

--VIII--

ORDINARY WORLD

Cliegg's chest expanded as his lungs inflated with the air that the warm breeze brought through the open window. He inhaled deeply, taking in the soothing feeling of the balmy environment as he stirred in his bed beside his wife. Eyes still closed, he kept his concentration on the affable weather that had greeted him almost every morning for decades. There were slight shifts in the morning weather from time to time, but for the most part they remained constant. Cliegg had no complaints.

The aging farmer opened his eyes and allowed the first rays of the morning's sunlight to hit him. He stirred again as he wanted to stay in bed for a little while longer, but he knew that there was work to be done. He always enjoyed an honest day's work, something that seemed more and more uncommon in the galaxy, but was never one to enjoy getting out of bed for it. Even so, it was something he did every day, albeit after brief fights with his fatigue. He somehow managed to win those fights every day.

Such fights were becoming more and more commonplace. As he stepped out of bed, Cliegg could feel his bones ache and his joints crack as he stretched out his arms. It was harder to be a farmer the more he aged, but he still fought through the pains that the aging brought with it. He was only forty-seven standard years old, and he had been a farmer for forty-four of them. Only a three year stint in the Republic Judicial Forces kept him from away from farming, much to the chagrin of his father who did not want his family to have anything to do with the Republic that was so far away from them.

Not only was his age a factor, but the drought that had been going on for nearly twenty years. Before the rain stopped falling, there would be months on end when the sands would blossom with food-bearing plants. The wasteland would see an eruption of green, creating a charming oasis that was less than a square kilometer in size. It took a great deal of work considering the environment that it would be grown in. Now, moisture farming had been turned into literally farming for water, using pumps to take the planet's now most precious resource out of the ground rather than relocate it for use in vegetative growth.

It was because of his family that Cliegg actually got out of bed every morning. Had it not been for Shmi lying next to him each and every day, he probably wouldn't have wanted to keep working on the moisture farm. The endless drought had taken its toll, but moisture farming was the best way he knew how to support his family. They were worth the

sacrifices that came with it. Providing for them was the most important thing he could do.

Cliegg met Shmi at a market in the spaceport settlement Mos Espa where she had been working for a Toydarian in a junk shop, as had Annikin. While they weren't slaves, Cliegg knew that they felt like they were, as they had no other place to go. That was, at least, until they met Cliegg and Owen. Cliegg was immediately taken with Shmi, and years later she told him that it had been the same with her. One year after they met, they were married, and Shmi and Annikin moved in with him on the farm.

Shmi wasn't Cliegg's first wife, though. Years earlier, his first wife, Akia, fell ill due to the drought. She died from an internal infection caused by her immense exposure to the binary sunlight, which left Cliegg feeling powerless. He had no idea how to raise his son on his own, but he and Owen were able to pull through and survive until they met Shmi. At that point, life became much easier for them.

Even so, the relationship between Owen and Annikin was never what Cliegg had wanted it to be. He and his brother Lee were inseparable as children and that relationship remained intact until Lee found work off-world and left the desert wastes. Cliegg wanted his son and stepson to have that same connection, but instead Owen constantly pushed Annikin away. Cliegg tried to talk to Owen about it numerous times, but Owen would never open up to him. For that reason, Cliegg always went above and beyond what he felt was necessary to be a good father to Annikin, hoping it would give the boy some sort of male figure in his life for support.

There was nothing to say about Annikin's birth father. Shmi told the boy that he was a navigator on a spice freighter somewhere in the Outer Rim. Cliegg never mentioned the story, nor did he say anything else regarding Annikin's paternal parentage. It wasn't his place to talk about such a private matter, regardless of the fact that Shmi had forbid him from ever saying anything about it.

Slipping into his work clothes for the morning, Cliegg slowly made his way out of his bedroom and into the large pit that was dug into the ground at the center of the homestead. He looked around and heard nothing from any of the surrounding rooms, so he could only assume that everyone was still asleep. He knew that Owen, however, was already up working on his chores, considering his son was always the first one up and the first one to finish all of his work.

There was so much work to be done around the farm that he didn't know how he and the others would be able to complete it. The outsider crew probably wouldn't be that helpful. Cliegg had no doubt that they would not put in their fair share, but rather work as little as possible just to say that they were doing something. He had no great expectations that a lot of work would be done. Still, he would make sure that Annikin finished his chores before working on the ship. Chores around the farm were far more important to Cliegg than some hyperdrive generator on a starship from far, far away.

"Annikin!" Cliegg shouted, trying to arouse his stepson's attention. "Annikin!"

Cliegg was still rubbing his drowsiness from his eyes, moving his neck back and forth from side to side to loosen his muscles. He wandered through the main pit as he was doing so, still seeing no sign of Annikin or anyone else. He shouted Annikin's name again, but his shouts did nothing except echo back at him, mocking his futile efforts. He should've known that Annikin would renege on his responsibility to do his chores, so Cliegg knew that it was his own fault for allowing such an oversight.

Before the aging farmer could call his stepson's name again, Cliegg stumbled backwards. Arcadia's head shot out of the cooling well in the center of the pit, startling the farmer. He shook his head to shake off the surprise. The silence in the entire area, particularly when he was shouting for Annikin, made him think that no one was around. He didn't expect to see someone pop out of the cooling well, or anywhere else for that matter, so quickly.

When Arcadia had first arrived, she had been dressed in an elegant blue and silver dress that shimmered as the binary sunlight hit it. Cliegg was struck by her beauty, having never seen someone so ornate and innocent yet bearing the weight of the galaxy on their shoulders. He assumed she was some sort of member of a noble class, having no idea that she was the queen of an entire world, so he was taken aback by her current appearance. The young monarch was covered in dirt and water, her hair soaked with sweat from what was a clear effort to fix the faulty cooling unit. Cliegg didn't expect to see her of all people working so diligently, so he was pleasantly surprised.

"Sorry," Arcadia said sleeplessly as she traded one tool from the ground above her for another. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"Oh, no, it's alright," Cliegg insisted, trying to brush off his momentarily scare with an overly macho voice that ended up working against him when he realized how fake it sounded. "Heh, it takes a lot to make this old man jump. What are you doing down there anyway?"

"Your son told me that the cooling unit needed fixing," Arcadia replied, trying to hold back a smirk once she realized that Cliegg didn't expect to see her working. "I figured I'd take a look at it for you."

"I'm impressed," Cliegg admitted, although he wasn't going to let onto the fact that he regretted judging her before he even saw what she was capable of doing. "I wouldn't have pegged you to be the type to actually get your hands dirty. I guess I misjudged you."

"People have a habit of doing that sometimes," Arcadia said, although what normally would've been a jubilant smile was instead a half-hearted one with a hint of sadness indicative of her reference to the ongoing Utapau crisis. "But, my father raised me to be self-sufficient. He told me 'Sabé, self-reliance is the only road to true independence'. I've always tried to remember that since."

Who is this woman?

That's the only thing that ran through Cliegg's head as she spoke. One thing that Cliegg frequently saw when he fought for the Republic was the greed and the elitism that ran rampant through the streets, creating a state of poverty and despair simply so the privileged few could garner more money, more prestige and practice more vices that stifled the freedom and muzzled the comfort and habitability for the people. Cliegg's assumption about Arcadia, which he could see was likely based on prejudice rather than fact, was directly routed in that. He may not have been as vocal and as untrusting as Owen was, but he could see clearly that he was pretty close to it.

"Good advice," Cliegg said, although his attention shifted once more as he started looking around the compound yet again. "Have you seen Annikin this morning?"

"He went with Kenobi back to our ship," she told him, carefully making sure that she didn't

use the term "Master" in front of Kenobi's name so they could rename incognito. "He wanted to get started as early as possible."

"He's gone already?" Cliegg asked, this time not hiding his emotions as he allowed his irritation to channel out through his voice. "If he doesn't get those chores of his on the south range done by midday then there'll be hell to pay."

"Oh, those are already finished," Arcadia told him, nearly giggling at Cliegg's surprised reaction. "We all woke up a few hours ago to help him out. Well, all of us except for Dooku, who's still sleeping. The rest of us wanted to make sure Annikin was done with his responsibilities before helping us. I hope you don't mind."

Cliegg stood half still for a moment, a blank expression covering his face. He was bewildered enough as it was after misjudging Arcadia, but nearly all of the outsiders? That was completely unexpected. Even after allowing them to stay at his home, which had more to do with his wife's reassurances than his own trust in them, Cliegg had given into the stereotypes that said outsiders were lazy, freeloading warmongers that wanted nothing more than to sit around at their secret meetings and plot their next sinister schemes. He would certainly have some interesting stories about these people to share with the other farmers in the area, assuming any of them believed what he had to say.

Leaving Arcadia to finish her work, Cliegg turned away and turned his attention towards the garage. As he entered, he expected to find it empty, but instead he found the elderly Dooku snoring in the corner of the droid holding area. Cliegg let out a slight chuckle. *Maybe I was somewhat right about them*, Cliegg bemused to himself. It wasn't a particularly big deal, though, considering there were nearly a dozen people out on his farm getting the chores done in what would probably be well less than half the time that he and his family could've finished them in. If everything went well, the work would be done within the next few hours, leaving plenty of leisure time that the Lars's were rarely able to experience. It would be the first time in years that he would have a break from work, and for once he felt that it was well deserved on his part.

Leaving holding area, where Dooku continued to snore like the four-legged reptilian dewbacks that lived in the desert wastes around the homestead, Cliegg made his way for the steps that would take him up onto the desert's surface. He stopped in his tracks, though, when Owen started to charge his way down, the young man nearly knocking over a shelf as he ran. Owen was clearly upset over something, but Cliegg couldn't imagine what it was. Outsiders or not, the people were getting their chores done for them, which Cliegg would say was cause for celebration. Owen, as Cliegg remembered soon thereafter, was easily flustered if something broke his routine or sense of normalcy.

"Dad!" Owen shouted, disregarding the fact that Dooku was asleep in the corner. "We need to talk. Now."

"What is it?" Cliegg asked somewhat reluctantly, knowing that he was about to get an earful as he continued to walk up the staircase with his son.

"That frog guy is out there doing my work!" Owen shouted in infuriation. Owen had little regard for outsiders, but the amphibious Jar Binks gave him the creeps. To Owen, what he was feeling wasn't prejudice. It was just common sense and behavior.

"And?" Cliegg asked, despite the fact that he knew the answer to his question, as they reached the top of the staircase and began to feel the morning's cool breeze become far

more course and hot as it gave way to the eventual blistering temperatures that the rising suns would bring.

"What do you mean and?" Owen demanded to know. "Just what am I supposed to do all day? Curl up on the couch with a hot glass of blue milk and call it a day?"

"Son, these people woke up hours ago because they wanted to help us," Cliegg said in an effort to reassure his son, but he wasn't exactly able to put in that same effort when he tried to hold back his partial amusement at the dismay. "That's hardly cause for being stubborn and pigheaded."

"Stubborn? Pigheaded?" Owen scoffed, not understanding why his father was suddenly becoming soft on outsiders when he had known him, in the past, to be far more vocal in his negative opinions towards them. "I'd bet my entire month's share of peggats that they're out there thinking that they're our saving grace."

"Owen - "

"And how can you even let these people roam around our farm?," Owen blurted out, blatantly ignoring his father's opinion on the matter. "We don't know what they're capable of, and we're certainly even less sure about what they want."

"I want you to shut up," Dooku bellowed out from the garage below, though he was still half asleep and his voice indicated that so the two Lars men ignored his rude interruption.

Before giving Owen an answer, Cliegg panoramically looked around his farm. The entire crew of the starship was pulling their fair share, each working on numerous jobs. Royal handmaidens worked with tools to repair damage on a few of the moisture vaporators that dotted the landscape, while the royal guards worked the pumps themselves to drill the water from the ground. It clearly wasn't an easy task for them, but they each did it to the best of their abilities. For Cliegg, it was one hell of a sight to be seen. Cliegg looked further into the distance as well and, sure enough, the Gungan was doing the repair work that Owen had been assigned. Had he been younger, Cliegg likely would've beamed with pride, but all he did not was simply feel a great deal of gratitude.

"Listen, son," Cliegg finally said, "I know you don't like it when something breaks your normal routine, but these people aren't our enemies. Let them help out and they'll soon be gone. Everything will be back to normal."

"But - "

"No buts," Cliegg commanded firmly, trying to avoid becoming verbally irritated. "Let them be. It's only for a few days."

Owen had no response for his father other to storm off even more frustrated than he had been when they first started their argument. Most people on the planet had a negative view of off-worlders, but Owen took it a step further. He had an outright hatred for them, especially the ones that they had welcomed into their home. Whatever Owen's reasons, Cliegg could only hope that Owen would one day see why the aging farmer let the outsiders stay at their home and why allowing them to work would probably turn out to be a positive thing rather than a negative one.

Owen was the only one who knew why he had such a strong hatred of outsiders. Put simply,

it was because of his mother's death. Of course, outsiders had not exactly been the direct cause, but he still blamed them for it. Over the course of thousands of years, dozens of companies like Czerka had come to the planet and plundered it for their own selfish and capitalistic gains. Every single one promised that their presence would make life better for the people of Tatooine, which is why Owen believed that outsiders thought of themselves as Tatooine's savior. The constant raping of the natural desert was, in Owen's opinion, the reason for the drought, and the drought was what caused his mother's death. He could never forgive outsiders for that.

Just thinking about it made his blood boil. As Owen approached the vaporator he was meant to be working on, the one that Jar was working on instead, his hands curled up into fists. He wouldn't actually strike the Gungan, but it took every fiber in his body to keep from doing so. Owen desperately wanted someone to take out all of his pent up frustration on, and Jar was the closest one to him. Nevertheless, he would heed his father's warning, although he couldn't guarantee that he would keep his mouth shut.

Industriously cranking at a number of loose screws with his wrench, Jar didn't even notice Owen approach. The work and the scorching heat kept him from paying attention to anything else, but he eventually did notice the farmer approaching. Setting the wrench down, Jar drank half of one of the dozens of water bottles that littered the ground around him. The environment wasn't suitable for Gungans, so he had to take a drink of water every few minutes, using a considerable amount of it.

"You must be Owen," Jar said as he finally stood up, extending his hand to introduce himself to Human who was now standing in front of him. "Annikin said you'd be joining me. I'm Jar Binks. It's a pleasure."

Owen's face scrunched with disgust when he saw how much of his family's precious supply of water was being used, but Jar didn't notice. Instead, the Gungan only noticed the young farmer ignoring the hand that was extended with no other thought behind it than the prospect of friendship, but Owen continued to ignore it and instead started to pace around to the other side of the vaporator.

"Good for you," Owen bitterly told the Gungan, refusing to make eye contact with him which left the exiled prince perplexed and somewhat offended.

"It took me awhile to get the hang of this contraption," Jar said, changing the subject and approaching Owen far more hesitantly and reserved than he had initially considering the attitude he had just been shown. "I think I have it under control now if you want to give me a hand with the pumping."

"I don't need any help", Owen argued, still not letting himself look the Gungan in the eye and instead inspecting every inch of the vaporator that he could reach, "so why don't you just hop on back to the homestead and let me get some real work done."

Hop on back to the homestead? *Who in the name of Gallo does he think he is?* Jar asked himself. In his mind he was shouting obscenity after obscenity, verbally bombarding the farmer and pounding his soul into whatever hole the arrogant snake slithered out of. Just when Arcadia, Obi-Wan and Annikin were starting to change his mind about Humans, Owen decided to use a racial slur against him. Had his face been capable of turning red with rage, it likely would have. The only question he could ask was whether Owen was the norm amongst Humans, or if it was the others.

"I'm sorry," Jar roared, "have I done something to offend you?"

"There are so many ways I could answer that question," Owen laughed, clearly enjoying himself while toying with the former Gungan monarch.

"Pick one," the Gungan demanded.

"Alright," Owen agreed, finally meeting the Gungan's gaze as he stormed up to him to look Jar directly in the eye as they spoke. "You were born somewhere other than Tatooine. Happy now?"

"Don't let anyone fool you," Jar began after taking one silent moment to calm his nerves, knowing that if Owen kept going he would likely cause the Gungan to explode in anger. "Stubbornness actually does have its helpful features. You always know what you're going to be thinking tomorrow."

Collecting his water bottles but leaving the tools for the despicable farm animal of a man to use on his own, Jar fumed as he stomped off towards the homestead. He would have to find Cliegg to get a new task considering Annikin was off at the ship, but anything would be better than having to stand around with Owen and be insulted just because he wasn't from Tatooine. He had enough to worry about without Owen acting like an arrogant and prejudiced monster.

An explosion rocked the southern quarter of Ogana. Screams rumbled through the streets. Dozens were dead. The Federation was responsible, no doubt. There were so many people actively rebelling across the city, for now surrendering their pacifist ideals to save their planet, that the Federation had started to indiscriminately bomb any suspected dissenting locations. They couldn't have cared less about what the galaxy thought of what they were doing. The way they saw it, everything was going to go according to their designs. The Senate would bow to their will and the anti-slavery measures would be overturned, and Utapau might possibly become a Federation-controlled world. They fully intended to see it through, but there were some people who weren't exactly ready to let that happen.

"This is *our* city!"

The ringleader of the ongoing rebellion cried out in both excitement and rage, and his voice echoed through the burning streets of Ogana. At first glance he would appear to be a beggar, someone adorned with ragged clothing and with a face covered in sweat and grime. It wouldn't be until one looked at the hundreds of screaming people before him would they realize that the entire city was in the same dire straits as he. The Federation invasion had cut off all utilities, and having been forced from their homes caused the people to start putting together clothing and supplies themselves using anything they could find, even from dumpsters and other fallen citizens.

It was no way to live, but that was why everyone was there, in the town square, crying out with the same rage that the rebel ringleader had. They leered their hate-filled eyes towards the Ogana Royal Palace that sat only a kilometer away, resting beautifully next to the waterfalls that mightily poured into the catch basins below, all while the mere presence of the Trade Federation raped the architectural wonder and historical significance of the ancient domed seat of power. The people would have nothing of it.

The townsfolk forced torches and pitchforks into the air, the ring leader standing in the fountain in the center serving as a rallying cry for them. The city may have been under Federation control, but there were still small pockets like this few-square kilometer nook of the southern quarter that had yet to fully fall under siege. After all, it took more than three days to secure an entire history. The military occupations stored in the annals of history could easily tell someone that much.

Even before the ring leader of this small pocket of resistance barked his order to move against the battle droids that were slowly stamping their robotic legs through the streets towards their location, the group was starting to move out. The Federation was a poison to their city, a stain upon civilization that desecrated everything that it touched. The slimy hands of the Neimoidian slugs had destroyed so much in the three centuries that it existed. These rebels had no intention of letting it continue.

On a side street adjacent to the crowd, one that took up its arms and prepared to physically remonstrate against the droids that were no doubt going to overtake them, Sio Bibble moved as a shadow through the night. The buildings were boarded up from citizens who had tried to hide, but they were now in camps or, worse, dead. The governor couldn't look at the buildings, many of them tainted with the blood of people he was supposed to help protect and lead. Every spatter of crimson blood was a reminder of his failure.

But as his lost queen would say, failure was a highway to success.

Certain measures had already been taken to ensure that their failure would not be everlasting, nor would it be the final nail in the coffin of Utapau's civilization. His black hood wrapped around his head to cloak his face and blend him into the lightless back street, one marred and charred with battle damage and stricken with the ghosts of the Federation's damnation, Bibble was headed towards insurrection. It was a path he thankfully wasn't taking alone. His pacifist nature wouldn't allow him to be so bold by his lonesome. Ironically enough, it was up to a larger band of pacifistic government officials to begin the insurgency.

The governor turned abruptly, noticing a small group of battle droids headed his way. Luckily he was already where he needed to be, only a few meters from his destination, a damaged home belonging to the brother of one of his staffers, both having been senselessly murdered at the hands of the Federation's treachery. The invasion had only been going for a few days, but Bibble's people were already estimating casualties in the thousands. New Centrif itself was completely destroyed, the only semblance of civilization being the charred remains of the city's formerly glorious architecture and the damned mechanical constructs of the Federation camps.

Bibble slowly looked behind him, trying to remain as nonchalant and indiscriminate as he possibly could. The battle droids could turn the corner at any minute, and he had no doubt that their memory cores were programmed with his image for their facial recognition software. If they didn't have a standing order to shoot him down on site, then at the very least they would have to capture him. For the life of him he couldn't figure out which was worse: was it a quick and painless death or torture at the hands of the Federation?

Confident that nothing and no one was following him, the governor leaned against the structure's wooden door and gently tapped on it to gain entry. Just the tap wasn't enough, of course. A few seconds later, he tapped three more times, and after another few seconds he tapped twice. It was incredibly simple and, to everyone involved, beyond absurdly ridiculous, but still necessary. They had to have some sort of code, if it could even be called that, or else any old knock would gain anyone entry, including battle droids.

The lack of a response worried him. The sweat that had already been dripping down his forehead from the walk was intensifying. His breathing became heavy and his chest expanded up and down, so much so that he had to put his hand over his mouth just to avoid being too loud. He had no idea how well battle droids could hear, so he had to be cautious. Hopefully he wasn't walking into a trap, or even worse...an already executed massacre, one that would have left his colleagues bodies strewn across the home for him to unfortunately see.

Thankfully that wasn't the case. The door opened slowly with barely an audible creak, and a dimly-lit glowrod shining a few meters outward slowly stuck itself out from behind the door, being held open by the twenty-nine year old Utapau-born Lieutenant Chamberlyn, one of the leaders of this newfound resistance against the Federation. Chamberlyn was a tall and imposing Human of over two meters, dwarfing the elderly Bibble by a long shot. The lieutenant's eye patch, leaving only one brown eye visible, from a training accident a decade earlier matched well with his dark red and black Security Forces garb, but he was normally more collected. His disheveled appearance was in stark contrast to the normally straight-laced and composed demeanor. If there was ever any doubt that the occupation was taking a toll on everyone, this would be enough to set any such disbelievers straight.

"You're late," Chamberlyn muttered, dispensing with the formalities in favor of quickly ushering the governor through the door and into the meeting area where other members of this new rebellion had gathered. "I told you to be here at 23:30."

"Know your place, Lieutenant," Bibble quietly snapped, put off by the rudeness of the acting Security Forces head even in the midst of such dire straits.

"You're not in my hierarchy," Chamberlyn retorted as he resisted the urge to slam the door for nothing more than dramatic effect, something he found to be useful when dealing with politicians who had a chip on their shoulder. "Besides, we don't have time to try to one up each other. We have a job to do, so let's just get it done. It doesn't matter who's in charge."

The old man ignored him, mostly because he knew he was right, as he stepped into the shockingly damaged home. It was dark, a sign of the desperate times of hiding and subterfuge they were living in. The room was dirty, damp, old; it was so old that the brick walls had started to crack, obviously having been that way before invasion. That part wasn't much of a surprise, as some in Ogana felt such a style was quaint so long as the overall building was structurally sound. Bibble looked up to see where the little light in the room was coming from, finding that it came from the sole window above him, one that stood behind the lights that no longer had any energy flowing to them. The light itself seemed contaminated somehow, like the room was begging to be plunged into darkness and to be left alone to rot.

Following Chamberlyn away from the door, the governor proceeded through the main hall, the cold stone floor sending a shiver up his leg. He couldn't help but shake. He may not have actually been able to feel the cold through his boots, but that didn't matter. The look of death was enough to give anyone the chills. The night was cold enough as it is, the visible breath leaving his shivering mouth being evidence enough of that. What a tragedy it was to have to go through this in one's own city, let alone one's own planet.

The two leaders of the new resistance continued through the complex, not one part of it giving Bibble any hope. He stepped onto the steps leading to a makeshift meeting room,

each step bringing louder and louder creaks and cracks that were uncomfortably noisy. They slowed their descent, but that only made the loud noises louder and longer. Hopefully there weren't any battle droids nearby, or else...

There wasn't any time to think about that. They sped up their walk, knowing it made little difference, into the broken-down underbelly of the home. The drywall was already coming apart both from a general lack of maintenance and the constant booms of explosions that were probably ready to tear the house apart at its seams. The rest of the area wasn't any better; they nearly had to leap across the floors once they were off of the steps to avoid falling through holes where floorboards once were, the wood scattered across the room.

The night was taking its toll. Bibble leaned forward, placing his hands on knees as he went. He wheezed from exhaustion, his expanding and contracting lungs raising his upper body up and down as the air went in and out of his mouth. Chamberlyn stopped just as the governor was standing back up. The old man needed only another moment or two as he put his hand up against the archway near the bottom of the stairs, the opening beneath the archway being the only source of light at the bottom of the house. They couldn't afford to light their glowrod or even candles. The heat might have set off any sensors the battle droids had.

Finally they arrived at the meeting, where only two others had gathered. They had to keep their numbers low to remain discreet, but their hope was to soon gather all of the insurgent citizens in the city and, perhaps, the planet under one banner to try to force the Federation off of their world. It was a bold move, one that odds said would probably fail. That wouldn't stop them from trying, of course. They couldn't stand aside and watch as their people died knowing that there was something they could've done to try and stop it. Such an idea was unthinkable, especially to someone like Bibble whose job was to watch over Ogana.

"Governor Bibble!" came the suddenly excited voice of Horace Vancil, the queen's political and economic adviser on the Advisory Council, who, along with Chief Architect and fellow council member Hugo Eckener, was already seated around a small circular table where they would hold tonight's exchange. "We were beginning to worry that they'd captured you. Thank goodness you're safe."

"Where do we stand?" Bibble cautiously asked. It was important to him that they skip the pleasantries and get right into the evening's business, even if he was afraid of what would be said, but he nevertheless offered a conciliatory smile to let the economic chief know that he wasn't ignoring his kind words.

"All security force members are behind us just as Lieutenant Chamberlyn assured," Vancil replied, his tone far more somber than it had been when he saw Bibble first enter the meeting space. "We've tried to reach out to the Gungans, but they don't want to speak to us. They still accuse us of stealing that damn crystal."

"Most of the Advisory Council is in hiding," Eckener began, continuing where Vancil left off when the latter diverged onto his momentary Gungan tangent. "Minister Graven has been arrested and likely faces execution."

Not Ruto Graven...

The governor had high hopes that Graven, the Assistant Minister of Internal Affairs for the queen, would join their efforts, but that didn't seem likely considering his current predicament. The aging Bibble assumed that Graven would want to be a part of it for the same reasons they were all part of it: their own failures. Each of their positions had

something to do with what was currently taking place in the city streets and across the planet, weighing them down with so much remorse that they were willing to give up their peaceful virtues just this once in order to expel the invaders.

Whereas the kindly old governor was meant to lead Ogana, a city he no longer had any power over, Vancil was meant to advise the queen on the politics of running the planet. Just the mere thought of his failure petrified him, so much so that he couldn't help but break out into a cold, nervous sweat, one so cold that it began to feel uncomfortably hot. Such was the nature of the paradox they called the Invasion of Utapau. He pushed up the bottoms of the voluminous sleeves on his heavy, black overcoat, one that he now realized he probably should not have worn, and tried to wipe the sweat out of his combed-over white hair.

Vancil couldn't imagine anyone in the galaxy feeling what he felt right now. He failed to foresee the repercussions of the queen taking up Senator Palpatine's offer and aiding with the passage of the anti-slavery laws. He knew the Federation would be angry, but he never believed it would come to this. He knew he shouldn't blame himself, but as the queen's adviser he felt it was his fault that the planet was involved and his fault that they were now living under a constant siege.

On the other side of the table, Eckener leaned forward with his hands against the table and sighed, believing that the regret was hurting him more than it was the others. As the Chief Architect of the planet, the elderly Eckener, losing much of his gray hair and adorned in a thick dark red overcoat similar to the one worn by Vancil, was tasked with protecting the planet's art, history, and architecture, all while continuing the expansion of civic life. Every bomb that went over, every spatter of blood on the streets, and every blaster shot slamming into the walls of the city reminded him of how he was failing in his duty. The natural wonders and architectural masterpieces of the last few millennia were being threatened in ways not seen since the Mandalorian invasion in the Great Sovereign Crusades. He could only hope that history would treat him better than Raul Obiurgo, the infamous Chief Architect during that cursed war who took his own life over the very same regret that Eckener was feeling now.

"And how are we militarily?" Bibble asked to finally break the silence and snap the others out of their regretful trances, despite not wanting to hear the answer to his question considering he knew full well that it would not be pleasant.

"We're down to fifteen percent combat ready personnel," Chamberlyn told him; the lieutenant was displeased, but he wasn't in a position like the others were so he had no reason to lower himself into regretful self-pity. "We're bringing more out of hiding, so hopefully we can boost that number up."

"Any estimates as to what that will bring us to, Lieutenant?" Vancil asked, still acting as he would were he in the presence of the queen and someone was giving her this information. It was important to him that he too had all of the information he needed, especially since any military counter-attack could affect the queen's public perception even while she was off the planet, a fact that the people still had not found out about.

"No more than thirty percent," Chamberlyn replied, mentally bracing himself for the peeved reactions from the politicians that would likely follow.

"You can't be serious!" Bibble shouted louder than he should have. He lowered himself physically, a subconscious reaction that would do absolutely nothing, other than make him feel momentarily better, if there were Federation forces nearby.

"As I'm sure you're aware, Governor, most of our forces are in the Federation camps," Chamberlyn said, he too raising his tone at the political babbling of someone he privately felt was partially responsible for the entire ordeal to begin with. "If we want to fight the Federation it'll have to be through insurgent strikes. We can't take them on directly, which means we can't attack the camps to free our forces. I wish it were otherwise, but they're too heavily fortified."

"I can't believe it has come to this," Vancil told the assembled men. "Perhaps it was a mistake to become involved with the anti-slavery law. The queen said she wanted to live up to the long-forgotten ideals of Jonathan Bac, but his ideals clearly have no place here anymore."

"How dare you," Chamberlyn scoffed, scolding Vancil for what Chamberlyn saw as near-blasphemy. "Jonathan Bac was one of the greatest men who ever lived. He laid the very foundation that our Republic stands upon. He didn't say 'all beings are created equal, except for the ones needed by corporate interests'. No, he said 'all beings have the right to live their lives as they choose, free from a government that stifles the freedoms and muzzles the self-expression of the people'. Our mistake, Minister, was not foreseeing this conflict."

The last line was met with a pointed gaze from Vancil, as he knew that Chamberlyn was directing it squarely at him, but the minister knew not to argue with Chamberlyn over early Republic history. Chamberlyn wrote his university thesis on Jonathan Bac, the first Supreme Chancellor of the Galactic Republic, so the lieutenant was a strong admirer of his. The former admiral of the Organian Empire and ambassador to the pre-Republic coalition of planets during the Unification War had been dead for nearly twenty-five thousand years, which made it hard for many to appreciate his influence on the Republic that he was responsible for creating. Chamberlyn, needless to say, was not one of these people.

Leaving the men to their own private thoughts, which the lieutenant cared very little about considering they were the political thoughts of partisan hacks, something he felt all politicians after the time of the early Republic were, Chamberlyn left his seat at the table and opened a door on the far side of the room. Behind it was an electronically-sealed safe protected by voice-print identification and a fingerprint scanner. Chamberlyn put his right thumb onto the scanner and the red beam on it slid across his finger. He winced as it shocked him, a necessary side effect to help determine whether it was an actual person or a fake print being used, but he tried his best to mask the minor pain that the shock brought.

"Chamberlyn one-one-three-eight," the lieutenant said, the code activating the internal workings of the safe.

A few moments of computer processing later, the door to the safe slid open. Chamberlyn backed away, prompting the others to stand from their seats in anticipation of what was about to happen. None of them had been told of this, so whatever Chamberlyn had up his sleeves was beyond each of them. Chamberlyn couldn't help but grin. He knew how easy it was to allude the eyes of politicians away from the obvious, and him bringing in what was in that safe was, to him, incredibly obvious.

The mechanical buzz of a small ramp emanated from the safe, and within a few moments the assembled delegates could see that what was inside was a sleek silver protocol droid, a servant of the Federation. It certainly wasn't Chamberlyn's, as he would never allow himself to have a pretend "Human" serve him. He cared little for droids, particularly those designed to mimic Human behavior like the female-programmed TC-series droid that stood before

him and the others.

"This is TC-14," Chamberlyn told the Advisory Council members who moved closer to inspect the droid for themselves, all of them sharing looks of concern considering the obvious source of the droid. "It was programmed to act as a personal assistant to Nute Gunray while he's here."

"I take it from your past tense that you've changed the programming, Lieutenant," Bibble noted skeptically, wary of what he assumed was the plan to use the protocol droid to their mutual advantage.

"That's correct," Chamberlyn continued. "My men found it wandering the streets dazed and confused, for whatever reason. I reprogrammed it so, should we all agree, it can be put back onto the streets and gather information for us when it returns to the Federation base. We can then use this information to help us conduct our strikes. If anyone has any objections, please state them now."

The others turned away and took a moment to talk amongst themselves, their soft whispers unable to reach Chamberlyn's ears. The lieutenant was concentrated more on his plans for the future anyway. His thoughts darted off to an image of a veermok, the large, ferocious primate native to the swamps and woodlands that the group had already pre-decided to name their resistance after. The animal lived around the fringes of the swamp and woodlands where it hunted prey through stealth and surprise, reminiscent of the upcoming insurgent strikes. They avoided the deep water because of their weak swimming skills, much like how the resistance would have to avoid large-scale attacks because of their weak numbers. He could think of no better creature befitting of their organization.

"We're somewhat skeptical of your proposal," Eckener finally stated, sharing the concern that the others had, "but we have no objections to letting you try."

"Then that's it then," Chamberlyn said, standing taller as he was suddenly encouraged by their approval to move forward. "I'll send the droid out tonight and we'll begin our first strikes. Their armies may be strong, but the courage of my men is infinite. The Veermok Resistance is born and ready."

Chamberlyn held out hope that he could succeed, but even he was unsure of himself in that moment. The collective courage of his men may have been infinite but his faith in their ability to fight a battle-hardened Federation army was. He had to have faith in his plan to steal their information, and perhaps he could even bribe Federation members to hand over information. If there was one thing more infinite than the courage of his forces, it was the corruption of the Trade Federation. That could be used to his advantage.

His ears perked up. The bells on the clock tower at the center of the city only blocks away chimed, sending the sound waves throughout the area. It was midnight now and the start of a new day, one that the Federation would hopefully live to regret. The Federation couldn't be allowed another inch of Utapau's land. His men would do everything they could to turn their now-ordinary worlds upside down.

"Goodness gracious me!" the gold-clad protocol droid who accompanied Annikin to the ship shouted as he nearly bumped into Artoo Detoo while walking towards the hyperdrive chamber.

The protocol droid was a tall, humanlike machine, one programmed with the voice of a male and personality traits similar to that of a Human being, if not an always-worried one. He lowered his head, similar to that of a Human's, towards the droid below him, his auditory sensors hearing the beeps and boops that astromech droids generally made. The slim robot was commissioned to fully function as a servant and to blend in perfectly amongst Humans, so much so that his gestures even mimicked those of his masters.

Although he had never seen one before, at least as far as he could recall, the droid's programming recognized Artoo as a small claw-armed tripod astromech droid made of computer lights surrounding a radar eye that sat in the middle of the front side of his dome-shaped head. The protocol droid, on the other hand, was a tall and slender droid of Human proportions with masculine programming. Unlike most protocol droids, however, he lacked a sleek and shiny covering. Instead, he had a dirty-brown surface of rusted scrap metal. Even the older looking Humanoid-like models that came before him were more aesthetically pleasing, and the droid knew it too.

"Oh," the protocol droid blurted out as Artoo let out a series of beeps to introduce himself and ask who the protocol droid was, "I am See Threepio, Human-cyborg relations. It is a pleasure to meet you, Artoo Detoo."

Threepio knew little about himself or his creation, but that wasn't any matter. From what he could figure out on his own, he was activated on Affa by Cybot Galactica on an unknown date. He eventually received a memory wipe and was broken into pieces and trashed on Tatooine, probably because he was of no further use to his former master. He wasn't reactivated until Annikin, his current master, found his discarded and gutted remains in Anchorhead. Annikin smuggled the parts home piece by piece to reassemble Threepio as a servant and occasional worker droid, even though his family didn't and still didn't think it would be of any use. After months of working, Threepio was functional again, but Annikin wasn't able to afford proper droid coverings so he melded together pieces of scrap metal from around the farm. He may not have been the most visually pleasing of droids, but that never interfered with his capabilities.

The two droids made their way down the hall, chatting and chirping away as Annikin and Obi-Wan worked in the generator room. Annikin couldn't help but let out an amused smile as he noticed that Threepio, as he often did, forgot everything he was doing. It wasn't of any matter, though, since all the droid had been doing was removing spare parts from the room. He wouldn't be needed for some time, and Obi-Wan was more than happy to help Annikin with anything he needed anyway.

Annikin wiped the pools of sweat away from his brow. He was used to the heat from outside, but he forgot to prepare himself for the even worse heat that was found within the completely enclosed starship. He looked out from underneath the hyperdrive generator and saw that Obi-Wan was also sweating profusely, the sweat staining the Jedi Knight's tunic that was now uncovered from the robes he normally wore. Annikin could at least be happy that it wasn't just him suffering from the temperature.

"Try opening the airlock," Annikin suggested as a remedy for their plight, pointing towards the airlock on the far wall while doing so. "It probably won't help, but you never know."

"Alright," Obi-Wan acknowledged. He nearly ran over to the hatch, hoping that something, anything, would stop the miserable heat from killing him on the spot. A warm breeze swept through the room, but considering the temperature they were in the warm breeze felt cool

as it hit their faces.

"Nothing like warm Tatooine air," Annikin said wryly, his sarcasm being one of the few things that could keep his mind off of the scorching heat wave.

"I doubt I could get use to it," Obi-Wan admitted.

"I wouldn't hit the swoop track then," Annikin warned, his voice straining as he struggled to loosen an abnormally tight screw from the engine. "If you can't handle it standing still, you won't want to try it going five hundred kph."

"You're a swoop racer?" Obi-Wan asked with a great deal of intrigue as he leaned against the wall next to the hatch, trying desperately to catch the breeze as it continued to whisk through the chamber.

"Not lately," Annikin remorsefully told him, "but I've done my fair share. Hand me the hydrosprayer?"

"Of course," Obi-Wan said as he grabbed the tool on the nearby stand and handed it over.

"Have you ever seen a swoop race?" Annikin asked, hoping to work it into a conversation where he could learn more about Obi-Wan. They had been working on the ship for hours, but the heat was so unbearable that they kept their discussion to a minimum.

"They have swoop racing on Malastare," Obi-Wan recalled. "I saw a race a few years back with Jard. They set up explosives on the track to make things, as they put it, 'a bit more interesting'. In a race that started with nine, only four came out without having to go to a hospital or a morgue. I wouldn't want to get mixed up in that."

"They don't usually do anything fancy like that here," Annikin said. "Usually it's just you, your bike and the desert wall, along with a dozen other people. It used to be where racers just tried to beat the best time of the day, but now it's racing against each other. *That* makes things a bit more interesting, let me tell you."

Annikin grew still, exhaling deeply with a sigh as he remembered every detail of his last race nearly a year earlier. Excitement was abound; he was poised to finally win his first championship and make some real money for his family, but the Dug Sebulba, a well known racer throughout the Outer Rim, felt the need to play unfairly. As he and Annikin rounded the last corner of the final lap, the Dug moved in close and nearly blinded Annikin with the steam from his vent ports.

Sebulba raced on and clinched that year's title. Annikin's spirit was crushed, especially considering it was the race that caused him to lose so much money to Greedo. Annikin was so confident in his ability to win the race that he placed money on his win, only to lose so much once he was cheated out of what was rightfully his. If things had only been like they were centuries earlier, where racers were against the clock, Annikin would certainly have had a much better chance at winning the title. There was no way Sebulba could have beaten him in that type of race.

"So how about you?" Annikin asked as he resumed his work, pulling a bundle of wires out from the now-exposed control panel on the bottom of the generator. "What do you like to do for fun?"

"For fun?" Obi-Wan asked, his eyes darting from side to side as he fumbled over what lie to tell so he could keep the fact that he was a Jedi a secret.

"Don't worry," Annikin chuckled as he slid further under the engine, working on a few parts as he continued to talk. "Your secret's safe with me. I won't tell anyone you're a Jedi."

Obi-Wan was left speechless, his mouth inadvertently hanging open as he stood dumbfounded by Annikin's realization as to who Obi-Wan really was. Annikin's comment blindsided him so much that Obi-Wan wasn't even able to hid his dismay. He never anticipated being found out, which was obviously his first mistake, but he clearly also hadn't given Annikin enough credit. Annikin was far more perceptive than Obi-Wan imagined.

"What makes you think I'm a Jedi?" a frantic Obi-Wan asked, his voice exuding the anxious sarcasm he tried to pass off as wit. "Do you have psychic powers?"

"No, but I've got eyes," Annikin said with a glimmer in his eyes, returning the Jedi Knight's sarcasm as he saw right through what Obi-Wan was trying to do. "I saw your laser sword. Only a Jedi carries that kind of weapon."

Nearly forcing his palm to his face in embarrassment, Obi-Wan sighed in concession. He hoped that making the comment sarcastic would have turned Annikin off from the idea and convinced him that it was a nonsensical belief, but there was little he could do if Annikin saw his lightsaber. Obi-Wan should have realized he wouldn't have been able to hide the weapon for that long without it being noticed. Perhaps Annikin's apparent perception was nothing more than penchant for noticing the obvious.

"Well that's not entirely true," Obi-Wan stated regretfully, considering how many Sith and Dark Jedi had wielded the weapon in the past, "but I'm glad my secret is safe with you. No one can know who we are."

"What are you and the queen doing all the way out here anyway?" Annikin asked as he shoved the wires back into the engine, wearing a grin that displayed his satisfaction for having successfully guessed who Obi-Wan was. "You're pretty far away from the Republic."

"Unfortunately, I'm not at liberty to tell you that now," Obi-Wan admitted, "but perhaps later that can change."

"Fair enough," Annikin said, his voice once again strained as he worked to open an even tighter fused hatch on the engine; he still would want to find out more about what the Jedi Order was like, so there was no shame in asking questions about that. "Is it true that you Jedi aren't allowed to love?"

"A common misconception," Obi-Wan explained, kneeling down more to Annikin's level as he began to go deeper into the beliefs of the Jedi Order. "Jedi are meant to love all life, whether those lives are Jedi or Gungans or even the ancient followers of the dark side. That love allows us to live for the benefit of all life, but what we must give up is attachment. Someone who is attached can never know true freedom. Attachment can lead to desire, and desire can lead to the dark side."

"So it's more compassion than anything else?" Annikin asked as he checked the fuel levels on the generator from a gauge he pulled from his belt. He wasn't intentionally trying to look as if he was ignoring Obi-Wan or being dismissive of him, as he was paying attention, but the conversation was also meant to serve as a distraction from the heat and the tedious

task of checking on and fixing all of the fried cords beneath the generator.

"Exactly," Obi-Wan continued. "As a Jedi, my compassion extends to all beings in the galaxy. With an open and loving heart, I can direct my compassion for the benefit of the entire universe."

"Have you ever actually fallen in love?" Annikin asked, prying further into Obi-Wan's personal life than he probably should have. Despite being hard at work, what he was hearing intrigued him more and more. Annikin slid out from underneath the generator and sat upright so he could better hear what Obi-Wan had to say.

Obi-Wan was visibly uncomfortable by the question. His face contorted into an awkward stare and his cheeks turned pale before finally altering into a rosy red. It had been so long since Obi-Wan thought of the one woman he ever loved, the one woman he ever went against the beliefs of the Jedi for, and the one woman whom he would have given up everything just to be with. It had been so long since he had seen her, so long since he was able to tell her how he truly felt.

He always told people that nothing came of his forbidden relationship with Siri Tachi when they were not but thirteen years old. Technically, this was true. When they were thirteen and Siri was transferred to Baltimn, nothing came of that relationship, but the relationship that blossomed before the Stark Hyperspace War was one that could have ignited the stars. He loved everything about her – her bountiful red hair, her angelic blue eyes, the dimples on her face when he made her laugh. There was nothing not to love. Unfortunately, he would never have a chance to tell her that again.

"No," Obi-Wan lied, "no I haven't. I've committed to the Way."

"The Way?" Annikin asked as he tried to shove his hydrospanner into a socket on the edge of the generator.

"The Way of the Jedi," Obi-Wan said proudly, despite his past transgressions. "It's our way of life, the very code of behavior we live by."

"I'm not gonna lie," Annikin told him, gritting his teeth as he kept trying to work the tool into the socket. "It seems a bit archa - "

Annikin winced as a surge of pain shot up his arm. The generator let out a calamitous spark, sending tiny sparking flames out from all sides from where Annikin's hand was. He flew backwards and his back slammed into the wall as he let out a fairly audible yelp in pain. He jumped right back up, trying to ignore the tingling ache that the electrical shock had caused in his hand. Annikin looked over the generator again and saw just how much trouble the accident had caused the repair efforts.

"Damn it," Annikin grunted as he rubbed his eyes, realizing that fatigue and conversation contributed to his stupid mistake. "There's a couple wasted hours."

"It's getting late," Obi-Wan observed as he noticed both the sun starting to move towards the horizon and his own fatigue, likely caused by the heat. "We've been working for nearly twelve hours. We should both rest."

As much as he wanted to finish the work, Annikin couldn't help but agree. He didn't want to keep going and run the risk of damaging even more of what he already fixed, so he grabbed

his tools and put them onto the counter near Obi-Wan so they would be ready for the next day. He pushed his arms forward, sending the pile towards the corner of the work station. He gave a slight tilt of his head to acknowledge that he was ready to leave, and Threepio and Artoo hurried over to them once the droids realized it was time to go.

Annikin stepped out of the ship first, followed by the Jedi and then the two droids, passing by the two guards that Arcadia had posted the day before. One guard broke his stance of attention only for a moment to close the hatch, but he stood entirely straight like a stick figure drawn by a child and remained at his position to await another day of work by Annikin and the Jedi.

Why won't this bloody thing just turn already?!

Arcadia's face contorted as her arms struggled to get a firm enough grasp on the wrench in her hand, which she was using to try to take out a screw out of the cooling well she'd been working on for hours, a cooling well that should have been fixed nearly two hours ago. A few setbacks slowed the repairs, and now she had spent the last half hour trying to get the last damn contraption on its outer control panel back together. She certainly wasn't going to go and plead for help. She had tried too hard all day to do things herself to admit that she wasn't capable of handling it alone.

Annoyance consumed her. Raising the wrench in her hand, she wanted to strike the cooling unit, which meant her irritation was causing her to not think clearly. Luckily for the hours upon hours of repair work, the wrench went flying out of her hand behind her. She turned around to pick it up and probably throw it, but instead she looked up to see one of the members of Panaka's contingent standing on the surface above her. He held the wrench in his hands, having caught it when it flew out of hers, and was staring at her with a sarcastic smile, clearly enjoying having seen her momentarily lapse in judgment.

"Good thing I was walking by, your highness," the security force member grinned, his normally affable demeanor coming across cocky to the young queen. The twenty-nine year old was known for his wit and subtle humor, but Arcadia didn't see his only comment to her quite like that.

"Good thing," Arcadia said with a fake laugh, rolling her eyes at the remarks.

"Do you need help with that?" he asked her, kneeling down so he could jump into the hole that she was working in. His knees nearly came to his chin, a side effect of his nearly two meter frame, and his spiked blonde hair, not covered by the standard cap of a guard's uniform, blended it almost seamlessly with the sands.

"No thanks," Arcadia snapped. She threw her hands up onto the sand above her, trying not to strain herself as her frail arms struggled to pull her back up to the surface. She had no intention of letting an older man help her. She already was seen as being an innocent young girl who needed the help of her all-male Advisory Council to run the planet, and she wasn't about to ask for help on the smaller things too.

"Fair enough, your majesty" the soldier told her, handing the wrench back. "My name's Logan, Logan Amator."

"I've never seen you before all this," Arcadia told him somewhat spitefully considering the

somewhat arrogant nature she suspected from him, so she looked away and grabbed a rag, brushing the muck and slime off of her hands. "When did you join Panaka?"

"Right before the blockade," Logan laughed, but there was still some remorse in his voice considering his first assignment was to run like hell away from the planet and help make sure that the Federation didn't kill his queen. "Good timing, huh?"

Arcadia laughed, a laugh that made even Logan smile and feel a bit more comfortable around her. The queen saw this and while she stopped laughing, she still kept a smile on her soft face. Something about his demeanor, now more relaxed than it had been when he first spoke, made her reconsider her first impression of him. She couldn't quite pin it down, but something told her that she had misjudged him. It may have been, as she then thought, that he had simply been nervous and was trying to break the ice.

"I almost didn't join though," Logan continued, his reminiscing clearly not bothering the queen. "I studied law at the University of Coruscant and was on the fast track to work for Senator Palpatine."

"Why didn't you?" Arcadia asked, dropping her tools to the ground so she could use them later. It normally would've been seen as impolite to just leave the tools lying around, but Cliegg had told her a few hours earlier that she could just leave them wherever she needed them next.

"I had my reasons," Logan admitted, but he wasn't quite ready to fully admit what those reasons were.

He had only just met her, and he felt that it may have been inappropriate to confess such a thing. She already had the false impression that he was cocky and arrogant, so there was no sense in telling her that. It was only one of many reasons, though, but it was one of the most important. Still, he held a great concern for the people of Utapau and was willing to do whatever it took to protect the queen and rescue them from harm. He always felt that his desire to make a difference was an important part of his personality.

Still, he wished he could tell her. His frustrated eyes flipped pages of air with every blink, blinks that brought his eyes staring into hers. Her dark blue eyes seemed so innocent and pure that they were like a trance, one that could suck someone in and trust fully in what she said. That was why he felt she was such an effective monarch, one who could relate to the people with her innocence. That innocence, something rarely if ever seen in those who had entered the realm of politics and governance, was something he admired about her, and something he hoped this conflict didn't take away from her.

"Smell that?" Arcadia asked, sniffing in the air as Logan kept looking at her. "Smells like dinner's ready. Cliegg told me they're cooking for everyone. Are you coming?"

"Yeah," Logan told her dejectedly, his shoulders slumping when he realized that she wasn't even paying attention to his somewhat obvious gazing. "I'll be right behind you, majesty."

Logan couldn't blame her for missing what he was doing. It wasn't exactly something she would expect coming from a member of her royal guard, even though many of them probably took the time to admire her considering the great power and respect that she commanded. Still, he couldn't help but feel somewhat put off, but he still knew that she had no reason to notice it. He hadn't told her anything about his true reasons for being there.

He hadn't told her what he *really* thought about her and her rule. Hopefully he would soon be able to do that, but now just wasn't the time.