

# PRELUDE TO ARMAGEDDON

The hooded stranger entered the darkened chamber with uneasy, careful steps. He was sure that the security systems had been deactivated with his arrival-with the people he was meeting, he knew that their thoroughness was guaranteed- but, in these recent uncertain times, and especially in the events of the last few hours, who really knew who to trust.

*No!!* He had to put such thoughts of betrayal out of his head. The people here were above reproach. Their unity and loyalty to him had been both unswerving and continually excellent. They would literally die for him if they believed it was necessary.

With his feelings of insecurity passing, he walked to the middle of the chamber and gazed at the circular panorama that was all around him. The city of Coruscant was at dusk, yet it was never busier than now. The swirling transports, airspeeders, and other carriages of delivery and departure were everywhere- as if the

very sky were theirs for the taking. Every race, of every known colour and creed imaginable, occupied these transports- from worlds both known and unknown to the observer. Who knew where they were all going, what appointments they would be making, what deals they would be doing? Just how many of their day to day transactions were benign? And how many were dangerous?



The shapes and sizes of the craft were at times beautiful to watch, their shells glistening against the departing sun: the sight of them temporarily taking the onlooker away briefly from the worries that had been racking through his mind. Just how many of the occupants of these tiny craft had family? Who did they care for? Who cared for them?

Did they sleep? Did they dream?

As the last embers of orange/red sunlight began to transform to an emotional purple/blue, he hoped, and prayed, that the occupants of those tiny craft would sleep well, especially on this night.

The outside beauty was a tiny reminder to the onlooker that we all existed within our own pocket universes, seemingly unaware of the bigger picture that we had, by the very nature of the universe we resided in, sometimes become embroiled. Whether we knew it or not, be it now or hundreds of years from now, with our children, or our children's children, the onlooker knew that the people out there had a part to play in the nature and shaping of the universe. Even if those people out there in those magnificent craft were not now directly affected by today's unusual events, the ripples of the disturbance would soon echo outwards, eventually reaching and affecting them at a time when they least expected it. Ripples from events that would decide the daily existence of the Republic- a Republic that people lived in freely, without major incident. A

way of life for a society of peoples that had- despite a few occasional cracks in its protective walls- stood firm and tall for a thousand years.

A thousand years of peace and prosperity- now facing tremendous challenges to its well being.

A Republic under siege from a dangerous new threat.

*How had this happened? How could so much trouble have happened so quickly?*

There had been a time when the space lanes had been devoid of pirates. There had been a time when slavery of innocent people on the outer worlds had been contained and almost eliminated. There had been a time when prosperity seemed to be a word that was no longer looked at with disdain, hatred, anger or envy.

How soon things had changed.

Weaponry was now ruling the depths of space, weaponry in the hands of greedy people taking advantage of an overburdened system of law and peaceful order. Pecking at the flesh within the chinks of armor like a vulture eager to feast on the abandoned wastes of the dead.

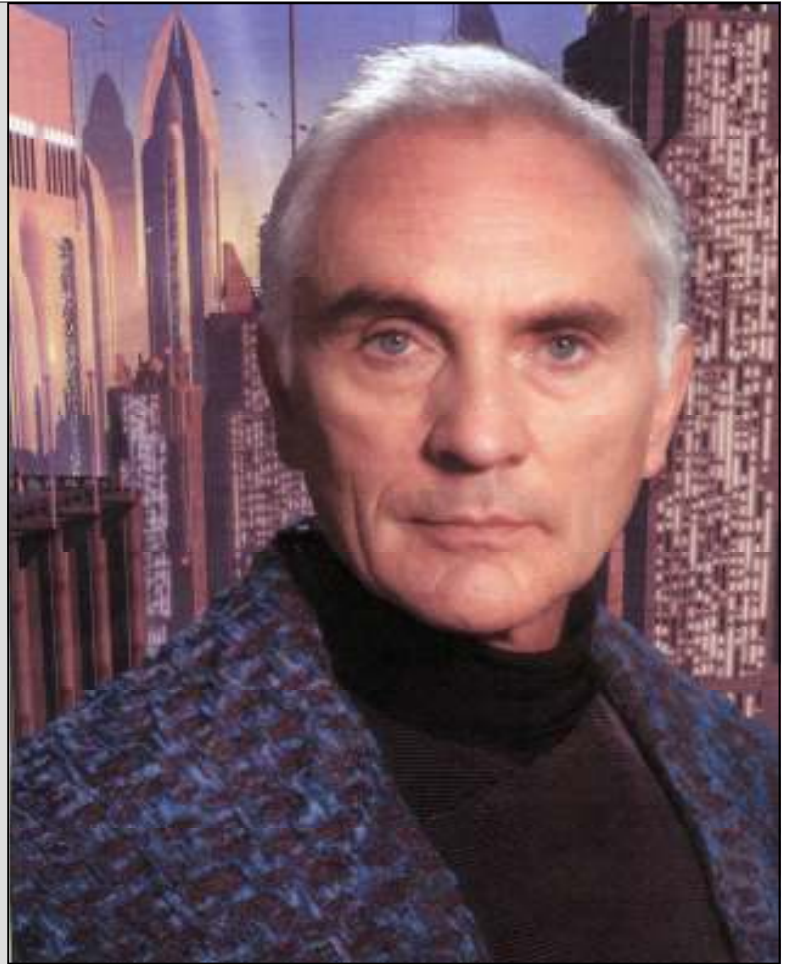
The hooded man, his face now down at the thought of the problems sweeping across the universe, lifted his back to the panorama, hoping for further solace towards the transports. At times, how he wished for a simpler life. A simpler life that he knew, deep down, he would never have.

For now, this moment, life was much too complicated...

“Always in motion is the future.....”

The onlooker turned towards a breach of light that was now filling the room, as the giant shielded door located to the other side of him, behind his tall shape, opened up with an almost silent ease. The small green figure, partially shrouded in the light, now became clearer, taking his first steps within the chamber, the brown tree trunk shaped cane supporting his tiny build, making small echoing noises as it tipped and tapped the floor beneath it. “...Not always so predictable.”

Small humps of old age discomfort resonated from Jedi Master Yoda’s frame, as finally he reached his goal: the comfortable, yet also imposing, seat that was located in the middle of the Jedi Council’s audience chamber, itself in a circle within the circle of the chambers interior: the place where the guardians of peace and justice discussed and carried out their duties- be they simple, or dangerous. Not only to their own lives, but also the lives of the people they had sworn to protect. The people of the Republic. At times hated and feared by the galaxy whose laws they continually upheld, the hooded observer knew just how much the Jedi had sacrificed in their lives in order to carry out their mission of peace. The galaxy owed their thanks to this small group of individuals a million times over but he knew that their code would forbid them from accepting it.



“If it was predicable, I wouldn’t be here with you now.” The hooded man revealed his countenance. A short crop of pure white hair, and a pair of still youthful blue eyes, friendly but penetrating- blazing with intensity, was revealed to the world. Yet there was unease in those eyes too, as well as an almost overwhelming tiredness, as if the universe was hanging on his shoulders. A heavy weight that Supreme Chancellor Finis Valorum was trying desperately hard not to show. “Thank you for seeing me at such short notice, and within this veil of secrecy.” He continued, now walking towards the intently listening green alien. “I apologize for having to do this, but, in these current times, and especially after the recent assassination attempt on my life, I thought it best not to take any chances.” His facial expression betrayed a small glint of humorous irony. “With the exception of my First commander, even my own personal guard are unaware that I’ve left my private quarters”.

Valorum walked gently, the utmost of delicacy within his body frame, across the circle of Jedi patterning located in the middle of the temple floor, trying to avoid damaging the tile work beneath his feet as if it were fragile beyond words. He briefly admired the depth of skill required to bring such beautiful craftsmanship to life. He hoped that such skills, by people so talented, would continue beyond his lifetime, beyond everything. Yoda knew that he was taking things slowly, trying not to sound on edge. Yet the aged Jedi Master instinctively knew of what was to come.

“We have just received word that the Trade Federation has initiated a blockade around Naboo. We don’t know yet if this is the action of a group of individuals within the organization, or whether it has the full backing of its leaders. I suppose they think that this will somehow help in the abolition of the taxation of the trade routes that we recently instigated. So far, there has been no direct action, or any violence, towards the planetary population, but I’m deeply concerned as to where the situation will go.”

Yoda nodded his head in quiet contemplation. “Know the young Queen Amidala, I do not.” he gently replied, “And no serious problems on that world have ever required the assistance of Jedi.”

Despite his claims, though, Yoda was all too aware that, with their dependency on specific foods and some important technology which they lacked, the Naboo system was an easy target for the machinations of the greedy and unscrupulous members of the Trade Federation, as well as it’s other associates.

Valorum’s concern continued. “Amidala is incredibly young for someone in such a position of authority. In fact, one of the youngest leaders the Naboo people have ever elected. That this is all happening now, especially in such a time of unease on their world, with the unexpected and mysterious death of King Veruna recently, cannot be disregarded. Though loved by her people, she is still untried with regards to matters of such potential danger. I cannot help but fear, from the sentiments of her Senator Palpatine when she was inaugurated, that she may be swimming in dangerous waters if she meets the Federation.”

Valorum paused, instinctively letting the words sink in, Yoda thought, like the true politician that he was. He now spoke delicately, firmly. “Master Yoda, I am... concerned... for her safety and that of the people of Naboo. Everything that the Federation has done so far is unusual. The way this operation has been directed towards them, it just doesn’t feel right.”

“What has the Senate decided?” Yoda asked, no longer grasping his cane, his three digit hands clenched deep in concentration.

Even with his back now turned, Yoda could feel the unease ever more clearly in Valorum’s eyes. More so than the Supreme Chancellor had ever wanted to reveal to anyone. “Nothing. Absolutely nothing.” The pain of frustration speared within his being even further. “The delegates have been locked in endless debate on the crisis for the last five hours. And the discussions have only just started. It’s getting us nowhere. I feel by the time a solution can be implemented it will be too late.”

The implications of his words were just too much for Valorum to bear. He couldn’t allow the situation to get out of hand any further. He instinctively knew what had to be done. “The Republic cannot allow this chain

of events to get out of control.” Hands firmly behind his back, Valorum, now determined to act, returned his gaze back to the Jedi. “A course of action must be implemented immediately, even if it means going against the wishes and procedures of the Senate and the legal departments. The blockade must be ended. Immediately.”

Valorum’s body language continued to show a grim stubbornness. Even if the powerful leader of the Jedi Knights challenged his decision, he would remain resolute. “I am going to be dispatching a team of “negotiators” to the Trade Federation command ship in orbit around Naboo.” The Jedi Master, impressed with the Chancellors strength of purpose, from the moment that Valorum had stressed the word “negotiators”, now knew what was required of him. “These won’t be any ordinary negotiators.” A last pause... “Master Yoda, I would like them to be Jedi.”

Returning his right hand to the cane at his side, the experienced old Jedi, now withdrawn from his comfortable red cushioned seat, contemplatively moved towards the Supreme Chancellor. Yet his gaze was elsewhere, no longer looking towards the tall frame in front of him, His observations went beyond Valorum, beyond the chamber, beyond Coruscant, beyond everything. Now at one with the Force, Yoda assessed the situation, studying the intricate balance and harmonies of the Force, the communion of Jedi even now in life immersion with it, and the actions and incidents to come that would influence the natural energies of the universe around them. For what seemed an eternity of silence to Valorum, Yoda finally returned to the smaller universe that his physical body existed within. His decision reached, he looked towards the Supreme Chancellor in a new way, as if appreciating the difficulty of the man’s situation. “Agreed with your actions, we are. Dispatch Jedi to Naboo we will.”



A great relief filed the Supreme Chancellors heart. Though he could have aggressively ordered the Jedi into doing something they felt violated the natural force of the universe, the very fact that Yoda agreed with him on the course of action, provided great encouragement that he was indeed doing the right thing. Even if it meant, for a short time, and with possible future consequences, going up against the very foundation of laws created to the agreement of the thousands of worlds that made up the wishes of the Senate. “I assume you’ll be sending Jedi experienced in dealings with the Federation?”

“No”. Yoda’s response took Valorum by complete surprise. “As you say, this situation with the Trade Federation is most unusual. See the full outcome of the situation, I cannot. Such actions made against the Republic require a different approach. Combat unlikely action with equally unlikely reaction we must. Heightened is the use of the living Force within this matter. Require experience beyond the normal parameters, we do. A different perspective is needed to bring closure to this problem.”

“So who will you send?” Valorum’s face betrayed bewilderment. To not dispatch the most experienced Jedi, with years of negotiating skills, was unusual to say the least. Just who would be selected to handle the conflict? That Yoda was doing something so completely different to anything seen before should not be unexpected, especially after recent events in the Senex system, but in this instance, he would provide an unlikely, yet strangely unique answer to the situation.

“Qui-Gon Jinn.”

Of all the thousands of Jedi Knights operating within the galaxies of the Republic, Qui-Gon Jinn had proved to be the most unlikely, and also the riskiest, choice of person to send out in such a delicate situation as this. Valorum was recently made well aware of Jinn's personal thoughts on the part played by living beings within the pure Force of the universe. They were beliefs and questions on the nature of the Force that had controversially bought him into friendly, and sometimes not so friendly, conflict with the rest of the Jedi. Apart from the Padawan he was rearing, Qui-Gon Jinn was almost considered a loner, in a way a maverick, who didn't always follow the commands he was given by the Jedi. A recent collision of ideas, theology and disobeying procedure had led to his name being removed as one of a number of possible candidates to join Yoda and the other members of the Jedi Council.

Yet, thinking about the choice further, Valorum knew that Yoda's decision was not as baffling as first thought, that the qualities that Qui-Gon possessed strangely made him the right candidate for the challenge. Beside the nobility and powerful frame of the Jedi Knight, he brought within him a sense of inner calm, the ability to look beyond the crises taking place around him, to take charge quickly and, if necessary, prove to the Trade Federation why he was acclaimed as one of the Jedi Order's most skilled fighters. Qui-Gon's formidable presence may indeed help intimidate the cowardly Trade Federation into backing down on their blockade before events went past the point of no return. Finally, most importantly, Valorum trusted Qui-Gon implicitly— the Jedi having saved his life in a recent assassination attempt made by the Nebula Front on his home planet of Eriadu.

“An excellent choice, Master Yoda.” Valorum's smile clearly showed what great appreciation he had for the aged Jedi Master. He sincerely hoped that, if his position of authority was sustained after the crisis, he would continue to have dealings and conversations with such a charismatic and wise person. “My thanks to you, and the rest of the Council, for your help in concluding this matter.”

With renewed confidence, a strong Valorum, bowing in respect to the Jedi Master, strided out from the Jedi chamber, confidently expecting the situation finally resolved, both firmly and quickly. As soon as his personal vessel had reached the Naboo system, and the Trade Federation blockade, he would inform both Queen Amidala's Senate Representative- Palpatine- and the rest of the Republic of his “Ambassadors” commencement of peace talks. Though expecting trouble within the massed ranks of alien ambassadors the moment they discover that he has acted on his own initiative, and without their direct approval, to resolve the situation, Valorum knew, with the help of his good friend Palpatine, a trusted confidante and adviser, as well as a charismatic Politician in his own right, that the situation would eventually calm down- that it would be contained and finally ceased, with another matter of importance eventually overshadowing the once dangerous incident.

Such was the life of politics.

Valorum sincerely hoped that, after Naboo, long term negotiations with the cowardly Neimoidian Trade Federation would extinguish any further foolish threats of blockades directed towards other prosperous planets.

Could the successful resolution of these unusual events herald the start of a new age of peace and prosperity for the Republic? With his long cherished political career (recently damaged by malicious, and un-proved, accusations of corruption) on the line from the decisions reached today, Valorum certainly hoped so.

As the pitch black darkness finally took over the sky around his personal air transport, his thoughts for the future were now nothing but positive.....

*By SCOTT WELLER*