



EMPIRES OF THE FUTURE

*"Empires based solely on faith cannot be sustained.
The empires of the future are the empires of the mind."*

- Bacatine, Last Emperor of Kamino
Journal of the Whills, 4:17

A storm was coming. Mace could feel it in every bone within his body. His craft had sailed silently through the night, now purposely adrift in the cold vacuum of space, but now he simply sat, watching, hoping that something in his on-board computer could give him some indication of what was happening. He and his R4 unit spent the entire trip scouring the Jedi Archives trying to find some indication of what he might find on Kamino. Just as he feared, the Republic and the Jedi knew next to nothing. It didn't surprise him considering how remote a planet this was, and how abandoned a region the Wild Space area had become.

There was a hurricane on the planet before him. The hulking mass of clouds and rain, illuminated by the binary stars, one an orange-red and the other a radiant blue like nothing the Jedi Master had ever before seen, provided the perfect backdrop to the thunderous events that laid just beyond the horizon. Mace had no idea what these events would be, but his worrisome mind ached to its very core. Something wasn't right here in the light of the Rishi Maze. Something was disturbing the Force.

There was very little time to worry about what could be. Mace prepared his craft for entry into the planet's atmosphere, plotting a course around the savage storms and fierce bolts of electricity that shot down lightning fast, which he could see even from thousands of kilometers away. Still, the planet was a thing of beauty. Beyond the silver specks of dust and rock that made up Kamino's ring system was a light blue jewel lost in space from even the most dedicated travelers. When not consumed by storms, a rarity in and of itself, the planet was a tranquil treasure, blinding men and hiding nothing in its measure. Anyone could get lost in the peaceful seas, rocking on the gentle waves for days on end before realizing how much time had gone by.

Mace's craft still hovered in space, a void that echoed the planet itself. The red star, taking its last breaths as it prepared for a cataclysmic explosion in the next few thousand years that would consume most of the star system, gave off very little light. Instead, the system relied on the serene blue gem of a star, its colors touching even the nebula remnants that were in the region. The bald, dark-skinned Jedi Master yawned, cupping his palm over his mouth to keep from fogging up the cockpit window. The area was blanketed in a peaceful blue hue, one so relaxing that Mace had trouble keeping awake, despite knowing that it was

time to proceed.

Mace signaled to R4 that it was time to begin their descent. The droid beeped and chirped, setting the coordinates it picked up from its scans so the ship could auto-pilot itself to the capital, Tipoca City, a dark beacon in the nighttime waves that sat above the ancient sunken continent that the planet once treasured. As he continued flying above the atmosphere, the ship brought itself to the far side of the world, giving Mace a rare glimpse of a blue binary sunrise from above the surface of a planet.

And there it was.

The majesty hit him with such intensity, considering he did not expect it. A Kaminoan moon, basking in the light of the azure nebula, was floating thousands of kilometers before him, but he could still make out its wonder. The limited cloud coverage, the large continent, the greens and the blues that made up its surface; it was a stark contrast to the water-covered Kamino, but that did not mean it was any normal space body. Strange gravimetric distortions blanketed the atmosphere for reasons Mace did not know. He had not seen any reports of a Kaminoan moon that was seemingly habitable, so he had no idea what might have been causing them or why.

The craft dipped. The view of the moon was replaced with that of atmospheric entry. The craft sailed smoothly through the winds and clouds, and Mace relished it. Knowing what the planet was like, he was prepared for the dangerous storms that he would encounter in any second. Kamino was not a world he would want to spend much time on; for all he knew he was headed into a trap. He would go in and get out as soon as possible.

A jolt. A crash. The slap of wind across the bow. Leaving the atmosphere was rougher than he expected, Mace's craft rocking from side to side. Sweating, Mace quickly pushed a few buttons, taking the craft out of auto-pilot. He grabbed the axel and pulled up. He flew high, sheltered from the thunder and lightning, but that was only for a few moments to allow him time to catch his breath. He looked back and forth out the window, searching for his destination, which he quickly caught sight of the city.

Tipoca City was an architectural wonder, sitting atop the planet's former continent. The domes gleamed and shined brightly as the light from the orbiting moon briefly poked through the clouds, accentuating the gracefully curved walls of the monumental network of stilt structures that seemed to go on for hundreds of kilometers. The buildings were sleek and smooth, but resembled the basic designs of the Wookiee villages high atop the trees of Kashyyyk. The galaxy's planets had much in common.

There was very little time to gaze on the surroundings. The autopilot continued on its course, setting the craft down on a landing pad on the far side of the city. Arfour beeped nervously, at least for a droid. Units such as Arfour were generally seen as having more of a personality than other droids, and it made for quirks in what seemed to be a personality that developed within them.

After setting down, the craft's hatch popped open on his command, and Mace stood up so he could finally set foot upon the landing pad. The winds surged and the Jedi Master stumbled backwards, nearly knocked off the side into the deep, gray ocean below him. Had it not been for his quick legwork, he probably would have been dinner for whatever inhabitants lived in the depths of the strange aquatic world.

The revered Jedi Guardian pulled his hood up, protecting his bald brown head from the

torrential downpour and the gale force winds that were threatening to blow him away to his demise. The weather was disconcerting; it was a sign, a vision, a warning of things to come. There was something on this world, something terrible, something that the Jedi were unprepared for. He had no idea what it was, but he could feel its cataclysmic nature. If they weren't careful, it had the potential to catch them off guard with the intensity of the harsh Kaminoan winds. The Force had to be with them, or else they would be doomed to whatever fate may have been in store for them.

Wasting little time, the Jedi Master began walking towards the doorway that led into vast hallway, but before Mace could make it even a few meters, let alone to the door, the walkway to the hall retracted, cutting Mace and the entire landing pad off from the city. Was it a trap? Something told him it wasn't, but it still struck him as dangerously suspicious.

Mace shook from a sharp jolt below him. Looking down, the entire landing pad began to descend into the bowels of the city, or so he presumed. The little light that the faraway sun provided was lost as the pad moved deeper and deeper, even below the surface of the water. Mace had wondered how a city that supposedly held a cloning center could be so small; it was clear that any cloning center this city had was deep in the ocean, not above it. If it was a trap, it was a perfectly laid one. There would be very few ways that the Jedi Master could escape from below the sea.

Another sharp jolt, again nearly knocking the Korunian Jedi off of his feet, indicated that the descent was over. A doorway closed above him, keeping any additional rainwater from flooding wherever he was. There was no light, and all that could be heard was the soft, nervous chirping of Arfour, and the constant dripping of water from the walls and ceilings.

Suddenly there was the presence of more people in the room. Mace stood still for a few moments, trying to find some sort of indication as to who they were. Each felt similar, as if the same person was standing in three different locations. It was a strange sensation, one that confused him, as he'd never felt something like that before. All life signs gave off differently sensations, but these were far from unique. These were far from normal.

The lights came on, and Mace realized he truly was faced with the same person in three separate locations. Before him were three guards, each pointing a different blaster directly at his head, but they each looked the same. At first he thought they were triplets, ones who were far similar to any normal group of siblings born at the same time, but then he realized they were too similar. No, they weren't triplets. They weren't even unique individuals. They were genetic creations, copied from another source.

They were the clones Mace was looking for.

Despite being taught to respect all life in any form, Mace was horribly disturbed, his brow furrowed and his eyebrows arched in both intrigue and confusion. Though he didn't want to pass vocal judgment on the ideals and values of the Kaminoan people, the very thought of cloning was unthinkable. The Jedi viewed every life as unique, something to be treasured for its individuality, but these three genetic approximations before him desecrated every one of those beliefs. How could a person be viewed as an individual when there was nothing individual about them? How could their very existence be seen as unique when they were created in a laboratory with the DNA of another person? The original host couldn't even be seen as an individual anymore. He sold his uniqueness to science.

Whatever ethical questions had arisen, the clones still stood with their weapons pointed towards the Jedi Master. Mace's instincts told him to reach for his lightsaber and defend

himself, but something about these guards told him that he had no need to fear them, at least not yet. There was no way he could know where their allegiances were or what the plan for their lives were, but at least for now he felt that there was nothing he needed to defend himself against.

"State your purpose," the lead clone demanded; his forcefulness took even Mace aback.

"I'm from the Republic," Mace told him. "I have business with your leaders."

"Follow me," the clone said. "Go only where I go."

Without any further discussion, the clone turned. Mace followed suit, not wanting to give the clones any reason to believe he was hostile or had anything other than the best of intentions. The situation felt tense, and Mace could only assume that the three clones felt the same way. Situations such as those had the potential to spiral out of control. The Jedi Master wasn't about to let that happen on his watch.

The door to the holding area slid open and revealed a long hall, awash with a bright white light glowing with the intensity of a thousand raging suns. The clones led Mace into the blindingly bright area, one that Mace could barely even look at. He kept his hood up and his head down, trying not to look at the lights. It must have been the Kaminoan culture that kept the lights so bright. Most Humans wouldn't be able to tolerate it.

A few minutes passed before the group finally arrived at their destinations. The clones snapped to attention and stood on either side of the doorway, which opened for Mace and Mace alone. The Jedi Master could feel that it was meant for him; no words had to be uttered. He strode inside, hoping he would finally find the answers he was looking for.

At long last, Mace finally came face-to-face with a Kaminoan. The creature before him was tall and thin, its glassy coated almond-shaped eyes hauntingly staring right into his. Its skin was a pale blue luminescent color, and its long thin neck allowed its head to tower over the Jedi Master. From the chair it was sitting upon, the Kaminoan stretched its slender legs and stood up to greet Mace as he entered.

"Master Jedi," the Kaminoan, indicating a second chair in the room as it sat back down upon his. "I am Lama Su, Supreme Leader of Kamino."

"Mace Windy," the Jedi replied, refraining from saying too much until he was able to figure out exactly what was going on. At first he wondered how the Supreme Ruler knew he was a Jedi, but it only took him a second to realize that he had been too distracted by the thought of defending himself that he neglected to defend his identity; his lightsaber was clearly hanging from his utility belt.

"I trust you will enjoy your time here," Lama Su said, watching as Mace remained standing, soaking wet onto the ground. "You have arrived at the best part of the season."

That wasn't something Mace expected to hear, on either count. Not only was the Supreme Leader far more welcoming than he would have imagined, it also struck him as odd that this was the best part of the season for Kamino. If the deluge just beyond the walls was the best, he would have hated to be around for the worst.

"But onto business of course," the Supreme Leader continued, piquing the Jedi Master's interests. "You will be pleased to know that we are ahead of our original schedule: five

hundred thousand units are ready, with two and a half million more well on the way and scheduled for active status within the next two months."

"That's..." Mace began, but hesitated in saying over almost every word that he wanted to have follow it, finding it difficult to comprehend the magnitude of what Lama Su was saying. "...good news."

"I am most pleased that you find it satisfactory," the emotionless Kaminoan continued. "We are perfectionists in our work, and it is very much appreciated when our customers are satisfied with the results. Please tell Master Sido-Dyas that his order will be met ahead of schedule, as he had hoped."

"Master who?" Mace asked; he knew of no Jedi by that name, especially one who would have so recklessly ordered a clone army to be used against the Republic. Why would a Jedi want to help destroy the Republic?

"Jedi Master Sido-Dyas is still a leading member of the Jedi Council, is he not?" Lama Su asked. Now the Supreme Leader's interests were piqued.

"There's no Jedi by that name," Mace replied, although not very confidently. Could he have actually not known who this Jedi was? It seemed very unlikely, but he had come to believe that nothing was impossible.

"Very curious," the Supreme Leader said. "Very curious indeed. By his correspondences, he seemed very proud that we were building the army for him."

For him...for Sido-Dyas? Was it for this person personally, or was it for another source for which Sido-Dyas was simply acting as a spokesperson? None of it made any sense to him. The mystery was only beginning to reveal itself.

"When Sido-Dyas ordered the army," Mace began, shifting uncomfortably in his chair while trying to seem as if he somewhat knew what he was talking about, "did he tell you who it was for?"

"Of course he did," Lama Su scoffed, almost as if the question had been an insult to his organizational and governmental methods. "We would never accept an order without knowing who it was meant for. This army is for the Republic."

For the Republic? Mace wanted to blurt the words out and let everyone in the area know how surprised he was. The Senate Armed Services Committee said the exact opposite. Was the committee wrong, or was Lama Su lying? Mace's instincts told him the former; nothing in Lama Su seemed to indicate that he was lying to the Jedi Master, but rather straightforward and honest, if not somewhat reserved. His mind was in turmoil, his thoughts raging as furiously as the storm beyond the walls.

The most pressing question was who Sido-Dyas was. Was it someone masquerading as a Jedi, someone whose goals were not yet clear? Was it truly a Jedi, perhaps using a pseudonym for fear of retribution? Either way, how could the Jedi Council, the wisest and most powerful individuals of the Jedi Order, not sense this? How could the Senate have missed it for so long?

The implications of an army for the Republic were severe; a thousand years earlier, Supreme Chancellor Tarsus Valorum's Ruusan Reformatations drastically changed the

Republic, and the Chancellor had made it clear that his reforms would never allow the Republic to have a standing military again. The reforms had been well received over the thousand years since the end of the New Sith War at which they were created, making this clone mystery even more puzzling.

"Now, Master Windy," Lama Su continued, breaking the silence that had befallen them, "you must be anxious to inspect the clones for yourself."

"I'd appreciate that," Mace admitted, standing up and straightening his robes as Lama Su did so as well. Talking about the clone army was one thing. He had to see it for himself. The anxiety he felt could barely let him keep to a normal, steady walk as he followed Lama Su out of the room, suddenly flanked by the three clone guards once more.

It was a peculiar thing, this rebellion on Utapau. It began on the streets of a Human world. It was being fought in the homes of Human families. It was one of the Human spirit, a spirit that cried out for the freedoms that Humans deserved, as did all of humanity's sentient brothers throughout the galaxy. But this rebellion was being fought in a strange way.

Now it was being waged by an artificial being, and the keys to victory lied within its metal skeleton and its artificial intelligence where the fires of rebellion were still being forged. Walking through the streets was TC-14, the protocol droid captured and reprogrammed by the Veermok Resistance to use in an effort to steal information from the Federation computer files in the Ojana Royal Palace. It was a bold move, especially considering that the quick reprogramming could easily be found if a diagnostic was performed on the droid, but it was one the resistance had to make nonetheless.

Twisted metallic skeletons littered the street, all of them from battle droids that Ojana's citizens had destroyed. The first rebellion in Ojana only hours earlier, the same night that the Veermok Resistance was officially established, lasted until it was broken up by the Federation, but that wasn't before numerous droid forces, and, regrettably, citizens of Utapau, were destroyed. Fires still burned from the destruction, and the citizens seemed eager to actually battle against the battle droid armies. It was amazing how quickly the peaceful people could turn into savages. Such was the nature of Human behavior.

Battle droids were not the only thing that littered the streets. Bodies were strewn across the sidewalks like ragdolls. The Ojanian citizens may have been united, but they had no combat experience. Their resolve couldn't be broken, but the battle droids likewise couldn't be beaten. And yet the rebellion continued to be waged. The people still took up the arms that they swore never to use.

"Oh," the protocol droid gasped in Pak Pak, the Neimoidian language that it was programmed to speak by default, "what a mess we've made."

In the far corner of the street, Lieutenant Chamberlyn, the de facto leader of the Veermok Resistance, and his men who flanked him wished to whatever higher power that may have been listening that the protocol droid would just shut up. Chamberlyn wanted to program it to act as dazed and confused as it had been when his men first found it lost, wandering through the streets, but that sort of program would've been easily located. There was no way he could get it as deep into its subroutines as he did its new infiltration program. All he could do was hope that the blabbering idiot of a supposedly intelligent droid wouldn't expose his location.

Finally the droid turned onto another street, bringing it only a few dozen meters from the Federation perimeter. That was as far as Chamberlyn was willing to bring his forces towards enemy territory, at least for now. The Federation, so far as he knew, still had no idea that there was an organized resistance movement amongst security personnel, and he preferred to keep it that way. Of course the political leaders of the movement, in all their blithering idiocy, at least so far as Chamberlyn saw it, wanted to send out messages to the Federation to let them know they were there and that they were coming to get them. Nothing would have been more of a strategic blunder than that, save for marching into the Federation's territory to say hello.

"You two," Chamberlyn whispered, pointing to the two security personnel closest to him, "come with me."

Slowly marching forward, Chamberlyn needed cover as he looked around the corner that TC-14 had gone around. For all he knew there were battle droids nearby, and he wasn't about to be caught out in the open. Discreetly running low to the far side of the small square they were in, he peered around the corner and watched as two battle droids intercepted the protocol droid, leading it back to the Federation base where it would hopefully be able to transmit information to the Veermok Resistance safe house on the far side of the city.

The two personnel that flanked Chamberlyn shared a collective gaze and breathed a sigh of relief. One of them was Esarra Till, the commanding pilot of Utapau's Bravo Squadron. The thirty-five year old red head had no problem taking orders from Chamberlyn, despite outranking him. She was never one to gripe over the job at hand. She had worked as a mercenary for years before becoming disillusioned with the corruption in the galaxy. She had thought that returning to Utapau and joining the Security Forces would be a breeze, but the recent invasion proved her wrong in that respect.

Till jumped as she heard a groan behind her. She jolted around, cocking her gun in expectation for an assault. Instead, she saw nothing, at least at first. It took her a moment to realize that there was a dimly-lit figure beneath a pile of destroyed battle droids. Motioning for her fellow security officer to help her, she started to pull the droids off of it, but she gasped in fright once she saw who she was helping: a Neimoidian.

Chamberlyn turned around just in time to see the gravely injured Neimoidian lying there. Considering how hard he studied the Federation hierarchy over the last few hours, there was no mistaking who it was. It was Rune Haako, one of Nute Gunray's pawns on the Federation Directorate. Chamberlyn's first instinct was to finish the job of whoever attempted to kill the Neimoidian earlier, but he hesitated. It wasn't what he expected to do.

But then it dawned on him. If he had been injured behind enemy lines and the Neimoidians or their battle droids found him, they wouldn't hesitate in shooting his head off at all. In fact, they would probably make a sport out of it. If he was to do the same thing, or if he ordered his men to do it for him to wash his hands clean of it, he would be no different than the Federation cowards who were oppressing his people. He may as well of been a murderer. He wasn't about to let himself become one of them.

"Orders, sir?" Till asked, already putting her finger on the trigger in anticipation of what she thought would be Chamberlyn's obvious command.

"Bring him back to base," Chamberlyn ordered, although he said it more suggestively than

forcefully. He may not have wanted to let himself turn into someone like the Neimoidians, but he still couldn't believe he was actually helping one of them. "We'll patch him up there."

"But sir, he's - "

"You heard me, Commander," Chamberlyn barked. He may not have been thrilled about helping his enemy, but he wasn't about to have his orders questioned.

"Respectfully, sir," Till said, lowering her weapon to comply with the order, even though she disapproved, "I don't believe they'd give us the same treatment."

"Exactly my point," the lieutenant virtuously boasted. "We can't defeat them by turning into them. We're going to help him, so get him out of here."

Despite her strong reservations, Till and her fellow security officer nevertheless complied with the orders, throwing Haako over their shoulders to carry him out of harm's way. She had half a mind to drop him hard enough to kill him and claim it was an accident, but she wasn't about to disobey a direct order. Chamberlyn may have been in charge of the resistance movement's combat operations, but he had never actually seen real combat before. As a former mercenary, Till certainly had, and suddenly she found herself doubting the resistance leadership. She prayed she was wrong, but until she found out otherwise she would go on doubting Chamberlyn. Little did she know that Chamberlyn equally doubted himself as well.

Mace had seen more of Tipoca City than he originally thought would be allowed. Beginning in the hatcheries all the way to the training facilities at the far end of the underwater complex, all of the wonders and complexities of life had been right before him. Some were in test tubes; others were marching back and forth in training to become tools of war and destruction. Still, he couldn't deny that it was an incredible operation, despite the ethical ambiguity of the whole thing.

Jedi were supposed to be nonjudgmental. It was best not to speak if all that could be said was telling others how they should live, but rather one's life, not their words, was meant to be their teaching. Yet he found himself in a situation where he almost couldn't help but judge the Kaminoans. The idea of creating life in a laboratory was abominable to him, but he fought that instinct every moment he was on this planet. Only those who could give up doctrine and dogma, even Jedi ones, would be counted among the wise. Anyone else could not be considered a true pupil of the Force.

His thoughts came from who these clones were, or rather his conflict about what they were. Were they truly simple tools of war and destruction, or were they actually Human? Were they bred to destroy, or they bred with the Human desire to save others? They seemed to be tools, ones who did not find life precious or fear death as all beings did. He had not yet seen the five aggregates of a Human being, or any sentient being for that matter. He had been taught them by his master as a small boy, and no matter how hard he tried he had yet to see them here. Perhaps he just wasn't looking hard enough.

"Would you care to inspect the final product now?" Lamu Su asked, his deep and soothing voice cutting off Mace's contemplations on the finitude of life. "I would prefer to have your direct approval before your Republic takes delivery."

Final product. There was such callousness in the Supreme Leader's voice, one that profoundly disturbed the Jedi Master who was trying so hard to remain impartial. It almost reinforced his opinion that the clones simply were tools, not actual people. If they were people, how could a supposedly enlightened society refer to them in such cold terminology? Such thoughts waged an assault against Mace's sense of what was right and what was wrong.

Continuing the tour, Mace followed the Kaminoan leader through the winding hallways, awash with the same blinding white light that he encountered when he first entered the facility a few hours earlier. He had seen the hatcheries, filled with blinking blue and red lights and green-hued test tubes that were growing the clone infants within them; the educational facilities, with desks in clean orderly rows where students, no more than nine years old, all dressed the same as they all processed the same information that their breeders deemed relevant; now he overlooked a commissary, one filled with hundreds of clone adults, all dressed in identical red garments, ate the same food in the same manner, all with the same expressions and features. The Jedi Master almost expected to see an elaborate series of mirrors that were playing a trick on his mind's eye, but there were none. It was far too real for his liking.

All of it showed him the first of the Jedi aggregates: form. What it did not show him was whether that actually indicated some sort of humanity within them. All beings had some sort of form. Whether it was a Human being or a gundark, there was no such thing as a being without some sort of form. It was far too early to tell if that actually meant anything.

Suddenly the tour stopped, and it only took him a moment to find out why. Below him, dozens of feet below the vast open window that was the only thing between him and the rest of the facility, were clones marching back and forth in formation, taking their orders from older, more experienced clone drill sergeants, all of whom were being overlooked by Kaminoan supervisors. Docks for observation ships were located at the far side, and behind him were lines and lines of clones waiting to receive their helmets from a dispenser at the center of the gray steel floor. Mace had thought seeing the clones who first greeted him was disturbing; the hundreds of clones below him knotted his stomach up.

"And here we have the center for the final states of training," Lama Su finally said, his cold matter-of-fact words still just as unsettling as they were earlier. "As you can see, they are very diligent in both their studies and combat training."

"They seem to take orders well," Mace blurted out, not quite having expected to say that. Was that the best he could come up with?

"You will find they are totally obedient," the Supreme Leader told him, not seeming to notice Mace's embarrassment. "They take any order from a designated superior without question. At first we were only going to accelerate their growth, but we modified their genetic structure to ensure obedience."

Genetic modifications? Even if they these clones were given humanity, which he still had his doubts about, would they even be fully Human? Human beings didn't grow in test tubes, nor did they have any tampering with their genomes. Jedi were meant to respect all life, but how could he respect a species whose sole purpose in life was to play divine creator?

"How old are these clones, then?" Mace asked, curious about the growth acceleration.

"Their outward appearance is twenty-five standard Human years," the Supreme Leader

informed him, which was what Mace had expected based on their physical condition. "Their true age, however, is only eight years. If we had foregone growth acceleration, a mature clone would take a lifetime to grow. Now we can do it in less than a decade. Their perception of reality is that they have lived for twenty-five years, although they know it has only been eight."

"Impressive," the Jedi Master lied. In fact, despite the scientific marvel, he wasn't impressed at all. He wouldn't let himself be, at least not internally. He wasn't going to try and convince himself that he was non-judgmental about this, even if he would outwardly pretend to be for the sake of his mission.

Still, he found the second aggregate: perception. One's perceptions would often confuse their understanding of reality and give them an impression that was completely wrong. Had the clones not exhibited some Human qualities then they would have believed they were twenty-five years old, but they knew it wasn't true. They knew they were actually eight years old. Could that have indicated complex thought? Perhaps, but there was no proof of that, at least not yet. It could have simply been that they were told the truth and they processed it as a computer processed downloaded information.

"I had hoped you would be pleased," Lama Su boasted, feeling a strong sense of satisfaction that the Jedi Order's ambassador seemed to approve of his people's work. "Clones can think creatively. You will find they are immensely superior to droids, and their combat skills are taken from some of the fiercest warriors the galaxy has ever known. Our methods have allowed us to perfect this over the centuries."

The third aggregate: mental formations. It confirmed that they did indeed have the potential to form complex thoughts and think for themselves, which meant that it was very likely they could also perceive they were truly eight years old. If that was true, then it also led to a fourth aggregate: consciousness. They were truly alive, not simply pretend creatures and shells of real sentience. That said, the fifth aggregate was the most important once the other four were in the mix, and he had yet to see that. Perhaps a little more digging into the Kaminoans was in order.

"No disrespect," Mace said truthfully, not wanting to compromise his mission with bad manners, "but why do you clone? Most societies consider it unethical."

"I can understand why they would think that," Lama Su said with a warm, yet somber, smile, the first hints of emotion he had shown all day. "A thousand years ago, we would have said the same. For several centuries, the Kingdom of Kamino ruled throughout the region you call Wild Space, but after the great flood that nearly destroyed us we began to think differently. The last emperor of our kingdom, a wise and powerful ruler named Bacatine, preached science instead of religion, which had been our dominant point of view for years. He felt that it was through science, not religion, that a society would thrive, and that it could be used for the benefit of the entire galaxy."

"Why?," Mace asked, truly intrigued by the Kaminoan history lesson. He folded his hands within his dark brown robes, almost like a child wrapping themselves into a warm blanket as their parents told them a bedtime story.

"The answer lies in Bacatine's own words," Lama Su continued. "'Empires based solely on faith cannot be sustained. The empires of the future are the empires of the mind.' Only genius and intellect, not blind faith, allowed us to create a greater society here and on our moon, Atlantica. Now we clone to preserve and create life everywhere, because if the great

flood taught us anything it was that life is precious and can be taken at any time.”

Suddenly I understand where they're coming from, Mace said to himself. While he still personally could not condone cloning, he could at least see why Kamino did it. It was more than simply profit or scientific development. It was about helping people, saving them. All ethical issues aside, if a species was destroyed then cloners such as the Kaminoans could bring it back, perhaps even the same as before they were destroyed. It was highly intriguing. Still, there was a contradiction in their views, one that he would want to see addressed.

“If life is precious, Supreme Leader,” Mace started, not realizing how he was now coming across as judgmental, even if inadvertently, “why are you creating an army?”

“Because that was the job we were paid to do!” the Supreme Leader snapped, not taking kindly to someone attempting to flaunt what they felt was their superiority over him. “We may be scientists, but like all great projects this one came with a price. Sido-Dyas and the original host were very persuasive.”

“I’m sorry if I was rude,” Mace said sincerely. “Who was the original host?”

“A businessman named Jango Fett,” the Supreme Leader said, nodding in recognition of the Jedi Master’s understand and forgivable faux-pas, yet at the same time giving Mace the impression that the Kaminoan was hiding something from him. “We felt that a Jedi Knight would have been the ideal host, but Sido-Dyas handpicked Fett himself.”

A Jedi wouldn’t let themselves be used like this, the Jedi Master wanted to blurt out, but he restrained himself this time. Lama Su may have been forgiving for one slip of the tongue, but he wasn’t about to press his luck with a second. In fact, the Kaminoan leader seemed almost too forgiving, and Mace couldn’t shake the sense that he was being misled. It was ironic that he had been thinking of the aggregate of perception. As his master once told him, where there was perception there was deception. Was this what she was talking about?

Then suddenly it dawned on him: Lama Su’s deception wasn’t the biggest threat he now had to worry about. It took him a few moments to realize it as he searched the back of his head, but his studies of warrior factions as he was creating his own lightsaber style led him to a number of Mandalorian clan names. One of those was Clan Fett. Could Jango Fett have been one of them? If so, what were the Mandalorians doing in this mess? The fact that one of their possible members was supposedly sponsoring an army didn’t sit well with him. The Republic knew all too well the might of the war-hungry Mandalorian Clans. The Mandalorian Wars nearly four thousand years earlier were something no one ever wanted to see again.

“Where can I find him?” Mace asked. He needed to meet this businessman, as he might have been able to provide clues about Sido-Dyas and the entire puzzle, most importantly any Mandalorian involvement.

“I am not sure where he is,” Lama Su told him, his voice expressing remorse but his mind expressing something...else, something that Mace couldn’t yet determine. “Unfortunately, he refused to stay here, despite our insistence. He returns every six months for more genetic sampling, but he will not be back for another four.”

“Any information would help,” Mace pleaded.

“The Fett Consortium has offices on a handful of worlds,” Lama Su seemed to suddenly

remember, although whether or not that was the case, or if this Fett Consortium even existed, was another matter entirely. "He could be on any one of them."

Mace turned his attention back away from the Supreme Leader, sensing that he wasn't going to be able to get anymore information from him. Whether that was deliberate or just a circumstance of not knowing enough, Mace had no idea. There was something about these people that he couldn't crack; most of the time he could see right through any species, but this one was surprisingly strong-minded. That may have been why Sido-Dyas, whoever he was, chose them. He would've known the Jedi would have no way of getting enough information from the Kaminoan minds.

Instead, the Jedi Master again focused on the clones beneath him. The ones in line had finished receiving their helmets from the dispenser and had joined their brothers in arms on the simulated battlefield. Mace now noticed that the helmets were specially designed to portray battlefield images, which is why Mace could see them performing maneuvers without any visible foe, hologram or otherwise, to spar against. Being able to perform realistic combat simulations using only visual images in a helmet took a great deal of skill.

"Very disciplined," Mace said, finally breaking the awkward silence that had befallen them.

"That is the key to the entire operation. They are disciplined, yet they can think creatively. It is an important combination on the battlefield. Now come, I want you to finally see the final product."

And this isn't the final product? the Jedi Master asked himself. Here he had been thinking that he was already looking at the most highly trained and professional soldiers the cloners had created. Mace followed Lama Su into a lift, one that shot up towards the sky immediately. In just seconds, Mace was able to step out onto their destination, a balcony, and realize why the clones deeper in the facility were not the final products.

Sheltered from the brutal winds and rains outside the facility by a durasteel casing around them, the two watched as hundreds of clones sparred against one another with holographic weapons, seemingly ignoring the howling winds and torrential downpours that would have made it nearly impossible for most other military forces to fight. Suddenly he realized just how disciplined the most elite clones were.

"Magnificent, aren't they?" Lama Su asked as lightning bolted through the sky above them.

Mace looked up to see the Supreme Leader beaming with pride. It reinforced Mace's belief that there were no ethical complications involved, that the Kaminoan conscience was far different than his own. He couldn't deny that the warriors before him were magnificent, and he knew that they would perform their duties with a brutal efficiency were the Republic every to need them in war, but the thought of that sent a shiver down the Jedi Master's spine. It seemed that his apprentice, who for so long had told him how the Jedi needed to be more pacifistic, was right all along.

Everything was a blur. Where was he? Was this death? Never having believed in an afterlife, that idea didn't sit too well, nor did it make any sense. Everything should have been black and full of nothingness, but instead there were faint images of a ceiling, and the barely audible sound of voices coming from nearby. No, it wasn't death. It was captivity.

Rune Haako groaned as he rose up from the bed he was lying upon. He had no idea where he was or how he had gotten there. The last thing he remembered was being escorted back from his transport to the palace when a number of Humans attacked him. They destroyed his droids, assaulted him, and left him for dead. He may have helped to orchestrate the subjugation of their world, but that was no way for supposedly civilized people to treat one of their new overlords. It was just plain rude and disrespectful. They would all be killed for their outlandish behavior.

Haako tried to rise to his feet, but instead he fell flat onto his face on the floor. He struggled to move forward, fighting what felt like paralysis. Of course, he wasn't paralyzed, but rather his legs were tightly chained to the bed so he couldn't move. With his hands, free of restraints, he pushed up on the floor and slid back onto the bed. This time, he sat up, which he was capable of doing with the restraints, instead of trying to stand up.

With his vision getting back to normal, he could finally make out the room he was in. It was rundown, with exposed wood and metal framework throughout it. There were no lights, but instead the night was being lit with candles. Moisture dripping from the ceiling led him to believe he was underground, perhaps in some sort of rebel headquarters. The dark, dreary gray of the area gave him little comfort. The entire building seemed like it had been hit by a bomb, which meant it probably was. The citizens of Utapau would never have allowed any part of their prized world become rundown like this.

He had no idea what his captors would do with him, their future overlord. Were he in their position and a force had subjugated Cato Neimoidia, his treasured home planet, he would likely see to it that they were promptly and brutally executed. The Humans of this world may have claimed to have been enlightened and peaceful, but they were already rebelling in the streets. They had already tried to kill him. He had no doubt they would finish the job now that they had him just where they wanted him.

The door handle began to jiggle, sending a bead of sweat down Haako's head. This could have been it. An armed guard could have walked right through and shot him in the head. Instead, an unarmed man, so far as Haako could tell, strolled into the room, immediately commanding Haako's attention. The Neimoidian didn't mean to give the man the satisfaction of feeling in control, but considering Haako could have very well been killed there was little he could do about his own nerves.

"I'm Lieutenant Chamberlyn of the Utapau Security Forces," the man finally said, turning to reveal his overly-intimidating eye patch to the Neimoidian captive. "You can save the introductions. I already know who you are."

"Dook nata vosas?" Haako asked, purposely avoiding Basic and instead speaking in his own language out of spite.

"You can also save your Pak Pak for someone else," Chamberlyn growled, clearly having no intention to play any sort of games with his prisoner. "I know you can speak my language. Considering your situation, I suggest you do it."

"I said, what do you want?" Haako asked, knowing that if he complied then he might have a chance at surviving this encounter.

"To heal you," Chamberlyn said, the shock in his voice as the words came out rivaling the shock Haako felt, "which we've already done, hence why you're awake."

"You likely poisoned me," the Neimoidian accused. He couldn't imagine the Humans treating him with such dignity as to actually heal the wounds that their own people inflicted.

"The thought did occur to me," Chamberlyn admitted, slamming a medical kit onto the table in front of him out of frustration for what he had done to aid and abet his enemy, "but I'm better than you. I wouldn't kill someone who can't defend themselves, even if that person was one of the masterminds behind the subjugation of my home and the mass killings of my people."

He had to be lying. There was no way an Utapau military officer would actually give aid and comfort, if one could call being chained to what might as well of been a concrete bed, to his enemy, let alone one of his enemy commanders. There was no way Haako was leaving the room alive. He was sure of it.

"What will you do then?" Haako asked, although he wasn't very comfortable in finding out the answer. "Give me a chance to defend myself and then butcher me?"

"I thought about that too," Chamberlyn admitted once more, lowering his head and wiping off the sweat from his brow as his sad, crumpled features almost seemed to say that he was regretting his decision. "In the end, though, I decided we're going to hold you here where you can't hurt anyone else."

"You cannot simply - "

"I could either hold you here," Chamberlyn threatened, grabbing the Neimoidian's bruised shoulders in a fit of rage that he couldn't control, "or I can let my men kill you like I know they want. I'm going out on a limb for my enemy here."

Chamberlyn's eyes twitched. He suddenly realized what he'd done and released his grip. He never meant to physically assault the Neimoidian like that, nor did he mean to threaten him. Still, what was done was done, and it may have been effective. If it made Haako realize how perilous his situation was, then Chamberlyn had done his job.

"But why are you doing this?" Haako asked, rubbing his now-bruised shoulders to take away the pain from Chamberlyn's iron grip.

Chamberlyn turned away and knocked on the door, signaling that he was ready to leave. A guard on the opposite side unlocked and opened it, but before walking all the way through Chamberlyn stopped and considered the question posed to him. He had already said he was doing it because he was better than Haako, and yet the Neimoidian didn't and couldn't realize that. Perhaps that was the problem.

"It's not in your nature to understand," Chamberlyn said, turning back around to face the Neimoidian one last time. "Now you should show me some respect. I dragged you out of the battlefield. I can throw you back in."

The door slammed shut in front of him, leaving the Neimoidian to ponder his own thoughts. There were few things more disturbing to him than to find in someone he detested a moral quality which seemed superior to any morals he himself had. That introduced a dangerous question: did Haako not care, or was he afraid to admit that Chamberlyn was right? But that idea was preposterous. Of course he didn't care. There was no way he could have thought his captor was right. He wouldn't allow it.

Mace stepped through the door into the landing area, flanked by Lama Su and two of the clone guards who had originally greeted him a few hours before. His visit was interesting, to say the least, if not incredibly disturbing. His views on a number of scientific and ethical issues were in conflict, as were his beliefs on being non-judgmental. Ever since he and the Supreme Leader had left the balcony overlooking the final clone training arena, he kept telling himself over and over that if the Kaminoans were happy with their practices then that was good enough for a Jedi Master.

"Thank you for the tour," Mace said, politely nodding as he turned back around towards the Kaminoan ruler. "You've been very accommodating."

"It was no trouble," Lama Su replied, returning the polite gesture. "It is always a pleasure to meet a Jedi. Now that the clones have their future deployment orders for the Republic, I am sure we will be seeing you soon."

The two shared a bow before the Kaminoan left the room, but the two clones stayed behind. Stepping up onto his starfighter, Mace sensed that they were asked to stay to make sure he left, but he didn't know why the Kaminoans would be afraid he was staying. It didn't exactly help change his view that the cloners were trying to hide something from him.

"Did you get deployment orders?" the first helmeted clone quietly asked, his voice emanating from his helmet's built-in comlink. The distinctive white plastoid armor had a number of features, including the comlink.

"No one has, as far as I know," the second clone replied, just as hushed and secretive, or so he thought, as his fellow soldier.

Mace resisted the urge to stop dead in his tracks. He knew that if he stopped climbing into his vessel then the clones would realize he overheard them, and that would probably have had dire consequences for him. It was all just too suspicious, and there was more deception than he previously thought. At first he just sensed that something was amiss, but now he knew that the Supreme Leader had lied to him. What else during the tour was a lie? Was the army actually for the Republic, or was he being misled in order to think that there was no threat from them? Clearly there was a threat, and only one person now could help him get to the bottom of it.

Jango Fett.

Pain. Suffering. Death. Such omens of the future were becoming far too common for the diminutive Jedi Grandmaster's comfort. Even more troubling was the signal he had just received in his quarters aboard Chu'unthor, where he and Ki-Adi Mundi, whom Yoda had briefed on the situation for additional Jedi Council support in this unauthorized investigation, were currently staying. The transmission was coming in over scramble code five, care of the "old folk's home." Only the most urgent of signals were sent by such means. It meant Master Windy had found what he was looking for.

The dark-skinned Jedi Master's face appeared before them, his bald head taking up a sizeable amount of the room's small space. He wore a grim determination combined with a somber worry, indicative of what he had discovered. Based on the image of a seat behind

him, it appeared that Mace had already left the Kaminoan city and was en route to his next destination, whether that was the flagship or another planet.

"Master Windy," Yoda began, with an uncharacteristically worried eagerness in his scratchy voice, "what have you found?"

"I'm not sure," the hologram's voice replied. "I sense a lot of deception in these people. Their leader told me the clones have deployment orders to fight for the Republic, not against it like the Senate said."

Yoda and Mundi breathed a collective sigh of relief. Yoda never smiled, but Mundi could almost make out what seemed to be a faint grin on his small, green master's face. The Grandmaster would never admit it, of course, preferring to remain stoic in front of all Jedi in order to appear as wise as he possibly could, but it was there. How could it not be? They just found out that there was no threat against the Republic after all.

"Then we have nothing to worry about," Mundi told them. "The Force is with us."

"I don't agree," Mace retorted, sending their spirits plummeting once again. "Their leader told me that the clones received deployment orders, but I overheard two of the clones say that none of them have received any orders."

"Lying their leader could be," Yoda acknowledged.

"What was the status of the army?" Mundi asked.

"Five hundred thousand units are fully ready," Mace said, still in a sense of disbelief of his own that would rival those of Yoda and Mundi. "Two and a half million more will be ready in the next two months."

"Three million?" Mundi gasped.

"They also claim that the order for the clones was placed by Jedi Master Sido-Dyas," Mace said, diving further into the mystery that he had discovered.

"Master who?" Mundi asked. He knew his fair share of Jedi, but he wasn't familiar with that particular one.

Mundi may not have known why he couldn't think of who Sido-Dyas was, but Yoda regrettably did. At eight hundred and seventy years of age, Yoda had known tens of thousands of Jedi during his lifetime. Even those he did not know he was familiar with. He knew the names of every single Jedi that had come through the Jedi Temple on Coruscant for the past hundred years, considering he trained most of them as younglings, and not once was there ever a Sido-Dyas.

"That's what I said," Mace's holographic visage affirmed. "There's no Jedi by that name, but that's not the worst of it. The genetic host is a man named Jango Fett. That's a Mandalorian clan name."

"You must find him, Master Windy," Yoda ordered, his determined and resolute tone being the closest the small, wise leader could come to barking orders. "If involved the Mandalorians are, grave danger the Republic is in."

"Understood," Mace replied. "I'll report back when I have him."

Mace's holographic form faded away, and Yoda, rubbing his three-fingered hand across his temple, closed his eyes, pondering where Mace's investigations would take him next. The Grandmaster's eyes closed tightly as he tried to reach out through the Force to find some sort of answer as to what was happening with the clones, and if it was connected to the situation on Utapau. The timing of the Senate's report on the clones, the discovery of a potential Mandalorian involvement, and the Federation's actions at Utapau were far too close together to be coincidental. Only the Force, for now, could provide answers.

What Yoda found in the Force greatly disturbed him: nothing. For whatever reason, the Force had no answers to give him. He was completely blind, as if he were a bat flying through the night without sonar to guide its way. It seemed like a dark hand was reaching across the galaxy, blocking out the light of all the stars, leaving a vast and empty expanse of absolute darkness and complete and total nothingness.

"Blind we are if the creation of this clone army we could not see," Yoda admitted.

Mundi nodded his head in agreement. He wished that it wasn't true, but if the strongest and wisest of all the Jedi Masters were left scratching their heads, it meant something was amiss. When Jedi of Yoda and Mace's stature could not find clairvoyance enough to see through the Force and uncovering what was happening, then it was more than likely the dark side was growing stronger. It was something he had never considered before he learned of the clone army. Now that he did, he knew it was something the Jedi Order would have to deal with for a long time to come.

It was troubling, but Mundi couldn't help but wonder if the only way to move forward with this handicap was to let the galaxy know that the Force was no longer there to properly guide them. It was obviously possible that such an action could prove to be suicidal to the Jedi Council, but there was no much else they would be able to do to deal with the crisis. It was a risk that they would have to consider taking, so long as Yoda approved of such an action. Knowing Yoda, though, Mundi would have a hard time convincing him to do so. Despite that, he couldn't let that hold back his opinion.

"Should we inform the Senate that our ability to use the Force has diminished?" the Jedi Knight asked, knowing full well that his suggestion would likely be shot down.

"Only those behind this plot may know of our weakness," Yoda reminded him. "If informed the Senate is, multiply our adversaries will."

Yoda could never approve of an action like that. Considering the timing of the Senate Armed Services Committee's report on the clones, it was entirely possible that whoever was behind the clone mystery was in league with someone in the Galactic Senate. Yoda's mind raced to its two co-chairman, Wilhuff Tarkin of Eriadu and Bail Prestor Organa of Alderaan, but he couldn't see either of them risking the security of the Republic like that. Either way, someone had to be a conspirator. It was the only way that the Republic Ministry of Intelligence could have missed the existence of the army for nearly ten years.

If such a person was to be informed of the Jedi handicap, they would be able to exploit the situation to their advantage. Neither Yoda nor the Jedi Council would have been able to afford taking such a bold and risky course of action during such unsure times. This was even truer considering the situation on Utapau, which had the ability to spiral into an all-out war if handled improperly. As far as Yoda knew, no one on the Jedi Council would stand for that.