



INVASION

Queen Arcadia sat silently on her throne, reflecting on what Maul had told her only minutes earlier. Ever since the blockade began she had feared that war was inevitable, and now that fear was coming to pass. This was all despite every bone in her body telling her that there was no such thing as an inevitable war. Perhaps there wasn't. But if it was true that war was not inevitable, yet war was coming to Utapau, then only one conclusion could be drawn - she had failed her people.

Her father, Veruna, had told her when she was still a small, optimistic girl that failure was a highway to success, perhaps even more than actual success was. He told her that failure would allow her to avoid such a thing happening again, to allow her to earnestly seek truth and further success.

It certainly didn't feel like it.

Her failure only served to make her feel even worse about herself, especially now. Though Utapau was a peaceful and virtually pacifist society, more and more elements in her government were encouraging their planet into a war of defense. Arcadia herself despised war. To the twenty-five year old queen, war was counter-productive and futile. She felt that, were she given the credits the Republic had spent on its wars in its twenty-five thousand year existence, she could furnish every sentient man, woman, and child with necessities fit for a king.

Even though such a moral outrage angered the queen, she knew it wasn't the worst of it. The shallow and fraudulent state of fake patriotism supported by the government and carried by the most ignorant of people was the ugliest of things. That wasn't to say that patriotism itself was bad; it was those who would wave a flag as if it was true courage, deny their government's wrongdoings and remain ignorant to the reality of the galaxy that disgusted her.

Freedom did not just come through the sword; every war had significant drawbacks to freedom, with rights being chipped away and squandered by the very people sworn to protect them. War in the interest of freedom was hypocrisy, and Arcadia wanted nothing of it. After all, it made no difference to the dead or the people whose rights were stripped

away if war was fought for totalitarianism or liberty. In the end, the rights were still gone and the people were still dead.

Utapau itself was the capital planet of the Chommell sector - and it was far too peaceful for war. The planet was a special natural wonder, a planet without a molten core, an enigma to even the most talented of scientists. Its vast plains, thick forests, pristine oceans, and immense systems of flowing waterfalls spoke of an unspoiled purity, one she did not want corrupted. Nor did she their culture.

The Humans of the planet were renowned for their enlightened and artistic lifestyles and for their aristocratic class system of the monarchy, the nobles, and the common class. Though other planets had similar systems, Utapau lacked a lower class. Intellectual maturity rather than biological age governed whether one was capable of leadership, a policy that came about when monarchs were forced to take the throne in their teenaged years.

Humans weren't the only inhabitants of Utapau, however. Beneath the Aquarian Ocean, north of the royal palace, lay the seat of the warrior-like Gungan Empire. The Humans of Utapau rarely had contact with or spoke to the Gungan people due to disagreements going back hundreds of years, despite the fact that the Gungans were believed to be the original species of the planet.

Arcadia herself was the daughter of the late King Veruna Arcadia, who was assassinated for his highly controversial policies. Many constantly reminded Arcadia of her father's failures, but she did not like to talk nor think about them. She concerned herself with serving the people, not her or her late father's interests. The people continued to trust her even after these two years, as far as she knew, and she was determined not to let them down. She was determined not to repeat the mistakes of her father.

The House of Arcadia had ruled Utapau for centuries. Originally a house of warriors that had fought against the Gungan Empire centuries earlier, they eventually became politicians. After filling the void left by an heirless monarch, the Arcadias ruled Utapau from then on, generally holding the respect of the people. There were, however, exceptions. Veruna was the most prominent member of the family to squander that respect after Utapau became a player in the interstellar plasma energy market. When high grade plasma veins were discovered below the streets of the capital city of Ogana, Veruna and Senator Malus Palpatine decided to build a plasma mining and refining center in the heart of the city.

Because Utapau was not fond of trade, however, they allowed the Trade Federation to purchase the plasma only at a fixed cost. But the Federation sold Utapau short by selling it to others at a marked-up price, taking advantage of Utapau's lack of experience in the interstellar market. Utapau demanded to be freed from the contract, and though Veruna agreed, he feared a military response. To prepare for this, Veruna expanded the Space Fighter Corp and founded new starfighter squadrons to defend the planet. These moves, however, were highly unpopular with the people as it was perceived as an attempt to suppress dissent and expand the size of the planetary security forces, creating a police state. In retaliation, Veruna was assassinated.

Arcadia then took the throne, beginning immediately to override some of her father's actions by reducing the size of the military. She did, however, despite the unpopularity of the move, keep one of the star fighter squadrons for defense. For this, she received threats, prompting her to create a legion of handmaidens and body doubles trained in defense. Fortunately, the threats subsided and Utapau returned to his peaceful state - before the blockade.

The blockade worried her. It worried or more than anything ever had before. When she rose to power, Arcadia had promised not to allow violent conflicts, but now she knew, she knew she would have to break it. And it was entirely her fault. She had worked with Palpatine to draft the law banning the use of slaves in the Outer Rim; undoubtedly this was why the Federation chose Utapau to blockade. While she did not regret freeing thousands of slaves, she could not help but wonder if Utapau would not have been targeted had she not become involved in the affairs of the Galactic Senate...

"Your majesty?" came a calm, soothing voice that jolted the queen from her reminiscing into the present. "Senator Palpatine has asked you a question."

The queen smiled sheepishly at Governor Sio Bibble, leader of the capital city of Ogana, too bashful to offer up an apology. Instead, she simply nodded her head, waiting for Palpatine. The senator offered up his own comforting smile at her over the holo-emitter as he continued.

Arcadia considered herself lucky not to have to work with a corrupt senator, a common trend among most members of the Senate. Palpatine was her mentor, someone who was always there, someone who dedicated himself to helping her through the rough parts of her rule and aiding her with her more difficult decisions.

"As I was saying," Palpatine continued, returning to his more serious expression, "how could what Maul said be true? I have assurances from Chancellor Valorum that his ambassadors did arrive. It must be the...get...gotiate...bassadors..."

Palpatine's blue holographic form sputtered and faded away, though for a moment it seemed the transmission would restore itself, but to no avail, finally disappearing altogether. Arcadia hid the worry that filled her mind, though it was evident on the faces of Governor Bibble and her other advisors. The queen licked her lips as she prepared to speak, hoping what she thought wasn't trust.

"What happened?" she asked, masking the dread in her voice with a stoic air. Captain Panaka, however, was already checking the communication sensor. The dark-skinned, heavily armed man, the queen's head of security, worked deftly to uncover what had happened.

"Check the communications array," Panaka signaled to one of the guards at the door, who saluted and left to carry out orders.

"A malfunction?" the Governor Bibble inquired with a suspicious countenance that told Arcadia that he, too, shared in her worry.

"Finished a diagnostic this morning," Panaka said with all the urgency of a dead rat as he shook his head, checking some more things on a series of witches and wires hidden in one of the throne room's pillars. "Probably jammed."

"A communications disruption can only mean one thing," Bibble reminded them. "Invasion."

Arcadia already had her hand to her head as her thoughts raced. She had already known this was true, but hearing her governor confirm it... It made her almost faint. A Federation invasion had the potential to destroy the peaceful culture of Utapau. The task would be so easy for the battle droid army. Utapau's lack of proper military forces, she knew, were

insufficient to war against the droid army - an army that would soon be marching to victory. But she would not lose hope. She couldn't. Hope that Utapau would be victorious, and more hope that the Federation would cease their invasion. She prayed, begged, that the attack would cease.

"I know we are all expecting an attack," Arcadia told the assembled delegation, keeping her voice steady and calm, "but I still can't believe that even the Federation would go this far."

"The Senate will revoke their trade franchise altogether," Bibble reminded them, as if trying to make himself believe it. "They would not even need slaves because they would lose their right to even exist! If we remind them of this, we may yet be able to rely on negotiation."

"Negotiation." Panaka repeated in monotone, shutting the control panel and checking his blaster, which was habitual for him even outside of times of need. "Negotiation...without communication."

Arcadia sat resolute, forcing herself to weed through all of the possible alternatives, consequences and outcomes in her head. She did not like or approve of any of them, but she particularly loathed the idea of having to wage a war, even if it was one of defense. Were Utapau truly threatened, she would protect her people. She knew when she took the throne that there were things she could not do, but that there were things she could force herself to do...if ever she had to. Until that time came, though, she would only prepare for defense through nonviolent means. Finally, with that in mind, she was ready to give her verdict.

"I will not condone a course of action that will lead us to war..."

It was twilight. The forested coasts of the Aquarian Ocean, hundreds of kilometers from any city, were calm, as they always were. Then the waves began to ripple as three Federation landing crafts dropped from the sky, breaking through the clouds, looking for an empty place to land. Starfighters buzzed through the sky, searching for anyone that might have witnessed their arrival. The Federation had a great deal at stake, so they could not afford being spied on. The element of surprise was crucial.

A C-9979 landing craft wobbled. The elephantine ship carrying its troops slowed, trying to regain its trajectory as a blue beam of light sliced through its underbelly and a waterfall of droids plopped into the water. The craft shook, finally veering off and gaining speed as it plunged to the earth. Before it did so, however, a figure dived into the lake beneath. The Jedi Knight remained below the surface as he swam tirelessly toward shore, hoping to avoid being spotted by any droid patrols - and protect himself. The water turned orange for a moment as the transport exploded on impact with the ground.

Out of breath, Obi-Wan surfaced, gasping in a breath of air before surveying what his little maneuver had accomplished. He grinned in satisfaction before jumping on a nearby bank - then the smile was wiped from his face. The transports just kept on coming, endlessly, so that the loss of the one was as a drop in the bucket. Battle droids rode back and forth across the plains and woods on STAPs, looking for any sign of a possible assailant. To Obi-Wan's chagrin it dawned on him that the droids would be programmed with enough brain power to inform them that the destroyed landing craft was not a random malfunction. Mumbling at himself for not thinking of that sooner, Obi-Wan turned away from the coast and darted into the forest.

Beside a nearby landing craft, the droid commander known as OOM-9 stood atop an Armored Assault Tank, or AAT, and looked out over the vast army of transports soaring across the ocean and forests. Though OOM-9's programming did not allow for any form of emotion, the droid knew that it would have felt pleasure at the sight of the invasion force preparing to head towards its first targets. The droid considered how long it would take to accomplish their initial objections before completing their primary goal of capturing Queen Arcadia in Ogana, but OOM-9 became distracted by the diminutive holographic image of Lord Maul that appeared on his tank's holo-emitter.

"Yes, Lord Maul?" the yellow and tan droid commander asked the figure, who even over a tiny hologram looked as imposing as he did in person.

"What is the status of your invasion, Commander?" Maul asked.

"My patrols are prepared to head to New Centrif to disable the last communications transmitter," the commander told him. "We will move through Harte Secur and Spinnaker before taking Ogana."

"Excellent. And OOM-9, the Jedi ambassadors are no longer aboard this ship," Maul told the commander, his voice harsh yet calm, creating a paradox in the droid's processor. "If you come in contact with them, your orders are to let them continue on their way."

"Yes sir," OOM-9 immediately responded, not understanding why Maul would want two Jedi assassins to continue through a restricted military zone towards what was likely Ogana. Nevertheless, the droid was programmed to follow orders, despite its ignorance as to the reasoning behind the order.

Kilometers away from the droid commander, Dooku could barely catch his breath. He ran as fast as he could through the forest, wheezing with each step. Every bone and muscle in his body ached, an agonizing pain that pierced his legs as he frantically tried to run faster. A series of monstrous troop transports emerged from the mist behind him, knocking down trees and slaughtering countless animals as they lumbered through the forest.

Dooku was one of the oldest Human Jedi Masters in the Order, and he had only been sent on the mission to Utapau because of his skills in negotiation. Had he known that he would be making an escape attempt like this, Dooku likely would not have agreed to make the journey; it had been some time since he used his combat skills in actual action. Unlike him, however, Dooku knew that Obi-Wan was likely having no trouble making his way through the area, considering he was forty years younger than his former master. Dooku envied the Jedi Knight for nearly nothing, but being in the physical prime of life was an exception.

Dooku, who had been born as the Count of Serenno, had known Obi-Wan for many years. When Obi-Wan first became Dooku's apprentice, Dooku felt that the boy was reckless and arrogant, more so than most students. The Jedi Master tried to transfer his apprentice to another master multiple times during the early years of their training, but each time it was rejected. He had no choice but to train Obi-Wan to the best of his abilities, but Obi-Wan always seemed to resist his master's teachings.

Obi-Wan had once told Dooku that he considered their mutual friend, Qui-Gon Jinn, to be more of a mentor than Dooku. It did not bother the Jedi Master at first, until he found out that Qui-Gon was teaching Obi-Wan different philosophies than Dooku's own, but he refrained from saying anything in hopes of spending less time with the boy. Even with Qui-Gon's training, Dooku did not believe that Obi-Wan would pass his trials and become a Jedi Knight due to the boy's constant arrogance. Despite his reservations, however, the Jedi Council had knighted Obi-Wan.

Just then Dooku noticed, a few meters in front of him, a young creature squatting down on the ground. The creature was an Otolla Gungan with a long bill and flaring nostrils, dressed in an ornate piece of light armor and cloth littered with broken jewels. The Gungan held a clam that he had retrieved from a nearby pond, and as he began to eat it his fin-like ears perked up. He suddenly noticed the troop transports, and Dooku, headed straight for him, nearly leaping into the air in bewilderment.

Although momentarily frightened, a slight grin swept across the Gungan's face and his eyes opened wide. Leaping into action just as the machines were about to overrun the aging Jedi, the Gungan dove onto Dooku and held him to the ground while the transports passed over them. The roar of the crafts and the heat of their engines was intense on their ears and skin, but after a few moments the Gungan looked up to find that the transports were continuing on their way through the trees.

"Damn," the creature said in his native tongue as he stood back up, having never seen anything like the MTTs before.

Looking down at the aching Jedi Master, the Gungan reached out his hand to help him up, but Dooku swatted it away. The creature did not know why Dooku rejected the offer to help after the Gungan had saved his life, but either way the creature knew that what the Gungan gods required of the occurrence. He would not let his first opportunity for freedom in two years pass him by after having sacrificed so much.

Before the Gungan could even speak, Dooku slowly stood up once again and watched as the war machines made their way into the distance. The Jedi Master began to walk again, not even so much as acknowledging the Gungan who had saved him. Although such emotions were frowned upon by the Jedi Order, it frustrated Dooku that some frog creature had to save him when he should have been able to run from the transports himself. He would never admit it, being too proud to admit that he had been saved by what struck him as a lower life form.

"Hey, wait a minute!" the Gungan shouted, this time in the common language of Galactic Basic with what seemed to be a distinctive Coruscanti accent. The Gungan was startled by how fast Dooku whipped around to look at him, and as the Gungan began to speak Dooku grabbed him by the cloth on his clothes and slammed him up against a tree.

"You almost got us killed!" the Jedi Master barked. "Are you brainless?"

The Gungan had little tolerance for someone who showed such disrespect, he never had. He grabbed Dooku by the wrists and pushed him back into the mud, becoming angry that he had ever decided to help such a stubborn person. Then, adding insult to injury, the man dared to question his intelligence as if he was some tadpole that had just crawled out of the pond. In fact, it was the Jedi Master who was unintelligently trying to outrun a war machine instead of simply ducking to the ground.

"I'm talking to you," the Gungan said as Dooku stood back up and brushed himself off, "so clearly I'm not."

"The ability to speak does not make you intelligent," Dooku scowled. "Now get out of here."

"Who do you think you are?" the Gungan asked, peeved that the Jedi Master was continuing with his tirade. "I'm not some lower life form you can kick around. Besides, I saved your life. You owe me a life debt."

"You saved my life?" Dooku asked with a laugh that bellowed out of his lungs in a mocking tone that would have stung even the hardest of people, despite the fact that he knew the Gungan had truly saved his life.

"I pulled you away from those steel beasts," the Gungan reminded him. "You would have been killed. The gods demand that your life belongs to me now."

Before Dooku could so much as argue the existence of whatever mythical gods the creature believed in, which he fully intended to do, two STAP bikes emerged from the mist, flanking Obi-Wan as he ran furiously through puddles of mud and water to escape them. Dooku immediately noticed that Obi-Wan had his lightsaber in his hand but was not using it. He rolled his eyes, knowing exactly what Obi-Wan had done. As a series of blaster bolts rained towards him and the Gungan, Dooku pushed the creature into the mud and pulled out his own emerald blade, deflecting the enemy fire back to the droids. The two STAPs were quickly startled by the incoming fire and did not have time to maneuver before their bikes exploded from the blaster impacts.

"Sorry," Obi-Wan said after he stopped running, place his hands on his knees while panting which Dooku considered to be poetic justice, "the water fried my weapon."

"You forgot to turn off the power again," Dooku told him. "It won't take long to recharge, but you can't keep making these careless mistakes. You're a Jedi Knight now, not a Padawan."

"Well...," the Gungan sighed before allowing Obi-Wan or Dooku speak, the creature letting out his frustrated regret as he realized he had lost the chance to gain favor with his people. "I suppose you've saved my life now. Our life debt has been settled..."

"Who's this?" Obi-Wan asked, also believing the Gungan to be a lesser life form, although he quickly sensed that this was not the case when he recognized him to be a Gungan.

"A local," Dooku said coldly, "now let's get out of here before anymore droids show up."

"Wait," the Gungan said before they could get on their way, realizing that he hadn't yet lost his opportunity to reclaim his honor and curry favor with the other Gungans. "If you're looking for refuge, then the safest place would be Otoh Gunga in the Aquarian Ocean. It's where I grew up."

"A city?" Dooku asked, suddenly intrigued by what the Gungan had to offer them.

"Could you take us there?" Obi-Wan asked, although somewhat hesitantly as he had no idea what they would be walking into.

"It's the least he could do after what he just put me through," Dooku chuckled, finding himself to be funny despite Obi-Wan and the Gungan disagreeing entirely.

Obi-Wan gave Dooku a subtle hand gesture as a way to tell the Jedi Master to back off. Obi-Wan knew that Dooku became easily irritated by those he looked down upon, and it was clear to the Jedi Knight that Dooku looked down upon the Gungan. While the creature did strike Obi-Wan as odd, in both looks and in the regal mannerisms of which he walked and talked, he recognized that the Gungan had something to offer them and that it was not a coincidence that they found one another. The Force rarely made things happen by accident.

"On second thought, no," the Gungan said with a grin that puzzled the Jedi, although the creature knew full well that he would be able to get what he wanted from them because of their obvious need to find a safe place to hide. "I've been banished, so I can't take you there...unless, of course, you'd be willing to grant me a small favor."

Before any of them could respond, they all jolted as they heard a rumbling in the distance that sounded to be growing louder and closer. They looked upwards and could see the tops of trees falling and crashing to the ground as the war machines continued to plow their way through the forests. Overhead flew dozens of droid star fighters headed towards the north, presumably on their way to Ogana. Obi-Wan and Dooku both turned to each other and shared the mutual astonishment of seeing so many forces moving through. It was clear to them that the Federation was not simply interested in attacking the planet, but rather occupying it indefinitely. The Jedi would need a safe refuge in order to survive.

"Do you hear that?" Obi-Wan asked the Gungan, moving closer to get in the creature's face.

"Unfortunately," the Gungan replied, refusing to back away as Obi-Wan approached.

"That is the sound of a thousand terrible things headed this way," Obi-Wan told him, exaggerating in order to make his point. "If they find us, they will kill us. Is that what you want?"

The Gungan was nearly offended by what he perceived to be Obi-Wan's suggestion that he wanted them dead, although he quickly realized that the Jedi Knight was only trying to prove a point. It was, of course, a moot point. The Gungan could easily hide in the forests from the Federation forces for as long as he needed. He had spent two years adapting to and becoming familiar with the terrain. The Jedi, on the other hand, were newcomers. They had no idea how to hide or adapt to the area. They would be killed within days, if not hours.

"Your point is well seen," the Gungan admitted, albeit with a refusal to grant them what they wanted unless they were to grant them what he wanted, "but you need to do me this favor."

"What favor is that?" the frustrated elder Jedi Master grunted, effectively humoring the Gungan as Dooku had no real interest in knowing that the creature wanted.

"As I said a moment ago," the Gungan began, "I was banished from my home. I need you to help me gain favor with my people so I can return without punishment. It's a relatively simple task."

The creature had planned to return home with Dooku to show that he had saved Dooku's life. It might have given him enough of an argument for his return to Gungan society, but Dooku's actions negated that. The Gungan didn't want to demand a favor out of them, but

he had no choice. Two years was too long to sit around in the forests, especially considering who he had once been within his home. He was more than happy to help the Jedi, but he couldn't avoid asking for their help in return.

Unsure how they were going to proceed, the two Jedi locked their eyes together, having a silent conversation without verbalizing anything or even using the Force. They both knew exactly what the other was thinking; Obi-Wan was willing to help, Dooku was ready to make his own way to safety without the Gungan. Dooku was about ready to say no, much to Obi-Wan's disappointment, but the sound of more tanks rolling towards them distracted Dooku, giving Obi-Wan the chance to speak first.

"Alright," Obi-Wan said, prompting Dooku to snap his neck around and meet Obi-Wan with a piercing gaze that expressed his absolute disdain for Obi-Wan's actions. "We'll do whatever we can."

Oh thank the gods, the Gungan told himself as Obi-Wan agreed. It was a small mercy, to be sure, but it would make a lot of difference. Nothing, at least not right now, felt more fulfilling than the creature's sense of gratitude, nor did the idea that he would be able to make a difference for his people again. The inward satisfaction it provided would give him added strength, something he would need when he faced judgment from his people.

"Before we leave," Obi-Wan said, after the creature began to walk towards a clearing in the woods, the Jedi's words prompting the Gungan to stop walking, "what's your name?"

"Jar Binks," the creature said with a sense of righteousness and entitlement, "Crowned Prince of the Gungan Empire."

Arruinda, mayor of New Centrif, wiped a cold towel across her face, hoping that she could calm the anxieties that were about ready to make her convulse in panic. Beads of sweat poured down her face, her heart racing like a tusk cat on the planet's western plains. Fifteen excruciatingly long minutes had passed since she received the word that part of the droid army was advancing towards her city. The mayor, a sixty year old woman of plain and wrinkling features and mayor for two decades, knew that there was not an adequate defense force to protect the city, and that the Federation's goal was to cripple one of the last remaining sources of planetary communication.

In a cruel twist of fate, her people had been frantically trying to make contact with the capital city, which she was sure the Federation wanted to prevent; this could only have been more true once they found out the droid army was advancing. Their efforts to communicate with Ogana increased a thousand fold once the droids approached, but the communications blackout was causing them to have difficulty in doing so.

The elderly woman sighed, letting out all of her pent up frustration at her certain death as she approached the window of her seventh-story office to overlook the streets. The town square below her bustled with frantic activity from her dedicated security forces. They knew the odds of survival as well as she did. Even some armed citizens approached the square, a source of pride for the mayor in such a difficult time. Even so, the Federation army that was approaching numbered in the hundreds, if not thousands. New Centrif was in the dozens. Not even the Jedi's Force could save them from that.

With a steady precision that would worry even the steadfast of commanders, the droid army arrived at the locked durasteel gate of the city. It was in the center of the wall that surrounded the settlement, though the edifice would do them little good.

OOM-9, atop his AAT, led the force. With the press of a button on a control panel, Maul's holographic image shimmered to life in front of the droid. Maul did little to hide his eagerness at an update, having invested so much time leading up to this moment.

"Lord Maul," OOM-9's cold robotic voice said, "we have arrived at New Centrif."

"Destroy the communication capability of that settlement," Maul demanded, his tone reflecting his great satisfaction at what was being accomplished. "These people must not get word back to the government."

"Right away, Lord Maul," OOM-9 replied as the hologram fizzled away.

"Open fire!"

From her secure office, Arruinada watched in horror as the droid tanks began to bombard the fortified gate at the entrance to her city. Within moments, the gate exploded in all directions, but the droids remained stationary and quiet. On the ground, Colonel Sotab Jacoma of the Utapau Security Forces stood with his men in confusion. His only thoughts were on the stationary droids, wondering why they were not moving.

But then they started their march. Jacoma's olive skin was dripping with sweat when the droids were still stationary, feeling that something wasn't right, but it was once they were on the move that he truly became frightened. Their march, their robotic clinging and clanging, their emotionless features; for droids with such a simple purpose, the horror that they inflicted was most complicated.

Jacoma had seen simulations of battles, but it was nothing like this. He told himself that nothing can truly prepare someone for the horrors of the dead and the dying. Nothing can truly make someone understand just how senseless and cruel life can be, and how easily life could be taken away.

School children playing war games with their friends would talk of the glorious days of the Mandalorian Wars, the Great Territorial War, the New Sith Wars and all the wars in between. Either things had changed since then, or those children were being fed lies. Holo-dramas about ancient wars showed the honorable soldiers rushing into combat against the evil Sith, dispersing their ranks to make sure that no enemy was left alive. The men ran through the battle fields of distant worlds; soldiers helped their fallen comrades and tended to the wounded. They ran to and fro across numerous worlds, defending freedom and liberty.

Utapau was nothing like that. Men were not gallantly running across the battle field. Instead, the droid armies of the Federation pounded their metal heels into the lush green grass, corrupting the innocence of the world. The droids marched side by side in a cold, calculated formation, so precise that only the computers controlling them could allow for such a feat.

Finally, Jacoma couldn't wait anymore. Forcing his men to watch the advance was psychological torture. Even he couldn't bear it. Clutching his blaster, he said a prayer and thought of his wife and infant daughter. He knew, as did everyone, that he would never see the two most precious things in his life ever again. But for Utapau, some sacrifices were worth it. For the freedom of his people, there were things worth dying for. Raising his blaster into the air, which caught the attention of all his men, Jacoma was ready to do just that.

"For the queen!" the colonel's voice roared as his troops surged forward towards their impending demise.

The band of men, barely enough to fill a platoon in a fully sized army, began advancing. The first few men, shouting with their captain as he sounded the battle cry, charged forward, diving toward any cover they could find. A building to one side, a mass of crates to another, they flew behind anything they could as the first wave of red lances sizzled towards them. The captain himself crouched behind a statue in the midst of his men, keeping his head down as the droids launched their initial barrage. The metal soldiers slowly advanced with a rhythmic clicking of their joints, the thudding of their metallic feet rumbling on the ground.

Jacoma breathed deeply as the first lasers began to thud and sputter about him. Many hit the statue he was crouching behind, its arm cleanly shot off and its stony face decimated. He felt the heat of the blasts on the back of his neck as beads of his own sweat dripped down his face. He slowly peered upwards toward the rest of his men behind him and saw at least five collapse into screaming, bloody heaps of singed flesh and burnt bone. They had been caught in the open by the attackers, and the smell of flesh cooking so close to him made the captain gag.

Taking a deep breath of courage, he crouched upwards and spun around the side of his statue, loosing as many shots from his weapon as his trigger finger could muster. As he leaned out, though, the smoke of battle and fumes of lasers stung his eyes. Firing blindly, he kept a steady wave of green lances zooming towards the enemy. As the first billow of smoke that hit him cleared, he began to open his eyes wider, crouching a little more into his cover while losing fewer aimed shots at the oncoming metal onslaught.

Fires burned on both sides of the road, flickering left and right about the corpses that littered the way. Of the fifteen or so men who had charged ahead of him, Jacoma could only see three left alive, and only one of those was still in a pose remotely similar to standing. The man was bent over, cradling one arm close to him, using his other to operate a pistol over the top of a crate he was huddle behind. His uniform was bloody, his face contorted in pain.

The two other men that made up the living three were badly wounded. In fact, the captain could only tell they were alive by the way they screamed in pain, their chests shaking. One had only two red stumps where his legs had once been, and he screamed in shock as blood trickled from where he lay. Within a couple of seconds he had passed out, either from shock or blood loss. The third was close to death too, a large metal fixture piercing his chest. His face was contorted in a silent scream, coughing up blood as he tried to call out, but whether it was for help or death could not be made certain. The others were all dead, what was left of them barely recognizable as Human. Pieces of them were strewn across what had once been the grand main road of New Centrif.

Still looking up, Jacoma heard a clank as a metal ball with a small red light bounced on the ground a few feet from the man with the pistol. Jacoma was able to see his eyes widen in shock, before the captain turned away as the grenade exploded. The explosion engulfed the poor soldier, and the wash of heat radiation washed over the captain as he dove backwards. He caught a glimpse of the statue toppling over as he moved, and as he hit the floor he could feel blisters stinging the side of his face that had been caught in the blast.

Realizing he was out in the open now, Jacoma tried to push himself to his feet. He gingerly went to lean on his forearms, before realizing that the statue had toppled over onto his legs. He was trapped. Propping himself up as best he could, he cast a glance with his good eye to what he thought would be the remaining men fighting behind him, only to find the same carnage as before. Just as great a number of corpses and body parts littered the street that led to the mayoral offices. This time, though, he could see only a handful of survivors cradling horrific injuries, and some who were still running from the droids. It seemed the droids had at least put the suffering out of their misery. All except Jacoma himself.

With what little energy he had left, he twisted around to see the droids approaching. Their march was close now, almost deafening. As his gaze rested upon them, he saw them merely feet away. It seemed they either had not noticed him or, seeing him trapped and defenseless, had seen no need to shoot him from afar. As the first row reached him, a droid that bore a slightly different color scheme to the rest, which the captain guessed counted as a rank insignia, stopped, the other rows marching on towards the building. Jacoma would have guessed that this was a lieutenant or captain, having seen the commander direct the battle from its tank behind the marching death bringers.

The droid looked down upon him, its black visual receptors, emotionless, meeting Jacoma's pained open eye. Without so much as a grunt or titter, the droid angled its rifle down towards the captain. Before it fired, though, Jacoma brought his left arm, which had been by his side, up to reveal a metal sphere nestling in the palm of his hand. He clicked a button with his thumb and a red light began flashing on the top. *Three*. With what Jacoma could only link to Human alarm, the droid leveled its rifle and shrugged back instantly. *Two*. Jacoma smiled weakly. *One*. The grenade exploded, and Jacoma was free of the metal beast that now had his home world firmly clamped between its jaws.

Far above the fray, Arruinada's jaw dropped as she watched her friends and townsfolk become engulfed in the explosion. The droids cut through the few defenders that were left like they were nothing, fixated on reaching the communications array just past the town square. The large satellite dish would likely be destroyed within minutes, and they still didn't have a single through to Ogana. With precious little time, the mayor demanded results.

"Do you have a signal yet?" Arruinada asked, forgoing formality and choosing not to hide the terror that rolled off of her tongue.

"A faint one," one of her technicians replied.

"That's better than no signal at all," she told him. "Start sending the signal to Ogana now."

The technician nodded and began working the computer behind them to prepare the transmission. Arruinada wouldn't be able to speak directly to the government, but she would be able to send them a message to let them know what was happening, provided the transmission array wasn't knocked out sooner. It was their only chance to let Queen Arcadia

know that the planet was being invaded, so the mayor felt that she had a grave responsibility and could not afford to fail.

"Queen Arcadia," Arruinada began once the technician gave her the all clear, "this is Mayor Arruinada of New Centrif. As we speak, our city is being invaded by the droid armies of the Trade Federation. They are attempting to destroy our communications array to block out all planetary communication. We do not have the man power to - "

Just then her sentence was broken as the door to the room burst into pieces, and technician after technician was gunned down by the droid forces that had managed to make their way into the office. Arruinada dove behind her desk and grabbed a gun from one of the drawers, firing back in a desperate attempt to stay alive.

The defense was futile.