilient Viceroy would tell him such.

"I am Hell, Viceroy," Maul said with a malicious grin, piercing Gunray's gaze with his yellow-red eyes that served as a sinister look into his mind and story. "Never forget that."

Deep inside Otoh Gunga, a cadre of Gungan guards led Jar and the Jedi through the halls of the city towards the chambers of the Gungan High Council. The two Jedi were in awe of their surroundings. They had seen many advanced civilizations before with remarkable architecture, some of them under water, although they had never seen anything quite like Otoh Gunga. How anyone, even an aquatic species, was able to build such structures underwater was a mystery to them, but they didn't dare to ask. Their presence was already causing enough disruption. They had no desire to insult the people.

The city was founded by a Gungan leader named Gallo nearly three thousand years earlier atop the remains of the Gungan city of Spearhead. The construction followed the unification of the Gungan tribes following a war between the tribes. After the unification came, Gungan populations from half a dozen different cities came together and decided to live in Otoh Gunga, which meant "Old Gungan" in the native language. Throughout the years, the population skyrocketed into the millions, necessitating constant expansion in the city. For the most part, they all lived in harmony with one another.

While the Jedi were showing how impressed they were with the city, Jar had a feeling of nostalgia. He had not been in the city for two years, and his warm smile, even in the face of certain death, let everyone know how refreshing it was to be in his home again. He had been raised in the monarchical residences, only a few kilometers from their current location, as the son of His Royal Highness Gorgr Binks, the leader of the Gungan Empire before his death nearly ten years earlier.

Jar had been deemed too young to rise to the throne, so Rugor Nass took his place and always looked down upon him. While Jar's banishment was a direct result of his own actions, he always suspected that the punishment was intended to solidify Nass's rule over the Gungan people. Jar always wanted to return and confront Nass, but he never found the courage to do so.

The door to the High Council chambers stood before them, prompting the group to stop and wait for the members of the council to decide that they were ready for them to enter. Jar didn't expect a warm welcome, although he knew that the Jedi had an important mission to complete and he would do what he could to help them. The odds of the Jedi being able to do anything to fulfill their promise of helping him gain favor was slim at this point, so he figured if he helped them escape arrest they would be able to make good on their vow at a later date. Escaping the city somehow was much better than facing the execution he would likely be sentenced to, but he would face that if need be.

The Gungan guards led the group through the doors and into the chamber once the council finally decided that it was ready to see them. A long circular bench sat all across one side of the large bubble, with one seat higher than the rest for the High Councilor. Each seat was occupied by a Gungan official, every one of them dressed in ornate official robes that represented their respective positions.

The higher seat was occupied by a heavier Ankura Gungan, Rugor Nass, who looked like he had never been as thin and muscular as Jar was. His neck was nearly non-existent, as his head and shoulders seemed to merge together from the fat. The Jedi could immediately tell from the look on Nass's face that he was not pleased to see outsiders, but an abnormally wide grin stretched across his dark green face once he saw Jar.

"Thank you for seeing us, High Councilor," Obi-Wan said with a bow, followed reluctantly by Dooku with his own bow. "It's imperative that we speak with you about the Federa - "

"Silence!" Nass shouted, spit flying from all sides of his face as he screamed. "You cannot be here. This army is up there is not our concern."

"As you seem to already know," Dooku said as he stepped forward, standing side by side with Obi-Wan, "a droid army is about to attack Ogana. We must stop them."

"We don't care about them," Nass said in a tone that told Dooku that he was someone who had been in a fair share of disagreements with the Humans of the planet, "and they don't care about us. They stole our sacred crystal, but they refuse to even acknowledge that they took it! They cannot be trusted."

"We sympathize," Obi-Wan said, giving a warm smile in the hopes of reducing the tension in the chamber, "but once these droids take control of the surface they will take control of you and your people."

"I do not think so," Nass said with a grin, almost as if he knew for a fact that the Federation would not do anything to the Gungan people.

"You and the Humans form a symbiotic circle," Obi-Wan told the High Councilor while scratching his own beard, intrigued that a person of power would reject such an obvious fact that could help those he served. "What happens to one of you *will* affect the other. You have to understand this."

"We do not care about the Humans," Nass angrily shouted, putting a particularly disgusting emphasis on the last word, "or your problems!"

Dooku had little patience for what he perceived to be the arrogance of a completely insignificant person. The Jedi Master moved his concentration away from the discussion that Obi-Wan continued to have with Nass, instead focusing on channeling the Force around him so he could briefly and subtly influence the Gungan leader's mind. When he had latched onto enough of the figurative universe around him, Dooku subtly and nonchalantly waved his hand in front of him, hoping that the Gungans were truly as weak-minded as he believed them to be.

"Then send us on our way," Dooku told him as he gestured with his hand, his voice highly suggestive to create added influence.

"We will send you on your way," the High Councilor echoed mindlessly, prompting looks of

concern and surprise from the other members of the High Council.

"We could use a transport," Dooku continued, still waving his hand as he spoke.

"We will give you a bongo," Nass decided, not noticing Jar's confusion behind the Gungan guards. "The fastest way to Ogana is to go through the ocean core."

"Thank you for your help," Dooku said as he and Obi-Wan bowed, ignoring the maliciously wide grin on Nass's face when he spoke of the ocean core. Dooku was satisfied that his trick was successful, although he was not particularly pleased at the attitudes of the Gungan leaders as he and Obi-Wan made their way towards the door.

"What's a bongo?" Obi-Wan whispered to his former teacher.

"Hopefully a transport," Dooku replied, not assuaging Obi-Wan's fears.

"Wait," Jar shouted, prompting the Jedi to turn from their path towards the door and notice that he was still chained and held by the Gungan guards. "They're setting you up. You'll never survive the core without my help. Get me out of this and I'll go with you."

Dooku was ready to keep heading towards the door, not wanting to allow Jar to travel with them to Ogana. Obi-Wan, however, knew better. He didn't know about the potential dangers in Utapau's oceans, and they had no idea where they were headed. Jar would undoubtedly be able to render much needed assistance if they brought him along. The only other option was to stand by and let him be killed for doing nothing more than returning to his home after so many years.

"We're short on time," Dooku reminded him, seeing what was going through his former pupil's mind.

"Time spent here can help us later," Obi-Wan said with his own reminder, "and we'll need a navigator to get us through the ocean core."

"You're losing focus," Dooku said with an edge, becoming irritated over Obi-Wan's constant need to involve himself in "pet projects" that had little to do with them.

"Your sensitivity to the Living Force is not your strength," Obi-Wan replied as he turned back towards the council, a hint of annoyance in his voice. "What is to become of Jar Binks?"

"He was exiled from here," Nass said, "and he broke our laws by coming back. He is to be...punished for his crime."

"He has been a great help to us," Obi-Wan informed them, "so I hope the punishment will not be too severe."

"Pounded until death," Nass said, cackling with glee as the words escaped his oversized lips. He had no concern for Jar's well being, only satisfaction in the thought of the Gungan's brutal death.

Dooku could barely keep his eyes from showing his surprise and disgust. He had expected that Jar would receive some sort of punishment, but not a rather elaborate and painful death. He turned around and saw the look of defeat on Jar's face, but what surprised him

the most was the feeling of concern that had actually manifested itself in his own mind. Only moments before, he had little concern for the Gungan's safety, but he wasn't about to let him be executed for, admittedly, helping him and Obi-Wan.

Play along if you know what's good for you, Dooku said in Jar's mind. The Gungan heard the call and looked around in all directions, confused as to where the voice came from until he looked back at Dooku. The Jedi Master nodded his head to let him know that the voice was his, and to hopefully lessen the Gungan's anxiety.

"I saved his life," Dooku told the High Councilor, hiding the sour taste that the words caused. "He owes me a life debt. Your gods demand that his life belongs to me now."

"Binks?" the High Councilor asked in bewilderment, noting the surprised looks that crossed over the faces of the other members of the council. "You have a life debt with this person?"

Jar nodded his head, realizing what Dooku meant when he told him to play along. Had he not heard the voice, the exiled prince would have undoubtedly protested simply to clear his name, as the life debts had been cancelled out, but it didn't matter. He had promised only a few minutes earlier that he would help the Jedi, and if that meant navigating through the ocean core then that was exactly what he would do. Besides, the look on many of the council members faces told Jar that he may have gained some, if not an extraordinarily small amount, of favor with them.

"His worthless life is yours, outsider," Nass decreed, rolling his eyes and flicking his wrist towards Jar as a sign of disrespect. "Now be gone with him!"

Twenty minutes passed by, and Jar was beyond relieved. Had the Jedi not intervened, he likely would have been sitting in a jail cell by now, if not being pounded to death with the heaviest stones the Gungan soldiers he once served with could lift. He felt that he truly did owe the Jedi a life debt after they stuck their necks out for him, so he would offer them, even Dooku, whatever help they needed.

After the three had boarded, the bio-engineered bongo submersible shot out of the bubble that housed the Gungan dock and made its way towards the ocean core that would take them to Ogana. Jar sat hunched over at the controls, re-familiarizing himself with their functions and abilities. He had not piloted a bongo for nearly five years, but he always felt that he had been skilled with operating them so it did not take long for the necessary knowledge to come flooding back to him.

The small ship was mostly a moving yet shielded electrical generator, as it was the only way that the Gungans could assure its effective operation underwater. It was designed to mimic a species of predatory squid to thwart potential threats, but that species of squid was long since extinct. The long tail of the triangular craft rotated as a propeller, connected to the generator which allowed it to move through the water.

Inside the hydrostatic bubble that created the cockpit, Obi-Wan sat next to Jar while Dooku sat in the seat behind them. Obi-Wan watched intently at the waters ahead to ensure that the Gungan did not miss any of the dangers lurking within the murky deep. Dooku, on the other hand, felt that the entire operation was a disaster waiting to happen. He assumed Jar's navigation skills would be useful to them, but he couldn't help but feel as if the Gungan High Councilor had set them all up to die. On the other hand, they both could have been

wrong about Jar's skills, as the only talent the Gungan had shown was the ability to fight, and that came with the territory of living in the forests. Why Obi-Wan felt the need to go out of his way to carry on with these pet projects was a mystery to the gaining Jedi Master.

"Why were you banished, Jar?" Obi-Wan asked, breaking the silence that had befallen them. The Jedi Knight was very curious about why a crowned prince would be exiled from his home, as it was not a story often heard.

"I don't like to talk about it," Jar told him. He brushed off the question as if it had never been asked, and his tone hinted at embarrassment.

"Please," Obi-Wan said in a tone that gave Jar some assurance, as the Jedi Knight was hopeful that the Gungan would share the secret with him. "We promised that we would help you. Anything you can tell us would help us do that."

Jar's eyestalks gestured in bewilderment. He had half expected both of the Jedi to kick him out of their way once they reached Ogana. They promised before reaching the city that they would somehow help him, and he assumed that their helpfulness quota with him had been filled when they saved him from execution. It was a pleasant surprise, one that made him more open to sharing his past with them, although not fully open.

"I, uh," Jar began to admit, but he hesitated before finally conceding to Obi-Wan's request to talk about his exile. "I wasn't paying attention."

"You were banished for not paying attention?" Dooku laughed. The Jedi Master was barely able to contain his amusement. He had never before heard of a banishment for something that seemed so simple and foolhardy.

"I was guarding an ancient relic," Jar snapped, sick of Dooku's constant mocking of him. "It was my duty as the Crowned Prince. A female colleague named Scortora approached me. I had been watching her for months ever since we started serving together. She said all the right things and....*distracted* me for too long. When I went back to my post, the relic was gone."

Jar could still see the orb's empty case as if it was right in front of him. He had seen Scortora on numerous occasions and believed she wanted to mate with him, which was why he allowed himself to become distracted. When he returned and saw that the relic was gone, though, he realized that she had purposely distracted him and that she was working with the Human government. Scortora was immediately executed for treason, but Jar was still banished from Otoh Gunga forever and stripped of his title of Crowned Prince.

"What was the relic?" Obi-Wan asked.

"You Humans would call it the Kaiburr crystal," Jar exclaimed, and he quickly recognized that he put too much emphasis on "you Humans". "My people believe that its healing powers come from our gods, but the Human government claims it was brought to this planet by a minion of a Dark Jedi called Xendor. Whatever the truth may be, the Humans wanted it badly enough to manipulate one of our people into letting them steal it."

Obi-Wan looked behind him and glanced at his former Jedi Master. The two shared a mutual look of concern when they heard the story. When they were both Padawans, they had learned the tale of Xendor, the first Dark Jedi to break away from the Jedi Order. It was only a few centuries after the formation of the Galactic Republic, so the information on

Xendor was limited. It was known, though, that the Kashi-born Dark Jedi was one of the most infamous in history.

Xendor was expelled from the Order because of his intent to practice the dark side, and after his exile he made his way to the Unknown Regions. In the decades that followed, he gathered a group of Dark Jedi and formed the Legions of Lettow, using them in an attempt to destroy the Jedi on Coruscant. The Legions were destroyed and Xendor was killed, with no one knowing what happened to his minions. It was possible that Xendor had found the crystal while in the Unknown Regions. Many mysteries were held in that sector of the galaxy, and a Force-laden crystal with the power to heal could have been one of them.

Before Jar could continue, there was a loud thump on the stern of the bongo and the ship jolted forward. The group spent a few frantic seconds looking all around the craft, finally realizing that something struck the craft again as it lurched sharply to one side. They turned around and watched as a massive opee sea killer hooked onto them with the massive tongue that shout of its abnormally large jaw. The bongo lurched backwards, quickly headed towards the mouth of the immense creature.

"Hit that red button," Jar shouted to Obi-Wan, who immediately complied when he saw which control the Gungan was referring to.

A rear weapons system activated when Obi-Wan pushed the button, and a massive canon emerged from the metallic structure of the craft's stern. Jar pushed the throttle of the vessel forward, and while doing so he unleashed an array of torpedoes at the creature's midsection. The sea killer collapsed onto a rock face in pain, but it was only momentarily stunned. It stood back up and charged at the bongo yet again.

"Well this is fun," Dooku muttered from the back, wiping sweat from his forehead as he continued to feel that the trip was becoming a disaster. He noticed that even Jar and Obi-Wan were becoming frantic, losing hope in the situation as it continued.

Before anyone could make another move, another larger creature emerged from the shadowy depths. This sando aqua monster caught the sea killer in its own titanic jaw, crushing its skull and devouring parts of the large creature that it dwarfed in size. The long, eel-like predator grabbed the sea killer with its claws before swallowing it relatively whole. As the aqua monster licked its lips, it did not even notice the bongo continue to move past it deeper into the core.

"There's always a bigger fish," Obi-Wan quipped. The comment, this time, forced even Dooku to smile considering the implications.

With the threat of the creature gone, Jar banked hard to the left and took the vessel deeper into the abyss. The light in the bongo became darker the deeper they moved, but it didn't affect Jar. He was relatively familiar with the route to Ojana, and once he found it the vessel dove further and made its way through the entrance to a cave that would, pending no further predatory interruptions, bring them to the rivers on the edge of the city.