

Fate/Knights of the Heroic Throne

Chapter Intro

Human order: Restored.

History: Preserved.

But what of the ones who made it possible?

Heroic Spirits—echoes of legends, bound to vessels, fated to fade without remembrance.

But a wish was made.

One last miracle from humanity's saviour—
that her fallen companions might live once more.

Story Starts

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Chapter 8.5 - The Blockade

The Radiant VII dropped out of hyperspace.

Obi-Wan Kenobi leaned towards the cockpit viewport and counted warships. He stopped at thirty. Every Lucrehulk hung in a precise grid, equidistant from its neighbours, and the pattern continued past the planet's curve—more of them at the far side of Naboo, far beyond where he could see. It looked like hundreds.

Naboo. He had read the briefing twice on the journey out. Plasma exports, a young elected queen, a trade dispute that had grown teeth. The briefing had not mentioned that the Federation would park enough firepower here to subdue a whole sector.

Through the sensors, he spotted still more Lucrehulks resolving behind them, strung out along the hyperlane approaches. They had probably blockaded the entire sector.

'Why have they concentrated towards Naboo?' He could not produce an answer. Perhaps the other systems had capitulated, and the Federation was consolidating against the last bastion of resistance.

Obi-Wan turned towards his Master.

"Master." He kept his voice level. "That is considerably more than a blockade."

Qui-Gon Jinn did not open his eyes. He sat in the passenger hold as he had sat for most of the journey—hands loose on his knees, breathing slow, somewhere between meditation and sleep in the way that only he could manage aboard a diplomatic vessel rattling towards what looked like a war zone.

"Yes. Which tells us the dispute was never about trade." Qui-Gon opened his eyes at last. "Be mindful. The Trade Federation are cowards, but cowards with this much to hide are dangerous."

The comm officer's voice drifted back from the cockpit. "Saak'ak control has cleared us to dock, Master Jedi. They're... being very polite about it."

"I have a bad feeling about this," Obi-Wan murmured.

"I don't sense anything." Qui-Gon paused. "Wait."

There was a sudden pulse from Naboo—the Force being used. Though its signature was peculiar.

Not dark. Not light. Raw.

The Council had spoken of disturbances in the Mid Rim. Obi-Wan had assumed the matter was above his pay grade. Not that he received pay. The Order drew on a credit allocation from the Republic treasury, supplemented by its own ancient endowments—a stray fact his mind produced now, entirely unbidden, as though the prospect of a war zone had made him nostalgic for trivia.

"I can sense your thoughts straying, my Padawan."

Obi-Wan winced. "Apologies, Master."

"Keep your concentration here and now, where it belongs."

"But Master Yoda says I should be mindful of the future."

"But not at the expense of the moment." Qui-Gon rose, robes settling around him. "Be mindful of the living Force, young Padawan."

"Yes, Master." Obi-Wan looked out the viewport once more as the Radiant VII climbed towards the Federation flagship. "How do you think this Viceroy will deal with the Chancellor's demands?"

"These Federation types are cowards. The negotiations will be short."

The flagship swallowed the horizon as they approached. A Lucrehulk-class battleship: a vast ring of hull nearly three kilometres across, a command sphere floating in the gap at its centre. Some designer on Neimoidia had presumably intended it to look imposing.

The docking bay swallowed them in turn.

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A silver protocol droid was waiting at the foot of the ramp.

"I'm TC-14, at your service." It bowed with a chime of servos. "This way, please."

The hangar was wrong. Obi-Wan catalogued it as they walked: racks of B1 battle droids folded into their storage berths, row upon row of them, the sheer density of armed units speaking to something far beyond customs enforcement. This looked less like a blockade and more like an invasion force waiting to deploy.

TC-14 showed them into a conference room with a polished table, a sweeping viewport, and chairs designed for beings who enjoyed looking down at their

guests. The droid produced refreshments with a cheer so desperate it bordered on apology, then shuffled out.

"I sense unusual fear," Qui-Gon said quietly, once the doors had sealed, "for something as trivial as this trade dispute."

Obi-Wan drew back his hood and took the offered cup without drinking from it. "Did you see the deck plating, Master? Scored by transport lifters. And half the storage racks in the far bays stood empty. A portion of their droid complement is already on the surface."

"Yes."

"Then there is nothing left to negotiate. The invasion they're denying on the Senate floor is simply... proceeding."

"Which makes one wonder," Qui-Gon said, settling into a chair as though he had all the time in the galaxy, "why they agreed to receive ambassadors at all."

The answer arrived through the ventilation system.

It came as a soft hiss, gentle as a door seal releasing—and then the smell reached him, sweet and chemical and wrong. Qui-Gon was on his feet before Obi-Wan's conscious mind had finished forming the word.

"Dioxis."

They each drew a single breath and held it.

The gas rolled in green and unhurried, filling the room from the ceiling down. Obi-Wan's eyes stung. Across the fog, Qui-Gon stood motionless, saber unlit in his hand, waiting with infuriating calm.

Muffled through the doors: the clatter of metal feet, a droid's flat voice. The hiss of the door releasing. TC-14's silver shape backed out through the gas with its serving tray, apologising to someone.

The moment the seal broke, they moved.

Obi-Wan's blade snapped to life in blue; Qui-Gon's in green. The battle droids at the door managed approximately one word of surprise apiece. Blaster fire came back at them from down the corridor and died against turning blades; deflected bolts found their owners with ease. Qui-Gon waded forward and simply cut the survivors down as though clearing brush.

"You were right, Master. The negotiations were short."

Qui-Gon did not dignify him with a response.

Then both frowned as they felt it—the life signs of their crew aboard the Radiant VII winking out, one after another. Captain Madakor. Her co-pilot. The comm officer who had joked about Neimoidian politeness not an hour ago. Obi-Wan let the grief rise, acknowledged it, and released it into the Force, the way he had been taught. It went reluctantly.

And then two more pulses from the Force, down on Naboo. The same raw signature as before, stronger now.

Somewhere above them, alarms began to wail.

"To the bridge?" Obi-Wan called, deflecting a bolt into a wall panel.

"They'll seal it." Qui-Gon was already moving. "But a look at their intentions wouldn't go amiss."

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The bridge blast doors sealed ahead of them, exactly as predicted. Qui-Gon planted his blade into the metal and began, with terrible patience, to carve. The durasteel bloomed orange around the wound. Through the narrowing gap in the interior seal, Obi-Wan glimpsed grey Neimoidian faces flinching backwards.

Then the Force shouted at him.

"Master. Destroyers."

They came round the corridor junction in a whine of repulsors—two wheels of bronze metal that unfolded into standing weapons platforms, shield generators blooming around them in bubbles of shimmer. Twin blaster cannons spun up and filled the corridor with fire.

They deflected what could be deflected. The shields drank everything they sent back.

"They have shield generators," Obi-Wan observed, giving ground.

"It's a standoff. Let's go."

Both Jedi called upon the Force, letting it flood their limbs and sharpen their senses until the corridor seemed to slow around them.

They blurred away from the droids, speed rendering them smears of motion the targeting systems could not track.

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The hangar below them was a lesson in scale.

Obi-Wan lay flat against the vent grating and looked down at a reinforcement wave in mid-assembly. Landing craft squatted in rows across the deck, wings folded up like resting insects, their holds gaping wide. Columns of racked B1s rolled aboard on transport sleds. Tank after tank ground up the ramps—and behind them came the supply lifters, the fuel bowzers, the crate-stacks of a military machine settling in for a long occupation.

"It's an odd play," he murmured. "They've already invaded. The Senate is already debating it. Killing the Chancellor's ambassadors gains them nothing except a war crime."

"Unless they know that this isn't an official mission." Qui-Gon's voice was thoughtful. "They could easily claim ignorance, or that something happened to us in transit."

"But if we escape, wouldn't that be more problematic for them?"

"The Federation are greedy, not suicidal. Someone has persuaded them they're protected." He nodded down at the landing craft. "Separate ships. We'll take the surface, find the Queen if she lives, and make our report. And Obi-Wan—"

"Yes, Master?"

"The Viceroy will know two Jedi are loose. Make sure not to get caught."

They dropped from the vents in the shadow of a supply lifter and parted without another word. Obi-Wan crossed the deck between crate-stacks, cloak drawn close, and slipped up the ramp of a C-9979 amid a column of deactivated droids racked for transport. He found a gap between a durasteel container and the hull frame, folded himself into it, and became luggage.

The hold sealed. The deck shuddered. Through the hull he felt the ship drop free of the hangar's gravity and fall towards the planet.

He reached out once, carefully, and found Qui-Gon's presence steady aboard another craft in the wave. Then—because it was a long descent, and he was alone in the dark with his curiosity—he reached further.

The planet rose to meet him through the Force. Half a billion lives, and grief running through them like a current; fear, and under the fear a stubbornness that surprised him, bright hard knots of it in every city. These were a people who had already faced down one tyrant. He had read about the planet's previous ruler, of course—a king whose dealings had done nothing to endear Naboo to the Trade Federation. The droids marching through their streets were simply the latest iteration of a familiar threat.

And then there were those pulses in the Force again. This time he felt four, emanating from two different places on the surface.

Obi-Wan frowned. The signatures were unlike anything in his experience—not the focused clarity of a trained Force user, nor the wild static of an untrained

sensitive. They burned bright, certainly. Brighter than most Knights he had met. But the texture was wrong, like hearing a familiar melody played on an instrument that shouldn't exist. The Force flowed through them, yes, but it also seemed to flow *around* them, bending in ways that suggested the universe itself wasn't entirely certain what to make of their presence.

Two sources. One at each location—and each had pulsed twice.

He tried to focus, to separate the threads, but the pulses faded as quickly as they had appeared—not suppressed, not hidden, simply *stopped*, as though whoever was responsible had finished whatever they were doing and moved on.

The landing craft shuddered as it entered atmosphere. Through the hull, Obi-Wan heard the distant scream of air resistance, felt the vessel bank into its descent vector. Somewhere below, Qui-Gon would be doing the same calculations he was: where to land, where to hide, how to reach the capital without being seen, and how to regroup.

Obi-Wan tucked the mystery away for later examination. The Force had guided them here, to this particular crisis at this particular moment. According to Qui-Gon, Master Yoda himself had mentioned disturbances in the Chommell Sector—and Qui-Gon had been requested by name. And now strange presences flickered at the edge of his awareness, tied to this world in ways he could not yet understand.

Coincidence was not a concept the Force recognised.

Whatever waited for them on Naboo's surface—Trade Federation occupation, a besieged queen, these unknown Force users—they would face it as they faced everything else. Together, and with whatever grace the Force saw fit to provide.

The transport's engines changed pitch as the pilot began final approach. Obi-Wan steadied his breathing, checked his saber, and prepared to disembark into a war zone.

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As he felt the vessel settle, Obi-Wan waited whilst the droids unloaded. Each row was systematically placed on the forest floor, activating and unfolding before marching forward in lockstep whilst another row replaced them—rank after rank, the racks cycling with mechanical patience, hydraulics hissing in the wet air. When the last row had deployed, he timed his leap for the precise moment the cargo ramp began closing, the vessel already lifting off beneath him.

Before any of the droids could turn and spot him, he wrapped himself in the Force and prepared to accelerate.

Then the Force pulsed again.

A large boom followed—unmistakably a sonic crack—and then a loud explosion from somewhere in the distance. The ground shuddered faintly beneath his feet, and a heartbeat later a column of smoke began climbing above the treeline to the north. Towards the capital.

Unfortunately, he stood directly between the explosion's direction and the droids marching behind him.

"Hey! That guy just fell out of the sky!" One of the B1 units swivelled its head. "Wait—is that a laser sword? Roger roger, it's definitely a laser sword!"

"Blast him!"

Now rather more incentivised, Obi-Wan wrapped himself deeper in the Force, deflecting multiple plasma bolts as he blurred away from the patrol towards where he could feel his Master's presence. The shots went wide, scorching bark and undergrowth, and by the time the droids had recalibrated their aim he was already fifty metres distant and accelerating.

His thoughts kept returning to that pulse. Significantly more present now that he stood on the planet's surface, it thrummed through his awareness like a second heartbeat. He still couldn't parse it properly. The explosion had been part of it—the Force had moved through that violent release of energy. His

mind circled the paradox: such destructive application should have carried darkness. It should have felt like rage, or hatred, or at least cold calculation.

It didn't.

It felt raw. Unrefined. Like lightning without malice.

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He found his Master sitting cross-legged on a fallen log, peaceful despite the sounds of battle surrounding them. Pockets of smoke rose through the canopy in at least three directions. Fire licked at distant treelines.

Another pulse. Another explosion. And one more from far away, muffled by distance but unmistakable.

"Obi-Wan." Qui-Gon opened his eyes. "You took the scenic route."

"My landing craft deposited its cargo two kilometres north of yours. I had to persuade a swamp creature the size of a landspeeder that I was not edible." He brushed something green and viscous from his sleeve. "You seem comfortable."

"I've been mapping the droid patrol routes from their vibrations through the ground. They're running a grid pattern—predictable, thorough, designed for area denial rather than pursuit. The occupation force is establishing control zones."

"Yes, they unfortunately discovered me." Obi-Wan crouched beside the log. "How long before they reach us?"

"They've passed this sector twice in the forty minutes I've been sitting here. Twenty-minute intervals. We have—" He tilted his head, listening to something Obi-Wan could not hear. "—roughly fourteen minutes before the next sweep."

"Then we need to move. The question is where." Obi-Wan kept his voice low despite the apparent solitude. "Theed is occupied. The Queen's status is

unknown. We have no communications, no transport, and no allies on the ground."

"We have the Force."

"The Force and wet boots, Master. I was hoping for something with a roof."

Qui-Gon's mouth twitched—the closest he came to laughing when he approved of something. "The Gungans. The briefing mentioned improved relations with the current government. An underwater city—Otoh Gunga. If we can reach it, we gain shelter, intelligence, and potentially an ally with military resources the Federation may not know about."

"I agree. The problem is finding it. The Gungans have kept its location—"

Something crashed through the undergrowth.

Both sabers were in hand before the sound resolved into a shape—tall, gangling, amphibian, moving with desperate gracelessness, fleeing something it could not outrun. Long ears streamed behind it. Its mouth hung open in a continuous warble of terror that was not quite a scream and not quite a prayer but occupied the precise territory between both.

The tank came second.

It ground through the tree line thirty metres behind the Gungan, its forward cannon already swivelling to track the fleeing figure. A Federation AAT on standard patrol—precisely the grid pattern Qui-Gon had described, though it had arrived early. Courtesy of the Gungan, no doubt.

Qui-Gon moved first. One moment he was beside Obi-Wan; the next he had crossed the clearing, caught the Gungan mid-stride, and pulled him down into the root hollow of the nearest tree. Obi-Wan was already there, pressed against the bark, drawing the Force around all three of them like a cloak—*nothing here, nothing interesting, move along, the forest is empty and the patrol is routine.*

The tank's cannon swept the clearing once. Twice. The repulsor wash flattened the reeds where the Gungan had been running and sent ripples across the standing water. Then the pilot—a droid, thank the Force, because droids trusted their sensors and their sensors said the clearing was empty—resumed its heading and ground onward through the swamp.

The Gungan lay face-down in the mud between them, trembling.

"Yousa," he said into the earth, voice muffled but fervent, "yousa saved my life. Mesa love yous. Mesa love yous *both*. Mesa your humble servant—"

"That won't be necessary," Obi-Wan said.

"—mesa do anyting, anyting yousa—"

"Truly. Not necessary."

Qui-Gon helped the creature upright with the patient gentleness he reserved for frightened animals and difficult politicians. The Gungan unfolded to his full height—taller than either of them, though not by much—all limbs and ears, with wide amber eyes that darted between the two Jedi with a mixture of adoration and residual panic.

"What is your name?" Qui-Gon asked.

"Mesa Jar Jar. Jar Jar Binks." He executed a bow that nearly sent him face-first into the mud again. "Yousa Jedi, no? Mesa can tell. Da robes, da—" He gestured vaguely at their general presence. "Da *feeling*."

"I'm Qui-Gon Jinn, and this is Obi-Wan Kenobi." Qui-Gon was already studying him with that particular look. Obi-Wan recognised it immediately. His Master was about to declare this bedraggled amphibian significant.

"Jar Jar, do you know these swamps well?"

"Oh, berry berry. Mesa born here, grown here, lived here all my—" His expression crumpled. "Well. Until da bosses banished mesa."

"Banished," Obi-Wan repeated. "From Otoh Gunga?"

The ears drooped to their fullest extent, a gesture of such theatrical misery that Obi-Wan was unsure whether it was genuine emotion or a species-specific bid for sympathy. Possibly both.

"Mesa clumsy. Dey say mesa clumsy. Okeyday, maybe mesa broke a few tings. And flooded da boss's bubble. And dere was da incident wit da energy ball and da—boot da *point* is, if mesa go back dere, da bosses gonna do terrible tings to mesa. Terrible terrible tings."

"More terrible than the tanks?" Obi-Wan asked.

Jar Jar opened his mouth. Closed it. Looked over his shoulder at the flattened reeds where the AAT had passed, the track-marks crushed deep into the soft ground, the broken trees still settling in the machine's wake.

"Mesa... hmm."

"The Federation has invaded the surface," Qui-Gon said, and his voice carried that particular warmth he used when he needed someone to trust him quickly. Not a mind trick—Qui-Gon did not use the Force to manipulate the unwilling. Just the natural authority of a man who had spent fifty years listening to frightened people and taking their fears seriously. "Their patrol craft are running grid patterns through these swamps. Every twenty minutes, another sweep. Each time the grid tightens."

"Dey been getting closer," Jar Jar admitted quietly, the clowning draining from his voice. "Mesa been hiding for days. Running. Dey keep coming."

"They will not stop," Qui-Gon continued. "The droids do not tire, do not get bored, do not give up a search pattern. Eventually, the grid will close completely. There will be nowhere left to hide."

Jar Jar's throat worked. His long fingers twisted together in his lap.

"Yousa need Otoh Gunga," he said. It was not a question.

"We need to reach the Gungan leadership. If the current Queen of Naboo has maintained the alliance we were briefed on, then the Gungans and the surface

dwellers share a common enemy." Qui-Gon placed a hand on Jar Jar's shoulder—carefully, reading the Gungan's body language for permission before making contact. "And you need somewhere safer than a mud hollow."

"Da bosses—"

"Are facing a planetary invasion," Obi-Wan said. "I suspect their priorities have shifted since your banishment."

"Besides," Qui-Gon added, and Obi-Wan caught the familiar glint in his Master's eye, "you would be bringing them two Jedi ambassadors. That ought to count for something."

Jar Jar looked between them. The tank's engine was still audible in the distance—faint but present, a mechanical heartbeat counting down the minutes until the next sweep.

"Okeyday," he said at last. "Boot if dey punish mesa, yousa gotta tell dem—tell dem mesa brought yousa. Mesa *helped*. Mesa was brave."

"You have my word," Qui-Gon said.

"And you were brave," Obi-Wan added, because it was true. The creature had been running through a warzone for days, alone, with no weapons and no allies and no plan beyond *survive until tomorrow*. That was not nothing. Though it might, admittedly, have been mostly luck.

Jar Jar straightened. Something shifted in his bearing—still gangly, still anxious, but underneath it a firm resolve.

"Okeyday. Follow mesa. And try not to splash too much—da water here, she tells tings to tings yousa don't want to meet."

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They moved through the swamp in single file, Jar Jar leading with an unexpected sureness despite his earlier clumsiness. The Gungan knew which

roots would hold weight and which would crumble, which pools were knee-deep and which would swallow a man whole. He navigated by subtle markers Obi-Wan could barely perceive—a particular curve of moss on bark, the angle of certain branches, the colour of standing water.

Another explosion rolled across the forest. Closer this time.

Obi-Wan felt the Force pulse a heartbeat before the sound reached them. That same raw quality. Powerful but directionless. Like a storm that simply *was*, without malice or design.

"Master," he said quietly, "those disturbances—"

"I feel them." Qui-Gon's voice was thoughtful rather than troubled. "Two sources. Moving independently but with purpose."

"The signatures we sensed from orbit."

"Yes. Though 'signatures' may not be the right word." Qui-Gon ducked beneath a hanging vine. "The Force flows through them, but not quite in the way it flows through us. It's as if..."

He trailed off, searching for the right comparison.

"As if they're using a different dialect," Obi-Wan offered. "The same language, but the grammar is wrong."

"Close. Your feelings do not betray you." Qui-Gon paused at the edge of a deeper pool, waiting for Jar Jar to find a crossing. "The Council will want to investigate."

"Assuming we survive long enough to file a report."

"Ever the optimist, Padawan."

Jar Jar found a submerged log and began picking his way across, long arms extended for balance. "Quiet now," he whispered back. "Dere's a opee sea killer nest just past dese trees. Dey don't like vibrations."

They crossed in silence, the water cold against Obi-Wan's legs, his boots squelching with each step. The Force pulsed again—distant now, moving away—and he filed the sensation away for later analysis.

First: survive.

Then: understand.

The swamp grew darker as they moved deeper, the canopy thickening until only scattered shafts of light penetrated to the forest floor. Bioluminescent fungi dotted the trunks, casting the undergrowth in pale blue and green. The air smelled of decay and growth in equal measure, that particular swamp scent of life feeding on death feeding on life.

"How much further?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Not far. Dere's a sacred place—da entrance to Otoh Gunga." Jar Jar's voice dropped even lower. "Boot we gotta swim. Long way down. Yousa can hold yousa breath?"

"We have rebreathers."

"Oh." Jar Jar blinked. "Dat's... dat's berry convenient."

"Jedi prepare for contingencies," Qui-Gon said mildly.

They emerged from the trees onto the shore of a vast lake. The water was dark, almost black, reflecting the grey sky above. No ripples disturbed its surface. It looked deep. Impossibly deep.

Jar Jar stood at the water's edge, his earlier anxiety returning. His hands twisted together again.

"Mesa not supposed to come back," he said, more to himself than to them. "Dey said if mesa ever come back..."

"The circumstances have changed," Qui-Gon said. "You're not returning as a criminal. You're returning as a guide who brought Jedi ambassadors through a war zone. That's service to your people, Jar Jar. That means something."

"Yousa tink so?"

"I know so."

Jar Jar took a deep breath. His shoulders squared. The drooping ears lifted slightly.

"Okeyday. Stay close. Da path, she twists. And don't touch da glowing tings—some of dem bite."

He dove.

Obi-Wan fitted his rebreather and followed, the cold water closing over his head like a fist. The darkness was immediate and complete—then his eyes adjusted, and he saw the bioluminescence Jar Jar had mentioned. Trails of pale light wound through the depths, some natural, some clearly artificial. Guide markers. The Gungans had been here for a very long time.

Qui-Gon swam beside him, his robes billowing in the current. Ahead, Jar Jar's silhouette moved with surprising grace—all that awkwardness vanished in his native element. Here, in the water, he was exactly what evolution had designed him to be.

The descent took longer than Obi-Wan expected. The pressure built in his ears, his sinuses, the small bones of his inner ear protesting the depth. He equalised repeatedly, focusing on his breathing, on the Force flowing around him.

And then the city appeared.

Otoh Gunga rose from the lake bed like a fever dream—massive bubbles of contained atmosphere connected by tubes and walkways, all of it glowing with soft golden light. Structures that looked grown rather than built, organic curves and flowing lines that bore no resemblance to any architecture Obi-Wan had studied. Gungan figures moved within the bubbles, going about their daily lives.

Beautiful, Obi-Wan thought.

Hidden, Qui-Gon brushed against his mind through their training bond; it wasn't words in the literal sense but it was a form of communication through the bond. *The Federation has no idea this is here.*

Which makes it the perfect staging ground for resistance.

If the Gungans are willing.

Jar Jar led them toward the largest bubble—the central administrative hub, if Obi-Wan's guess was correct. Guards spotted them approaching. Spears were raised. Warning calls echoed through the water.

Jar Jar surfaced through the membrane first, gasping and dripping, his arms raised in surrender.

"Wait! Wait! Mesa bring da Jedi! Mesa bring dem to help!"

The guards did not lower their spears.

Obi-Wan surfaced beside Qui-Gon, water streaming from his robes. A dozen armed Gungans surrounded them, energy poles humming at the ready, their formation disciplined in a way that pricked at his attention—these were not startled sentries but soldiers on a war footing. Their expressions ranged from suspicious to openly hostile. One of them—larger than the others, with elaborate markings on his skin—stepped forward.

"Jar Jar Binks," he said, and the name carried decades of accumulated frustration. "Yousa got some bombad nerve."

"Captain Tarpals, please—"

"Yousa *banished*. Da Boss gonna have yousa head."

"Den let him have it!" Jar Jar straightened to his full height, and for a moment the clumsiness fell away from him entirely. "Boot first let him *listen*. Da maccaneks are on da surface. Thousands of dem. Dey got tanks and ships and dey're taking everything. If da Naboo fall, how long before dey come looking down here?"

Tarpals hesitated.

Qui-Gon stepped forward, hands visible and empty. "I am Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn. My apprentice and I were sent by the Galactic Republic to negotiate an end to the Trade Federation's illegal occupation. We seek an audience with your leader—not to ask for war, but to discuss mutual survival."

The guards exchanged glances.

"Da Boss won't like dis," Tarpals said.

"Probably not," Qui-Gon agreed. "But he'll like a Federation invasion even less."

A long moment passed. Then Tarpals lowered his spear—not entirely, but enough.

"Follow mesa. And if yousa try anything..."

"We won't," Obi-Wan said.

"Yousa not da ferst ones ta come."

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan exchanged curious glances.

They were led deeper into Otoh Gunga, toward whatever waited in its heart. Above them, through countless tonnes of water, the battles continued without them.

But not, Obi-Wan suspected, for much longer.

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End

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