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This has been edited by [morde24](#) and [Nad Destroyer](#) along with myself and Grammarly. Please give them their thanks for their help with the chapter.

Chapter 17: Tricks, Secrets and Blunders

Sidious stared at Pestage with widened eyes for barely a second before he slowly leaning back in his chair and steepled his fingers. For a moment there was nothing in his features or anything else that showed the shock of the news his aid had just given him. But still Pestage shivered at the sudden, almost terrifying feeling of being the object of the Chancellor's **full** attention. "I'm sorry, what did you just say?" The Sith lord questioned, his tone almost pleasant.

"The, the Jedi younglings are gone, my Lord. They do not seem to be in the temple any longer."

All of Sidious's calm control snapped in an instant. With the Veil of the Dark Side covering him, he reached out with the Force and began to Force Choke Pestage, snarling out, "I heard you the first time, fool!"

But even in his rage, Sidious knew that he couldn't keep using an active Force power like that so close to the temple for very long. Physical Force techniques always created a larger splash in the Force than mental ones, and the longer he kept this up, the more it was possible that he would be discovered even with the Veil clouding the Jedi's perceptions. Still, he kept the Force Choke going for two more long interminable seconds, taking some delight in the other man's choking gasps, before releasing the technique.

Pestage crumpled to the ground, both hands going to his throat, massaging it as he stared up at the desk of Sidious, unable to see the man himself from this angle. Then Sidious moved around his desk, and Pestage found himself staring up at his Lord and Master, the fear in his eyes doing just as much to help calm Sidious down as the man's panic of a moment ago. He reached down and grabbed him by the shoulder. Pestage shuddered under his touch, but all Sidious did was help the other human to his feet and then propel him into a chair nearby, almost gently.

"Now, please explain to me further. What do you mean, the Jedi brats are gone?" Sidious requested his tone back to its normal calm, commanding one rather than the wrathful tone it had been.

With another shudder, Pestage began quickly began to explain, ignoring the pain in his neck. Pestage did not repeat anything he had already said, giving his own suppositions on what

he had observed. "The temple isn't large enough that you can keep more than two thousand children of all ages silent. Further, it felt almost as if the temple was empty, for the first time I've ever been there. Always before there's well, there was the liveliness you get from having a bunch of people in one building. Even with a large majority of the Jedi out on missions the temple felt lived-in as long as the younglings were there, their teachers and everyone else. I did not get that impression when I was in the temple this time," he babbled before Sidious cocked an eyebrow at him and made a 'calm down' gesture.

There was something almost perverse about seeing that gesture from Palpatine after his earlier moment of rage, but Pestage willed himself to calm down further.

"Furthermore, I do not think this was something that was disorganized. There were no signs of any rushing departure. Whatever happened, it was well-planned and kept secret, I think, even from a lot of the Jedi themselves. I saw several Jedi arriving as I left. One or two looked startled almost, as they entered the temple. They were Jedi that I recognized from reports who have not been back to the temple in several weeks. I, I think that's all I can say," Pestage finished, his voice trailing off into a near whimper.

Thankfully, Sidious was over his earlier moment of rage at the messenger. Yes, in ancient times, perhaps Sith Lords could get away with killing messengers who delivered bad news. But Sidious could not go that route. *If I did that, I would lose all of my messengers far too quickly.* Indeed, the Dark Side was now whispering danger signals in his mind. Hiding the younglings would've been one thing. But so many of the teaching staff gone as well?

Scowling, Sidious tried to bring to mind how many younglings had been in the temple of the time, and decided that Pestage's earlier comment on there being about two-thousand was reasonably accurate. It was hard to keep track of the younglings since there was always a steady shift from youngling to padawan and youngling to Agri-corps going on, and the Jedi were not obligated to inform the Senate of the specific number of younglings they had within the temple, only how much foodstuffs the temple as a whole needed. He knew there were at least sixteen youngling clans, most of them named after animals for some bizarre reason, but their sizes differed greatly, from a hundred to as many as four hundred.

Sidious had hoped to gather such children up at the end of the war. Either to indoctrinate them and use them going forward in some fashion or as a final test of Anakin Skywalker, forcing him further into the Dark Side. Or, barring the need, perhaps simply as batteries. Like Dominus, Sidious had learned the ability to siphon off another individual's Force powers, although he wasn't nearly as subtle about it as Dominus was. Sidious's mental abilities ran in other directions than that.

Sidious moved back to sit at his desk, and after a few moments of work on his computer, Sidious was looking at the information he wanted: the space control and observation data on the temple for the past two weeks. Quickly sifting through the number of ships that had been in orbit over that timeframe, Sidious discovered the information he had already known he would

find thanks to the whisper of the Dark Side in his mind. The only ship large enough to carry that many children affiliated with the Jedi in orbit at the time was the Tyrant's Bane. *And I have been hiding under the Ysalamiri too often to notice anything unusual, Dark Side take it! But surely...*

Staring as the number of shuttle trips back and forth from the temple and the Tyrant's Bane, Sidious once more lost his cool and slammed one hand down on the desk in front of him, knowing that he should have caught this, and would have if not for Potter and his actions. An instant later, his self-control once more came to the fore. "The Tyrant's Bane, once more it comes back to the ship. And its owner," He said, his tone as cold and implacable as space.

The fact that I have yet to hear from Dominus about its destruction is even more important now. Yet, I do know something about it, where it was supposed to be going...

With that thought, Sidious pressed a series of buttons, sending out a signal to one of his operatives. This man was a spy who could operate openly in one guise for the Chancellor yet disappear easily into the black because he was so in the background normally that few people even knew his name, let alone anything else. This was quite unlike Pestage, who was very publicly Sidious's aide, like Sly Moore, an Umbaran woman who was 'Palpatine's' second aid. Indeed, Pestage and Moore's public persona as Sidious's aides protected this operative, whose name was Kinman Doriana.

A moment later, the man himself appeared in the door. And just like his persona, his physical body was completely unassuming. He was human, middle-aged and balding, with a kind of combover that signified to everyone that he didn't want to own up to his baldness just yet. In other words, he looked like the kind of sad, drooping menial or office grunt that could be found on any human world, colony or space station. The sort of person, in fact, who wouldn't be so out of place on any world where humans could live at all.

Because of this, and the fact that he was far more intelligent than he looked, Kinman was easily one of Sidious's most effective agents. Sidious didn't trust anyone, but he came closest to trusting Sly Moore, his apprentice Darth Noctis, and Kinman, if for very different reasons. Noctis could be trusted as far as any Sith could be, and she knew that Sidious's position made him indispensable to the Great Plan, unlike Dominus. Sly Moore was an acolyte, a dabbler in the Dark Side, thanks to Sidious training her, and she doubled as Sidious's sex partner. Kinman though, was loyal to the cause, and had been so for far longer than any of Sidious's other tools.

"Kinman," Sidious greeted with a nod.

In reply, Kinman bowed deeply from the waist, then moved to sit next to Pestage, his eyes never leaving his master, but not speaking, simply waiting for his command. Another thing that Sidious liked about the man.

"I have a mission for you. I wish you to travel to the Jedi's Agri-corps worlds. Do not let them know you are there, but I need to know what the ***Tyrant's Bane*** and Harry Potter are up to. If you can discover a way to track them, I need to know where they go."

Cocking his head thoughtfully, Kinman said simply, "This does not seem like a mission for me. You could send any of a dozen Republic agents on trumped-up missions to those worlds, then make more excuses to need to know where the *Bane* went. There must be more to it."

"There is. The Jedi younglings are gone, and I need to know where they went." Sidious answered just as bluntly.

Kinman's reaction was a widening of the eyes, and he leaned forward, frowning deeply. Part of why Sidious trusted him so much was that despite not being a force user, Kinman believed in the cause: a true Empire rather than a faltering Republic. "And you believe that they have been sequestered to the Agri-Corps worlds? I can't see that. None of those worlds have any defenses to speak of. Their defense is their anonymity, and occasionally, the kind of terrain any attacker would have to deal with to launch a ground assault. While you could easily hide the younglings on a few of them, it would not be very safe. If anything, I would say they were taken to Corellia."

"It, it might even make sense, Pestage posited, interjecting himself into the conversation, eager to regain some face in front of his master. "Corellia is where the GDL's so-called Congress of Free Stars is being created." The name hadn't come from Count Potter, but it had been bandied about in the past few days, here on Coruscant, where the name certainly had created a mixed response.

"No," Sidious mused, shaking his head after a few seconds of thought. "While Corellia is becoming more and more prominent as they bring their mothballed fleets online, Serenno is still the military head of the GDL. It is where Bel Iblis and the rest of their high command is. And the training center that Dooku created years ago."

Kinman was still frowning. "They might split the younglings up between Serenno and Corellia, yet even that doesn't make much sense. If they were moving them there, you would think they would own up to it. Unless they are afraid of political and public backlash at such a move?"

"Perhaps. Or perhaps the younglings will not be found on either world. Bar the Green Jedi's own, at least." As a semi-autonomous faction within the Order, the Green Jedi had their own younglings training in their Green Temple in Coronet.

"Still, if they even step into one of those systems, there will be evidence of it, if not where they are going. If I can find a starting point I can follow the trail, I think," Kinman mused, now understanding why he was being given this mission. "Do you want daily reports, or would

you prefer that I wait until I have gathered all the information I can discover for you without giving myself away?"

Sidious paused, thinking. And once more, he realized that while this was probably a blow to the Great Plan, he could roll with it... for now. *The bigger issue is what it implies!* "If the Jedi younglings are on Serenno, I will expect a report on that immediately. If you find anything unusual at the Agri-corps worlds, you can report on that as well. But I need **information**, and if you think that staying silent is safer for your operation, then I expect you to follow your own judgment."

Kinman once more bowed, then stood. "In that case, I should start immediately. I want to get off-planet, and then to Chandrila for the first portion of this mission."

Chandrila was where he kept his ship, the Scimitar. This was the same ship design which Darth Maul and several of his clones had been given copies of. Indeed even Darth Noctis used a ship that had much the same Stygium crystal-based stealth technology. "I'll also have to set up some things for an entrance into Serenno." The seemingly middle-aged man smiled, not at all whimsically. "The GDL's Security teams are extremely competent, and I know for a fact that Serenno has at least two or three Jedi working with their anti-espionage teams. My identity and background will have to be airtight before I enter GDL space. Luckily I have several backgrounds I can use that will get me in, with a bit of work."

Sidious nodded and waved his hand, then looked over at Pestage as Kinman left. "Was there anything else that you felt you had to report?"

But Pestage simply shook his head, and Sidious nodded him out of the office as well, after which Sidious flicking off his office lights while turning the windows opaque, blocking out all light.

For a few seconds, Sidious just stood in the darkness, which helped him calm down as he clenched and unclenched his hands over and over. But there was a feeling deep inside of him, a feeling of a tiny hole in the dam appearing, water spraying through it. As if something hidden had started to come out into the open. And it would not stop until it had washed away all of his plans.

"But it will take more than that! I can roll with this! I can keep going with the Great Plan, just like Potter and his anti-clone stance, I can make it work for myself," Sidious said aloud. For a moment, as he moved to turn on the lights once more and reconnect with the rest of the universe, he even believed it.

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Unaware that the Sith knew anything about his movements, and indeed had discovered a portion of the Jedi Order's previously secret movements, Harry sat in the shuttle, heading

over to one of the three Lucrehulks that they had captured. As the shuttle flew forward, Harry was rethinking about his plans for those and the two Munificent-class ships that had surrendered. Serenno didn't have enough dock capacity to see to all of them. Harry felt it would be a good idea to leave the two Munificent-class ships there while sending two of the Lucrehulks on to Corellia and keeping a third with him to be taken for a rune-style refit.

"That way, the runes teams with Master Gallia can start work on turning it into a warship equal to the Tyrant's Bane," Harry sent to Aayla via their mental connection. *"I think we need to get another ship like the Bane online as fast as possible, and that's the best way to do it."*

"That'll still take months, love," Aayla answered with a shake of her mental avatar's head, from where she sat at the controls of a shuttle heading towards one of those self-same Lucrehulks, concern and no small amount of sadness going through her as she thought about the war and the lives it was currently claiming across the galaxy. The number of living people who she had felt pass on in this battle alone had brought that to her mind rather forcefully now that the fight was over. *"We won't see an immediate benefit from it, and I am afraid in that amount of time, the CIS's numbers will start to grind down the GDL, let alone the Republic."*

Feeling those emotions from his love, Harry shook his head, both mentally and figuratively, as he thought about how to both soothe Aayla and convince her he wasn't crazy to think about something that far into the future.

This movement made Ahsoka look at him in confusion from where she was sitting next to him in the passenger sector of their own shuttle before realizing that he was probably communing with Aayla. Ahsoka had refused to stay behind, so the two of them were leading a small group of techs onto the last Lucrehulk to surrender. Their mission was to make certain that it had been left with its computer intact and no booby traps.

Ahsoka was concerned and more than a little wary at the moment, since they might be heading into what would be her first real combat mission, but Ahsoka was refusing to let that bother her. *I've got this, I was one of the best lightsaber duelists of my clan, well, before most of them were chosen as Padawans, but so what? And so what if this is my first mission! I've got my lightsaber, I've got the Force, I have my training. And I've got my Master here.*

Whatever she might have thought, Ahsoka was actually broadcasting both her worries and the false bravado she was trying to use to cover her fears more than loudly enough for Harry to pick up on,. Still, Harry felt Ahsoka could wait the few seconds it would take to finish his current conversation with Aayla before he addressed his padawan's fears.

"This war spans the entire pre-war Republic, which means there won't be any short-term, knockout blow victory," He said, his voice sad but soothing as he bolstered Aayla's sadness by sending her a pulse of emotion containing his own sadness and firm resolve. *"And while we don't have the targets we need if we choose to go on the offensive, the Confederacy*

has to be very lucky to hurt us or double down on any attack and thus hurt themselves in the short term to hurt us strategically."

After a few mental minutes spent simply soothing Aayla's sadness, Harry went on. *"I'm afraid the Confederacy will continue to try and grind us down in mid-scale battles, keeping the greater number of their navies pushing into Republic territory to take strategic goals on their side of things. With the CIS's use of droids, they think they can win this war that way. I wish they were wrong, but I don't know if they are or not. It's been a thousand years since a war was fought on this scale, and even the New Sith Wars were smaller in terms of the forces both sides could field compared to what this war will see."*

"Hopefully, that first point will change, and we'll have a chance to prove them wrong," Aayla said with a weary sigh, conceding the point. *"I don't like it. This kind of what did you call it? Attritional? This kind of attritional warfare will kill untold trillions. The longer it goes on, the more people die, and the stronger the Dark Side becomes."*

At that, Harry sent a feeling of love and commiseration down their link, but that was all. As he knew she would, Aayla gathered her own resolve and pushed through her sadness, fueled by her desire to save as many people as they could. After a second he deliberately changed the subject, asking *"By the way, what was the name of the space station again? And what you think are the odds that we will find no boobytraps or anything else aboard the ships?"*

"Probably quite low unfortunately. But I don't think we'll see anything uniform. The captains on any one of these ships might have decided to go against their word and boobytrap them. I certainly got a sense of smug duplicity from a few of the shuttles that were picking up their escape pods. But it wouldn't have been ordered from a higher authority. Once we destroyed their flagship, the Confederacy fleet lost all cohesion. It was like they didn't have a real chain of command underneath it," Aayla mused, her mind once more on things they could truly control rather than the existential costs of the war.

"Perhaps they did, but the losses they had already taken meant that they no longer had anyone of flag rank," Harry replied equally thoughtfully.

"I don't think so," Aayla said in turn, shaking her head. *"I think this is a sign of how... well... how top-heavy the CIS is."*

Harry's mind worked like any other male individual. Further, thanks to their concerns about Ahsoka, he and Aayla had been careful not to have any real alone time since that moment of utter embarrassment. So when Harry considered the term top-heavy, it meant something entirely different. Instead, the image of Aayla with breasts four or five times larger than her current size appeared in their mental plane.

Aayla took one look and shuddered. *"Goodness, I'd have to use the Force to hold those things up, Harry! My back hurts just looking at that thing!"*

"*Sorry, couldn't help it.*" Instantly the image changed to Aayla's body as it was now, with a few changes. One, it was naked, and two, it looked as if it was from a memory, specifically the memory of their time with Padme when Harry had oiled them both up, her skin glistening with the oils. "*You should know I much prefer your body as is,*" he murmured, his mental voice going a bit lower in register as he looked at Aayla's mental avatar boldly.

Even as she pushed down her own desire, Aayla chuckled, then answered Harry's previous question. "*Down boy. And as for the name of Master Gallia's space station, they were still voting for different names when we left.*"

"*Oh, yes. I think I voted for the name Freedom's Fence and Entryway. The first for what it stands for, then the other for what it is.*"

Hearing that, Aayla's mental image slapped itself in the face, then shook his head. "*Harry, no... just... no. You're no longer allowed to name things. And now that you have raised my spirits, and I love you for it, why don't you go make certain that your young padawan doesn't vibrate herself into pieces mentally or physically.*"

Lips quirking, Harry came back to his own physical senses and saw that Aayla's comment had been entirely too accurate. Ahsoka was basically vibrating in her seat, bouncing up and down, her feet creating a staccato rhythm that even had a few of the other shuttle's passengers looking at her askance. Eagerness, concern, worry, a desire to get this over with, a fear of the same thing, and frankly, the desire to just move was radiating off her now.

With a sigh, Harry reached out and touched her shoulder gently. "Breathe, padawan," he ordered, waving one hand up and down in front of his chest. "Breathe in, breathe out. Center yourself in the Force. What comes will come, what will be will be. You will do your best, the Force will aid you, as it will me, and I will aid you, as you will aid me. Trust in the Force, trust in yourself, and do not let your fears color your connection to the Force."

As her master's soothing voice washed over her, Ahsoka concentrated on a few breathing exercises, then closed her eyes as she slowly started to center herself. Soon enough, Harry had difficulty feeling her emotions even through their link, which meant that she was barely broadcasting at all. Smiling proudly, Harry released Ahsoka's shoulder. "Very well done. I know this is your first mission, combat-related or otherwise Ahsoka. Some anxiety and anxiousness, even fear, is to be expected. But you should not allow it to color your connection to the Force."

He then smiled and twisted his chair around, standing up and heading up to the cockpit. He stood there for a moment as they closed into viewing range of the damaged and currently derelict Lucrehulk. "It looks as if we are not going to be taken under fire then, that's good at least. And you requested to do a pass over of the ship, C'ktra?"

The Verpine in question nodded his head rapidly. "But this will slow us down, Jedi Potter. There were some concerns that there might be traps rigged to blow the ship after a certain amount of time left in the engineering room."

"Indeed, but now that we are closer, I cannot sense any threat on that scale. There is some danger within, perhaps... droids and electronic dangers are hard to sense in the Force, but danger on that scale would register at this range. Regardless, I would rather we know what we were working with, gentleman."

At the use of the male term, which really didn't reflect the reality of the Verpine species, they all chattered in amusement while the pilot began to turn away from a direct route to the prize ship's hanger bay. With some more time now before they would be needed, Harry went to sit next to Ahsoka, and with some effort, twisted their chairs to look at one another, their knees almost touching.

"Would you like to hear about my first actual mission? Admittedly, I'd had quite a few adventures up to that point, but I was still feeling anxious, like someone would quiz me on everything that happened on the mission. And if I didn't get it right... hmm, looking back on it, I don't think I ever quite worked out what would happen to me if I failed the 'quiz'. But that certainly didn't stop me from feeling worried about it."

"Even with someone like Master Fay as your master? I've heard stories about her," Ahsoka replied dubiously.

"Yes, even with Master Fay. In fact, I bet that was worse than a lot of Masters." Ahsoka snorted in derision, but Harry simply smirked. "What would be worse, someone shouting at you about how they were disappointed with you, or someone just shaking her head and sighing as if you were just a little child who they couldn't possibly have expected to get things right?"

After a few seconds of thought Ahsoka winced. "I see your point. I wouldn't like the shouting, but it wouldn't make me feel as guilty or as if I had really failed miserably as the other."

"Exactly. Now, my first mission..." Scratching at his chin and noting absently that he had to shave again, Harry pulled his mind back through his mental landscape's forest of crystals, looking for the one that he wanted, as he brought the memory to his forefront.

By the time Harry had finished his tale, Ahsoka was giggling, shaking her head at how Harry's first mission has turned out. She was concentrating on her master so much that it came as a shock when Ahsoka realized that instead of flying around the captured ship, they were now flying into its hangar bay, the shuttle's lights illuminating the darkness ahead of them eerily.

Her anxiety started to come back, but Ahsoka crushed it down ruthlessly, thinking that if other Jedi like her Master could go through with their first missions, then so could she. The

young Togrutan hopped to her feet as the door opened, and soon she and Harry moved out of the shuttle first, after the scanners had informed him the ship's hangar bay was once more airtight. Harry paused at the bottom of the ramp to turn back to the shuttle and order the engineers to wait until the two Jedi had surveyed the engineering room and the central control structure, the ball-like segment of the ship which resided within the two main nacelles of the Lucrehulk design. Those were the only two sections of the Lucrehulk's ship where living sentients would have been stationed.

They were also the places where traps could have been set up that could destroy the ship either now or when the ship entered hyperspace. Moreover, once they were in control of the bridge, the techs could bring in a separate power source to start powering the ship's system up in segments and check the interior cameras for anything untoward.

No one was willing to trust that the Confederacy crew had been willing to abide by the order that Harry had given them. *Although if they really haven't, as Aayla indicated, that opens up the question as to what I'll have to do about it*, Harry thought. He looked at Ahsoka and smiled. "Would you like to create some illumination for us? And then check around the deck. I doubt they will have boobytrapped the bay, but it can be practice for you going forward."

"Right, Master," Ahsoka replied instantly, having been a little wary of how much darkness was all around them with the only light coming from the shuttle's exterior lamps. A second later, a bright yellow light bloomed from her hand, floating into the air above her, bobbing along as Ahsoka moved around the hanger bay.

Smiling at that, Harry turned back, raising his hands towards the shuttle, reaching out with the Force. A large Force Shield appeared all around it, becoming thicker as Harry allowed more of his power to flow into the technique before he was satisfied. With that, Harry repeated his earlier injunction about staying aboard the shuttle and then turned to Ahsoka. "Shall we?"

Ahsoka nodded, and the two of them exited the hangar bay soon, having found nothing that screamed of danger through the Force in the hanger bay. As they made their way around the C-shape of the Lucrehulk, they didn't discover anything untoward.

"They've kept the environmental systems on too, which is nice," Ahsoka said, smiling faintly at that, gesturing to her horns. "I hate wearing helmets. Even ones made for Togrutans aren't very comfortable to wear. They block out all the echolocation we get from our horns, and I always get this weird, echoey kind of feeling in mine."

Harry nodded in commiseration, even as he activated his Lightsaber. Taking her cue from him, Ahsoka did the same, and Harry frowned, standing still as he reached out for the Force. He could sense danger aboard, but it wasn't coming from the engine room as he had thought. Instead, it was coming from somewhere else, but Harry couldn't localize it.

"Master, I hear something in the distance," Ahsoka interrupted Harry's thoughts. She had been using the Force too, but in Ahsoka's case, she had been using it to modify and enhance the same echolocation ability of her montrals she had just been talking about. "Some kind of clanking."

The two Jedi looked at one another, then Harry sighed. "Droids?"

"Droids," Ahsoka agreed with a sigh of her own. "I suppose we should've expected that."

The two of them moved down the corridor to the ship's main body, where the neck of the ship connected the control area to the rest of the Lucrehulk's C shape. But to Harry's surprise, the ambush didn't occur there, where, in the Bane, the engines and segments given over to the shield generators began. Instead, they found nothing. "Exactly how far can you hear with your montrals when you enhance your echolocation with the Force?"

"A long way," Ahsoka said with a shrug, then pointed down the corridor that would eventually lead them to the central control hub, living quarters and command center of the ship. "They're in that direction."

"Are they becoming louder?"

Ahsoka shook her head, and Harry turned, gesturing into the engine room. "In that case, let's check the engine room first."

The engine room was situated to one side of the thoroughfare they were standing in, with numerous small hatches to allow access from several different floors. But from here, the two of them entered at the lowest level and pushed forward into the engine room, staring up at the engines and all around. "Master, a concern of occurs to me. I'm not an engineer. Are you? Or can you tell there is some danger here via the Force?"

"I would be able to tell if something was out of place or immediately dangerous to us, yes. Don't worry about that Ahsoka, you'll get there eventually. But as for anything else, a trap that is part of the system, say, that's what communication and recording devices are for," Harry returned.

With that, Harry pulled out his datapad as he began to use the video option, showing the interior of the engine room to the Verpine engineers back on the shuttle.

A few times, he had to push to make certain the Verpine techs weren't causing him to stop so they could look at a piece of technology the Verpine thought could be modified to work better in some fashion, but eventually, they discovered that the engine room had not, in fact, been booby-trapped. Or at least, not physically. If someone had left a program in the computers, that would only be discovered once they powered them up.

This was why they had brought along a complete copy of the Tyrant's Bane's operating system in several large computer blocks. Instead of starting the ship's own operating system, they would link it to the copy of the Tyrant's Bane's, overwriting the original. That would take several hours. A ship this large had a lot of computing power and different programs within it, but it would be the safest way to make certain that there were no boobytraps or Trojan horses among that vast sea of computational power.

With the engine room reasonably secure, the two Jedi headed towards the control ball, their Lightsabers now on as the Lumos ball flickered above them under Ahsoka's guidance.

This ended abruptly as blaster fire came towards them.

For a moment, Ahsoka almost froze, but then her training came in, and she raised her lightsaber, the Force singing through her as she anticipated where the bolt came from. Ahsoka's Force Precognition wasn't good enough yet to bounce them straight back into the attackers, but the young Togruta could at least get her lightsaber in the way of the bolts coming toward her.

Harry was more than good enough to do that. From beyond Ahsoka's light, the sound of metal exploding under plasma fire came as his lightsaber flicked in a circle, battering several plasma bolts back the way they had come. He then slid a few steps forward, and Ahsoka gasped as she felt their connection rising to an entirely new level. "With me, my padawan," Harry said, his voice an ocean of control, and Ahsoka found herself grinning as she hefted her green lightsaber in both hands, slipping into the first stance of Shien next to Harry.

With both of them using this defensive style, which was designed to engage blaster wielding enemies and bounce their plasma bolts back, the pair moved down the corridor towards their attackers. Behind their twirling, dancing lightsabers and the sharp sound of plasma meeting plasma, the blaster fire coming their way became heavier. "Can you make your light brighter, Ahsoka?" Harry asked conversationally.

"Er, probably not while I'm doing this, Master," Ahsoka answered, her voice coming out a bit ragged. Moving her limbs this quickly was swiftly taking a toll. *Good grief, no wonder our training emphasizes speed and endurance!*

"Very well, cancel your light then." Ahsoka did so, but before she could wonder, Harry created his own, tossing it into the air ahead of them. The bright illumination was much bigger than her own, filling the corridor ahead of them.

And as it did, the Jedi saw they were facing what looked like a full company of B-2 battle droids. The droids reacted quickly, moving to either side of the corridor to allow two droidekas to roll forward, blasting away every time they paused, their shields flaring into life as they came closer.

"Um, Master?" Ahsoka muttered even as she successfully bounced a plasma bolt back into a B-2's birdlike head. "How exactly..."

But before she could even finish the question, their connection flared with the answer. A brief spurt of panic went through Ahsoka for a second at the amount of trust that Harry was about to put in her. But that spurt of panic didn't have enough time to find purchase in her mind, and Ahsoka took a step forward, conjuring up her Force Shield as Harry concentrated.

Her shield wavered under the fire, but then Harry's hand rose, and both droidekas were picked up off of the floor via the Force then hurled into each other and around at the other droids, smashing more than a dozen off their feet and even destroying a few before the shields failed under repeated physical impacts and the droidekas themselves were smashed to pieces.

"Well done, Ahsoka!" Harry said, as he moved around her again, his Lightsaber up and battering aside some more blaster bolts. "Very well done indeed. Now, conserve your strength."

At that, Ahsoka let her shield fail, and her lightsaber was up again, battering the bolts back the way they had come.

Despite Harry's efforts with the droidekas, there were still numerous droids ahead of them on their feet and firing, or at least firing. One droid Ahsoka saw was down on his knees, buried under two other droids that had been knocked off their feet by the impromptu battering rams of the droidekas. But it was still trying to fire in their general direction.

Harry led the way forward, with Ahsoka beside him protecting his offhand side, as having destroyed the two droidekas, he limited himself to just his lightsaber and Force Precognition. *This is a good, almost controlled environment, perfect for giving Ahsoka some combat experience.*

However, this almost instantly backfired as the Force blared at him in warning. "Ahsoka, watch out!"

A bare instant after he started speaking, a boobytrap set against one wall of the corridor went off, spraying out shrapnel towards the two Jedi.

The scream of the Force shouting at her in danger had Ahsoka already twisting her head in that direction, but she froze, staring at the sheer number of metal ball bearings coming towards her too fast for her to dodge or even shield herself against.

But then Harry grabbed her shoulder, and they were suddenly standing somewhere else; When she regained her bearings and fought down a urge to hurl, Ahsoka realized they were several hundred feet back down the corridor where they'd been coming from.

The droids did not respond well to this moment of impossibility. "Error, error! Have our electronic rangefinders gone wrong? The targets were here, but then they are! This is against the laws of physics!"

"But not against the laws of the Force," Harry said with a sigh, looking down at his now severely shaken and almost out of it padawan even as he threw up a shield between them and the enemy. *Damn it, Harry, that was the most stupidly arrogant thing you could ever have thought: no combat zone is controlled!* With that, Harry reached out his free hand touching the young Togrutan on the shoulder, shaking her lightly. "Ahsoka, come back to me."

That seemed to shock her, and Ahsoka stood back, but Harry noticed that her earlier growing confidence had been snuffed out like a candle, and he winced. *Is this what I would've been like if I hadn't had all the previous experiences to fall back on when the Bando Gora attacked the Explorer?* Harry felt he probably would have been. Indeed, he would probably have been far worse given the difference in their ages.

As he watched, Ahsoka slowly started to regain her mental footing. She was still shaky, and Harry could tell that her connection to the Force was somewhat tenuous.

Enough of this, Harry thought grimly. "Can you create a Force Shield?"

Hesitantly Ahsoka nodded, then gestured. At first, the shield was a small, weak thing, but Ahsoka gritted her teeth and, deactivating her lightsaber, used both hands to gesture. This wasn't really needed, but it did help her concentrate, and a second later, a more powerful Force Shield appeared in front of them.

"Good work," Harry praised, then concentrating for a brief moment, he held up a hand and gestured down the corridor. The bits and pieces of shattered droids and the flechettes from the boobytrapped lifted into the air, and then, with another gesture, he pulled them back towards him and Ahsoka, who was maintaining a Force Shield in front of him.

With another gesture, Harry sent all of the trash through the corridor like so much shrapnel, just like the trap would've done to Ahsoka if not for Harry's fast thinking. The remaining droids were shredded in turn, and Harry led Ahsoka down the mangled hallway, ready for more trouble.

Two of the droids were still in enough of a piece to be able to raise their blasters, and one of them reached forward for Harry, mumbling out something in its flat, robotic voice. "Destroy intruders, destroy intruders." Shaking his head, Harry cut off the droids head with a single swipe of his Lightsaber, as Ahsoka did the same to two more.

"Well done for your first battle, my padawan." Harry added a smile to his words of encouragement, but Ahsoka simply nodded her head, and Harry could tell that she was starting to shake now that the battle was over. After all, there was a big difference between combat

training and real combat, and Ahsoka also knew she would have died just then if not for Harry. With a sigh, Harry looped an arm around her shoulders, pulling the shorter girl into a hug, even as he directed them down the corridor.

Ahsoka clung to Harry's side, her whole body shaking. This slowed their progress somewhat, but Harry did not mind at all. *"Well, everything is just bloody magnificent here, as my mother would say,"* he sent to Aayla down their link, his mental tone both sardonic and self-castigating as he knew she had seen the battle through his eyes. *"How are you doing?"*

On another Lucrehulk, Aayla was actually having a somewhat easier time of it. For one thing, she had come aboard with two Green Jedi. Furthermore, the ambush came sooner, although they had boarded the ship later than Harry and Ahsoka. This ambush was set up directly in front of the engine room rather than in the corridor leading to the control section.

Initially, the droids pulled back, making it so that the Jedi had to come to them. Then, when the Jedi came out of the corridor, the wider area allowed the droids to fire at the three Jedi from all sides. Further, they were equipped with bollards, large metal portions of the flooring that had risen to give them some cover from return fire.

But the Force Shield of the Jedi absorbed their bolts, and now, Aayla moved to deal with the ones directly in front and to the sides of them. She concentrated for a brief then reached out with the Force, tearing at the hallway's planking. There a water pipe came up, the water within a bare trickle. But that was enough. *Oh yes, much faster than creating a similar amount of water out of the air, especially on a ship.*

Reaching forward with the Force once more, Aayla took control of the water throughout the pipe. An instant later, what had been a bare trickle became a battering ram of water rushing out of the pipe and into the droids in front of Aayla and her companions. Holding it under her power, Aayla began to move the water around the room, picking up the droids as it went.

And these B-2 droids were not rated to be exposed to water. Even a glancing blow was enough to short-circuit several of them, electricity sparking through the water for a second as the water smashed more of them to pieces.

This left only the ones on the two remaining levels facing them, firing at them from all across a one-hundred and sixty-degree angle above the Jedi's own position. But at her shout, the Jedi now used the Force Shields to close. *"We still need to clear the engine room and the control section swiftly, I am concerned that there might be something on a timer from what the Force is telling me,"* Aayla said as she turned in that direction.

As her two Jedi companions finished off the droids, the Twi'lek raced into the engine room, and like Harry, began to shine her datapad around, allowing the engineers on the shuttle to look around with her. As she also reached out to the Force, needing more specific guidance.

Finding one control panel that looked out of place, Aayla realized it was not actually a control panel but a datapad connected to the side of one, underneath which a battery pack had been rigged to a plasma drill. With the engineers walking her through the process, Aayla quickly disarmed the trap, which had been intended to blast through the main generator's cowling, with disastrous results.

After the trap was disarmed, Aayla made a very slow perusal of the rest of the engine room, but she didn't find any further traps. Nor, astonishingly, did she find any on the bridge either.

For his part, Harry did find several more traps along the way to the bridge of the ship he was exploring, and another booby-trap was set directly underneath the captain's chair. Eventually, they were all disarmed, and he quickly called the engineering teams up to join them, waiting until they cleared the engine room of any remaining issues before coming up to replace the pre-existing operating system with the one they had copied over from the Tyrant's Bane.

"How much do you want to wager that there will be another trap in the operating system that this will supersede?" Harry asked, looking over at Ahsoka.

She shook her head, letting a wan smile appear, but she didn't move from his side, standing so close she could reach out and grab him at a second's notice like he was a lifeline Ahsoka was leery of letting go even now that her shakes had subsided. "I don't have any money to wager with, Master. And even if I was willing to bet something like more exercises or something like that, I wouldn't gamble on such a silly thing. How would we know, after all?"

Chuckling, Harry once more put an arm around her shoulders, sensing that she needed it. And Ahsoka leaned into his side, still trying to push past her first combat experience.

Thankfully, Harry was correct in that bringing over a copy of the Tyrant's Bane's operating system would supersede any Trojan horse-like traps left in the ships' programming. The Munificent class ships were going to be an issue though, considering their system would be an entirely different one from the Lucrehulk, and they didn't have a copy of that one.

But, they did have the prisoners. Prisoners who at the very least had officers among them who had gone against the conditions of their surrender.

"Terrorists could be summarily executed, you know," said Capt. Harrington, scowling angrily. Harry and Aayla had decided to bring her and the other officers of the Bane in on this conference, wondering what their thoughts on it would be. The final decision would be his and Aayla's alone, but Harry wanted to know what everyone else was thinking.

The various regular officers took grim about it, wanting a much stricter punishments than the Jedi. "They gave their word that they would surrender without leaving any traps

behind. Removing the operating system, junking portions of the engine room? That could have been explained away as a last ditch attempt to slow our turning those ships around under our colors. But leaving traps to kill our people, that's a deliberate act of malice, an attempt to kill our people after they've surrendered, and it can't be born. They need to be punished," Rafael agreed.

"But we would only be punishing them," said one of the others, the Green Jedi who handled communications shaking his head. "It's not like we're going to be letting any of these people go, after all. There is no way anyone else will think they can take advantage of our kindness or that we're not strong enough to enforce our decisions after a battle. I say we just do nothing."

"No. You forget we need to know if there are any other traps, especially in the operating systems of those Munificent class ships before we try to move them. Even with the slave system, we would still be relying on their engines, if nothing else."

"How long would it take to power up the existing systems and go through the various files? I confess that I know little about computer programming," Confessed a female Nautolan, named Arjen Larima. She was a Jedi Knight from the Temple whom Yoda had recommended to stay aboard the Bane and join Harry's command team. Aayla had spent some time with her, and found her quick and easy-going, and had learned she was one of the top fifty best starfighter pilots in the Order, although her humble air showed not even a hint of that fact.

"Far more than we are willing to spend for certain. You're talking about nearly a week of twenty-hour workdays for every slicer we have aboard, and even then, we might miss something." This was said by Orel, the young padawan from Corellia, who was the son of a slicer clan. He had been brought into this discussion for his expertise on this topic.

One of the Verpine Sass, spoke then, adding his voice to the young Jedi. "We could perhaps discover something in the operating system in the bridge isolating it from the rest of the ship's systems, but any issue, any missing bit of data or corrupted file in the engine's operating programs would spell disaster. And worse, most of our slicers are of my people. We would not be able to stop ourselves from attempting to correct the programming, making it better and more efficient, as we went along."

"If the OS has been corrupted, is there any way we can take it back to factory settings or something?" Aayla interjected.

Before she was finished speaking, the engineers, and indeed a lot of the others, were shaking their heads. "No chance. In the Republic, that kind of thing can only be done by special codes given out to a spaceport by the ship's captains to work on the ship. In times of war, I doubt even captains have access to those codes. Too easy to slip in malware," the Verpine replied, young Orel's head bobbing in agreement almost comically quickly.

"So we need to make certain that the Munificent captains understand what will happen to them if more traps are found. Which means threatening them somehow," Harry sighed.

"As terrorists, you should summarily execute the officers of those two Lucrehulk ships. It would get the message across in no uncertain terms," Harrington repeated her earlier statement, still extremely angry about what she saw as a betrayal of the code of war.

"No," Yoda intoned, smacking his gimer stick down on the table hard. "Jedi are we, teachers, judges, law officers, warriors, hrhrhrhm. Executioners, we are not. A law there is not to say prisoners must not lie."

"I rather think there might be," Ahsoka sent to Harry silently even as she nodded agreement with Yoda. "You'd probably have to go back to the new Sith wars to find, though. And right now, I agree with Master Yoda and the others, Harry. We can't execute any of those prisoners. If we do that for so little reason, we compromise our personal sense of right and wrong for no real reason but vengeance for what might have happened. Not even pragmatism or to send a message, just revenge."

"Then how about this..." Harry mused, putting his hands together as he sent a burst of wordless agreement and understanding to his lover. "We instead tell them what has happened, and then tell them what it means for them. There will be no immediate executions or anything of that nature, but that doesn't mean we have to treat them as nicely as we would be doing otherwise. Instead of prisoners of war, they will be terrorists, losing all of their rights and privileges to be freed back to their families after the war or have those families know what happened to them now. Instead, hard labor is going to be their fate."

"Agreed. Harsh it is, but a good idea."

Harrington and Rafael both looked a little annoyed but nodded acquiescence, along with the other non-Jedi officers. It wasn't as uncompromising as they had hoped, but it might get them what they wanted right now. "Aayla?"

Aayla was easily the best of the two of them in spotting both liars and innocents. "Got it," Aayla replied with a nod.

Soon, Aayla was boarding one of the shuttles designated as prisoner transports and holding areas. The prisoners would not be allowed off of those ships at all until they arrived at their destinations. Food would be delivered to them by a series of Jedi, all of whom could use Force Shield to stop any sudden rush. *Not*, Aayla reflected, *that it was likely to occur*. Even from outside the shuttles, she sensed the prisoners were still in some shock at how the battle had gone, the Lucrehulk crews especially. They had come into this fight believing that their ships were kings of the space-ways, only to be destroyed in a one-sided slaughter.

The Bane had numerous shuttles of various sizes, and all of the large cargo haulers had been pressed into service as prisoner containers. Of course, even that would not have been possible except for the fact that for all their size, most Lucrehulks had less than four-hundred living crewmen aboard them. The rest of the crew was made up of droids most of the time. The Munificent class had more living crew despite being less than a tenth of the cost.

Now those shuttles were linked together in a single local area network, as Aayla stood at the entrance, the landing bay door closing shut behind her. In front of her, the crew of the Lucrehulk that Harry had boarded were arrayed in front of her, sitting in various chairs.

The captain looked up at the Rutian Twi'lek angrily, and for a moment, he seemed about to leer, but the sight of the lightsaber at her side stopped that. He looked away, then muttered, "So, are you here to tell us when we can move to better accommodations."

Aayla allowed a brief smile to appear on her face but didn't reply. Instead, she made a point of looking around the area once more, making eye contact with each prisoner in turn. Then she spoke. "May I have your attention, please?" Once all of them were looking at her, she removed a simple communicator from her belt. It was also linked to the shuttle's local network so that all the other shuttles would hear her words.

"When one is defeated in combat and offered terms of surrender, it is assumed that those who surrender will honor that agreement. If they do not, there must be consequences. The crew of the Autocrat failed to live up to this simple bargain. The crew of the *Recalcitrant* did not live up to this simple bargain. On both ships, we ran into both boobytraps and activated security droids."

Aayla let those words hover in the air for a brief second before pressing on. "This was not a military action. There was no way you could have reclaimed those ships, and if you had wanted to deny us access to them, you could have had bombs destroy their engines. This was an act of malice, intended to kill our survey teams, plain and simple. And as I said, this act broke the agreement that led to your surrender. As such, you are no longer soldiers in the eyes of the GDL. Rather, you are terrorists. You have lost all rights as prisoners of war. You will no longer have our promise to send you back to your families at the end of hostilities, nor will they ever hear about your fate."

That caused some raucous shouting from the crews, but the captain kept on glaring, although Aayla could sense the Neimoidian's fear as she continued on in the soft, almost sad tone. "Further, we are under no obligation to treat you fairly as we would prisoners of war. Your rations will be cut to half of what they would have been before. And moreover, instead of being kept in an isolated POW camp, you will be remitted entirely to hard labor in the mines of various planets. You are prisoners for life and will be put to hard labor for as long as you each last."

"You can't do this! You're a Jedi, you're supposed to be about..." the captain began.

"As a Jedi, I uphold law and order through the use of the Force. But the Force has nothing to do with this decision. You gave us your word," Aayla's voice suddenly became a booming thunder as she used the Force to override the shouts of the crew in front of her. "Your officers decided to break that word. You crewmen went along with things rather than informing us. The outcome of this is on your heads! I hate this," she admitted, her voice now back to its previous sad but firm tone. "I hate this, but when you break your agreement, surely there must be consequences? As a Neimoidian, a Trade Federation hull captain, you must know that better than anyone. Honestly, what were you expecting to happen?"

Now the Neimoidian captain couldn't contain himself anymore, snarling out, "We expected you to act like a Jedi..." He stopped and stared at Aayla, his face closing down as he tried to stop the words from getting out.

Aayla smirked back. "A pushover? Yes, perhaps in times of peace, there would not have been any repercussions for you beyond a longer sentence. This is not a time of peace, this is a time of war. The Confederacy, for no reason I can see, has decided to make war upon not only the Republic, with which it has an honest set of grievances but with the planets of the GDL, who have removed themselves from the Republic."

"You call turning our own planets against us not a grievance!"

"Those planets were not being well-served by their connection to the Trade Federation or the other powers that have since created the Confederacy of Independent Systems. They joined the GDL of their own free will, which cannot be said for many of them when given the... 'opportunity' to originally join those powers. But I am not here to get into a debate on this issue with you." Aayla's smirk widened. "If I was, I would mention the fact your CIS is being led by a Sith. Instead, I am here to simply tell you what is going to happen. What your actions have caused."

"What about if we didn't know what was going on?" asked a random crewman, a human man at middle-ages or worse.

"Did you?" Aayla asked back, and the crewmen shook his head. "Say it aloud, please," Aayla ordered, looking at him and then around at the others. As they did, Aayla felt the truth of their words through the Force, and she slowly nodded. "...You are telling the truth. But you still served on the ships which were boobytrapped, so there will be penalties for that. I believe that the half ration edict will stand for all of you, but only those involved in the planting and creating the traps will be treated as terrorists. I believe I am being more than fair in this."

The crewmen, happy to be let off the hard labor, all nodded rapidly while the captain of the former Confederacy battleship shouted out, "Traitors!"

Aayla turned to him, shaking her head in amusement. "Coming from one who broke his own word that term loses any kind of impact."

Aayla went over to the next shuttle, the one that contained the crews of the other Lucrehulks they had captured, and stepped up words into it, looking around. They had heard her dealing with the Recalcitrant's crew, and now all of them looked at her with both fear and a desire to exonerate themselves. "Now, does anyone have anything they want to say to me?"

There was a vast clamor, but here, most of the engineering room's crew had known about the traps, and Aayla was able to see through their attempt to lie easily. They hadn't stopped it from happening, and a few of them had even helped their officers rig up the booby-traps. So there weren't as many from the Recalcitrant who could be separated from those who would be turned into veritable slaves rather than POWs.

By the time Aayla had walked into the first of the shuttles that held a Munificent class ship's crew, they had been brought to a boil rather nicely. She stepped forward and then debated for an instant whether or not to repeat her words from the previous shuttle. Then she decided it was pointless and got right down to business. "We have not yet boarded the Munificent-class ships, deciding logically to start with the largest of our prizes first. But with your ships, we don't have an operating system that will bypass any bugs or malware left in your ships. Therefore any booby-traps there will be much more dangerous. So I'm going to ask this once of each of your crews. If you do not answer me and we discover traps in place, you will not get a second chance, and I will not ask whether or not you were involved in the decision. Instead, you will all hang together."

The Rutian Jedi let those words hang like a guillotine in the air for a moment and then continued on softly, "Now, may I ask if we will find any such traps?"

Even as their captain, a Muun, began to shout at them to not believe her words, that Aayla was a Jedi, and the Jedi would never go through with sentencing someone to death like that, the rest of the crew began to shout about what they knew had been put on their ship in various ways.

Eventually, Aayla learned about a few Trojan programs left on one of the ships, and with no way to remove them quickly, it was decided to simply destroy the ship entirely. The Tyrant's Bane blew it into pieces while the other two were cleared by engineering techs and other Jedi, under Wulo and Aayla's command.

Meanwhile, on the ships that had already been cleared, teams continued to work. One group went over the damage which had been done during the battle. Another was working on restarting the ships and placing the slave-system programs on the engines and bridge.

Meanwhile, the remaining Vultures, the two Archer frigates and the last small shuttle grabbed bits of debris to bring back to the Tyrant's Bane. The ship would need those resources to convert and build more vultures. That wouldn't be a fast process. Building the Vultures themselves would be relatively quick, but Harry had decided that all of the Vultures on board the Bane were to receive the same treatment that so few had gotten before: reinforced armor

and expanded concussion missile magazines. That would slow things down considerably since it was easier to add some of those runic arrays during the construction process. But the upside was too much to ignore.

However, Harry was not involved with any of that. He had extremely good people in each of those jobs and trusted them implicitly to do them far better than he could. For himself, Harry had a semi-twitchy, extremely demoralized padawan to deal with.

Knocking on the hatch leading into Ahsoka's room, Harry was about to speak, but Ahsoka's voice reached him before he could. "I know you're there, Master, and I know what you want to say. That doesn't change the truth, though. I nearly got us both killed!"

Ah, instead of still dealing with fear from her brush with death, Ahsoka seems to be in full-on teenage pout mode at what she sees as her shortcomings. Delightful, truly. Thank goodness I never went through a stage like this.

As Harry thought that, on Ruusan, Lily and Fay both burst into laughter for no apparent reason.

Still, Harry kept his tone mild and calm as he replied to the hatch in front of him. "No, you didn't. At no point on that ship were we actually in any danger. I, I wanted you to face your first combat mission in a controlled environment, and that's what we did. It was my mistake, Ahsoka, I forgot the first rule of battle: no plan survives contact with the enemy. No battlefield is a controlled environment. I regret that, but I cannot change it."

"So it really was another test? That doesn't make me feel any better!"

"Is talking to a wall helping, or could we actually talk face-to-face for a moment?" Harry returned.

For a moment, Harry was afraid that Ahsoka would continue to deal with her concerns and fears independently. While for most padawans her age, this would have been acceptable, Ahsoka still lacked the necessary bedrock of self-belief and control that having spent a few years with a Master in a one on one learning environment would allow. Further, Ahsoka was even more emotional than most younglings were. Thus Ahsoka could not be allowed to just deal with this on her own. The feelings of inadequacy and perhaps fear for her own life would continue to build on themselves and impact her connection with the Force. Once that started, the Force would reverberate those emotions back on themselves, making controlling those emotions harder and harder.

Thankfully, Harry's previous work with her, and Ahsoka's earlier training, meant that Ahsoka was fully aware of all this. So, where a regular teen would have been unwilling to respond to Harry's gentle cajoling, Ahsoka did. She opened the door, shrugging her shoulders sheepishly at him. "Sorry, Master. I realize I'm being childish about this. Kriff, I know I'm being

as bad as a youngling about this! But that was my first mission! I wanted to do well like you did."

"Albeit accidentally in my case," Harry laughed, causing Ahsoka to snicker as she recalled the story he had told her, and Harry reached over to stroke her montrals. "I think I know what the real problem here is, and it has does have something to do with comparing yourself to others."

Ahsoka flinched a little, looking away, and Harry sighed. "Come with me, my padawan. I think it's time to take a walk."

Blinking, Ahsoka cocked her head, wondering about the odd emphasis on the word walk that Harry had added there. Then her eyes widened as Harry went on. "I do believe you have been given a spacesuit, yes?"

Moments later, Ahsoka was wondering about her Master's sanity. The both of them had changed into spacesuits, skintight suits that enclosed them from foot to finger. Her hands were covered with a well-fitting, highly dexterous glove, while their boots were heavy and hard to move in, thanks to the heavy magnets that made up much of their bulk.

And yet... "Master, as far as I know, Force users like us still need to breathe." Ahsoka muttered as they stood in front of the energy shield, keeping in the hangar bay's air from space beyond.

Harry smiled and gently tapped her on the forehead. She blinked as she felt the Force move around her, then gasped as a bubble of some kind grew around her head. A moment later, Harry was covered in a similar bubble. He smirked at her, gesturing for her to touch the button on her belt, which would start the suit's backpack cycling air up into the helmet. "My mother called this the bubblehead technique. It's a little childish in terms of the name, but it works very well. It works against gasses, volatile or otherwise, and can keep in the air to breathe even in space. It was going to be the next one of my own techniques that I would be teaching you anyway, so we will go over it tomorrow. But for now you get will at least get to see a use of it."

Nodding, Ahsoka raised a gauntleted hand to gently touch the surface of the bubble, feeling it give like a bubble that would occasionally appear in the baths or something similar if you added too much soap. "That's honestly kind of cool."

"Well, thank you, I'll be sure to pass that on to Mum when I see her," Harry replied dryly, and then took a step outside. "But come on." his voice reverberated through the communicator that they both wore in their collars as part of their suits, and Ahsoka chuckled, moving after him. The first moment of taking a step outside the hanger bay as the two of them walked over and around the edge of the hangar bay was disconcerting. Up became sideways as the magnets in their feet dragged them around, and Ahsoka had a moment of vertigo.

But Harry waited for her for a moment and then led the way out onto the ship. After a rather long and silent walk, they eventually wound up on the aft end of the ship near where the starboard half-C shape began. There, as Harry moved around a turbolaser battery, Ahsoka realized she had not been told a rather important piece of information. "Master, how long do these bubbles last?"

"Under the current circumstances, around three and a half hours," Harry replied. "Remember, your own spacesuit is creating the air that is being breathed. I just replaced the helmet with my own version. I feel that the bubblehead charm allows us to better feel the world around us in some fashion. And you did complain about the effect of helmets."

Nodding in agreement, Ahsoka continued to walk, looking around at the ship's hull in interest. There wasn't even any damage from the recent battle. And that brought home again how one-sided the conflict had been.

A few minutes after that, Harry indicated they should sit. He sat on a normal-sized turbolaser battery, nonchalantly crossing his legs, in a way that caused Ahsoka to actually giggle for a second.

"As I said inside, I think that your problem is still built around a false assumption: that you need to compare yourself to others to gauge your own progress. Not so much in your body any longer," Harry teased, and Ahsoka had the good grace to look embarrassed, remembering how Harry and Ahsoka had between them destroyed that idea, as well as shattering her ego about her Lightsaber skills and her growing fears about why she had been passed over so often. "But in terms of worth. You know your fellow padawans your own age have been in the field for several years. You know they have survived, perhaps even thrived in combat situations, and at your first one..."

"I froze up!" Ahsoka interrupted angrily, the Force around her flaring with her anger. "I know that Master, you don't have to..." she paused as she looked at into Harry's face, the understanding look there, visible in a few of the ship's running lights nearby, and her anger flickered out. "I suppose you're right, Master. Perhaps I am, but isn't that what we're supposed to do?"

"Yes and no. As people, we compare ourselves to one another to create... call it our views of the world. But as a Jedi, that is not exactly the correct way of going about it. And 'worth' is a very slippery concept. At one time, I was concerned about something much the same thing. I was called a freak, an unnatural thing, a burden. But those terms never really applied to me. Instead, I was simply different. Do you remember what I said to you when you were showing me your Force techniques?"

When Ahsoka didn't reply, he went on. "I only asked you to do your best..."

"Like I did earlier!? If I was on my own, I might have been killed. How does that make me good Jedi material?" Ahsoka again interrupted, in no mood to let her concerns be so easily swept aside.

"You are still young yet," Harry soothed, remembering some of his own conversations with his Master Fay and drawing on conversations that Aayla had had when she was younger. But in both of their cases, they had a Master nearby to help them. Master Vos had been waiting in the wings since they had met him, even before Harry had met Master Fay, for Aayla. And Master Fay had built a connection with Harry overtime on the Explorer. He'd also had his mother.

Ahsoka had no such individual. Even Shaak Ti and Plo Koon had been unable to be there in the past few years. All she'd had were the regular teachers and trainers. There was a reason why most padawans were chosen during their preteen years. It was very rare to see a padawan as old as Ahsoka chosen as a padawan rather than being sent to the Agri-corps as a matter of course.

"I might be young, but you said it yourself! All of those other padawans have so much more combat experience than me because they weren't passed over as I was. Maybe, there really is a reason for that, above and beyond my issues with controlling my emotions."

"They were chosen before you, but are those other padawans you?"

Ahsoka huffed, shaking her head. "Of course not, but why should that matter?"

Harry smiled, having led Ahsoka to where he had hoped. This was why he had come out because, for symbolism, you couldn't do much better than the darkness of space. "Tell me, padawan, what do you sense around us?"

Blinking at the apparent non sequitur, Ahsoka narrowed her eyes at Harry, thinking this was some kind of trick, but then she sighed and looked around her. "Cold Master," the young Togrutan answered tartly, but as Harry crossed his arms and just looked back at her, Ahsoka sighed, then stretched out her Force senses into the space around them. "Cold, space, blackness, a yawning void. And within the ship, I can sense the other Jedi and the other crewmen..."

"Good. But..." Harry toggled his communicator until he was connected to the bridge. When he was, he asked them to turn off the ship's running lights. However, as he was about to disconnect, Aayla reached out to him. Having turned over examining their prizes entirely to Wulo and Arjen, Aayla had returned, and understanding what Harry was up to, wanted to use this moment on a wider scale.

"*Are you sure that's necessary?*" Harry sent back, somewhat bemused by Aayla's plan as she explained it to him. "*I haven't gotten any sense of the resentment you're talking about.*"

"You haven't because you don't spend much time with the Agri-corps folk. You've spoken to them as a large group, and you've spoken to the masters. But I've spoken to the former younglings and padawan-aged folk who were sent to the Agricultural corps. Wulo's done a decent job of removing a lot of their simmering annoyance, and the Masters are old hands at directing it, but they still see themselves as outsiders to the Order, they think they have been discarded. This, what you're talking about, can be a sign of things to come."

Understanding his love's point, Harry conceded and turned back to Ahsoka as the lights in this sector of the hull went out. "What else do you see?"

Ahsoka waited for a second so that her eyes could adjust to the sudden darkness, then stared up and up further still at the backdrop of stars all around her. And looking at them, Ahsoka felt a vague echo of those stars, the billions of lives that relied on each of those distant motes of light. It was as if the full weight of the Unifying Force flowed into her all at once, and it was all Ahsoka could do to not gasp. "Hundreds," she whispered, "thousands of distant stars."

"Yes, as an analogy, I think that works quite well."

Once more, Ahsoka found herself blinking at her Master, and Harry chuckled. "Do all those stars look the same?"

Ahsoka knew this was a trap, and so she shook her head. "Oh, from here they all look the same. But we are so far away. Closer up, most of them will be different."

"Good. Yes, every star is different. Even stars in the same solar life-cycle will be different." Harry paused, waiting.

For a few seconds, Ahsoka didn't understand, then she finally realized what he was getting at. "Just like all people are different, all Jedi must be different," she eventually admitted.

"Exactly," Harry replied, then he looked away from her, leaning back almost as if he was taking his ease against the turbolaser battery behind him, the smaller magnets on his back keeping him there. "One way or another, Ahsoka, the Jedi order will change because of this war. It will change because of what has been going on before, the allowance of physical affection, and Clan Saa techniques. What won't change won't grow, what won't grow will stagnate, that is as true for the Order and the Republic as a whole as it is for anything alive. The Force demands we change even when itself is eternal."

Then Harry was looking back at Ahsoka, and she nearly twitched backward at the weight behind Harry's gaze on her. "The Force binds us all together, all those little dots out there. And each light does the same job regardless of its size and its own abilities. Can you tell me what that job is?"

For a moment, Ahsoka struggled with the analogy, then she pared it down a bit, finally nodding. "To," she paused again, feeling somewhat foolish. "To um, to light the way?" She guessed.

"Yes," Harry said simply. "While we Jedi don't lead often, we need to light the way. We can do so by example, by giving our advice, by defending others or just helping them along. But regardless of how we do it, a Jedi's job pushed back the darkness. Each light is different, and each is worthy in its own right, regardless of individual strength. No matter how strong the Dark Side becomes, we can shine bright enough to push it back together."

He strode forward as he finished speaking, and Ahsoka's eyes widened, not having realized that Harry had stood up at some point during his little speech, his words lulling her almost into a meditation stance of her own. He gently reached out both hands, gripping the young Togrutan's slim shoulders with both of his hands.

And when he spoke, Harry's next words struck her like a thunderbolt. "Whatever you might have thought, whatever doubts you might have had or have been dealing with since the fight, know this. You are worthy of being my padawan. You will make a difference as you will it and as the Force allows. Banish your fears, banish your feeling of self-doubt and go forward with the rest of the Order and me behind you."

With that, he took a step back and held out a hand, which began to glow with light and for a moment, Ahsoka could barely breathe. Harry's Force power bore down on Ahsoka through their link, pushing down on Ahsoka mentally and physically, somehow emulating the sense of facing death again, as she had earlier that day.

It was with a tremendous amount of willpower that Ahsoka finally stood. Pushing against the feeling with her Force powers, and as the feeling receded, she gasped for air, grinning up at him. The effort had cost her, but it also helped her to push through the last of her doubt and fears, which had been so rekindled by her near-death experience.

"What is your name?" Harry questioned, and again, his power bore down onto her like a tidal wave. But Ahsoka was ready for it this time, and she grinned in the face of the Harry's Force presence, pushing back with all of her own strength. And, although Ahsoka was no Anakin, the young Togrutan was quite strong. It was why, despite her inability to do away with her emotions, her self-control issues and the growing chip on her shoulder. The way she hid those fears, the Order had never quite given up on her.

Well, that, and Harry felt that Yoda had been simply waiting for Harry to be ready to take Ahsoka on. *That old man certainly knows a lot of tricks*, Harry thought, watching with a sense of accomplishment as Ahsoka pushed through his Force power. Then, she surprised him, as Ahsoka's entire body began to glow with the same Illumination technique they had used earlier on the enemy Lucrehulk. But unlike those lights, which had been somewhat diffuse,

Ahsoka now blazed as she shouted her name. "My name is Ahsoka Tano! I am a Jedi, and I will shine!"

As the reverberations of the shout wound through the Force and the light around Ahsoka began to fade, she seemed to droop a little, the effect of using the Force in such a way having exhausted her. Harry was quickly at her side, putting an arm around her waist and starting to take her back the way they had come. "I do not doubt it," he said softly, as he began to gently probe Ahsoka with the Force, making sure she hadn't hurt herself, and, while not as directly dangerous but still important, that Ahsoka had not breached the defenses that he and Aayla had in place between him, Aayla, and Ahsoka.

To his relief, it appeared as if the damage done was minor and easily repaired. Harry still didn't like how close the nebula he pictured Ahsoka's mind as in the Force was so to those defenses. But occasionally shoring them up was a small price to pay so that Ahsoka didn't go through another moment as she had that night.

As they entered the hanger bay, Harry paused. "My word, Aayla, I didn't expect this..."

Hearing that murmur, Ahsoka looked up wearily, then gasped as around the hanger bay stood several thousand of the Agri-corps Force users. And while many were not using the Bubblehead technique, all of them were using the Illumination technique. The hangar bay's normal lights had been turned off, and the lights from the Jedi lit the area up, and like the distant stars, all were subtly different, creating a cornucopia of light. And now, looking at them, Harry couldn't feel any of the buried annoyance, resentment or envy he had feared after Aayla had brought his attention to them. Instead, all of them, young and old alike, radiated a sense of purpose and brotherhood, and Harry smiled. *"You were right again, my love."*

"Aren't I always," Aayla shot back, beaming as she moved out from within the group of Jedi.

As he led their way forward, Harry murmured, "You see, my padawan? We are all bound together and stronger for it." To which Ahsoka could only nod.

OOOOOOO

Inside the ship, Yoda smiled, amused by the panoply, but well-pleased by Aayla's little scheme of using Harry's little speech, if such it could be called. It had been a little too theatrical for his tastes, but he could already feel through the Force that it had worked. And looking over at where Wulo's image looked back at him, he could tell that his former padawan could feel it too. *What Wulo started, finished Harry has.*

Although few would admit it, many Jedi younglings sent to the Agri-corps resented the Order for it. They had given years of their own lives, most of them from well before they could walk, in an attempt to become Jedi without any real choice in the matter. And then many failed

simply because of the random nature of who was strong enough in the Force to become Jedi or who could catch the eye of a Master. Others resented the amount of effort they needed to put into what came so naturally to others. Still more resented the fact the Order had rejected them without also allowing them to just leave it entirely.

Now? After more than a year of Wulo's prepping them, and after hearing Harry dealing with Ahsoka? That strained, resentful loyalty had shifted to a firm, steadfast devotion to the Order's goals and to its future.

There were still several who resented the Jedi, those who had been powerful enough but like Ahsoka hadn't been emotionally stable enough or hadn't had the drive necessary to master their Force powers. Those who had been lazy, in other words. But they were now an extremely small minority. A minority that Yoda knew he could trust Master Fay, Lily, and the other teachers to keep a lid on or to change in some fashion.

For now, however, Yoda had to turn his attention back to his own little scheme. A scheme that, in its own way, would have an even larger impact than the victory the Bane had won here. Yet, it had to do with something that Master Yoda did not have all that great a history in. He had to outright lie. Not prevaricate, not obfuscate the truth, not lead other people to discover said truth, something he was very good at. No, this would be an outright deception and one that would propagate itself too, if done correctly. *To do this again, we might not, but now? Control the narrative I can. Only the information I wish, escape it will.*

With that in mind, he moved from where he was meditating in the hydroponics garden to the bridge of the Tyrant's Bane, where Yoda sat for a time, his knees under him as he went over his wording, meditating on if this was, in fact, a good idea, and finally, reached out for the controls that would connect him to the ship's Hypercom.

First, Yoda sent a message to the temple and asked the Jedi on station there to connect him directly to the High Council, encrypting the transmission in such a way that it would be devilishly hard to crack, but eventually it would be because the base code behind the encryption had been used before. *Inform the Council I must, as to this ambush. Sow the seeds this will begin.* As soon as the image of Council room showed up, he began to explain what had happened, ending with, "A spy the CIS must have on Coruscant somewhere. Yet, failed the ambush did, due to the new weapon. Told about it we were, the Switch Code."

Yoda made a point of shaking his head, his ears drooping. *Old I am, but act I still can.* "Worked alarmingly well, it did. A true breakthrough, this could be, but speak more on this I will not."

On the other end of the receiving, Rancisis nodded his head slowly as if he had any idea about what Master Yoda was talking about. Beside him, Master Windu, who had apparently returned to the temple since Yoda had left Coruscant, also nodded his head. "I see, and did it work to its potential, or did it simply..."

"Reach its full potential, the weapon did not. Enough it did. Speak more of this I will not," Yoda repeat.

Rancisis nodded equably. "Of course, of course. We will wait for your next report when you arrive on Serenno."

OOOOOOO

As the Hypercom communication ended, The other two high Council members still present on Coruscant looked between Master Windu and Master Rancisis, their eyes confused. "Secret weapon?" Master Jocasta Nu rolled her eyes, crossing her arms. "And what 'secret weapon' does Master Yoda to speak of that I, as our chief archivist and historian, wouldn't know about? Something from the Potter boy, no doubt."

"Nothing," Master Rancisis answered simply. "He speaks of nothing."

Master Nu opened her mouth, then closed it thoughtfully, while Master Ki Adi Mundi's eyes narrowed. "I see. Quite sneaky of him."

OOOOOOO

Another message was bounced to the GDL on Serenno. A third message was sent to the Republic High command, although that was by far the shortest since they could get more details from the Jedi. Other messages were sent to several other people and groups known to be friendly towards the Jedi around the galaxy. Although worded differently each time, the message was much the same: The Tyrant's Bane had been ambushed, but a single weapon had seemingly turned the enemy against themselves.

Yoda never came out and outright said that, of course. He hinted at that point on a few of them, but not all. He never gave the weapon a name, simply making certain to always talk about it as if it was a single weapon and mentioning how the Tyrant's Bane had come through the battle unscathed. Which, against the number of attackers, implied just as much as the idea of a single weapon destroying an entire fleet.

Each time Yoda sent out a message, it was coded so that it would be eventually intercepted. It would take time and effort, more than enough to convince people that it wasn't meant to found. Each message was hidden under various encryptions, just like his message to the Jedi Temple. It would take some time, a few weeks perhaps, to decode these messages. But, once it did, and coupled with the fact they had been able to take several ships prisoner, their crews captured in their entirety, and not allowing any survivors? That would point to one thing, and one thing only: the Jedi or Harry Potter had come up with a way to turn the droids of the enemy against the Confederacy.

Droids, like slaves they are. Slave owners, they fear the most, they do? Uprisings, hrrhrhrhm, revolts. Secrets so discovered hint at more than just this one battle it will. Hinting at a strategic concern that must be addressed, completely obfuscating the truth of what occurred here it will. Fear this will cause, immense disorder. The Dark Side gain strength it will, but hard to control it will be. Loss of control the Confederacy will need to deal with. A calculated risk, this is, Yoda admitted to himself.

And how the CIS, and the Sith like C'baoth, dealt with this would also prove interesting. And it would also allow the Jedi Order to push for more security on their Hypercom transmissions, enough to perhaps break away entirely from the Senate's own security systems, which they had been forced to use up to this point. *Good, it would be, to be able to communicate without fear.* All in all, Yoda believed the positives outweighed the concerns about what the Sith could do with the strength it would add to the Veil of the Dark Side.

Aayla walked onto the bridge as Yoda was finishing, moving over to the captain's chair. "Expected Harry I did," Yoda intoned, looking at her in amusement. "Normally break things up you do. Harry handle leadership responsibilities he does. Manage people side of things you do."

Aayla laughed. "Harry is a decent enough people person when he wants to be, even if he lacks my Force-assisted empathy. But he was roped into teaching many of the others the bubbleheaded charm thanks to his and Ahsoka's little moment out on the Bane's hull. After that, Ahsoka plans to force Harry to train with her for the rest of the day. She wants to be certain that something like that doesn't happen again. So we'll be training her Force senses almost to the exclusion of everything else on the mental side of things for a time, along with her lightsaber skills."

Aayla frowned a little. "I think that will push back the time when we will be able to actually let Ahsoka off the ship. Like the rest of the younglings, there's no way we want her or anyone else who knows about our space enlarging technique to be captured." She shrugged. "Still, considering where we're going, that won't matter for a bit."

"A good Job, Harry did with young Ahsoka. Better, your idea was, broadcasting it into the ship. Welded the Agri-corps Jedi to our cause, it did," Yoda observed.

Aayla bowed but showed no other sign of enjoyment of his words, which caused Yoda to harrumph in approval. It was the action that should be lauded, not the individual. Shaking his head, Yoda turned to the tactical screen, gesturing to the dots that signified the ships surrounding them. "Do with these what you will?"

"We'll be taking them with us to Serenno. They'll be moved on from there to Corellia, most of them anyway. Harry's decided that we will be taking one of them with us."

Yoda slowly nodded. "A tremendous addition to our forces, another Lucrehulk could be, if modified like the Bane, it was." He then smiled. "Argue with you on this, I will not. Proven

your abilities you already have. Battle meditation you have learned. Life itself, the only teacher left you both have."

Aayla smiled at that, bowed her head once more in thanks for the Grand Master's words, then turned to the rest of the skeleton bridge crew. "Are the captured ships enslaved to ours, and is Wulo and his team back aboard?"

"Slave programs are online, engines check out across the board. All ships are cleared of all boobytraps. Master Wulo is indeed aboard. His group was the last to report readiness," said a Serennoan sitting in front of the communications console.

"I am connected to the other ships. Calculating the differences in our various hyperspace jumps now," A Verpine said from another console, this one the navigator's chair. He would be the one running the hyperspace shift program for the other ships once the Tyrant's Bane's own computers finish the computations.

"I'm still not pleased with the Munificents. We don't know nearly enough about their operating systems, and the idea of trusting the word of our prisoners leaves a bad taste in my mouth," another crewman grumbled. "They could have orders to ram us the moment we come out of hyperspace for all we know. With the shields at full power, that wouldn't do much, but with them at their 'normal' strength, we could be damaged badly."

"I understand your concerns, but we did not try to appeal to our prisoner's sense of honor or fair play," Aayla soothed. "We instead appealed to their self-preservation. I think we can trust them, and I am the empath here, you know."

The men around her all laughed at that, and then waved it off, and another man formally said, "Despite Lieutenant Devries' worries, we are ready to jump, Master Jedi. We simply await your orders."

"Is the course laid in to take us the back way towards Serenno?" Aayla asked equally formally, even as her lips twitched at the need for such.

"We won't be entering any more inhabited systems until we reach Serenno. We might still be spotted. I'm certain that the Galactic Defense League's defenses have pointed out that the CIS needs to start scouting empty systems and, more importantly, the great dark between them," the Verpine warned. "But there's nothing we can do about that unless we spot the ships doing the scouting in question."

"In that case, jump us to hyperspace, Commander," Aayla ordered. Half a minute later, the Tyrant's Bane, fresh off of its first victory in the war, disappeared into hyperspace and from the sight of their various enemies for a time.

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Even as the Tyrant's Bane jumped for hyperspace, Kinman arrived in the first system that the Tyrant's Bane had visited. At first, Kinman didn't believe what his sensors were telling him. But soon after his ship entered Rulan 7's atmosphere, it became obvious. *Either the Jedi have gone to ground or...* Shaking his head, Kinman settled his ship down onto a clearing and then made his way through the woods toward the nearest farm.

Rulan 7 was a community made entirely of Jedi and droids, no one else. Kinman had always thought that ironic considering the plan for the current war and its use of droids. But as he moved through the farm, Kinman's eyes narrowed at how everything was shut down and prepared for abandonment. And as he moved on to the nearest village, nowhere could he see the signs of even a single person still being around. *This is not looking good.*

Hours later, Kinman was back in his ship and using it's Hypercom uplink to send a message to his Lord.

OOOOOOO

On Coruscant, Sidious sat at his desk after a day of meetings only to frown in surprise at the message waiting on his system, hidden under several encryptions. *Kinman has already reported back and has used the Scimitar's Hypercom for it? Not only is that a dangerous thing to do at this point in time, with the Jedi involved in guarding the Uplink Centers as they are. And he could not have gone further than the first Agri-world...* Scowling, wondered what new plot of the Jedi Kinman had found, the Dark Side coiling in him as he fought back a flash of sudden rage. But whatever he might have thought, the reality was much, much worse.

"My Lord, the Agri-world of Rulan 7 has been completely deserted by the Jedi. Not a single Jedi remains on the moon. Everything automated had been turned off save for the Hypercom network. That was destroyed. I thus was forced to use the Scimitar's personal Hypercom uplink to reach you. I am continuing my mission and investigating the other Jedi Agri-colonies, after which I will head to Serenno. I will make a note of further discrepancies but will not attempt to report back until I have discovered everything I can. Yet I felt this discovery was of enough import to take the chance to report in this manner."

Closing the file and erasing it from his computer via a special program designed to remove every trace of a given file, Sidious leaned back, thinking about what this meant, his anger a cold, purposeful thing deep in his belly. Not how it had been accomplished, that was obvious: Harry Potter and the Tyrant's Bane. But what it could mean for himself and the Great Plan deserved some contemplation. Weak or not, the Agri-corps members were still Force-sensitives. And there were still Jedi among them. Less than a hundred perhaps who had enough connection to the Force to be of any use in war, but that was only one area of concern. *Where have they gone, what will they do? And how can I discover more?*

That, last, at least was easy enough: Sidious could beard the Jedi in their den, and perhaps, through adroit questioning, discover more. With that thought, Sidious activated a

program that would show that he was in a meeting for anyone who called or came to his office unannounced and retreated into his sanctum hidden beneath the Chancellor's office. In his throne room, Sidious went over a giant map of the known galaxy, showing the war's current disposition. With a tap of his fingers on the star, the corresponding information would pop up, showing him everything known from either side of the war. This was all thanks to the Hypercom Network still being a semi-autonomous entity and the fact that the Sith played both sides of this war.

It took about fifteen minutes for Sidious to discover a reason to personally meet with the Temple's High Council. The issue was about the ongoing war occurring around Ord Zat, a Mid Rim system home to one of the few full-strength Ord fleets. The system was part of the Lesser Plooroid Cluster, a cluster of stars notorious for breeding pirates, hence the larger fleet presence.

It's commodore – the fleet didn't have anything larger than a single heavy cruiser and thus had not been worthy of someone of an admiral's rank - was one that Sidious had some hope for in the future and who had long since crushed the pirate presence. But if that planet fell, the entire nebulae would become indefensible, and any hope of using it as a staging area for offensive operations later in the war against several nearby Confederacy sectors, including the conquered Ord Mantell, would disappear.

Sidious put it like that to the Jedi council later that day before stating bluntly, "I want that defense led by a Jedi."

The High Council members who were still present in the Temple looked back at him. Chief among them was the Master of the Order Oppo Rancisis, who had not left the temple since the start of the war except to meet with the High Command. He was busy using his Battle Meditation sparingly to send the groups of five Jedi out into the universe where they would do the most good. It wasn't a perfect system, especially since with Sidious' power and the Veil, Sidious could discern where many of those Jedi went and plot against them, but they were indeed making a large difference already, slowing down the Confederacy at certain points and, worryingly, creating an upswell of positive publicity for the Jedi. That had to be combatted, but Sidious had planned for that already.

"Might we ask why you are so adamant on that point?" Agen Kolar asked. "I can understand the military necessity given how many resources the Confederacy was able to capture at Ord Mantell." Being one of the most well-fortified Ord planets in the Mid-Rim, that planet had enough resources to supply a fleet of several hundred capital ships for years, greatly reinforcing the Confederacy's already overwhelming material superiority. "But why does this operation need to be led by a Jedi?"

"Would you not wish to help save four of your own?" The Chancellor asked in turn before chuckling. "I know you Jedi are supposed to put the idea of the greater good and the will

of the Force over your own lives. Still..." Then he shook his head. "But yes, there is another reason for it."

Using his datapad, he showed a series of videos from a security camera. "This video was sent to us from a space station around the Mouncra gas giant, which inhabits a system barely two jumps away from Ord Zat. And this is why I wish a group of Jedi to leave that force."

On the screen was a Zabrak female wielding a lightsaber as she led the assault into the space station. It was a red lightsaber, and the video showed her using a Force blow of such power that it took the doors to the interior of the station's hangar bay, shattering them entirely and sending bits and pieces of steel everywhere, clearing the way for the droids. Another video showed the same Force user fighting two Jedi, one young human man and an older looking female Duro in the middle of a station's market square. As the video continued, the Jedi and Chancellor watched the Zabrak female cut the woman in half while using a Force Shield variant to keep the younger man pinned to the side of a hallway.

Master Rancisis shook his head. "Master Votal and her young padawan. They were assigned to Master Farn's combat team and must have been attacked mid-route."

An instant later, the image cut out, leaving Sidious to shake his head. "I agree. But that was a Sith warrior, a true Sith warrior, not one of the Blanked. Her presence means our enemies think the campaign going on around Ord Zat is important in some fashion too. I have seen reports to show that Master Alice Farn and the remaining members of her combat team are still alive, but with the Confederacy so close to the Ord Zat, I don't know how long the planet can hold out, even with a Jedi Master there, especially one who lacks, to the best of my knowledge, any previous command history. Commodore Grunger is good, but if the Confederacy simply bulls him out of the way and takes that planet, there will be little he can do."

"Hmm..." Rancisis looked over at Master Nu, who had been raised to the High Council for the moment to give them an uneven number with so many out in the field. She frowned at his unvoiced question, pulling up a holographic screen for a moment, moving through a series of lists as she stared at the image in the main hologram before matching it to a file. "She was one of ours," she said sadly. "Jedi Knight Kadrian Sey."

Ki-Adi-Mundi, a Cerean, shook his head. "We will send forces to aid Ord Zat," he agreed. Looking around at the others, he saw Master Rancisis raise a hand slightly in acknowledgment, and the Cerean stood up, laying a hand on his lightsaber hilt. "I will choose four others to join me. That, and whatever reinforcements you can give us, will be enough to retain Ord Zat."

"Thank you," Sidious said, putting as much sincerity into his tone as he could, although not enough to seem insincere, a delicate balance but one that, as a Sith Lord and a politician, he could do rather easily. "I'm afraid up to this point the only victories we have are those led by Jedi, and though they have been defensive in nature, they have cost us. I hope that this one

does not cost as much as a few others which already haunt my dreams. This war and its prolific hunger for sentient life is a horrifying reality that I am already having trouble with, and it isn't even a month old yet. I am glad that the Jedi have been coming forward in such numbers to do their part."

The Jedi all nodded, lapping it up as Sidious had known they would. And after a bit of small talk about other matters pertaining to the war behind the scenes, he began to ask about those numbers. The number of Guardian Jedi the Order had suddenly produced as the war began was an irritant, and the number of Sentinels too. But when he posed that question, the Jedi Council clammed up, with Rancisis merely saying that "We have long been pressing for more equality between the Orders in terms of our youngling's training. It has finally borne fruit."

"Hmm... well, that makes sense, but I had a thought. I realize this is an internal Jedi Order issue, but during this time of conflict, surely the Jedi of the Agri-corps should be reassigned?"

If Sidious had thought the High Council had stonewalled him a moment ago, that was nothing to this. However, Master Rancisis could respond before the other's stiffness could allow Sidious to press them on it. "We actually have already begun that process, Chancellor. Indeed, many of the Jedi from the Agri-corps have already been added into the Order's espionage service."

"Ah, I see. Thereby freeing other, more combat-ready Jedi for the front! An excellent idea," Sidious enthused, while inwardly he seethed. If that was true, it certainly could explain how much of the GDL's movements had remained hidden from the Sith. *And yet, it smacks of a prevarication, not an outright lie, but not the entirety of the truth.* On a hunch – which could not be said to be Force assisted since he couldn't use the Dark Side this close to so many Jedi even with his Force Cloak in place - Sidious decided to bring up an old point of contention. "I don't suppose they have been involved in keeping the source of the GDL's Tibanna gas secret, have they? I will admit that even my office was interested at one point in discovering that source."

Rancisis smiled blandly. "I cannot possibly comment, Chancellor."

Laughing quietly, Sidious seemed to change the subject, asking a few questions about Master Trebor and his ongoing work on the public-relations side of things while his mind worked frantically. *There is a connection there, I think. Rancisis is good, but he was too fast to come up with that response. Regardless, the Agri-corps Jedi have been removed from my reach for now. Worse, while I might be able to use the Veil to find so many Force users clustered together, I might not. Most of them are so weak I could barely sense them before. Perhaps if they stay with Potter or Yoda, I might have a better chance, but how likely is that, and how likely am I to have a full night to meditate to do so? No, Dark Side curse it! I will have to devote resources to hunting them down.*

Eventually, Sidious stood up and was ushered out of the high Council room and through the Temple by Master Bilaba. As they walked, Sidious asked, "By the way, where is Master Plo Koon? I understand that Master Yoda had to go with Count Potter to speak directly to the GDL's High Command, but I had thought that Master Koon would be the representative of the High Council to meet with the Kaminoans and take formal command of the clone army. Instead, it was Master Bulq, who is not even a member of the High Council."

"Master Plo Koon has volunteered to start leading a wing of Jedi starfighters, acting as a single strike-force. They are currently working up to speed over Obroa-Sky in the Outer Rim, well away from most of the combat hot zones," Bilaba replied easily.

Sidious nodded thoughtfully, as he had known that. The idea of a wing of Jedi starfighters was dangerous. That many Jedi in one place was a nice target, but a thorny one, given the Aethersprite starfighters' abilities. *But it might become too tempting a target the moment it entered battle for the Confederacy to ignore...*

Still, that wasn't why Sidious was there today. No, he wanted more information about the younglings and the Agri-corps. "That is an interesting idea, and I quite approve, although, given the size of the Republic, I am uncertain if they will do as much good as you might think only being on a single battlefield at any one time like that. Still, Master Yoda was correct: that winning one battle was more important than simply slowing the devastation and loss in five or ten."

'Palpatine' then paused, looking around thoughtfully, frowning in confusion. "Wouldn't I normally hear training going on this level? The sound of younglings at their tests, their laughing and training games. I always liked that," he confessed artfully. "You don't often get to see children at all once you reach my position, unfortunately. And that is a rather sad thing considering that it is their future that we are presently fighting for."

Depa Bilaba stiffened very slightly but noticeably in a Jedi to Sidious's eyes, but she replied with a bland, "That is true. However, the clans are busy with other things at the moment. With the drain on our resources caused by the war, we have had to shift the teaching schedules around, enlarging the various classes immensely."

"Understandable, of course." However, as they moved, Sidious made a point to yawn, slowing himself down a little, then looking to the side slightly out of the corner of his eye as he wiped at his face with a hand. That was enough to tell him that Pestage had been correct. With that too confirmed, he decided to break things off for the day, mentioning to the Jedi woman how he had been "living off caff and energy drinks," before resuming his walk next to Depa Bilaba, chatting politely with her until he left the Temple.

As he walked away from the temple down the long wide thoroughfare that connected it to the rest of the senatorial district, Sidious mentally snarled in anger. The younglings were indeed gone, as well as the Jedi of the Agri-corps. *And the best I can hope for is they are simply*

hiding out somewhere out in Wild Space! But how!? How long have they been planning this? Where have they gone? And why do I think that their merely hiding out would be the best option for the Great Plan?

OOOOOOO

As Sidious stewed, elsewhere, things were shifting. The Confederacy was still pushing hard across the Republic. However, their task forces had begun to get bogged down in various places by Republic defenders led by Jedi. This was occurring almost always in areas where the Republic Navy itself, rather than any of the disparate system defense forces, were the defenders, bar the raid on Kuat.

Despite the Republic's slowly strengthening defense, several more Ord systems fell to the enemy as the third week of the war started, depriving the surrounding sectors of both their fleets and the ordinance that those planets had been built and maintained to house. No further major losses of major industrial capacity had occurred just yet, though the losses incurred in the first round of attacks was more than enough to put the Republic on its heels. It would take months to rebuild the shipyard capacity alone. To rebuild the hidden fleets which had been destroyed or captured would take a year or more.

And, of course, Dominus's order to concentrate further strength into attacking the GDL quickly affected various battles. One that a certain green-skinned friend of Harry's was one of the first to see a sign of.

The ship certainly does not have that ship smell, Jedi Knight Alecto thought, smiling faintly, as he led his Padawan, Sanstish, onto the bridge of the Unyielding. He slid into the captain's chair, nodding at his first officer, a Corellian by the name of Trennan Fel, a middle-aged, recently married farmer who had a commission in the Corellian naval militia. "How is the ship XO?"

"Sir, The Unyielding is pretty much working like a dream so far. Of course, the first real test of it will be in battle, not in a hyperspace jump." The man's accent was thick, that of someone who grew up in Corellia's out-system, a kind of lilting gravel sort of voice.

"True," Alecto replied with a chuckle. "But that is true for the crew as well as the ship."

Trennan stiffened, but after a moment, nodded. The Unyielding was part of an old design named Audacious, a quintessentially Corellian name for a ship's class. They were local ships built around a bank of three spinal mounted heavy turbolasers, although they could only fire them one at a time due to heat issues brought about by the design and size of the ship. Those weapons had not been augmented, only repaired since reactivation efforts had begun. They had okay shielding and anti-fighter weaponry in the form of thirty defensive lasers in banks of two and five turbolasers and very good armor for their size. And in size, they were the

equivalent of destroyers in the GDL defense league, bigger than the Archer frigates but not up to a light cruiser in weight.

But where they truly shone was in their speed. These ships had been designed to be incredibly fast, faster than even the smaller Archer class frigates, let alone any of the enemy ships that had so far been brought into the war. Even the various types of enemy gunboats would have trouble keeping up with an Audacious class in a sprint.

"Corellians," Alecto shook his head as he once more went over the ship's design with his Padawan. "They sure love their speed."

"Not me, Master," his Padawan said cheerfully, shaking his head, the movements a sinuous flick of his long neck. Sanstish was a Selonian, a previously semi-aquatic species that had evolved on Selon. Their society was based around matriarchal clans, built around a single, fertile female called a Queen. Fiercely independent and protective of their clans, only infertile females were normally allowed to travel off-world, but as a Force-Sensitive, Sanstish was allowed to join the Green Jedi. As a Selonian, he was powerful, quick, athletic, and serious, with no real sense of humor for the most part, but he had an intuitive grasp of software that Alecto greatly admired. He was perfect Sentinel or Guardian material, and Alecto had enjoyed the time since he had become Sanstish's Master.

Currently, the Corellian ships had been sent to join one of the GDL's hidden fleets, which was somewhat confusing to Sanstish. "I just don't get the GDL's strategy doctrine, Master. It's almost as if you're planning to fail, isn't it?"

"Not at all," Alecto replied with a smile. Questions like that were meat and gristle to a good Master. "Rather, you do not see the long term. We know we will lose on the tactical level occasionally, but we are not caring so much about tactics as we are about strategy. A single battle is not going to win the war. And unlike our enemies, we must husband our capital ships. That is the first and primary rule of the GDL to keep our fleet in one piece, learning, building up our numbers and our logistics as we bleed the enemy."

"I understand Master, I just don't think that I would be able to sacrifice so many smaller victories to keep fighting."

"It is not the kind of thoughts that come naturally to Jedi, no. But it is one that we must reality of."

The Fourth Fleet of the GDL was a large body, although its individual ships were, in the main, smaller than either the Republic or CIS would prefer as main combatants. Most of them were missile frigates, light cruisers or heavy cruisers. There was only a single star dreadnought among them, another ship from Corellia, one of the previously mothballed ships.

Alecto hadn't been aboard it yet, but he understood that it was primary designed to kill enemy capital ships, and it had been designed to do that almost to the exclusion of anything else. It was apparently named the Waldorf after some ancient Corellian captain of some repute. However, Alecto had heard that everyone aboard, even the captain and the Adm. currently flying his flag from aboard, simply called it The Wall instead. There was quite a bit of affection to the nickname, but also some wry acknowledgment of reality, as the ship was slow as molasses in real-space, something no Corellian could ever be truly happy with. In hyperspace, at least, it could keep up with its escorts.

For a time, Alecto and his XO went through the order of battle and their ship's role in it. As Captain, Alecto would be in charge during the battle, while his Padawan didn't have a set role, except to simply use the Force to feel out things around them as much as possible. As such, Alecto had decided he would work with the repair crews. "If any of the ship's various divisions will need a Jedi's help, it will be the repair teams."

After they went through the order of battle and the various designations, they spent the rest of the day meditating, followed by a late evening endurance run in the exercise area aboard the ship, before several onlookers watched as Alecto put his younger charge through his paces with his lightsaber. The boy's body was seemingly built for Ataru, and yet his instincts were more to use Soresu, and Alecto was teaching him what he could to help him switch from one to the other seamlessly, having told his Padawan several times the same thing that Harry had told Ahsoka: it was the ability to truly make a style your own that made one a true master of the lightsaber.

Early the next day, the fleet was called to action. Another heavy Confederacy assault had been launched into the GDL, this time at one of the other Hypercom Relay Centers that had joined the Galactic Defense League. Technically a type II planet, it was near an Ord system that had joined the GDL.

At first, the attack on the Hypercom Relay Center didn't seem very important. Leferna, an arid, mineral-rich world with a decently sized local industry and population, was a Type II planet. It could see to its own needs on a defensive level and provide a small surplus of electronic goods and a local type of meat popular on nearby worlds. But otherwise, the only thing of value on it was the Hypercom relay center itself. Indeed, the local fleet Admiral had thought that the attack there was simply supposed to pull away from the fleet they knew was at Ord Saboak.

However, another fleet had since hit Ord Saboak, pinning them in place, while another group of six Lucrehulks had appeared to join the initial assault on the Type II planet. That would be enough to break through their defenses and start to perhaps hammer the planetary shield enough to start landing troops. With the Hypercom Relay Center there, that could not be allowed.

Coming out of hyperspace, Alecto quickly looked over at the tactical screen, memorizing what was on it. There was a fleet of Eleven Lucrehulks here, the initial five, which had seemingly been satisfied with besieging the planet, moving all around the system while their Vulture fighters did most of the fighting, and the six which had joined them afterward. They had since formed into one large hammer and were already in the process of pounding the four opposing Golan Defense Platforms despite all the efforts the planetary shield could do.

The number of local Arrow type starfighters had also been pared back badly, although, judging by the number of Vultures, they had taken out a goodly number of Vultures themselves before dying. Alecto was fully aware of how many Vultures a regular Lucrehulk could hold, and there weren't many more out there than the six newest Lucrehulks could have had aboard them. *And I also see the CIS has yet to field enough in the way of smaller ships. The Munificent class is a ship killer and a decent cruiser, but it isn't as mobile or fast enough to force destroyers or frigate to battle. That leaves a hole in their order of battle. Although they tend to fill it in with Vultures, whereas most of our capital ships don't carry starfighters at all.*

The five ships of Alecto's division - Corellia believed in having five ship-divisions rather than the normal four - roared out of hyperspace at a dead sprint along with another three divisions of the same class. They moved even faster than the Archer missile frigates could. All around them, the Arrow fighters that was part of the flotilla also emerged. At the angle they had chosen to exit hyperspace from, they were able to close with the rear of the attacking fleet before the majority of the Vultures could be pulled off from where they had been attacking the Golan Defense Platforms and the few remaining Arrows defending them.

The Lucrehulks turned, blasting out with a wall of fire, but the Corellian ships ducked and dodged at the range, hammering back with their primary spinal mounted turbolasers whenever they could. Each shot was aimed at a single ship, as Alecto directed the battle. "Keep our fire concentrated! The only way we will be able to get through those monstrous shields is if we keep the punishment concentrated."

The ships moved and swerved, zooming to either side of the quickly shifting enemy. The Audacious class's speed helped them keep the range open and control the angle of engagement, although they couldn't do as much damage to the Lucrehulks shields that way. It was completely different from how most capital ships would fight and seemed to flummox the enemy commander. Capital ships were supposed to form up in a battle line, move across from one another and hammer at other capital ships in a stationary position as they could manage in space, or slowly move through the battlefield to engage in broadsides.

Soon the Corellian ships had pulled back and away from the Lucrehulks, who were lumbering out of position from around the planet to give chase. Simultaneously, the faster Munificents, twenty of them to the eleven Lucrehulks, had peeled off from the rest of the fleet, coming after attackers.

The Audacious classes flipped on their rears, bringing their turbolaser cannons to bear once more, on the Munificents this time, hammering out single shots as they closed, targeting a single Munificent class with all of their firepower as they went roaring into the Munificent class's formation, exchanging body blows, and allowing their secondary weapons to speak for the first time in the battle.

At the same time, from out of hyperspace came Dorian gunboats. These were the ships that had so far flummoxed the Confederacy Navy's Vulture heavy assault policy. They were nineteen meters long with eight double turbolasers and eight concussion missile launchers. These gunboats were built to destroy waves of starfighters at long range and even hurt heavier ships before letting them close, more maneuverable for their size than the Audacious was. With them came several Archer class ships. The frigates, though, held back, using the firing information from the Audacious to line up their shots, blasting out their proton torpedo payload.

This new formation came in from directly above the battle and engaged the Munificents as they tried to destroy the Audacious class ships. Most of the Munificents had redirected their energy to their side and forward shielding. Moreover, their fire coordination was shot to ribbons thanks to the Audacious classes' closing speed. The missiles hammered into their shielding, collapsing sectors across all of the enemy flotilla as four Munificent class were turned into drifting wrecks. Two others reeled out of formation.

Alecto had the still moving and dodging Unyielding around to line up a shot on one of them. The three heavy turbolasers, having had time to cool, fired as one. While alarms blared on the bridge at the resulting heat, the blow cracked the enemy ship's spine, sending the two pieces spinning through space.

"Sir, our shields are down to forty-two percent," a crewman shouted. "The worst readings we're getting is from the Bellerophon, which is down to twenty-two."

"Time to pull back, boys! Radio the Commodore of the gunboats to do the same. I assume the Archers already know their business," Alecto ordered, his tone light and almost airy. "Put us in between the Bellerophon and the enemy."

As they left the enemy formation behind, the Corellian task group moved at a downward angle away from the incoming Lucrehulks so they would not be able to bring the destroyers to battle. However, the enemy Vultures were still numerous enough to close with them, and the ships continued to take hits, causing Alecto to grimace. All of the ships had taken some damage, but their shields were still at least twelve percent for the Bellerophon, more for the others. It was good, not great, but they'd been able to escape relatively unscathed. For all their zeal, the Vulture wings had been gored by the gunboats even as they closed. There was no chance the Vultures alone would stop the Corellians from retreating into hyperspace.

Feeling through the Force, Alecto could feel the Confederacy commander's anger and rage, and he smiled thinly. He could also feel Sanstish's confusion and looked over his Padawan where he sat by the entrance to the bridge, ready to race out at any moment. "Master, they are still in charge of the system. I mean, we hurt them, but..."

"I see I have neglected your strategic thinking too much if you forgot so quickly our talk yesterday," Alecto said ruefully, patting the young Selonian on his shoulder, the furry youngster currently wearing the same spacesuit that Alecto himself was. "It is a matter of Logistics. We are forcing the enemy to use up their resources while we husband our own. Our strafing attack didn't lose a single ship. We lost a few people, two dead on board this ship, when one of our turbolaser batteries exploded under a stray bolt that somehow got through as one of our shields went down for a moment. But on the flipside, they lost upwards of seven hundred Vultures and five Munificent class ships. Which.." the Duros Jedi's face hardened noticeably, "Unlike the larger Lucrehulk classes are extremely crew-intensive and are mostly manned by living sentients. Indeed, if you're talking about living casualties, apparently destroying one of them is worth at least two of the larger vessels."

Alecto became even more serious then, squeezing's Sanstish's shoulder. "Remember, the Confederacy Navy has an advantage in ships that is so high we could never overcome it. It is only because they are also fighting the Republic that we are still around. We must survive and hurt them in any way we can. However, we can while we build up our numbers, and, even more importantly, build up our experience."

"Sir, I don't think this Admiral is going to give over," Alecto's tactical officer interrupted. "They are still coming after us, and they're spreading out, so they will be able to pick up whatever angle we use to enter hyperspace."

Alecto looked over at the screen and smiled thinly. "He is indeed going to try to chase us into hyperspace." For a moment, he paused, thinking, not just about what they could do with this, but also of what he had sensed of the enemy commander. "Make our exit route obvious, and jump us to these coordinates, please," he said, quickly inputting a new arrival point. "Then send a message to D'Richeliu containing that information. I expect he will know what to do with it."

It was a known dwarf star system, a system that had literally nothing in it, a bit of nothingness between real systems, as it were. The perfect place to hide one of the GDL's hidden fleet support bases. Or so the enemy would think.

He felt Sanstish's concern and patted his shoulder again before moving back to his command chair. "Calm yourself, young Padawan." Sanstish closed his eyes, then slowly regained control of himself, nodding to his Master. Alecto nodded back firmly, then gestured. "Watch and learn. There is nothing so dangerous as losing your concentration on the overall picture in pursuit of one goal."

Sanstish thought about it for a moment, then supplied, "He, he is angry. He is overlooking his original objectives to hurt us."

"Exactly. And the enemy commander will also be thinking that he can overcome us, judging by what we have already shown him. This too is in error," Alecto replied.

When they came out into the dwarf star system named IL1-00245, the task group stayed in position, their engines at full strength as their shields slowly regained power. They only had to wait twenty minutes before the Confederacy fleet came out of hyperspace after them.

Instantly, the gunboats and the Corellian heavy cruisers twisted and ran deeper in-system, apparently trying to make a run around the sun, as the remaining Vultures of the enemy launched, and the fleet came after them. The enemy ships also spread out, with the remaining Munificent bunched up on the wings and the Lucrehulks moving to put greater and greater distance between them.

However, before they could close, two new groups of GDL forces arrived.

One of them was another pure Corellian force, led by the sole Corellian Star dreadnought in the local defense fleet, *The Wall*. *The Wall* was ponderous in real-space, slow and ungainly. It even looked as if it had been cobbled together. But it was powerful, and it had come out of hyperspace right into one of the enemy fleet's wings.

It began to hammer out blows as this new task group took one of the Munificent formations from the side above. So heavy was *the Wall's* broadside it cracked two of their shielding's within thirty seconds, the ships in question having shifted their power away from shielding to boost their engines for the inevitable chase. The ships exploded, and then the star dreadnought was in and among its smaller prey, smashing out with all of its weaponry in every direction while the Gozanti light cruisers who had come in with it danced and juked around their slightly larger, and far more heavily armed opponents. Their banks of proton torpedoes and concussion missiles fired, filling the space around them with explosions.

"All ships, turn and engage," Alecto ordered. The gunboats, who had been fully re-armed by two colliers who even now jumped for hyperspace, shifted around Alecto's original task force in a controlled movement that had them peeling into what Alecto thought of as a wave formation moving to either side and above and below in groups of threes while the Audacious class stayed concentrated. In this manner, each weapon system aboard their ships could fire on the incoming Vultures at just barely out of the Vulture's own range.

Whole squadrons of vultures died in those first few seconds, and then, the heavy cruisers led by Alecto's slammed into the center of the Vulture formation. Their own anti-fighter weaponry took a toll on the shattered remnants before they were past and moving on to crash into the equally disorganized Munificent division on that edge of the enemy's formation.

At the back of the Munificent division being so hammered, the Lucrehulks had begun to enter the battle. One of the Gozantis was sent reeling before twisting around and entering hyperspace at a desperate angle away from the rest of the battle. The star dreadnaught too lumbered towards these new enemies, The Wall living up to its name as they began to take it under fire.

But as even as several more Munificent classes were being hammered under by his own ships, Alecto was watching the overall battle, frowning. There were just too many Lucrehulks, and they were not going to win this battle outright. Still, that was alright. *Every time we hurt them more than we get hurt is a victory, no matter how minor.*

As he thought that, a new force arrived as he thought that from the GDL, three divisions of Mon Calamari MC-80 cruisers. Much larger than the light cruiser Gozanti class, they were slower in turn, but still faster than either the Lucrehulks or the star dreadnought, and their shielding was simply incredible to Alecto, who whispered this out to Sanstish, as he took a seat beside Alecto's captain's chair.

Now they both reached out for the Force. With his padawan's help, Alecto directed the ship this way and that, hammering her spinal mounted turbolaser cannons into whatever weakening shields he could with the accuracy of a sniper, despite the ship's pilot moving them around like a crazed antelope.

"Through the enemy formations," Alecto ordered. "Through the formations to link up with the cruisers."

As he gave that order, the gunboats were ordered to peel away by the admiral. The Vulture fighters they had been initially fighting had been simply mauled by this point, and the battle was now getting hot and heavy around the larger capital ships. And unlike the Archers, a squadron of eight of which had just arrived – the same group who had unloaded into the battle over Leferna – they simply didn't have the range to take on the big boys. The next second, the admiral gave another order to pull back in groups.

Alecto felt Sanstish's confusion once more and smiled faintly. "We're not going to win this fight, my young Padawan. We don't even intend to. But..." Alecto paused, waiting as one of the Lucrehulks was smashed out of position by heavy Archer missile fire, the proton torpedoes getting through its shielding. The Mon Calamari cruisers had just entered the battlefield as that happened and instantly took it under fire, while its sister ships desperately shifted their attention away from The Wall to these new opponents trying to save the massive capital ship.

Another Munificent died, and then two more, followed by another four of the light cruisers from Corellia reeling out of formation. Most of their systems were dead bar their engines, which carried them out of the battlefield and into hyperspace. But one wasn't so lucky and exploded under enemy fire, gone with all hands.

"That was why you wanted them here, Master! Hyperspace is so open here, isn't it?" Sanstish said, suddenly understanding.

"Exactly." Alecto bestowed a smile on his Padawan for just a brief moment before barking out orders to his ship to heave over, rolling to put itself between one of its wounded fellows and the incoming fire of the Lucrehulk. The fire hammered into their shielding, but as the ship was also rolling on its axis at the same time, that damage was spread along with their shields, which only failed in a few spots. Bulkheads exploded, and one unfortunate crewman was pulled out into space before the interior bulkheads slammed down, and the ship continued on its way, still guarding its more horribly wounded fellow while Sanstish raced off to join the repair teams.

The injured Lucrehulk Alecto had noticed earlier had not escaped the Mon Calamari ships' fury. They battered it relentlessly, and it finally exploded as they twisted away, pulling their line at a sharp angle down and away. The last ship in that line took a monstrous pounding in return, but it couldn't be helped, and Mon Calamari ships could absorb a tremendous amount of damage.

This move was just in time, however. As Alecto watched, a new task group came out of hyperspace. Led by another two Lucrehulks, this group consisted of those large ships, ten new Munificent-class carriers, and twelve Captor-class carriers. All of them started to launch starfighters, more than enough to overwhelm the gathered Fourth Fleet divisions' defenses. But they came in at an angle too wide to bring the retreating ships to battle, even the horribly battered Gozanti and Mon Calamari heavy cruisers.

Frowning, Alecto stared at this new group, then hit the communications device on his chair. "Admiral, this is Knight Alecto. I feel as if we should not return to our primary fallback point. We need to throw off this group somehow."

"Agreed. All ships, plan Gamma epsilon. Five random jumps, minimum before we make for the shipyard. Durant, Thrust, Brigadoon, Bullet, Bellerophon, this includes you. No exceptions."

As the surviving Gozanti-class ships and The Wall peeled away from the enemy, one division of ships after another disappearing into hyperspace. They left behind a horribly wounded but supposedly triumphant enemy in charge of the dead system, their attack on Leferna disrupted, for now. True to Alecto's prediction, the ships did attempt to follow them. While the newcomers waited to bring their Vulture squadrons aboard, the surviving Munificent-class carriers from the first task group had seemingly been able to jump out after segments of the Fourth fleet.

To follow a ship through hyperspace, the pursuer could use the telemetry data to try and follow the fleeing ship, but hyperspace jumps were so singular that doing so perfectly was

almost impossible. Instead, the pursuer could send ships out along any angle that the ship, or in this case the combat group, could have jumped out on.

Having anticipated this, Alecto led his ships in a quick and dirty ambush, their ships turning on the enemy the moment he appeared. A Munificent ship was a dangerous ship killer, but alone, the destroyers of Alecto's task force was able to overwhelm it in short order, with only a few of them taking hard shots from its spinal-mounted heavy turbolaser batteries. In turn, their own less-powerful turbolasers knocked the Confederacy ship's shields down before gutting it.

"Away, into hyperspace, random walk by three," Alecto barked into the communicator. "Rally point theta, then back on the Admiral's plan."

A second later, his ships jumped, too fast for any follow-on wave to possibly catch.

Elsewhere this game of cat and mouse did not as well for the units of Fourth Fleet. But, in the main, their capital ships were able to break contact, only a four-ship group of Archers being unable to hyperjump out fast enough to get away from the Lucrehulk that had come after them. In turbolaser range of the bigger ship, the Archers lasted barely a minute before their shields failed and were destroyed with all hands.

Yet elsewhere, D'Richeliu was able to mousetrap a group of three Lucrehulks, pounding them with several other Fourth Fleet task groups, destroying one outright and crippling the other before leading a reinforcing task group a merry chase, losing only two Gozanti outright in return, while the rest of his ships took varying levels of damage. Regardless, Alecto was concerned, and he and D'Richeliu both sent reports to the GDL High Command as to what had happened.

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Regardless of the issues that the Fourth Fleet ran into after Alecto relieved it, Leferna, was lucky that the attack on it had been redirected. Outside of a few Ord planets and GDL held territory, the Outer Rim, as the Republic thought of it, had either joined with the CIS, or had already been conquered by them.

Of course, this left a lot of space that wasn't part of the CIS out there. The Hutts, for example, had their own small empire in the Outer Rim. And there were other polities out there as well who were not well-known by the Republic and not part of it at present. But of the worlds which the Republic could honestly say to have influence over, the Confederacy now controlled.

Even the Galactic Defense League had lost numerous Type 3 planets in the Outer Rim. Yet those planets gave the CIS nothing, and their defense had cost the attackers more than the planets themselves were currently worth. And the Confederacy of Independent Systems had

made no inroads whatsoever in the Calamari Sector or the Dominus Sector, which were incredibly important to the GDL.

But their conquests did include planets on several of the different Hyperspace Trade Routes which were the true lifeblood of the Republic. These were vast roads through hyperspace where the users didn't need to stop and calculate the next jump. These hyperspace lanes allowed someone to make a trip in a few hours what would otherwise take days, or even weeks and spanned the entire Republic. Before the war, the Trade Federation had owned one such trade route lock, stock and barrel. But now conflict was rearing up all around it, as the planets that had previously fought against that domination now saw the Confederacy in their skies once more. The control of several of the Hyperspace Trade Routes allowed the CIS to shift forces faster than the Republic could in the Outer Rim, Mid Rim, and Expansion regions. However, nearer to the core their control wasn't as solid.

All of that was normal. Control of those lanes and many of the Confederacy's targets made sense, socially, logistically and militarily. But something very unusual and hard to explain was occurring on the GDL front, enough so that Garm Bel Iblis couldn't concentrate on his meal, Frowning angrily, Garm pushed it and grabbed up another datapad, staring through it for something that had just penetrated his senses after reading a third such message, scowling as he tried to decipher what was bothering him.

Not even three weeks into the war, and the GDL were doing... okay. Just okay. While they had yet to lose many capital ships, their starfighter losses were something he was having a hard time accustoming himself to. If Corellia had sustained the losses the GDL had taken in starfighters, it would have been enough to force them out of the war. For the GDL, it wasn't anywhere near that point, and Garm needed to remember that.

For that matter, Arrow and Archer-led assaults on supply lines, the hyperspace shipping lanes the CIS controlled and so forth were succeeding in the main. The CIS navy now found their ability to sustain the siege of Rendili hampering and the Confederacy's ability to attack deeper into the various GDL sectors and larger areas where numerous systems had joined together was being badly eroded. Of course no place was completely safe, but Garm believed that he and Harry had hit upon the only method to fight an opponent who outweighed them so much: Husband your capital ships and, make certain that the enemy never learned where your fleet was based while continuing to build your numbers.

Garm felt quite a bit of pride in that Corellia was at the head of that project with more of their ships coming out of previously mothballed fleets. But for some reason, he felt something had shifted recently in the reports they were getting.

Despite consisting of several thousand planets and numerous sectors, the GDL should have been a side show. Yes they were dangerous, but outside of Corellia, they didn't really have any planets whose industrial capacity or history would make anyone sit up and take notice, not even Serenno. Dac was practically unknown to the Republic as a whole, the Mon Calamari

never having been a big ship supplier to anyone else, and the Dorneans were even less well known.

And Corellia had been crippled for several years thanks to its ongoing issues with the Commerce Guild and the lack of Tibanna gas. That was no longer the case and had not been for years, thanks to Harry's efforts, but even so, anyone with any intelligence should have realized now that it was the Republic, with its vast resources and manpower, which posed the largest threat to the Confederacy. Once the Republic's people and economic infrastructure were roused, at any rate.

But it seemed as if, perhaps thanks to the victories that they had won against smaller task groups, the Confederacy had decided that the GDL was just as much of a threat. Barely two weeks into the war, more reports were now crossing General Bel Iblis's desk. And something about them, beyond the sheer number of task groups, flotillas, and squadrons of capital ships that the Confederacy had committed to the GDL front, was bothering him.

"Brought in one after another from the deep dark, smaller task groups with reserve squadrons, the enemy is using," Yaddle's voice sounded from one side of Garm, startling the Corellian so much he leaped away, grabbing at his chest as he gasped in shock, his heart going a light year a second.

"GAAAA! Where did... how... you old..." Garm grabbed his limited diplomatic skills with both hands, throttling his words into submission, before barking out, "Master Yaddle where did you come from!?"

"Walked in like a normal person I did," Yaddle answered, smirking up at her much younger human companion, her ears twitching in amusement. "Young you are, a scare now and then, good it is for your heart."

"I would rather like my actual doctor to be the judge of that, thank you!" Garm answered tartly.

Yaddle smirked even more at that, the twitching of her long ears now almost insouciant, and Garm began to chuckle ruefully. "I suppose I was a bit out of it, wasn't I?"

"Think this is obvious, I do. Moreover, need some rest, you do occasionally. Doing too much you are." Yaddle admonished mildly. While he had correctly pulled away from having anything to do with the creation of the governmental side of the League, Garm was taking too much of the day to day running of the GDL's military machine onto his shoulders. He needed to rely more on Yaddle and the rest of the High Command.

Nodding his head at Yaddle's point, Garm promised to look after himself, moving over to his desk and dutifully beginning to eat. However, as he did, he asked, "You were saying?"

Sighing, Yaddle allowed it was time to be serious, handing over a datapad containing the report from Alecto and Admiral D'Richelu. "Almost mirroring how we are doing things the Confederacy is. Trying to mousetrap us already, they are."

Reading the report, Garm frowned, although he did not stop eating under the old Jedi's eyes. "...They're changing strategy far too quickly." Leaving his meal for a second, Garm shifted around through a few other reports, pushing them all up onto a screen that dominated one wall of his office. "They're also assigning more ships to convoy duty, mostly those Captor class ships." Bel Iblis frowned. "That I think is an obvious idea, but as for the sheer number of troops concentrating us, I don't understand that at all."

"See us as a threat, C'baoth will. Personal, it will be. A Sith tactic, not a military one, this is," Yaddle answered definitively.

"I would've thought that even as a Sith Lord, C'baoth would have lost a lot of his military clout after the first few setbacks we gave them."

Yaddle shook his head. "Set against the backdrop of the successful destruction of the hidden Republic construction yards, they are. Further..." she paused, thinking then shrugging. "Further, the Force, used to dominate it can be. A mental trick there is, turn aside the minds of others. Extended that technique can be, if one gives in to the Dark Side."

"That's quite disturbing," Bel Iblis drawled, shaking his head. "But thank you for your honesty. You think he did something like that?"

Yaddle shrugged her shoulders. "A possibility it is. Further, signs of the Dark Side influencing them there might be."

She picked out two of the reports they had seen, highlighting both. "Unsuccessful these attacks were, on Sigmatus, Randall Five." The two names were pulled from Shwuy Sector, a Colonies region. They were the only two systems in that sector that had gone over to the GDL, with the rest staying loyal to the Republic. The sector was an important source for a few different kinds of gems and a few metals, and infantry-style guns but was made important thanks to being on the Hydian Way Super Route and the Shwuy Exchange.

The sector was under attack by a series of Confederacy task groups, and on the attack on Sigmatus and Randall five, the groups sent hadn't been all that large. Two Munificent-class ships, a smaller Captor-class freighter. In comparison to the forces Alecto and his fellow Corellian were dueling with, Garm considered these groups almost too minor to consider.

Because of that, Garm didn't understand why these reports interested Yaddle. But then he saw the list of damages afterward, and after a few seconds reading through them, stated, "They wiped out the outer system industry."

"Yes." Yaddle nodded her head, then pulled up three more reports.

All showed the same thing and Garm winced. "Even if they can't attack the planets, they are going to set those planets back decades! If they keep doing that they really will start to hurt us in the long run." Only Type 1 planets had enough military strength to beat what amounted to spoiling raids like that off before they could do billions worth in damages.

Then, Master Yaddle proceeded to make Garm's day worse. She pulled up the same reports as before, including an eyewitness audio report, playing it aloud for them both. The voice was accented and spoke as if he was speaking through a mask of some kind, but his words were still understandable. "They blew up the escape pods! Several of those ships, I knew the miners! Leteb and the others, they would have, have surrendered! We heard the radio call of several of the other! But those CIS kriffers still blew their ships up, and then shot up their escape pods!"

Bel Iblis sighed, shaking his head. "And now you're going to tell me that's not an isolated incident."

"Perhaps. Other reports, mention this kind of barbarity they do not. Yet likely, it might be. Communicate with the Republic High Command, I will." Yaddle paused, seeming to slump. "Had hoped I did, Senator Amidala's attempts to reach out to the Confederacy Congress, put a halt to such things it would have. Keep some measure of civility and decency in this war it might have."

Garm parked a harsh laugh. "There is nothing decent about war. There has never been anything about war. And then the CIS decided to make it even worse by using unfeeling droids for the majority of their military. No, the only way to bring back some kind of civility to this war will be to start hitting their populations hard. When their own people start to feel some loss maybe they'll think twice about such atrocities. And we're not in a position to do that yet, and won't be for a while unless Master Yoda's bit of deception works far better than I think it will."

Even now Garm had to smile at the little trick Yoda had played to, for the moment anyway, obfuscate the truth as to how the Tyrant's Bane had survived. It wouldn't last for long, but it would still last long enough. But while he had laughed loud and hard after his own part in that trick had finished, Garm's good mood couldn't last at the moment, and he shook his head. "To get to that point we have to hold on whatever they throw at us."

Sighing, Bel Iblis pushed away his half uneaten meal and strode out into the rest of the commands, sitting down and glancing over at a few of his officers. It was time to get back to the war. And Master Yaddle, alas, could not find it in her to stop him.

OOOOOOO

The largest of the recent additions to the Galactic Defense League was the Burma sector. It was a Core Worlds sector that had astonishingly decided to join with GDL, unlike the vast majority of that area of space. They were, even now, coming under heavy assault as part of the Confederacy's push into the Core Worlds areas.

Most of them had already had planetary shield generators and local defense fleets: corvettes, gunboats, patrol craft, and a hodgepodge of different starfighter types. Now, thanks to the space expanded freighters of the GDL, most had been given a few Golan Defense stations to defend themselves. Thus these planets were able to see off the attacks launched on them, since these attacks were made by barely task force-strength Confederacy forces. The war in that sector quickly became a slog, with the GDL fleets doing all they could to hamper the CIS's forces.

However, in a few places, a new aspect of warfare that the GDL was not equipped to face was beginning to rear its head: land-based warfare. While the Burma sector planets had local armies and were heavily industrialized, in the main, the GDL had yet to create even a marine force, let alone a full land-based army.

Although even here, the CIS was starting to run into issues thanks to the GDL's good relationship with the Jedi.

There were only two real ways to take out a planetary shield. You could bombard it from orbit, smashing it down through sheer power. Or you could destroy the shield generators from within via treachery or planetary assault.

Betrayal had actually been the reason for such more often in the past than most of the Republic planets, in particular the Core Worlds, would like to think. Certainly, it had occurred often during the New Sith Wars, and before that, the various non-Force-related wars that dotted galactic history all the way back to the creation of the Republic.

The first option, simply pounding the shield down, had very rarely been used. The amount of firepower that it would take against even systems whose local power network wasn't as efficient or as powerful as, say, Alderaan's was known to be, was just too much to assemble most of the time. And most of the time, wars began over resources rather than ideology. The Jedi and Sith wars had destroyed more than the 'normal' wars, but they were not the majority of actual wars that occurred. And in those cases destroying the industry you wanted to take over made little to no sense.

A planetary assault was the third method. Planetary shields would allow ships in if they were moving slowly enough to not seem to be a threat or if portions of the shield had been weakened in order to shift power elsewhere. Planetary shields could even be knocked down for a certain amount of time in a specific quadrant, and then an army landed. This was difficult, time-consuming and resource-heavy, but it could be done far more easily than option one.

On Ord Radama, this was what was going on now. For the first time in this war, a planet with a planetary shield would be invaded.

This planet was home to the birdlike Devliikk. This species had the dubious distinction of having one of the shortest lifespans in all of the Republic. They were short, birdlike beings with long necks who could see in the dark just as well as in daylight. The Devliikk normally had quick, intelligent minds, and as a race, they had an affinity for technology even before they had met the Republic. Because of that, and because of their love of democracy, their system had become an Ord system long ago during the Colonization Era and had remained so despite its position in the Outer Rim's Esstran Sector.

This system supplied munitions and fuel to not one but two sector fleets. These fleets weren't very large in terms of the current war, and their heaviest unit was a light cruiser. But both fleets were capably led. The local sectors were home to numerous planets that had reached out to the GDL. These fleets were busily making a nuisance of themselves raiding the enemy's planets in the area and scouting for the CIS's hidden shipyards.

Therefore, this logistical linchpin had to be removed. With Ord Radama taken, the way into several dozen planets in the surrounding sector and beyond would be open. Indeed, around eighty Republic planets would become vulnerable if the defending fleets had to rely on local resources for rearming or refueling. Several other GDL planets would also be left vulnerable.

However, as intelligent a move as attacking Ord Radama might be, the droid general in charge of the planetary assault instantly realized that his masters had miscalculated. He cogitated on this point while crouching in a corridor as nearby artillery fire went off, exploding against several different defensive installations that were built around the planet's capital city. The locals had ceded the capital city quickly, even though it contained the planetary shield generators, and the reasoning was the same as why the general was crouching: everything on this planet bar a few of the government buildings, was built on a scale for someone who was, at best, half the height of a normal human-type sentient.

Elsewhere on the planet, his droids were running into trouble, trouble with a capital 'J'.

The first to realize this was a group of scout droids. Painted matte black, with lighter weapons but more built-in intelligence than the regular B-2 model, they had moved ahead of the rest of the army to call down artillery fire on defensive positions. The defensive position in question, however, had ended up being empty. The droids conversed in Droid Cant for a moment, then moved on, only to pause as light suddenly blared from one side. A lightsaber igniting in the dark.

They twisted, blasters quickly firing in that direction, only to find the lightsaber flicking this way and that easily, battering them back into the droids before another lightsaber activated behind them. "My fine droid fellows, I think you will find, that this was a most

inopportune choice of targets," Master Tsui Choi said with a faint smile on his blue-scaled birdlike face.

"Too true, Master, but don't be too hard on them," His apprentice, a Lannik named Est Char, answered, laughing as he chopped a droid in two, his lightsaber flashing behind his back to block another blaster bolt aimed his way, then four more as he bounced around and through their ranks, his small stature a major help here. "After all, they're already going all to pieces, why rub it in?"

"Your sense of humor needs work, I feel," Tsui remarked, even as his own shoto made quick work of the droids. Although designed for infiltration, the droids were still very hampered by the odd environment they found themselves in.

An entire company of B2 droids arrived soon after, but the two Jedi, with their ability to move far more easily than the B-2 droids, slaughtered them, then moved forward with several squads of Devliikk militia to attack the rest of the invading army. An army, moreover, that was already getting bogged down in small ambushes and dead drop traps created by the locals. There were now dozens of small-scale fierce firefights going on, and worse, the local defenders now began to call in their own artillery fire, while other Jedi of similar stature led their own infiltration of the captured capital city.

For all their short stature, there was little give in the Devliikk, and this was their home planet. A vast majority, something like 90% of their population, still lived on it, and as such, the Devliikk were willing to fight to the death for it, man and woman.

This level of violence continued elsewhere on the planet as the troopships spread out to other landing zones, though the Jedi were concentrated on the defenses around the capital city. But even without the Jedi, each of the cities was a winding maze for the attackers.

As more and more reports of his troops getting bogged down and of companies being wiped out even, came in, The droid general knew they were in for a rough time. When a series of counterattacks led by Jedi destroyed most of his own artillery, the droid general in charge of this campaign knew it was hopeless and shook his head. "We might have made a mistake coming here," he said aloud.

One of his communications operatives muttered "Roger, Roger," at that, then bent over his console again. After all, there was nothing else they could do. They had their orders.

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At the same time, that particular droid general was bemoaning his lot in life, another attack was launched on another planet in Republic space. Although this planet in the Inner Rim had been targeted almost as a side note by the local Confederacy Admiral, the attack would have far-reaching consequences...

Baron Constantine of Vena stared at his control center's main hologram in horror. One Lucrehulk, four Munificent class, two smaller carriers, and twenty patrol boats, which seemed to be the typical size of an independent task group. With them came several other freighter-sized ships, which he had to assume carried the landing forces. *By the Force, this is... that number of ships... we, we're doomed.*

The Vulture fighters launched, and so did the defenders' own starfighters. The two starfighter groups battled it out in the space between the incoming fleet and the defenders. He had pulled back his planet's five destroyer-sized ships, deciding there was no reason to lose them in a vainglorious attempt trying to defend the outer system.

Thankfully, it seemed as if the CIS wasn't interested in simple destruction. They had bypassed almost all of that outer infrastructure, save for a freighter, which had the very bad luck of being directly in their way and unable to get out of it before the Vulture fighters attacked. And even then, they hadn't destroyed the ship's escape pods.

The enemy's Vulture fighters had overwhelming numerical superiority, and, as he watched the dogfight on his holo-screen, with a sinking heart Baron Constantine realized they were also individually better than his own. His planet had only been able to buy a single squadron of Aethersprites, most of his pilots were using the older Delta-6 Sprite.

The dogfight was short and brutal, wiping out the defenders for the loss of thirty or so Vultures. It was hard to tell individual signals within the melee, at least for him. Constantine had never been taught how to read a tactical screen after all. Then they were roaring on towards his planet's defenses, and around him, the space station began to open fire, the booming of the weapons sending small shocks through his feet.

It was a locally built space station, like most such across the Republic. It had shields and weapons, but those defenses were almost entirely geared towards stopping starfighters, and the same was true for the other orbital stations. Like most planets, Vena relied on the Republic to fight other capital ships, while it was more concerned with seeing off pirates, and stopping smuggling, a particular concern here.

Unfortunately, that was also the case for the local destroyer-sized ships. They were sleek, fast builds designed by a Nabooan native who had migrated here decades ago. But for all their beauty, they would be no help once that group of capital ships closed. And they were doing so inexorably.

Below, the planetary defenses opened fire, heavy turbolasers shot up, crashing into the Lucrehulks shielding, which caused it to almost stop in space. But at the same time, those enemy ships took Vena's defenders under fire. Three of them exploded within ten minutes of the fight, taking with them all hands. Soon, his own command center began to rock under continuous fire. And unlike most Core Worlds or several of the other planets under attack by the CIS, Vena's energy grid wasn't robust enough that they could push the bubble of their quite

new planetary shield out beyond the atmosphere. This left the defending space stations to their own devices.

Another turbolaser around from the planet blasted out, followed by two ion cannon bolts. The Lucrehulk began to pull away, its shields flickering. This seemed to be the signal to the planetary gunners to shift fire to the other ships, who began to also take damage. But each gun battery chose a different target, showing their inexperience.

The shields of the attacking ships were going down, but not fast enough. And the last two local destroyers went down. One of them reeled, entering the atmosphere at an angle that implied it was going to crash soon, and the others simply listing, all its powers gone, as a group of Vultures moved to defeat it, losing many of their numbers to the remaining defense stations, but not enough. "Damn it, we're being slaughtered! We need reinforcements. Where the hell is the Republic!?"

As the last of the lost ships fell, help did come, but not from the Republic. Or rather, not from the Republic as a whole. Instead, it came from one of its most reclusive members. "Sir, we're getting readings of another hyperspace footprint, incoming from the Cluster!"

"What?"

"Wha, why now of all times? Is this the case of bad timing, or something worse?"

From a hyperspace route that would carry someone into or out of the Hapes Cluster came a group of twenty ships. Two of the brand new Hapan battleships accompanied eighteen Heruc class battlecruisers flashed into real-space accompanied by twelve wings of their local starfighters and sixty gunboats. Those gunboats were not the match of the gunboats that the GDL used, more commerce raiders than defenders. But they would go a long way towards evening up the numerical superiority of the enemy starfighters.

The ships that had retreated from the planetary batteries' punishment found themselves facing this onslaught almost alone for a moment, their fighters busy around Vena's defense station. Individually their ships were much better. The Lucrehulk out-massed the incoming battleships by five times at least and, worse, had better technology. The Hapes Cluster was quite a ways behind in many areas, especially in cooling and turbolaser technology. Therefore, all of their ships had to have an ability to rotate their guns out to fire as effectively as a normal Republican or CIS ship of the same class. However, the shields of those ships were already damaged, and these attackers were fresh and more numerous, able to surround them and attack from every side.

The Vultures were quick to fall back from Vena to engage this new force, and the dogfight escalated quickly. Meanwhile, the two sides of the capital ships began to fire at one another, the Hapans trying to envelop the Confederacy ships.

The Confederacy gunboats fell quickly, and the Hapans bore in their globe closing. The smaller carriers died quickly, while the Munificents and the Lucrehulk, the *Dealmaker*, started to take damage. The Hapans extensive use of ion cannons was beginning to tell already on the enemy's deflector shields.

"Now, if I had any reserves, now would be the time to put them forward," Constantine muttered, scowling as he was forced to watch as the Hapans began to batter the Confederacy. As he watched, one of the Heruc-class ships died. Something was wrong with its shields, or perhaps it was simply bad luck. Regardless the two Munificent class pounced, shifted their targeting to it. Their heavy turbolasers hammered against that single area of shielding, downing it permanently in time for the Vulture fighters to rush in, their concussion missiles crashed into it, exploding large segments of its outer hull until they hit something vital, killing it.

At the same time, the Hapan gunboats were doing a far more effective job against the Vultures than the Baron had expected. This was because a large majority of those Vultures had already expended their concussion missiles in the earlier attacks and had not returned to their motherships to rearm. Meanwhile, one of the Munificents also started to suffer, surrounded and being hammered under by ships which, while not as well-designed, were at least in their weight class, unlike Vena's destroyers.

Seeming to realize the battle was lost, the Lucrehulk began to pull away. They did not pull in their Vultures, knowing that to wait to do so would have been a mistake, given how badly their shields were already flickering. Instead, they simply turned, moving away from the planet and the attacking Hapans. The Munificents followed, the entire Confederacy formation shifting into a defensive one.

The Hapans did not let up, battering the enemy ships continuously, getting hurt in turn. Three more of the Herucs were forced to halt their pursuit, shifting away from the battlefield, and more of their gunboats began to die as they too began to expend their onboard concussion missiles. A more specialized design than the Dornea gunboats used in the GDL, they lacked the shielding and turbolasers to keep fighting without concussion missiles.

Eventually, the Lucrehulk, thanks to its heavy shields and sheer size, reached the hyperspace limit despite everything the Hapans could do. There, it showed the unconcern the Confederacy had for its droid troops, jumping for hyperspace immediately, followed by a single damaged Munificent. The second cruiser couldn't make it, its engines dying under heavy ion cannon fire that burst through their shielding before it could jump. It now turned to protect one last cargo transport, but in vain. The Hapans just had too many ships and were able to close in and slag the last freighter before it could jump to hyperspace. With both ships now defenseless, the Hapans launched boarding parties, their motherships hammering further ion cannon rounds into anything aboard the ships that looked as if it had any power.

For a moment, as the last of the enemy capital ships flickered from the red of an enemy to the black of an unknown on his screen, Constantine stared, wondering aloud at what he was

seeing. "Why? Why the kriff is a Hapan battlefleet of that size involving itself in our affairs? That has to be at least a fifth of their full fleet complement, and they never send their flotillas beyond the Shield Worlds! The Confederacy won't bother with them, the Hapes Cluster has nothing that they could be interested in, and the Shield Worlds would eat any attacking fleet alive, so why involve themselves in this war after more than two thousand years spent enforcing their isolation?"

The Shield Worlds were star systems that were, as the name suggested, fortified as best as they could be, planetary systems that the cluster had turned into fortresses that could sneer at even a fully Republic or Confederacy fleet. Everything about them was geared towards defending the cluster, whose other defenders would know how to hyper in and out of the systems, attacking as they could to relieve the pressure from the Shield Worlds themselves via the nearly impassable hyperspace lanes surrounding the cluster. They had done so for millennia alongside the nebula's own temperamental, ever-changing gaseous interior.

Calming down, Constantine frowned as a thought occurred to him. *Maybe they really are afraid that the Confederacy could move against them? With the Confederacy linked to the Sith, that is a possibility. I've heard rumors that Force users can find routes through hyperspace areas that computers can't. That could include that dense miasma of gases asteroids and what have you that protects the Cluster.*

"Baron, we are being hailed," said one of his officers quietly. "Should I put it through?"

Constantine stared back at the man, his mind trying to understand why the universe had suddenly changed so profoundly on him. *What does this mean? What will the Hapan's demand for this moment of largess? A largess no doubt made more expensive by the fact that they lost ships here. And will their price be something I will be willing to, or even allowed, to pay? What is going on here!* Eventually, he got control of himself enough to nodded his head as he tried to think of possibilities of why the cluster had decided to intervene.

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"Chume'da, we have established a connection with the local Republic representative. Do you wish to speak to him directly, or would you prefer I begin the discussion?"

"I will speak to the Baron personally, the better to emphasize both our unequal positions of authority and the seriousness of my words, I think." Whereas the first voice which spoke was that of an older woman, her voice scratchy from shouting orders for years, the second voice was that of a young woman. She sat in her chair aboard the Hapan Battle Dragon, regal as a queen on her throne and just as demanding. She had long blond hair tied into an intricate braid that fell in a cascade down one side of her chest, dark green eyes, and a face to make most movie starlets and models weep. It was a haughty face, but her eyes gleamed with intelligence and just an inkling of amusement.

This was Ta'a Chumei, the heir apparent to the throne of the Hapes Consortium. And currently, she was a young woman on a mission.

Judging from the shocked gasp and his foolishly opening and closing mouth, it appeared to Ta'a that introductions were not necessary. *Good, that will save me from bandying too many words with this idiot male.* "Baron Constantine. You looked as if you needed help."

The Baron nodded. "We did, and I thank you. Yet, I do not think you did this out of any sense of fellow feeling towards a fellow Republic planet. Nor is the Hapes Consortium known for acts of generosity."

"That would be very foolish of you to think, indeed," the Chumei'da snorted. "No, our help has a price tag attached. But in return, if the Confederacy do ever return, so too may our aid in driving them off."

"What do you want that my planet could possibly provide?" the Baron asked, although his head was bowed, knowing that whatever it was, he was going to do it if it was within his power to do so. They did need the help, and, not to put too fine a point on it, but his defenses were ravaged. The Hapans might have a bit of trouble knocking his shield down enough to launch troops since his planet's planetary-based ground batteries were still intact, but beyond that, they owned his system right now.

"You will join the GDL, and you will send a message to its leader, Count Potter. You will tell him the Princess of the Hapes Consortium wishes to meet with him." She smiled, and for a moment, it was a much warmer, more personable smile than the Baron, or indeed any man, had ever seen on her face before. "I wish to see if he remembers a day long past and a meeting most fraught that occurred on your planet..." *And perhaps something more...*

OOOOOOO

Other planets were not so lucky as Vena. Chellak fell under a Confederacy assault that was almost vindictive in its nature. The attack battered its orbital infrastructure into wreckage and then began pounding down the shield enough to land troops, which quickly overran the capital, killing thousands of people. Others, mostly Type 3 planets, found themselves under the heels of the conqueror. They had to hope that the GDL's promise of being freed would come true.

Still, there were other planets where the Confederacy discovered things were much tougher than they had anticipated. The Republic's defense was becoming tougher, and while the Confederacy was still winning battles, they were losing many others.

One planet that was being targeted in particular was the Alsakan sector of Neimos. This planet was the sector's shipbuilding and repair capital and had been the site of numerous conflicts throughout known history, almost as much as Alsaka itself. It was a Core Worlds

system and just as heavily industrialized as any other. And unlike most, it had invested heavily in defense.

Now, Neimos became the site of the largest battle of the war to date as two-hundred plus capital ships fought it out in the skies over Neimos.

The attacking fleet was built around seven Lucrehulks, fifty Munificent class, and dozens of smaller ships. The defenders were in smaller cruisers, the largest cruisers a homebuilt kind of ship that had been touted as a match for the old Katana fleet's Dreadnaught class cruisers. The planet's defense force also contained more than forty wings of starfighters of various designs, all of them modern, homebuilt or otherwise. Besides that, they had several orbital defense stations around several out-system asteroids and the planet itself.

The one in charge of the city defense was Neimosan vice-admiral and a Jedi named Doclan Tinvar. He had led a group of nine other Jedi, one other Master, four knights, and their padawans, to aid in defense of Neimos. The Jedi were currently spread out aboard the defense ships, helping to coordinate the defenses against the building pressure of the Confederacy assault.

Or rather, most of them were. Two were missing, Master Ba'co and his padawan. The Neimosan vice-Admiral wondered about that but didn't have much concentration to waste on it.

With the Jedi's ability to see a few split-seconds into the future, the defense was doing well, pulling back under coordinated fire, and had only lost a few of their heavy ships just yet. Although, the attackers were not losing ships either.

"Bring us around," the Jedi Master whispered, his voice barely audible over the hum of electronics and the shouts of the various officers in the flag bridge. "The Neimosan Light is about to lose its engines."

A second later, the ship in question did lose its engines and would've been pounced on by a mass of Vulture fighters if not for the flagship, the Prideful, getting in their way, disrupting their strafing run and destroying several. It took several hard shots from a Munificent in return in the next few moments, but both local ships took the same ship under fire, causing it to peel away slowly, its frontal shields hammered into the yellow. But two more took its place, while the Neimosan Light was able to repair its engines.

This was a more normal battle than those the GDL took part in, with no use of movement or multipronged assaults. Simply two fleets hammering against one another, with the admirals using their tactical sense to put different portions of their fleet into different areas of the battle in the hopes of punching out a capital ship or two and thus turning the tide.

"Wing Omega, Wing Omicron, flip your attack vectors," the Admiral shouted into his communicator. "I want a one-two punch on the Temerity, its shields in the aft quadrant are going." Thanks to the angle from which they had advanced in-system, the Confederacy was forced to defend themselves from a few of the outer system's orbital stations. They were not as well-armed as Golan type defense stations, but they had many anti-fighter quad cannons and shields for days.

If we can damage one of those Lucrehulks, the enemy will have to assign ships and vultures to escorted out of the battle zone. They know we've still got other starfighter wings waiting, to be called in and they can't risk one of their ships getting jumped like that. And even one less Lucrehulk would make a difference to the rest of the battle.

The Admiral's thoughts were interrupted by the Jedi next to him whispering out another order. "Master S'ten, push your ship forward to engage the Temerity as the wings go in. Your shields should be able to take the punishment."

The Admiral looked at him quizzically, not seeing a point to that. Worse, it would put that heavy cruiser too far forward from the defense fire of its fellows. But the Jedi simply raised a finger, still having his eyes closed. He wasn't able to use Battle Meditation like a few others in the Order. But like most Jedi Masters, he was very good at reading the future, and he was putting all of his efforts into doing so right now.

And this was one of the moves that they had been planning all along. "We have an incoming ally," he said simply. "Prepare to relay telemetry data."

On the other cruiser's bridge, Master S'ten obeyed even as his ship started to rock under the hits from the enemy, who were targeting his ship more than its fellows now. They hit back, further pressuring the shields of the Lucrehulk, but even as the starfighters, Aethersprites, and older variants roared in, there was no chance that the shields of that ship would fail anytime soon.

To the Confederacy, it must have seemed that the locals had seemingly made the mistake of rushing out to defend the outer-system orbital defenses and so didn't have any access to the planetary weapons that could batter through those kinds of shielding swiftly. This left them in a slogging match with the opponents, but that didn't mean that the defenders lacked in tricks.

There was a reason why they were fighting out here away from the inner system's gravity wells.

A second later, that reason came out of hyperspace. The Alsakan sectors Star dreadnought, the Independent, came out of hyperspace right behind the enemy fleet. Swarms of Vulture starfighters instantly began to turn towards it, but the Independent blew dozens of

them out of space quickly, even as its main weapons and its proton torpedoes latched onto two of the Lucrehulks in particular.

From behind the enemy line, the new ship began to batter them down, and the ships were not in a position to respond. Most of their weapons were on their sides and the outer edge of their C-shaped hulls. Like most capital ships, there weren't as many weapons facing aft, especially heavy weapons.

Their shields were still very heavy, though, and it took several minutes for the new arrival to batter them down, nearly fifteen minutes each. During this time, the various Munificent class ships twisted around, allowing their larger fellows to continue concentrating on the defenders while they began to attack this newcomer.

At the Admiral's order, two more wings of starfighters came up out of the atmosphere of one of the inner-city moons. All Aethersprites, they zipped towards the battlefield, coming up towards the main battle, taking the same ships the Independent were engaged with under fire.

One enemy frigate soon began to list badly, its engines damaged from a lucky hit that got through a weakened portion of its shielding. Another Lucrehulk reeled out of formation, some of its power going out, as its engines blew under the star dreadnaught's fire. The rest of their fleet was also starting to feel it, although so were the defenders, and the Admiral was kept busy shouting out orders to his captains. Meanwhile, the dogfight was vicious, whole squadrons disappearing in moments.

Even the star dreadnought was beginning to feel it, although not nearly as much as its enemies, and the Temerity was close to losing its shields entirely. After that, caught between the Star dreadnaught, the orbital stations, and S'ten's ship, it would die.

Suddenly the Jedi Master's eyes opened wide, and he shouted out, "Connect me to the Independent! Master Ba'co, get out of there! Hyperjump out!"

The Admiral blinked but didn't countermand the Order, concentrating several more of his lighter ships, which had just returned from being rotated out of the battle into a firing pass on one of the wounded Munificents. They took damage from its fellows, but two of them were able to get between it and one of those other ships, raking the front-mounted enemy ship with a broadside.

Its shields began to falter even as it fired back, hammering the two ships that had attacked it one after another as they passed.

The star dreadnought obeyed the Jedi's Order, which had been backed up an instant later by their own Jedi. Master Doclan turned to the Admiral, his face grim. "It is time to cede

the outer system, sir. We have incoming, heavy enemy reinforcements. Pull back to Neimos, retreat into the orbitals."

Blinking, the Neimosan Admiral was about to ask why. It looked as if they were going to be able to, if not win, then certainly starts to beat off this attack. Then, not four minutes after the *Independent* jumped to hyperspace, an entire fleet of new enemy icons jumped in. "Give me a reading on those!"

"Five Lucrehulks, they've already started to fire, we don't have identifiers on the other four ships, but there are at least..."

Those four ships were the smaller carriers of the Confederacy, the Captor class. Unable to transport as many Vultures as the Lucrehulks could, they were horribly vulnerable to enemy fire once their shields fell. But they had three times as many Vulture fighters as the Munificent class, and they could launch them extremely quickly. And although older than the Lucrehulk class, they could be made far more easily as well.

They did so now, and the numerical superiority in starfighters shifted from near parity to just ridiculous in seconds. The Admiral was tempted to call forward his remaining reserves but knew that the Jedi Master was right: with Five new Lucrehulks in the system, all un-blooded, they couldn't hold the outer system.

Instead, he shifted his tactics to be fully on the defensive, wincing as he lost both of the light cruisers who had heretofore been pounding one of the enemy Munificents flat. "All starfighter squadrons bar Wing Omicron switch to defensive mode! Wing Omicron, jump those Vultures before they hit our ships. All units, pull back!"

Omicron had somehow retained its formation almost entirely up to this point. The wing had moved in to defend the *Star Dreadnaught* before it jumped to hyperspace. Now the wing of Aethersprites crashed into the new Vultures even as the new Lucrehulks almost ignored them entirely, moving into the battle. But the Jedi's warning had stopped them from claiming their real prize in the *Independent*, and now the defenders were already pulling back.

Slowly, the defensive fleet fell back through the system back to Neimos, with the Admiral bringing forward his last reserves of starfighters. They lost seven ships in the retreat, all light cruisers. Soon one of the larger heavy cruisers went down as well, slowed by Vulture fire, and then pounded flat by several of the Lucrehulks.

But when the battle entered Neimos's orbit, the defenders got a massive boost in their defensive fire. The Admiral ordered the more wounded ships down under the planetary shield, their firepower more than replaced by the defense stations. And now, the planet's own batteries began to fire.

Shields began to falter among the Confederacies fleet, and one unlucky Munificent, the Creditor, was destroyed. But the numerical superiority was now clearly on the attacker's side, and soon the Admiral knew he would have to pull his remaining ships back behind the planetary shield. After that, the Confederacy pulled back too and commenced a siege of the planet, destroying everything beyond its guns' reach.

"Where is the Alsakan fleet! They should've been here to back up the Independent!?! And where is the Independent? Have we been able to contact them since they jumped out?"

"I don't know sir, they're jamming all outgoing Hypercom signals now,"

"Dammit! Here was me thinking that they weren't going to be doing that in this fight, the Neimosan said with a sigh. "It turns out they were instead coordinating their own attack."

Six more ships blew up, as the Admiral desperately tried to stave off the inevitable. Two more Munificents reeled out of formation, followed by a third exploding. Two of the smaller carriers were jumped by a small group of starfighters who had somehow used the debris of the earlier phase of the battle to hide for a time. And another Lucrehulk began to falter as its shields began to falter under the planetary defenses' hammering.

However, the Neimosan was about to order his mobile units to retreat under the planetary defense shield, leaving the space stations to their own devices when suddenly, the enemy fleet began to pull out of orbit. Not in a controlled movement either, but every ship going into full reverse at the same time. This left several of the damaged Munificents and many Vultures suddenly without their fellow's defensive fire.

Even as the Neimosans took advantage of this, their Admiral shook his head incredulously. "What in the world is that about?"

As he watched, one of the Lucrehulks, the Veracity, ran into a piece of debris it was retreating so quickly. Its shields flickered badly as they deflected the large chunk of metal composed of the hull from a previously destroyed local cruiser. Instantly a group of the Neimosan starfighters took advantage of this, moving into the shielding, hammering proton torpedoes down into the ship's hull, exploding entire segments here and there before several died under its defensive fire.

The Master Jedi next to the Admiral whispered out, "Take that ship out! It is the second-in-command of the attacking fleet." All ships that could quickly change their targeting to the wounded giant among them.

Moments later, its shield faltering from several ion cannon blasts from the planet. Soon after, the ship itself exploded under the combined fire of seventeen of the local defenders.

Those ships took damage from the retreating enemy but were still able to pull back into formation above the planet. All of them were badly damaged, but they left the Lucrehulk exploding ruin in their wake.

For a moment, the Neimosan thought that perhaps the enemy had retreated to combat an allied fleet jumping into the system. *But then how would they know it was coming?* However, this did not happen. Instead, the ships retreated entirely, taking on their Vulture fighters as best they could and then jumping for hyperspace without further ado.

"What just happened? This wasn't some kind of spoiling raid, was it?" the Admiral asked, looking around for anyone who had any answers.

"I am not certain except..." Doclan trailed off, knowing that the other Jedi were doing much the same thing as they thought about what the Force was telling them of the minds aboard those ships. What they felt was fear. A lot of fear. An almost irrational level of fear coming from many of the minds of the enemy, starting with the commanding officers and then spreading out from them like a plague. As if they had just been given information that scared them silly. "Except that, I think they have much greater problems than attacking your planet to worry about."

Admiral Neimos looked around, gazing at the wreckage of his world's once-proud defense fleet, gazing at the damage done to his system. Unlike the attacks into the GDL, the attackers hadn't swept the outer system clear of all industry. But even so, the attack had damaged quite a lot of that industrial capacity, destroying mining sites here and there as they pushed towards Neimos. And his fleet had been mangled. It would be months before any of his ships saw further action. Not to mention the space stations. One had been lost with all hands, while two others had been battered into obsolescence. "Whatever it is, I can only but be thankful."

Nodding, the older Twi'lek Jedi turned his attention to helping the recovery teams.

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"What do you mean you pulled your fleets back?" Dominus growled. Gone was his normal grandfatherly, sad tutor guise. In its place was the snarl of a man on the brink of rage as he stared through the pickup at several of his admirals. So angry was he that Dominus didn't think he would be able to control the Force well enough to do anything, let alone reach across the lightyears and Force Choke these fools as their actions deserve. *How dare they take such an action without my orders?!*

"You've seen the intelligent reports, surely Master C'baoth. That kriffing little freak, Yoda, has been sharing it with Jedi allies all over the Republic!" One of his Theatre Commanders muttered, somewhat cowed by C'baoth's anger but, even though he was one of the admirals who he had already begun to mentally dominate a week ago.

"Agreed, it's just luck that we were able to break a few of those codes, else we wouldn't even know about it. Who's to say who has access to this override program!?" Said one of the other admirals, a Neimoidian. He looked even more afraid than the rest of them.

Normally, Dominus was all in favor of seeing fear in those around him. Fear fed the Dark Side and gave him both power over them, and more power in the Force that he could manipulate to his own ends. Yet while that was true, this kind of fear was different. Not in the emotion, but rather the impact. Because there was a tremendous amount of fear going through the entire Confederacy at the idea that their droids could be turned against them. "You know that is impossible! The droids are a closed system, only able to connect to their local area network."

"But that doesn't mean that something could impact that local network through the Hypercom, which could then be sent out to all the droids. Or perhaps even traitors among our own people..."

"We do not need that kind of witch-hunt!" Trench barked. He alone of the admirals in this conference seemed to have kept his fear from controlling him.

"No, we just need to go over the programming, calmly and slowly," Said the Sluisi Admiral, Druck. "We cannot leave this kind of threat hanging over our heads. We need to prove it false."

"And in so doing, we lose the momentum of this war! We must keep the GDL and the Republic reeling! Pulling back our forces..." Dominus argued.

"Not all of them, just some. Say half my own fleets perhaps, while the other half will continue to fight," soothed another Theatre Commander, this one a Geonosian named Sun Fac. The hard-bitten, ruthless bug-like alien was the last one to advocate anything that could be seen as fear, but this just showed how dangerous the very idea of having their droids turned against them was to the Confederacy.

"Why does yours have to be the first to be cleared! What about mine? My task forces are pushing hard into the GDL, and we have lost Lucrehulks! I need to clear more of my troops for combat than any of you," Trench argued.

"Enough!" Dominus shouted. But for once, he knew that fear was working against the Sith. It wasn't just the admirals that were afraid after all, but their captains and officers. By the Dark Side, the entire intelligence community of the Confederacy had gone mad. The slicers who had broken Yoda's 'secret' communications with the GDL, the temple and various Pro-Jedi groups the Republic over had thought they needed to spread this bit of information as far and as fast as they could, not realizing how dangerous doing so would be.

Did none of them think it was a bluff? But then again, how else to explain the Tyrant's Bane's survival? Dominus thought before thrusting the idea aside. They could find that out later. Right now, he had to do damage control.

"This is just a, a trick that Yoda has constructed out of whole cloth. The Tyrant's Bane was saved from destruction in some other fashion, which we will eventually discover. No doubt it was some Jedi trick, but nothing like this 'Override Program' that Yoda talked about. After all, why would they wait to use something like that? Instead of using it on a dozen battlefields all at once. No, it must be something different."

Reaching out to the Dark Side, Dominus grabbed his Admirals' fear, then slowly began to ask questions to lead the admirals and the other officers in taking part in this conference to the correct conclusion. "So you see, Yoda is lying. That is why he spread the lie so far! We have millions of slicers the galaxy over. All of them can attest that there is no way to invade a droid's program like that without a physical connection.

Further, our various droid production centers are among the most closely guarded secrets in the Confederacy. To install this kind of program into our droids, you would need to find all of those production centers, and the Republic hasn't. They don't have the resources yet to even start scouting for them."

Watching his Theatre Commanders all nodding their heads in agreement, Dominus was unsurprised to hear several of them say that whatever they felt, it would take time to really sink in among their officers. Trench even went so far as to say, "We may even need to keep pulling back our forces until we can pass around your arguments among them, Master C'baoth. Otherwise, the fear will make them retreat piecemeal regardless of what we command them, or possibly even revolt. Especially on the various GDL fronts."

"To say nothing of what the defensive fleets will need to do if the news gets out to our political so-called leaders," Ningo added.

Dominus seemed to think, then nodded. "Very well, you can each pull a fourth of your attacking forces out of the attacking task forces. But only a fourth at a time. Beyond that, I expect you to keep up the pressure, damn it!"

That was the best he could get, he sensed. Indeed, many of his Theatre Commanders were concerned that they might well face a mutiny among their officers if they were not seen doing anything about this fictional threat. Even a public announcement over Hypercom would not stop the fear and concern among the Confederacy forces from growing. Only time and, as Trench put it, seeming to do something could stave that off.

This meant that, regardless of what Dominus or Sidious wanted, the GDL, at the least, was going to get a reprieve. *Indeed, it might be impossible for me to stop us from losing momentum against the Republic as well. The Dark Side take Yoda's soul!*

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Sidious gaped at the report in front of him, then looked up to Admiral Yularen, who had handed it to him. Yularen looked back at the Chancellor with a shrug. "That's what our reports are sending. Many of the attacks on the Republic haven't quite stopped, but a majority of new assaults had abruptly ended, with the Confederacy forces retreating at speed. The same is true on the GDL side of things. I wish we could make use of it somehow, but thanks to the Jedi trotting out this new weapon of theirs on such a small scale, then Force blast it, crowing about it, we might have lost a precious strategic advantage!"

"Well?" Sidious asked, looking over at Master Rancisis. "Do you Jedi honestly have such a weapon, and if so, why haven't you used it before?"

The Thisspiasian looked back at the Chancellor and the rest of the Republic High Command, his alien face set in an inscrutable mask. Then he simply shrugged, a full-body motion for his species that send shivers up and down his snakelike frame. "The veil of illusion covers much and can hide the true reality."

"So that would be a no then," Sidious responded dryly. "I think I'm getting better at Jedi-speak, and I am afraid your anger on this point is misplaced, Admiral Yularen."

Rancisis shrugged. "If we do have such, it is of very limited utility."

"So again, that would be a no," Sidious replied, drawling out his words this time, for once allowing his irritation the Jedi's ability to speak around the truth like any other politician to annoy him. *I need more time in my meditation chamber. I'm beginning to lose my temper too easily. Thankfully, that doesn't impact my control of my own Force Stealth, but still...*

"Even if it's a lie, I wonder if we can run with us," Isard murmured. "It is definitely a way to put the fear of revolt into the heart of the Confederacy military. They all rely on droid troops to the extent that, if they no longer trust them, we could be within a month of winning the war..."

"Perhaps, but how to spread it around without it becoming more obvious that it is, in fact, a lie would be a problem. Worse, suppose we tell our own side that we have such a weapon, one that could perhaps end the war quickly as you said, Director. Then, it turns out that we don't? We could see a decline in morale both among the troops at the front and the civilians. Even the cloned troops would become affected by such as that, I think," Sidious argued back, quick to head off any such thing. "Unless you have such a way to spread such information?"

Isard let loose a sigh, then shook his head. "No Chancellor, I don't have nearly enough agents to create that kind of a disinformation campaign. Frankly, it's astonishing that Master Yoda's words spread so far so quickly."

"Indeed it is," Sidious replied with a light chuckle, while internally he was frowning heavily at that same thing and its implications.

"How has Operation Iron Grip gone?" Master Rancisis asked. "I understand that the preliminaries at least were successful?"

"It has succeeded entirely, actually," Yularen answered, quickly recovering from his earlier moment of annoyance at the mention of his own masterstroke, although Sidious noted that the Jedi too seemed to want to avoid conversations about what the Tyrant's Bane had run into and how Potter had gotten out of it. "The offensive into the Alsakan sector has halted, and we were able to pull out the Independent, use it as a spearhead into our first offensive of the war. Foerost is now entirely blockaded."

"So we've cut off the Confederacy from their largest shipyard for now," Rancisis said, while more than one of the other officers present nodded their heads, seemingly in relief. Thanks to its position, Foerost, a Techno Union world, had found itself the site of the only offensive action the Republic could launch at present. It was simply too surrounded by other Core Worlds, each of which had their own defense fleets, all of which had willingly been folded into the Republic Navy.

"Their largest known," Isard burst their bubbles coolly. "We still have no idea where their hidden shipyards are, and there is no way that the ones we know of, like Foerost, could have created this massive fleet they're using, let alone the number of droids we are seeing."

"And how goes our logistics?" Sidious changed the subject. The slow growth of Republic Intelligence was something he wanted to keep as a subtle thing for now. Eventually, it would become his hidden dagger in the dark, but for now, it was still growing.

Though Sidious made a note to come back to this idea of using a program against the droids later, just to make certain that there was no substance to that rumor. It would create a major upset to his plans, dwarfing even that of the report from Kinman about the Agri-corps Jedi. *After all, if the enemy couldn't field droids, there would be no reason to field clones, would there?*

Yet at present, there was nothing that he could do about it other than spread a counter rumor, a tongue-in-cheek thing perhaps, that the Jedi had tricked the entire Confederacy. *That would infuriate the Confederates while also backing up whatever steps Dominus uses to get control of this, getting them back into the war with a vengeance. No one likes being made a fool, after all. Yes, that is how I will play it.*

And yet, and yet, why? Why did Yoda come up with something like this? It is entirely unlike him. Yoda can prevaricate, can obfuscate the truth like the best of them, can even mislead on the tactical and strategic level, I have no doubt. But was the purpose of this to simply sow confusion? Or... he frowned and side, glancing over to Rancisis. *Or was it, as the*

Thisspiasian said, a veil to hide the reality? What if this lie wasn't made just to spread disorder among the enemy, but to hide what truly happened to let the Tyrant's Bane escape certain destruction?

That was a disturbing thought. But then Sidious thought further, thinking about the Tyrant's Bane. Again it comes back to that cursed ship and its owner! If they didn't have such a program, how did it fend off such a large force? Did the GDL have that kind of resources in that area, and if so, how?

With a scowl, he realized that once more that he would have to hope Kinman did his usual better than average job on being thorough when he reached that battlefield. I need answers, dammit! Whatever it is, it isn't going to affect the overall strategic picture of the war yet. But there are enough mysteries about the GDL and their ability to ferry around planetary shields and space stations around the galaxy at will that I cannot afford still more.

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As one of the Senators on the Military Oversight Committee, Padme was privy to many of the same intelligence reports that the High Command talked about in open meetings like the one currently going on. Now, as she sat in a separate overwatch room staring down at the Chancellor and the other officers as they moved on to discuss strategy and the logistics of the hundreds of different battlefronts scattered across the Republic, she wondered about it. Padme and Zule had been unable to contact Harry just yet. "What do you think?"

Zule snorted in laughter. "It's a trick. Who came up with it, I don't know, though, for some reason, I think its Master Yoda, but I don't know why." Then she lowered her voice, leaning in to whisper into Padme's ear, so close her breath sending a shiver down Padme's spine. "Although, we both know what it might be hiding..."

Turning to face her, Padme leaned over in turn, whispering into the other woman's ears just as closely, leaning in so no one could even read her lips. Although Chewie had devised a portable noise scrambler that might stop hearing devices, there was no way to know who around them might try to listen in. And with Harry having shared his concerns about continued Sith machinations, neither Jedi Knight nor Senator was willing to take chances. "I know that the defenses of the Tyrant's Bane could laugh at that kind of assault, but I didn't get the impression that your offensive punch would be able to destroy so many ships without some escaping."

"You didn't see everything we had on hand, trust me, Princess," Zule retorted.

"I do trust you, but I could have sworn I told you to stop calling me that," Senator Padme drawled, pulling away to poke the other young woman in the ribs lightly. "I stopped being a Queen before I became Senator, and I was never a princess."

"I know, but it bothers, you so I'll keep doing it. Call it my attempt to help your self-control remain high," Zule replied honestly before spending a moment to think about the previous topic. *I wonder how much longer Harry will be able to keep the Bane's abilities a secret after this? Still, there's nothing I can do from here on that score. Best to keep my thoughts on what I can truly impact.*

Zule then stood up, pulling Padme to her own feet. "Now come on. There's not going to be anything else important discussed today. You've already made your case for the Medical Ship Neutrality Act earlier today. You're not going to miss anything, certainly nothing worth missing a day of exercise. And there's nothing we can do about **it** anyway," she added as Padme made to object. *And for some reason, the Force is... feeling off somehow, not quite a vision, but I don't think either of us should be here right now.*

At that, Padme's aborted protest died, and she sighed and moved after the other woman, the two of them picking up Chewie outside the security zone around the Command Center. As they left, Zule left a brief message to Master Rancisis via her communicator as they went, warning her of the vague sense of unease she had felt through the Force.

The trio was soon down at one of the Senate Security stations, where a training facility had been set up for the Senate's guards. Chewbacca had booked Padme for some live-fire training, and she went about the movements with her blaster with practiced ease: cleaning the blaster, checking the stock, making certain that the plasma residue inside hadn't built up to the degree that repeated firings would cause damage. Then she put the blaster rifle back together before sliding the magazine home and listening for the telltale hiss of compressed gasses for a second. A second later, a little light beeped on the side of the blaster, showing that the gases within were heating up to the appropriate temperature, and she picked up a helmet, setting it on her head before moving next to Chewbacca.

The massive Wookiee gestured down the firing range, his voice as always coming from the small translator on his waist. "I've set the defenders to defend themselves with stunners, so this will be a live-fire training exercise of the truest sense. You'll have to move and fire for effect. We'll be here until you can get to the other side of the firing range without being tagged, so do it well the first time through."

Chuckling at that admonition, Padme raised the blaster, staring down the sight line, getting her eye in. At the same time, she eyed the half-droid dummies that were slowly twitching to life throughout the firing range.

With barely a pause, Padme raised her rifle to her shoulder and started to send bolts of plasma downrange, hitting the first two droids at the fifty meters mark.

Elsewhere, Zule was working with a few of the Republic Senate guards, figuring out where a few strange life sign readings were coming from in one of the spires that was mainly given over to senatorial living quarters. In the past two weeks, with their authority and remit

both expanded thanks to the war, Senate Security had begun to make inroads, completely shutting down any connection between the lower levels of Coruscant and the Senatorial District at the top. This was **not** easy, but it basically involved moving a lot of people from the living districts below a certain level in the spires that made up the Senatorial district, out of their homes and filling them with ferrocrete.

This had no doubt been done numerous times before. Everything on Coruscant was built on the remains of earlier cities. And, of course, there was still millions of people living below that demarcation line. But it had slowly begun to shut down the massive security hole which had, in a way, allowed the attack on Padme a week before. However, that didn't mean that they were anywhere near finished with the operation. Hovercars and short term shuttles were still a huge security nightmare, since below the topmost three levels – the two-hundred-plus levels of Coruscant that could be called the 'surface' of the ecumenopolis- any attempt to police or control such movement was impossible. Which was, again, a major issue. After all, what could go down, could come up.

However, not five minutes into Padme's exercise, a commotion erupted, with the blare of alarms and the scream of tortured metal as elsewhere defense guns strewn throughout the Senate District began to fire. The side of the spire that housed the shooting range exploded inward, under a massive impact. A large cargo hauler had been smashed into the side of the building, having deviated from its previous landing coordinates. It was supposed to be bringing in a series of local delicacies from several Core Worlds.

Instantly as it smashed in through the outer wall, Padme turned, bringing up her blaster rifle and shooting towards the nose of the hauler as it stuck out through the rain of debris. "Honestly, not a month into the war, and already I've been attacked twice? I must be doing something right!"

"Hahaha!" howling in Wookiee laughter, Chewbacca followed suit as he charged forward to meet the group of people who came out of the snout of the cargo hauler as it fell open to reveal that the interior had been heavily modified to be a troop transport of some kind. There were around thirty people inside, all humans, all men and they shouted out imprecations that made Padme's eyes widen even as she shot at them. "Core Worlds for humanity, aliens out! The alien is the root of all disasters. Only humans can rule the stars! Death to the traitoress!"

"What, just...what?" Padme muttered, even as she stopped mid-charge, rolling to the side to put herself behind cover, shooting out short, controlled bolts of plasma fire, impacting the incoming attackers as they too began to take cover.

A second later, she breathed a sigh of thanks to Harry and Aayla as she heard the familiar popping his of a lightsaber being activated behind her. "I leave you for five minutes! Five minutes!" Zule shouted. "Honestly, I don't know who's a greater magnet for trouble, you, Aayla, or Harry!"

So saying, Zule leaped up and over where Padme was crouching, her lightsaber flashing this way and that, battering back blaster bolts. A second later, a Force Shield covered Chewbacca, and he popped out of cover, his bowcaster outside of the shield as he fired, charging forward, the shield moving with him.

"Death to the aliens!" the attackers practically screamed back. As Padme watched for a moment, unwilling to fire past Zule, they quickly started to shift their fire to Chewbacca and Zule, seemingly forgetting the fact that they were here to assassinate her. Why they were here to assassinate her, Padme still had trouble understanding. Their slogans sounded somewhat familiar to Padme, though. *Something I've read about in history lessons, I think?*

Shaking that thought away, Padme quickly shifted over to another bollard, using it as cover to give her two friends and Guardians protective fire from the flank. Several attackers shifted their attention to Padme, but a second later, the Wookie and Jedi closed, with Chewbacca literally barreling into a few of the humans. His Force Shield smacking them aside until it fell, and he reached forward's grabbing two of the attackers breaking their arms.

Padme was then a witness as to why the Wookies were so feared in hand-to-hand combat. For all the fact that he looked like a fur rug given legs and arms, Chewbacca had far, far greater strength for his size than any human would have. He lifted up his two victims easily and then began to twirl them around, slamming them into the others like human-shaped maces, tossing them off their feet, crushing one man's head beneath his foot, as he roared.

In contrast, Zule was far more focused in her attacks. Now that she was in amongst them, she was using the stunning technique to down as many of the attackers as possible, her lightsaber turned off in favor of a Force Shield that covered her a bare centimeter away from her skin. She was only forced to use her lightsaber once she saw two men wearing dozens of grenades.

Decapitating both with a single twirl of her lightsaber, Zule then hurled them back into the cargo hauler with a Force Push before tossing up another Force Shield just in time as there was a series of detonations within the hauler. By which time Chewie had finished pummeling the last of the attackers into the ground, and the security guards had finally arrived.

"Sorry for the wait Madame Senator," the sergeant in charge of the quick response team saluted, his fellows quickly moving past him. Two other cargo haulers crashed into our security area. One of them tried to crash directly above us, and the other crew made for the Chancellor's office via a set of grapple and hover-plates."

"I take it they didn't get far?"

"No ma'am, but the attack above took some time to corral, and we were much more concerned about the rest of our charges than ourselves. Plus, well," the older man, a Duros,

chuckled ruefully, gesturing with a thumb towards Chewbacca and Zule. "You had those two with you."

"True," Padme said with a chuckle of her own before turning serious. "I would like to be informed by whatever you get out of these prisoners. Given what they were shouting, I would have thought this was a personal attack on me if you hadn't told me about the other attacks."

"And on the Chancellor and a few others." The man said with a nod. "Going by their shouted slogans, we know they were shouting about a pro-human league or something. It doesn't look as if it was connected to the CIS or anything of that nature at all. Indeed, even the way they were able to bypass outer-security doesn't match what I would think we'd see from a CIS infiltration team."

"Good," Padme said with a sigh. "It would have been very disturbing if the Confederacy could strike at us here on Coruscant, and me personally, twice in less than two weeks."

A few hours later, she, a few other senators from outside the Core Worlds, the Chancellor, and to her astonishment Anakin and Master Windu sat, listening to the report from Senate Security and Director Isard.

"We stopped eighteen other attempts before they could even get through our outer defenses. Four of them were stopped when they started to deviate from their courses, the rest before they could crash home. Only three attacks were able to unload their assault teams, and they were all filled to the gills with terrorists, all of them were human and male," Officer Foch growled. "The most serious attack was the one launched on the Command Center's observation room, and thanks to Master Rancisis asking my people to be extra alert, we stopped the attempt to place a bomb inside the building."

Rancisis nodded slightly towards Zule, who nodded back, pleased to detect no annoyance that a Jedi who was so much more in touch with her emotions and the Living Force rather than the Unifying Force had been proven right. That was a good thing, in her opinion.

Meanwhile, Foch had paused for a moment, thinking, then he shrugged. "We may want to think about additional electronic security and passwords for normal supply shuttles, but beyond that, I think we can be reasonably pleased in how my people reacted. I have a more detailed AAR to go over, but I think that can wait for later, sirs."

"True. This was an assault that was heavy on the manpower and not so heavy on the insider knowledge, which we have to be thankful for. And thanks to Senate Security and Padme and her guards, we were able to question several dozen of the attackers, and with Jedi aid, we've discovered the reasons behind this attack." Isard shook his head ruefully. "It seems as if this group was part of a Radical group of Pius Dea throwbacks from within the Core Worlds called the Red Bloods."

That name took many of the Senator's aback, and they all scowled angrily, especially Senators Vergari and Senator Orn Free Ta. Orn Free Ta was the leader of the powerful Rim Faction. Vergari, the Drall Senator who had taken over from Garm, was now the official GDL representative here on Coruscant. Most of the other GDL senators had left the planet, heading to Corellia to begin work on putting together a more formal government structure for the league. Both were aliens and came from species who well understood what a mention of the Pius Dea meant.

The Pius Dea was a name from the Republic's early days when a semireligious movement had begun to control the Core Worlds. In the main, its beliefs were just like the shouts that had assaulted Padme earlier. The Pius Dea was a pro-human religion that believed that humanity was the only truly intelligent race. All others were but pretenders who could simply emulate their betters and be conquered for their own good or exterminated for the good of the Republic.

The Pius Dea had eventually taken over the entire Republic – which wasn't nearly as large back then and had begun pushing out into the rest of the known galaxy – when one of their fellows became Chancellor. They made war against the other races that made up the Colonies, Inner Rim, and Expansion regions until they were stopped by a unified coalition consisting of Corellia, Alsaka, and the Jedi, who had been going through a period of seclusion before joining the alliance.

The giant Temple Ships of the Pius Dea had proven an issue time and time again in open combat until a final climactic battle, where Jedi had implanted a bug into their hyperdrives, burning them out in a final jump to deep space. Most of the Temple ships disappeared into hyperspace, while the rest were beaten in the battle of Uquine by a confederation of Alsakan, Corellian, Duros, and other forces. The Jedi had proven instrumental in boarding and destroying the few temple-ships that hadn't been tricking into jumping into hyperspace.

As Isard began to explain how they had discovered the names and planets of origin for each of the prisoners, Sidious frowned, but not because of the consternation, anger or simple shock the senators around him felt. No, he was frowning in well-hidden rage. Part of the Great Plan he and the Sith Lords before him had long set up was that the Empire he would build would be pro-human. They would utilize the Pius Dea belief that still had some influence in Core World culture to do this, fanning the flames of the wariness those planets felt for the alien races.

But this? This was far, far too soon for the Jedi in particular, to become aware that that belief was still so strong among the Core Worlds. And before these attacks, Sidious had no idea that this radical group, the so-called Red Bloods, even existed!

Worse, there was no way he could block the Jedi from following up on this, and if they did, the Jedi could well begin to combat it. The Jedi were still held in immense respect in the eyes of the Core World's public. If a few human Jedi were to speak out against anti-alien

bigotry, it could well set back the moves the Sith had begun in the Core Worlds on that score by decades.

"Do we know why they wanted to attack Senator Amidala? Myself, and our nonhuman senators, I can understand. They probably see me as some sort of alien apologist or some such, and nonhumans in positions of power would obviously be targets. But why was young Padme attacked personally?" he asked, more to stave off his own rising anger than because Sidious cared. *On the other hand, the attack on her, and Anakin being here, could be an opportunity.*

"From questioning the prisoners, we have learned that the Red Bloods and the rest of the so-called Pro Human movement believe that the entire GDL is anathema to their beliefs," Rancis intoned, with Isard nodding in agreement. "I think that was based on recent surveys being done that says that two-thirds of the GDL is made up of alien species and the extreme importance of Aayla Secura in its command structure."

"So, in other words, they're just quasi-religious bigots," Anakin scowled. "Doesn't answer to how they got the resources for this attack."

"No, it doesn't," the Chancellor said firmly. *If I cannot stop the tide, I might as well make political hay by hopping out in front of the wave. It isn't very likely that the Jedi will be able to do much to the bedrock wariness of alien races present in the Core Worlds, after all.* "I would dearly like to know the answer to that one, and I think we have the resources on hand to follow this up. Master Windu, young Anakin, can I ask the two of you to look into this?"

Mace frowned, running a hand up and over his bald pate for a moment as he glanced sideways to Anakin, who looked pained for a moment, and guilty too. "...We will look into it here on Coruscant. I am afraid it has been almost a decade since I last took a mission in the Core Worlds, so I lack the resources and connections there, senator chancellors. But rest assured that the Jedi Order will follow it up."

"Definitely!" Anakin agreed with a firm nod, throwing off his moment of guilt and sadness at his recent brush with the Dark Side like an ill-fitting cloak. "We can't let religious wackos just go around attacking senators after all."

"I think the GDL will also devote some resources to this," Zule announced thoughtfully. "Although we don't honestly have many espionage-type resources to spare. Still, any attack on our chosen representative here on Coruscant, and our allies in the Peace Party, is something we need to look into."

As the group exited his office, some went to a news conference about this attack, while the others went back to their various duties. Sidious leaned back, staring at his hands as he clenched them on his desk. This had been strangely random and quite odd. Indeed, something about it was niggling his senses. This attack wasn't all that it seemed to be. But he didn't know what.

Regardless, this will not only cut into the unity I had hoped to create in my pro-human Empire but also set back the plans to vilify the Jedi in the Core Worlds even more than they have already been. Dark Side take them, If I had the time, I would hunt down this group of terrorists and butcher them myself! Then he frowned as the Dark Side pulsed within him, and Sidious suddenly realized that was the point. *Someone out there is moving against my long term plans from the shadows. Someone knows about some of my contacts in the Core Worlds! Force curse it, if I hadn't been so thrown off by Potter and the issues with the younglings and the Agri-corps Jedi, I might have seen this coming!*

The idea that this had not been a random attack, but one launched his way by an unseen enemy allowed Sidious to calm himself further. *If I have an enemy, then I can perhaps strike at them given enough time. And I will. Whoever is behind this will discover the true power of the Sith, and that the shadows of this galaxy belong to us!*

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Elsewhere on Corellia, in a dingy bar among even dingier areas, a man and woman sat, drinking quietly. "Well, that seems to have worked out well enough," the woman said in an undertone to the man as the newsfeed ran about the attack on the Senate and what was behind it. "Now, if we only knew who was setting up the propaganda against the Jedi rather than their middlemen."

"That'll come in time, and this way, the middlemen will be removed, one way or another, the Order will be combating the anti-Jedi propaganda even before it can really start to spread while also combating the pro-human movement before it too can be stoked further. And beyond that, I think we've done in as much as we can here. We need to leave and get into position to take advantage of the Sith's cutting their losses. What do you think?" Quinlan Vos asked as he gently pulled off a mask that had previously covered his Kiffar markings.

"Yes. I think it's time to head off. Before the Order can somehow sense we are here... or anyone else." With their Force Stealth covering the table for a moment, Komari Vosa reached up and pulled out a set of contacts that had changed her eye color, followed by removing a wig, leaving her normal brown hair, short-cropped now, to move ever so slightly in the breeze of an overhead fan. "I could wish we could do more, but..." she shrugged.

Having a far greater background in undercover work than Master Dooku's former apprentice, Quinlan shrugged, putting an arm around her shoulders. "We can only hunt down every different clue as we come across them. And once each thread has been pulled, or perhaps burned by the web's owner, we will, eventually, arrive at the truth."

Komari nodded, and the two of them stood up, their arms around one another as they moved out of the bar, heading towards their ship, the Ramshackle, which was nowhere near as dilapidated as it looked on the outside. Hours later, the two of them were gone, disappearing

into hyperspace, leaving behind them the soon-to-be shattered remains of one portion of the Grand Plan.

OOOOOOO

While the various Theatre Commanders were busy scrambling to deal with Yoda's little bombshell, Grievous began his own mission. While he had received reports about the so-called Override program like the rest of the CIS 's admirals, the cyborg discounted it entirely as he began to build up his troops and ships for the big push into the Jaco sector.

First, Grievous would attack several other nearby sectors, as if he was abiding by an unspoken rule that Thyferra and the surrounding sector was off-limits. Yet all the while, he would keep his true forces hidden behind the defenses of the Givin's homeworld, building up there until he could crush Thyferra's defenses and those of the worlds between it and Yag'dhul without pause. Once he was given the go-ahead, anyway. But unlike the other admirals, who might have fooled themselves into thinking his mission was pure speculation, Grievous knew it was only a matter of time.

He arrived on Yag'dhul, via the same trade route Grievous would use to attack Thyferra and was soon meeting with the local Admiral, Valtas, in person. He was a Givin, of course, and he nodded his head politely to the general, showing none of the fear that most individuals would in the fearsome cyborg's presence. Of course, reading Givin faces was hard on its own, and it was a problem that Grievous hadn't run into before. Givin looked almost like corpses anyway, with a heavy bone-like carapace over all of their squishy parts, even their eyes and mouths. They had evolved this to protect themselves against the weather of the planet below.

"Greetings, Admiral Grievous. In the equation, $A = (\pi/1012 \times 16,072)(R \times R)(E \infty)^2$, can you tell me what the value of A is?"

For a moment, Grievous snarled angrily, one hand flicking down to his lightsabers, as he wondered what the hell the creature was saying, why was he suddenly being bombarded by math? But then, to his surprise, the computer portion of his brain allowed him to answer quickly. It also gave him some information about the creature in front of him and his species. This was not a question to figure out Grievous' mathematical skills for some reason. Rather it was how the Givin greeted one another: a politeness like shaking hands was for numerous humanoid species.

Grievous didn't have much time for politeness. But, this man was an admiral, and this was his system. The shipyards here were also among the most efficient that the Confederacy had access to. "I understand," he said slowly and carefully. "That was a greeting among your people. It is not so among mine. Indeed, it has not been all that long since my people even attained mathematics. So you will no longer greet me in such a manner. Is that understood?" he finished with a growl, a harsh electronic noise out of his grating of a mouth.

The Admiral nodded slowly, then turned around abruptly, matching rudeness for rudeness and motioned to an officer who had just plugged a data cube into a hologram projector. Soon information about the local sector of space and along the Rimma Trade Route appeared. "My scouts have begun to pick out targets for your forces. I understand that you will be in charge of a major offensive eventually, but you wish to weaken and assess your original target? It is a good strategy, almost as good as the Quizarkian mathematical theorem of spatial relativity. I have selected targets. Would you like to look over them?"

Scowling as best he could in annoyance, Grievous eventually agreed with several of the other Admiral suggestions. That initial greeting had made him think that the other Admiral was simply a pencil pusher, someone who didn't understand war. And yet, apparently, mathematics somehow allowed one to understand warfare, if taken to what Grievous considered a somewhat illogical conclusion. "This one, Trakar 4," he said at last, pointing at a single system. "This new report that they are about to open up some kind of mining operation, that interests me. We must control resources and destroy any new sources of resources that the Republic comes up with. If we cannot, they will eventually be able to overwhelm us with sheer numbers."

"Yes. Anyone can see that, as simply as calculating a jump a ship to hyperspace within a lightyear of a known starting point." Before Grievous could become angry at the continued mathematical allegories, the Givin continued. "The reports indicate that system was taken by a Sullustan colony, a group that has remained loyal to the Republic, rather than joining with the CIS as Sullust has. I believe we could request a task group from Admiral Ningo to add to your own if we agree to take that system rather than simply raze it to the ground."

The blood-chilling pronouncement was said with as much aplomb as the rest of Admiral Valtas' speech.

Grievous shook his head firmly, shifting the hologram back to a wider show of the local star space. "No. Ord Podera is far too close for us to be able to hold it. But..." Grievous thought about it then thought about the distance between Ord Podera and his true target for this campaign, then began to speak aloud again, his metallic fingers poking through the hologram at several other points. "But, if we strike at these other two systems here and here, we can perhaps pull them out of position or force them to spread their forces too thinly. Then Admiral Ningo can strike Trakar 4 himself, while I strike at Ord Podera."

He turned, almost glaring at the local Admiral. "Meanwhile, Sullust and Yag'dhul will continue to build up troops and ships, in such a way that the Republic has no idea how strong your defenses truly are. Understood?"

"Indubitably," The Givin replied, with the short bob of his head, that was his people's equivalent of a snort. "That, too, is a simple equation. Much like the one we followed when we decided to shift our allegiances to the Confederacy."

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Thanks to Yoda's trickery, the war entered a lull as commerce raiding replaced massed conflict on most fronts. This would continue for several weeks before Dominus was able to convince his admirals and troops that the virus was an elaborate hoax. The Republic wasn't prepared for this, and their planets started to lose millions of worth in industrial capacity to these smaller strikes, further slowing down their troop buildup. The GDL, on the other hand, was given a breather. Their military was actually a good bit better at that game than the CIS. It's smaller and much faster ships better suited to commerce raiding and defense.

About two days after this shift in the war, the Tyrant's Bane and its captured prizes came out of hyperspace. As they did, Harry opened up a communication with the GDL High Command. "Marshall Bel Iblis, Master Yaddle, this is the Tyrant's Bane. How goes the war?" They hadn't been in communication for five days, not wanting to leave a Hypercom trail of their movements, and Harry not seeing the need to breathe down Garm's neck.

The Corellian's face appeared in the pickup after several seconds, and he was grinning when it did. "Heh, well, if you're asking about the war, Harry, I have to say it's gone very strangely. Which we have Master Yoda to thank, I believe?" He laughed, shaking his head. "Come on down, Your Countness, and we will give you all a full report."

"I'm looking forward to it," Harry replied, watching as almost a hundred Archer class frigates sped out towards his ship and their prizes accompanied by several wings of starfighters. *"It looks as if we might have gotten some luck going our way love, what do you think?"*

"I think you're right, Harry. Master Yoda's little trick seemed to have had a much bigger impact than we could have hoped for," Aayla sent back across their link. *"Still, I have to wonder how long our good luck will last. And what C'baoth's response to this will be. He might take it as a personal insult that Yoda fooled the entire CIS command after all."*

Winning at that, Harry had no reply as the Tyrant's Bane continued on its way toward Serenno.

End Chapter

It always bothered me how there wasn't a lot of talk about ECM and ECCM in conjunction with the droids in the Clone Wars. At least, not in the comics or books. The same could be said for Ahsoka Tano's first action as a padawan. She takes to it like a duck to water? Really? Without any problems? Yeah...no. Just no. Even a Jedi padawan should have more of a reaction to her first real brush with death, no matter her prior training. After all, no matter how hard the training, the people training you aren't really trying to kill you. That, coupled with the rest of her mental issues would feed into one another, and then have to be dealt with.

The rest of the chapter was designed for me to show the rest of the war from various perspectives, a few different combat settings, and bring forward a plot that has been working in the background as certain people grow up LOL. And let's face facts, the Hapes Cluster is perfect to join the GDL. Whether or not that agreement will be both social and personal is a question, as will the reaction of those involved.

As for the pro-human empire, that's canon fact despite how the Emperor made such use of alien senators to become chancellor and everything else. The Core Worlds are indeed mostly human and still very wary of aliens, so it wasn't a huge leap for them to become anti-alien later. Now that is going to be stopped in its tracks along with the anti-Jedi propaganda, and Sidious's building power base is taking a few hits. He also knows about what the Jedi have been up to. But can't do anything about it hehe. That's bound to be frustrating, especially after the full impact of what the Jedi have done becomes apparent. And frustrated people start to make mistakes...

Beyond that, hope you all enjoyed this despite the somewhat abrupt ending. I had hoped to write out Harry and co. dropping off the kids in Ruusan and returning to the war, but RL did not allow for that.