



ALLUSIONS

"The secrets of the galaxy are not for all men to see, but only for those who seek them. That is the way of our hidden Order within an Order, a council of protectors."
- Caecum Veritas, Jedi Master circa 1,000 BBY
Journal of the Whills, 11:9

Chu'unthor, the flagship of the Jedi Order, gallantly sailed through the hyperspace lanes towards its destination of Coruscant. The ship, which was carrying three prominent Jedi Council members home from a mission on Ansion, was a massive two kilometers long. There were very few non-Jedi crew members in the vessel, as most of the jobs were carried out by Jedi Padawans, as well as Jedi Knights with limited experience.

The ship, a profound achievement in Jedi engineering, could hold up to ten thousand Jedi students, but there were certainly not that many Padawans in the Order. Workshops were provided so they could construct and maintain their lightsabers, and meditation chambers gave everyone on board a place to be one with the Force and focus on their mental abilities. Jedi healing was taught in the medical wing so Jedi would know how to properly heal themselves or others during unfortunate situations.

The gigantic vessel was once a hidden Jedi Praxeum constructed by a somewhat unorthodox Jedi Master. He had named it after a Wookiee Jedi Knight of the same name who fought during the Great Sith War four thousand years earlier. The ship was later adopted as the Jedi Order's flagship, as the High Council desired a space-based academy. Once it was integrated into the Jedi Order, it was fitted with an extensive library of texts covering the plethora of Jedi teachings, sciences, historical annals, galactic literature and encyclopedias. It was truly a breakthrough in Jedi ingenuity.

Numerous chambers on the highest level were built with open domed roofs to alleviate the sense of confinement and loneliness that long voyages could bring. The result was a stunning and radiant effect that all hoped to see during their classes and training sessions, but only few were privileged enough to train in the higher levels. When the ship was stationary, numerous sights could be seen: planets, stars and distant galaxies all seemed to be within arm's length, as if the Jedi could reach out and hold whole worlds within the palms of their hands. By always having space within eyesight, it reminded the Jedi Padawans that a Jedi's mandate was to serve all existence rather than their own selfish wants and desires.

While the hulking mass of the space faring academy sailed through the currents of hyperspace, two blades crossed in combat in one of the exposed sparring chambers covered only by a transparisteel dome that allowed anyone within it to gaze into the depths of the heavens. One purple and the other blue, the two blades danced around the wide open chamber in a spectacle of light and prowess as their wielders held them tightly. Jedi Master Mace Windy held his guard while Jedi Knight Ki-Adi Mundi futilely tried to strike against him. The attack was one that Mace frequently saw coming, as the two often dueled with one another. They were two of the best swordsmen the Jedi had to offer, and almost everyone knew it. It was for that reason that they enjoyed sparring against one another, always wondering who would be the victor by day's end.

The dark-skinned Mace Windy was from the planet Haruun Kal, and after the death of his parents he was turned over to the Jedi. He was taken to Coruscant when he was six months old, and he remembered nothing of his parents or his home planet. Like many other Jedi, he was trained by Jedi Grandmaster Yoda when he was a smaller learner. Around his thirteenth birthday, Mace became the Padawan learner of Master T'ra Saa.

During his training, Mace became aware of his rare ability to detect shatterpoints within the force and how these brief moments and individuals would affect all of his future actions. With his unique ability, he was able to see parts of the future, including the building of his signature violet lightsaber. His power and potential also saw him appointed to the High Council at the age of twenty-eight, making him the youngest Jedi to ever sit on the body.

Mundi was also something of a legend amongst his peers. He entered the Jedi Order at the age of four, far later than most, and matured into a well respected Jedi Knight under Yoda's guidance. While in his fifties, he had yet to take on an apprentice, as he had been too busy with his assignment as the Jedi Watchman over his home planet of Cerea. Despite his rank, Mundi still was given a seat on the Council, an unprecedented move considering all members of the Council had historically been Masters.

In the match, Mace stepped forth and swung his blade into the high guard. Mundi took one step backwards, angling his wrists to hold his blade horizontally in front of him. Both Jedi smirked before Mace rushed his opponent with incredible speed, which gave Mundi very little time to sidestep and deflect before mounting his own attack. The Jedi Knight thrust his weapon forward, aiming at a spot on Mace's chest, but the Jedi Master flawlessly avoided the advance. Mace stepped to his right and stuck his foot forward, tripping the Jedi Knight onto his back.

Mundi managed to tuck and roll before Mace brought his blade down towards him. The Cerean's face scrunched up in annoyance, not at his opponent but at himself for falling into the trap. Within a split second, though, Mundi rose from the floor and held his blade in defense once more. This time, he knew he had to remain more reserved and hold up his defense before trying to strike back.

Just as the Knight predicted, Mace attacked once more, but Mundi's plan changed. Instead of blocking any attack, he leaped backwards towards the wall directly behind him, barely avoiding Mace's downward strike that cut a swath in the floor below him. Mundi's feet landed on the wall and he instantly launched himself forward into a leap, soaring over and above Mace's head.

The Jedi Master spun around with his blade ready, having expected a more unorthodox move from his counterpart. Mace, too, launched himself forward with a thrust from the Force, his boots lifting off of the ground just before he landed in front of the Knight. Their

blades clashed and crackled against one another in a rhythmic motion. Mace slashed upward, and Mundi followed with a parry. The Master slashed downwards, and his subordinate again followed his every move.

As the two Jedi dueled, the diminutive green frame of Master Yoda entered the gymnasium. Standing less than two meters off the ground, Yoda frequently astonished those who did not know him by revealing he was the Grandmaster of the Jedi Order, following in the footsteps of famed Grandmasters like Banik Kelrada during one of the many conflicts with the Alsakan Union and Damien Nightblade during the Great Territorial War. Yoda pressed on his wooden walking stick as he watched the two Jedi spar, knowing full well that Mace was far superior in skill to Mundi. Even so, he greatly admired Mundi's resolve, however futile it may have been. Yoda simply watched with a smile on his face, waiting patiently for the dueling Jedi to finish their session.

The duel continued in the same pattern it had been for the last minute, with Ki-Adi defending against each of Mace's attacks, but Mundi saw an opening in the Jedi Master's pattern. He sensed that Mace was readying himself to lunge forward, and the instant it came, he sidestepped and immediately responded by slashing his lightsaber towards his right where the Jedi Master stood.

For the split second it took to sidestep, Mundi thought he had the victory in reach. His confidence sparked and he couldn't help but grin as he thought his triumph was imminent, but just before his strike reached its target he felt a sharp pain on his right ear. It took him a second to realize he was falling towards the floor and that his lightsaber had fallen out of his hand, but once he smacked against the ground he caught up with the situation. Mace had tricked him into believing he had a chance of launching a successful attack, and instead easily defeated him with a simple strike from the elbow to the Cerean's right ear. Mundi looked up as his victorious foe, who was extending out his hand to his opponent.

"You did well, Ki-Adi," Mace said as Mundi graciously took his hand, "but you're too overconfident. You can't always take shortcuts.

Mundi knew that his superior was spot on in his assessment, so all the Knight could do was simply nod as he rubbed the side of his head. Still groggy from the beating, he knew that his day to beat Mace would arrive soon enough. They had practiced against one another for five years every other week, and Mace was always the victor. Mundi often came close, but it was never close enough.

"Yes, Master Windy," Mundi said with clear embarrassment, "but I'll get you next time."

Mace laughed off the comment in good fun, but as he and Mundi turned around his laughter immediately turned into a serious look of respect once he caught side of Yoda. The two Jedi approached their master and bowed in respect, a gesture which was returned by a nod. Yoda signaled for Mundi to leave, however, wishing to speak only to Mace. The Jedi Knight caught the gesture and left for a nearby refresher.

"Still compete, do you?" Yoda asked, his voice reflective of both his curiosity and approval. It was refreshing for him to see two of the more senior members of the Order continuing to train as if they were younglings.

"Every two weeks," Mace replied, still trying to catch his breath as he spoke. "He's determined to beat me."

"To victory great resolve often leads," Yoda mused aloud, though his voice was distant as if he was thinking of something else. He turned slowly, leaning on his cane for balance, and began to walk through the open gymnasium door into the wide and open high-ceilinged corridor on the other side.

"I agree," Mace affirmed as he followed the Grandmaster out into the large gray hallway, one that was still vibrant due to the large amounts of light that poured into it, "but I don't think that's why you wanted to talk to me."

"Always astute," Yoda chuckled.

Mace stopped walking when he realized that the humor was covering up the Jedi Master's worry, and the abrupt stop caused Yoda to do the same. For a moment, Mace believed that the conversation would be about his Padawan, Padmé Naberrie, but Yoda's deep worry told him otherwise. Mace knew there could be only one explanation for it, as it was a topic he too had given much thought in previous days.

"Is this about the report from the Armed Services Committee?" Mace asked with a highly curious inflection, wondering what else could have possibly been bothering the Grandmaster so much.

"It is," the eight-hundred and seventy year old Jedi Master replied, pausing to think back on his sources. "Dangerous and disturbing are these rumors in the Senate. Little we know of Kamino and its intentions."

"We know it's near the Rishi Maze," Mace replied as well as he could, "and that they conduct cloning experiments that would be illegal if they operated in the Republic. Now they're supposedly creating a clone army to invade the Republic."

"Heard these rumors as well, I have," Yoda confirmed, though he could tell that Mace, like himself, believed that they were more than simply rumors. "More of the puzzle is there still to discover."

"Do you think this has anything to do with the Si - "

"No," Yoda snapped, cutting Mace off before he could finish the sentence. "To do with the truth, this does not. Further investigation do we require."

Yoda was surprised that Mace had asked him that question. There were very few people who knew the truth about the subject, and those who did rarely spoke about it. Yoda and Mace were two of those few who knew about it, and they had only spoken of it a few times. Yoda's personal experiences taught him not to speak of them or get involved, as it only led to dangerous situations for the Jedi.

"Agreed," Mace told him, but he was still not completely convinced that what he had asked was wrong. "I'll go to Kamino and find out what I can. With luck, I'll be able to get the Senate whatever they need to stop the army."

The Jedi Grandmaster nodded, agreeing to Mace's declaration. While an invasion of the Republic did not seem out of the ordinary considering how many times it had happened over the years, Yoda believed that there was something more sinister behind the creation of this army. He too was not convinced that his dismissal of those of whom they did not speak was accurate, but he knew full well that the dark side had been clouding his ability to see the

Force lately. It was as if they were bordering close to the proverbial end times that the religions of their ancestors often spoken of.

"I'll notify my Padawan," Mace told him. "She'll remain on Coruscant while I'm on assignment."

"How is her training?" Yoda asked curiously, purposely shifting to a more upbeat topic than the potential of galactic armageddon.

"Very well," Mace told him. "Padmé's learning quicker than I'd imagined. She's the best apprentice I've ever had by a long shot."

"An exceptional student, she is," Yoda complimented, "and an even greater Jedi will she become. Bright is her future, despite her tragic past."

Mace nodded in agreement. He had taken Padmé as his apprentice five years earlier when she was thirteen, although he had found her on her home planet after her parents had died. It was a similar story to his own, so he felt drawn to her and knew he could relate to her tragedy. From the moment he decided to officially train her, he recognized that he had an exceptional student. It wasn't often that an apprentice would master the ways of the Jedi so quickly, but every few years there was one. Sometimes, such as Padmé's case, it was a good quality, although it could often time lead down the path of darkness.

Before Mace and Yoda could walk off in their separate directions, with Mace preparing to fetch a starfighter and Yoda intending to return his meditations, the door to a small crew office opened, shooting straight up into the ceiling with the intensity of a repulsor-lift. Just as it did, a young tan-skinned Jedi Knight named Geith emerged from behind it. Behind him was a group of technicians dutifully working on and monitoring the ship's systems, and a small holographic protector that remained in the center of them reminded Mace and Yoda that it was used as a small war room during times of turmoil. Mace was not often aboard the vessel, so he could only assume that the last time it was used in combat was during the Stark Hyperspace War.

Holding a datapad, Geith stepped out into the bright hallway to speak with the two Masters, as he had been assigned to assist them with anything they needed during their brief stay. Geith, a Human with rust colored hair, was a native of the Tibanna gas mining facility of Cloud City on Bespin, where he had been recruited into the Jedi Order as a young boy. He was somewhat strangely dressed for a Jedi of his era, wearing a full blue tunic with blue gloves very much reminiscent of the standard dress for Jedi during the Jedi Civil War. Geith felt it reflected the golden age of the Jedi, an era that had long since passed when the Order was far nobler.

Many Jedi took note of the twenty-seven year old Knight's opinion and his choice of attire, but they chose to do nothing about it. In their opinions, while he was somewhat arrogant, his belief that he was upholding the best principles of the Jedi Order was of little concern to them. Some even agreed with his assessment, but they chose to remain silent out of fear of embarrassment because of it.

"Masters," Geith exclaimed once he finally left the offices, "I just wanted to let you know that we'll be arriving at Coruscant in just under an hour. Is there anything else I can do for you while you're with us?"

"Nothing more do I require," Yoda said in thanks, pleased with Geith's performance.

"Have the docking bay prepare a starfighter for me," Mace replied, but he conveniently omitted why he needed one. "I won't be going home today after all."

"Right away, Master," Geith said, punching a few commands into his datapad so the docking bay would be able to instantly prepare a fighter. "Padawan Hadaack will be there to assist you with whatever you need."

Geith bowed and returned to the offices, but he couldn't help but wonder why Mace was changing his pre-arranged itinerary. Jedi Councilors certainly didn't need to answer to one Knight, but he still preferred to be told things. He knew that no communication had been received from the High Council, considering messages had to travel through his office, so Mace clearly had his own matters to attend to. Whatever they were was not Geith's business, but as the door closed behind him he couldn't help but be curious.

"I'll report back to you once I make contact with the cloners," Mace told the small, pointed-ear Jedi Master. "I'll try not to be long."

"Not authorized is this mission," Yoda reminded him. "In our best interests it will be for you to quickly discover the truth about this plot."

Understanding exactly what his superior was saying, Mace bowed in respect. As the two separated, Mace made his way to the nearest elevator shaft to take him to the hangar. Once he stepped inside the shaft, he could feel the ship rock slightly before returning to a feeling of normality. The ship had clearly dropped out of hyperspace, as was standard protocol when another vessel was preparing to enter or exit the docking bay.

As the elevator descended towards the lower levels, Mace tried to figure out what to expect when he arrived on Kamino, but it didn't take him long to realize that he knew nothing of the planet beyond what he told Yoda. Although there was pertinent information in the Jedi Archives, which he would likely read on his voyage to the Wild Space planet, he would still likely encounter many surprises on the world.

Once it came to a somewhat abrupt halt, the elevator opened its doors and Mace stepped out into the hangar. It was a vast and wide open area made mostly out of the same gray material as the rest of the ship. The floor was completely transparent, allowing anyone who stood upon it to gaze at the stars or hyperspace trails below them. The furthest wall on the port side of the ship was also opened, covered only by a shield that kept the bay pressurized. In the distance, a large star flickered, and a few dots on its surface pointed out that there were planets in the system.

When he noticed that Mace had entered the hangar, the young long-haired Padawan Crispin Hadaack looked up from his work station and walked towards the Jedi Master. A docking bay technician was not a job that Crispin had expected. As the Padawan learner of Rana Quemín, a Jedi Master Mace had frequent disagreements with, Crispin eventually came to tolerate undesirable assignments, especially considering the Order believed all of its people should learn to understand the common man and his skills. Crispin wasn't thrilled, feeling he was above such menial labor, but he still carried it out to the best of his abilities.

Mace watched Crispin with some suspicion, but he never fully understood why he often did it. It was nothing personal, but rather Mace felt the young man needed somewhat of an attitude adjustment if he was to become a Knight. Crispin was highly respected throughout the Jedi Order, but he was also arrogant in his beliefs and actions despite his skills.

"Master Windy," Crispin said as he approached, "your fighter is ready."

"Thank you, Padawan," Mace said as he began to walk towards the small craft on the far left side of the hangar.

The small *Delta-7* starfighter that was floating above the docking bay floor was an evolutionary descendant of the ancient *Aurek* fighter. Surrounded by a hyperspace ring that allowed it to travel long distances, it was a sleek interceptor given to Jedi for use during reconnaissance missions, but it was fitted with weapons for when the situation called for them. The red color of the triangular starfighter represented the diplomatic immunity that it had been granted by the Republic Judicial Department.

Stepping into the cockpit, Mace placed the standard gold headset of a Jedi pilot onto his bald head so he would be able to communicate with the small R2 droid in the cavity on the left wing of the vessel, as well as anyone else who contacted him during the flight to Kamino. After checking over the pre-flight checks that the Jedi technicians had carried out satisfactorily, Mace ignited the engines of the starfighter and blue flames shot out from the rear engines as they roared to life.

The craft rose higher above the glassy surface while the other people in the bay cleared the area. Once they were safely on the other side of the walls, the shield dropped and Mace rocketed forward into space. Moving to a safe distance, he caught the roar of *Chu'unthor's* engines as it shot back into hyperspace, and moments later he too ignited his engines and picked up the currents of a hyperspace lane traveling towards the Rishi Maze where he would find Kamino. What he would find on the planet was another story entirely.