

Howdy all. Now I know it's been a long time, but please put the fake lightsabers and the all-too real pitchforks down, please. I could not have done anything about it. It just didn't win the polls, that's all there is to it. But last month it tied, and now it is being updated.

You all, my patrons, are seeing this a week before the fans over on fanfic will. I haven't Grammarlied it, so if you see any mistakes – especially sentences that make no sense or seem to have bits missing – please point them out.

And without further ado... enjoy!

Chapter 23: Growing Darkness, Gathering Light

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iXDnFYu91vY>

In A Galaxy Far, Far Away...

War Has Gripped The Old Republic. Split Apart By Corruption, Greed, And The Machinations Of The Sith, The Republic Is Now Split Into Three Factions.

On One Side The Republic, Espousing The Belief That All Should Be One, And That All Talk Of Change Must Come From Within While Downplaying The Need For That Change. Still Controlling The Majority Of The Galaxy, The Republic Is Slow To Act, Ponderous When It Does, But Mighty.

On The Other, The Confederacy Of Independent Systems, A Conglomeration Of The Most Powerful And Most Greedy Unions And

The Most Downtrodden And Ignored Planets, Ruled By Jedi Master Jorus C'baoth, The Sith Lord Dominus. The Ones To Start The War, The CIS Currently Are Pressing Hard On All Fronts, And Have A Massive Advantage In Numbers Through Embracing Droid Warfare... And In Ruthlessness.

And In The Middle, Pushing For Less Centralization And More Personal Freedom Is The Galactic Defense League. Led By Jedi Knight Harry Potter And His Force-Bonded Lover, Aayla Secura, The GDL Stands Apart From The Republic, Fighting Their Own War Against The CIS, While A State Of Peace And Alliance Rests Between The GDL And The Republic. Yet Even So, The GDL Is Quickly Becoming More Isolated From The Republic Both In How They Think, And How They See The Future Playing Out If The War Ends In Victory.

Mighty Fleets And Armies Clash The Galaxy Over As Planets Change Hands And People Die In Their Thousands While All Three Sides Espouse Propaganda And News, With The Common Citizen Hard Pressed To Tell The Difference. Millions Have Died Already, And More Will Continue To Do So.

Meanwhile, In The Shadows Of The Galaxy Another War Is Taking Place For Influence And Information Among The Corrupt And Powerful And The Criminal Element Alike. For The True Sith Lord Is Still Out There. His Presence Masked To The Jedi, Pulling Strings Behind The Scenes, It Is He Who Has Set This War And All Events Leading It Into Motion, Positioning Himself To Wipe Out The Jedi And Take Control Of The Galaxy. Although Having Faced Several Severe Setbacks, Darth Sidious's Great Plan Still Moves Forward. And Until He Is Unmasked, Any Victory, In War Or In The Minds Of The People, Is Fleeting, For The Veil Of The Dark Side Covers All, Threatening The Future Of The Galaxy.

As The War, Not Even A Year Old Yet, Threatens To Become All The Bloodier, Many Are Forced To Wonder How Will It All Play Out In The End. But For Many In A Place Of Power, The Ends To Not Matter, As Power Itself Is The Only Goal Worth Fighting For...

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Even a Force user needed to use a lot of technology to stay on top of what was going on in the known galaxy. Especially during a war like this one. This had come as something of a surprise for Dominus, but as the war grew, he had needed to renovate his flagship's command center several times, and had even needed to overhaul the central computer, adding memory several new communications gear and so forth to help analyze all the data coming in from every front the Confederacy of Independent Systems was currently fighting.

There were literally hundreds of those, although most of them were unimportant in the great scheme of things. Little skirmishes here and there, planets without much to offer changing hands one way or the other, and numerous deep space clashes between fleets. Nearly every flotilla in the massive CIS fleet had a Hypercom, and it updated the information from the flotilla as a whole every few hours.

At the moment, there were four different fronts where the Confederacy was driving **hard**, with fleets the size of which had never been seen since the Pius Deux era flying through space, organized to strike a single target. The composition of those fleets had slowly changed as the CIS Admiralty learned what war on this scale was like, with more dedicated anti-capital ship dreadnaughts and smaller capital ships slowly joining the fleet, but regardless of composition, those fleets had more than enough power to annihilate whole star systems.

About twenty-two fronts, depending on how you used the term, had devolved into what amounted to grinding battles of attrition. *Most of which is because are being fought on the planet's surface*, Dominus thought, amused as he watched footage from several Magna Guards fighting a Jedi as around them a city burned. *It is strange that no one in the Republic has realized that particular tactic, our landing of troops on planets, is strange, regardless of our local goals. After all, most planets' orbitals can be wiped out from long range if you are willing to pay the sacrifice in proton torpedoes or concussion missiles to smash the planetary shield back into the planet's atmosphere. And with our industrial capacity, that is certainly something the Confederacy could do.*

But this way, we use our vast number of droids to bleed the enemy, both militarily and their civilian population. Dominus smiled ecstatically, reaching out to the Force and feeling the Dark Side flowing into him. *Ahh... I can feel the energies of the Dark Side rising throughout the galaxy. And that is without my being the center of the veil.*

That thought was momentarily a sour one, but Dominus pushed through it to consider the reality of the Veil and what it meant. The Veil of the Dark Side was a Force construct on a scale that had never been seen in recorded Galactic history, save perhaps the creation of Corellia. But

as best anyone could tell, it had not been done via the Force, so Dominus didn't think it counted. The creation of the pylons to gather Dark Side energies, the emplacement, of them in a network across the galaxy, each positioned through the use of Dark Side Mathomancy, an exceedingly obscure art of the Dark Side, that had been researched and brought to light by Darth Tenebrous. An amazingly skilled engineer, he was the first to build a Dark Side Pylon, and calculate how such creations could be used to smother the Force with the Dark Side, generating, moving and strengthening the Dark Side throughout the galaxy to the point it would blot out the Unifying Force to the Jedi, leaving them blind.

The meticulous planning that had gone into it, into forever blanketing the future from the Jedi, awed Dominus. It truly showed that the Dark Side was far more powerful than the simple Force or even the so-called Light Side the Jedi vowed to serve. *As if any of them could imagine building something on so grand a scale to manipulate the Unifying Force on such a grand scale!*

And I am not the one sitting at the center of it, Dominus thought once again, now allowing himself to dwell on his anger at that like a lover's caress, letting the Anger build within him. *But perhaps, perhaps in the future I will be strong enough to challenge Sidious. Surely with everything that is going on with the Senate and the Republic he doesn't have enough time to train to actually fight someone. If I can take him by surprise...*

Dominus shook his head, sending his wild matted gray streaked hair dancing across his shoulders with the energy of the movement. *No, I cannot allow myself to dwell on such things. It is not yet time, and it may never be time. I will not allow myself to fall into the habit of underestimating my opponent for certain. Not Sidious nor the Jedi or Potter. Indeed, that last one is perhaps the most dangerous because of how little of his abilities are unknown.*

Once more concentrating on the screens around him, Dominus gestured. Each of the screens was connected via the Malevolence's internal wireless communications system, to a different computer elsewhere, following events from a specific sector or important front. They were made to be a mobile, letting Dominus sit in the center of his meditation room and bring the screens to him for closer perusal. Dominus had found that his Force instincts worked best this way. Instead of trying to pick out a single report from a series of summaries, the Force would call his attention to the monitor connected to the incoming report of most importance.

The first of the five monitors floated center stage, showing all the recordings of events on Rendili before the war began, when the Sith strike force sent by Sidious attacked Potter and his companions. It had taken some time, but it remained the only recording of Potter in combat, and Dominus made a point to look at it every few days. Still, he found no new insight into the man's abilities. Knowing Potter's teleportation skill would be incredibly difficult to deal with wasn't anything new, and after a moment's fulminating glares, Dominus gestured and sent the monitor back to the wall, turning his attention to the other four, which were all connected to the Hypercom, updating constantly.

These four fronts in particular were the most important ones right now. The offensive zones where the Confederacy was going hard, led by capable local commanders.

The first was, of course, the drive into the Corellia sector with the aim to take and hold that system, turning it's massive industrial capacity to the good of the CIS. Corellia was the beating sinews and might have the GDL, although in terms of military importance, Serenno and Dac were almost as important. But neither of those systems could match the output and industrial capacity of Corellia, which meant it had to be the first target. There was also the Green Jedi to consider. *They were the real reason Sidious ordered me to target Corellia, but I am not so blind as to ignore the war with the GDL.*

Take or destroy that system, and the GDL will lose a tremendous amount of its industrial capacity, and might even be knocked out of the war entirely, forced to either cede for peace with the Confederacy, or rejoin the Republic as a whole. *Given the differences in command structure and the grassroots response that Sidious has started to smear the GDL in the eyes of Republic citizenry, any such move would be **fraught** to say the least, and will cost the Jedi order a loss of political capital.*

The losses thus far sustained in the rather straightforward assault into Corellia sector was somewhat annoying, but nothing that the Confederacy of Independent systems could not sustain. The hit and run tactics of the GDL worked to bleed their enemy, but not stop them in place. *A hammer against a shield made of nails. If our information is accurate, the GDL will be unable to build up enough ships to truly halt our fleet in place despite the hundreds of hyperspace traps and mine fields our fleet is facing. Our losses will be harsh, but what does that matter? And if we can do this to Corellia... well... other targets might present themselves. Both in the GDL and in the Republic.*

Despite those upbeat thoughts, Dominus wrote out several orders to a few of the nearby CIS systems supply lines to which were not as heavily engaged to back up Admiral Kul'Teska's efforts. *Give him enough material throw weight, and he will be able to break through eventually, regardless of what the Corellian's and the rest of the GDL have done to the hyperspace lanes in an out of their territory. But only if we can keep supplying him with Vultures and other munitions. The GDL might not be a true peer to the Republic and the CIS, but they went into this war with a solid plan and a clearer understanding of what this war might become than even Sidious.*

With that done, Dominus switched to one of the other fronts. This one had battle footage from a battle occurring in an orbital shipyard, and Dominus allowed himself to enjoy the sight of a Jedi combat team being overwhelmed for a few moments. This was but one battle from a series of large and small scale conflicts occurring around the Harch homeworld of Secundus Ando as they sought to reclaim their colonies and expand their influence beyond in conjunction with the Aqualish. That was part of why they had agreed to the CIS and Dominus had no trouble allowing

it. The Andoan Free Colonies would fall under CIS control within a month at this rate, and the CIS would pay very little for it in terms of ships and material lost.

The hate and fear growing from these battles was almost delicious to Dominus, especially fueled by the dead Jedi. *They made a mistake there, not understanding Harch or how good a commander he is after the privateer campaigns going back and forth between the Spiverelda and the Free Colonies. A whole fleet trapped and annihilated, and then two Jedi teams isolated. One was able to escape thanks to the efforts of Master Ki Adi Mundi, but the other was lost to a sentient. Ahh... so lovely.*

“Hehehehe...” a dark, ominous chuckle resounded out from Dominus then, imagining what was going on there. Those deaths are a worthy payment for the death of my former apprentice. *Ah Lorana, so sad that your skills were never as good as your ability to follow. I spent so long molding you into the perfect follower, and then you die on Brentaal. And Skorr as well, though his loss matters as much to me as losing a nail would to a woodcrafter. Still, that young Dathomiri woman that Kern found is powerful in the Force, and already well-versed in the Dark Side. She may be a good replacement. We will have to see how she and Kern do on their latest campaign. What was... ah yes, a resumption of the campaign to gain control of Ord Mantell and through it, control of the Celanon Spur. It could be the start of a new campaign in the Expansion Region.*

Thinking about that campaign, and, should it succeed this time, how Ord Mantell and its criminal elements would soon be under CIS control made him smile. Criminals like that would be a major help in spreading chaos out past the so-called front lines, just like his Blanked had done before the Jedi figured out how to find them. After their loyalties were... suitably corrected, of course. Dominus would see to that along with Saato, the only one of his acolytes who had shown any skill in mental domination. Which would also let Dominus examine this Ventress woman.

When Dominus turned his attention to the next screen, his dark amusement came back once more as he contemplated how well it was feeding the Dark Side.

Years before the CIS declared independence, the Jedi had discovered something about Darth Plagueis, and his connection to the Intergalactic Banking Clan. The Republic Senate had been forced to break the clan up into two groups, the Outer Rim Banking Clan and Core World Banking Clan. But both were still led by Muun, the race who had created the original banking clan in the first place, and were based on Muunilist, a colony world, and Scipio, the Muun’s original homeworld, despite most of their business being within the Core and Colony World territories. And both groups saw themselves as the rightful heirs to the original Banking Clan. This made for a cold blooded but brutal feud when the ORBC became part of the CIS, while the other had refused reconstitution under their auspices and had remained loyal to the Republic.

The war there was one of maneuver, then overwhelming attack, a thing of numbers and cost effectiveness. Yet the death toll was truly horrendous on the planets within the Albarrio and Obtrexta sectors, and Dominus loved it.

The fourth front was not so pleasant to contemplate. The defense of Antar 4, and the Jedi led assault on the Vulture production planet of Caaratos. Under the direction of Master Windu and his padawan Skywalker, the Republic had launched a successful campaign against the planet, smashing the vulture factories, taking over the planet's limited defenses, and brought in more troops to dig in and defend it against any attempt to reclaim it. A quick, almost brilliant campaign where the 501st barely took any losses as they wiped out the local droid forces using mobility and a specially organized wet water navy component brought along to help transport them across the globe.

That was a setback, Dominus could admit, one that he was not happy about. *It will damage the war efforts in that sector and beyond for certain, but more than that, it is the first real offensive the Republic has launched that is a clear victory. And Skywalker was part of it too. That boy's power in the Force is profound, and he and Windu are a deadly combination.*

And of course, it allows Sidious to prop up Anakin Skywalker and begin to build his Hero of the Republic persona. All the better for later when he dies, the resulting loss and morale will fuel the Dark Side even further.

*Well... that death might not be in Sidious' plans, no matter how much sense it makes. I feel something from the Force when I try to concentrate my senses on Skywalker. Regardless, his death is certainly in **my** plans, as are Windu and Yoda's. Yoda's death would be glorious, but Windu, that would be personal. And he and Skywalker being such a good team and, on the front, makes it easy to move forces into play to take them both out. The Acolyte Trio and their infiltration force will find them on Caaratos.*

The Acolyte Trio was a group of relatively weak former padawans whose masters had proven subtle enough to feel Dominus's mental manipulations of them. He had killed all three, and taken their padawans for his own tools. Their hatred towards him had made them easy prey for both the Dark Side, and Dominus' mind powers. Within a bare day, each Acolyte's hatred toward Dominus had shifted to hatred for the weakness of their former Masters. They were not nearly as well-trained as Dominus' other Acolytes, but specialists with computers, infiltration, and the use of unconventional tactics and weaponry.

Fighting Windu or Skywalker in a straight fight would be foolish in the extreme. An oblique approach is necessary, and will work very well against the rule-abiding Windu. To say nothing about the infiltration droids and the other droid specialists I assigned to the Trio. And if they succeed, perhaps I will even give them back their names. Dominus had at one point been so annoyed by how weak the Trio were as combatants that he had removed the knowledge of their own names from their minds. Yes... to remove both Windu and Skywalker from the board will be most enjoyable. Although I would not revel in it as much as hearing that Potter had been killed.

The thought of Potter once more threatened to divert Dominus for a few moments. The utter destruction he had wrought with the Jedi's secret anti-droid weapon, destroying an entire fleet, and then most recently leading a fleet against Ord Cestus and defending Valahari was annoying.

Indeed, the entire GDL was frustrating in the extreme. There was no straight up clash, no grinding war there, it was fully about maneuver, power to a point, and sudden assaults from multiple angles. But Dominus refused to allow himself to fall into tunnel vision where Potter was concerned. *If you concentrate on one enemy, others may blindside you. Considering how rarely Sidious has been able to contact me for real-time communication since that debacle, it might already have occurred in some fashion to him. Good.*

That won some dark amusement from Dominus, but also a good deal of fear. He remembered how Sidious had shown him the power of the Dark Side, how Sidious had then helped Dominus to discover the true depths of the Force, the true way forward, dominating everyone around you until their thoughts were yours, there will your own. And then, how easily Sidious had been easily able to Dominate Dominus in turn despite the thousands of light years between them. *No, I'm not ready for that fight just yet. But that doesn't mean that I will entirely follow the script I've been given. That script has already gone through several revisions after all.*

"Great Master, you ordered that you be told when it would be local twelve hundred hours on the planet Raxus Secundus. It is five minutes to the appointed time," a robotic voice intoned from the room's intercom.

At that Dominus's smile widened. With a wave of his hands he sent the four screens that he had been looking at flowing back to their places along the walls of the circular meditation-cum-command center and pulled a larger screen towards him from another sector of the wall. And as Dominus watched, tapping his chin thoughtfully, his lips twitching between a smile and a sneer of delight.

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Senator Bonteri pasted her public smile on her face as she waved at a reporter, the young Zelosian camera whirling to capture her as she moved among her fellow Parliament members. *There might be only eighty of us here right now, but we are all mid-tier in terms of influence. I could have wished to get one of the Council's agreement to be here, but given how deeply they are involved in the war efforts, I can understand, if not condone.*

As she moved through the crowd, her security team warned her via her earbud that the camera remained locked on her. "If they don't start to record other people, Senator, I'm upgrading it to a threat."

"He please, let us have no Humanocentric sentiments here," Bonteri murmured, the words picked up by a small microphone set against her jaw, molded to look almost like her skin, but not quite. With a nod, she sent her son, who was currently working as her aide, to speak to the reporters. She wanted to make certain they knew the question and answer session would

happen after the meal and she and her fellows gave their speeches, not before. "After all, it isn't as if it's entirely unusual for me to be the center of attention."

Despite being in her late forties, Bonteri was a statuesque woman and extremely photogenic, something she acknowledged and even had taken advantage of. *And everyone knows who is behind this celebration, and the law we are trying to pass.* With that thought, she set aside considerations of the general public, moving through the crowds, shaking hands, joking, and generally taking the time to further cement the support for a recent bill that she had proposed.

For a few moments, the reporter, escorted now by her son, moved around the room, asking questions and generally speaking getting the feel of the room. The smile on the young Zelosian face made Bonteri smirk very slightly as she saw it. *I see my son has lost none of his abilities with the ladies despite leaving Coruscant and his normal hunting grounds behind.* Shaking that thought off, Bonteri turned her attention back to the Muun she was speaking with.

Eventually, the initial gladhanding faded as food arrived. Senator Bonteri moved to the front of the room, near where she would be sitting for the meal to come, raising a glass in one hand and a small spoon, tapping the spoon against the glass. This universal signal for attention soon gathered silence from the crowd of parliamentary members, and Bonteri smiled at them all. "Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for being here with me today. I want to make certain that you all understand how proud I am to see so many faces joining me in hoping to push forward the law that I have recently proposed to the parliament as a whole. It gives me hope for not only the future of the Confederacy, but for the near future of this war."

Cheers erupted, and Bonteri grimaced internally. While everyone didn't like how far the war had gone, they approved of fighting for their freedom. Bonteri had her own thoughts on that score, but remained silent for now on that topic. "The Military Laws of Respectable Warfare Act will show the differences between the Republic and the Confederacy of Independent systems as we learn and grow beyond the atrocities both sides have caused so far to draw a line in the sand and say no more. Many of those differences will remain insoluble even with the Galactic Defense league, considering that they consider us mere tools of the so-called Sith. But we need to show the public that we are more than the slander our enemies have lobbed at our feet."

There was a rumble of discontent at that, and Bonteri let it build for a moment before going on. "Yes, the differences between us might be insoluble, and that will impose changes to the galaxy. For far longer than anyone can possibly remember, there's only been the Republic. There has never been any kind of near-peer power within recorded history. Even during the New Sith Wars the Sith were not seen as a legitimate power onto themselves, but as simply a threat to Galactic order, not a peer. Similarly, even further back the Republic was at war with itself or smaller local powers. That is not the case now. Going into the future, there might be as many as three galactic powers, all intermingled, all sharing borders. That will force a different mindset on those of us who lead in such times, not just in war, but in the peace to follow. A peace that cannot come under the boot of the conqueror."

Once again there was a susurrantion of noise as people murmured amongst themselves, but it was more thoughtful one, as everyone realized Bonteri had a point. Unless the Republic was willing to embrace genocide, there was no way they would be able to force the Confederacy into the fold again.

Similarly, although few here would verbalize the fact, the GDL would not rejoin the Republic so long as so many of the problems that had been pointed out by the Confederacy and the GDL in times of peace remained unsolved within the way the Republic was run. Similarly, the Republic and GDL were simply too large for the Confederacy to think of occupying. Beating the Reps in the war was possible, but occupying the Republic as a whole? There wasn't enough metal in the galaxy to build that many droids. As the smaller of the three powers, the GDL could perhaps be beaten and occupied as a whole, and many of the representatives both here and within the greater parliament eagerly looked forward to the day where they could add the GDL's massive industrial capacity to that of the Confederacy, but that would only bring them to near parity.

This time, Bonteri didn't will the pause to extend before continuing, not wanting people to get bogged down in the long term thinking, but rather to concentrate on the here and now.

"Towards that end, this war must, and I repeat this, **must** have a series of checks on what we are willing to allow! We in the CIS have already turned over the actual combat to our droids, now we need to show that we care just as much about our opponent's civilian population as our own. We must show that this is not a war of annihilation, that this is not a war being fought by terrorists, being fought under the auspices of something like the Sith, as has been thrown in our faces, but rather a fight for our freedom and rights as living beings!"

Her voice lowered from it's previous impassioned tones, as she went on, a loud rumble going around her audience. Many of the representatives in this room remembered how that denouncement had been thrown in their faces and why, and had not forgotten that final humiliation. But her last words calmed them down, and Bonteri had no trouble continuing her speech.

"The agreement that we reached with the GDL and Republic on allowing medical ships to roam freely must be built on. The Military Laws of Respectable Warfare Act must pass, so we can embrace this opportunity to create limits to what this war can become. We are not barbarians, we are not evil, taking delight in the suffering of others. We are statesmen who were pushed to realize that war was not only a solution, but inevitable in front of the blandishments of our opponents. And we will fight this war as such."

For a moment there was silence, and then, as Bonteri stepped away from the podium, people began to clap. Soon, everyone there was standing up, men and women of multiple races standing up and clapping.

They were still clapping when the explosion occurred directly underneath Bonteri. Her body disappeared in the explosion before she even had a chance to scream, utterly incinerated by its

heat as well as her son and several others nearby. The explosion continued, filling the meeting hall, slaying practically everyone within, including the cameramen.

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“AHAHAHAHHA!!!!” Dominus laughed as the feed cut out, instantly shifting to another camera following a reporter around outside the Parliament building. One of many crews waiting to speak to Senator Bonteri about the motion she had been pushing, the owner of the camera was pointing back at himself when the explosion occurred in the background. The explosion rocked the building, sending people screaming and scuttling for cover as a portion of the building collapsed in on itself and the hovering camera shifted to catch what was going on.

“Oh my word, yes, that was most satisfying. Ror has done very good work there. And I was most pleased with the paper trail he left as well. Republic Intelligence will get the blame for it or perhaps the GDL’s intelligence apparatus. They can disavow it as much as they like, but proving a negative will be impossible for them. And the public reaction will be fascinating to watch.

There, Dominus paused, then in a moment of clarity, shook his head. *Well, it is doubtful that the Republic and the GDL citizens will ever believe RI had anything to do with it, but enough people in the Confederacy will believe it to stoke the flames of hatred harder, and to make certain that no similar bill has even a remote chance of passing. Unfortunately, the GDL will be able to disprove they had anything to do with it all too easily, Dark Side take Potter and his plans!*

His humor faded instantly as he contemplated the fact that even the public knew that the GDL didn’t really have an offensive espionage service before the war began. The GDL was very open about it, and the fact that many Jedi had joined Specter, the GDL’s counterespionage directory.

It was also becoming an open secret at how good they were at keeping secrets of their own on the military side of things. The number of surprises the CIS navy had been running into on a daily basis was proof of that, to say nothing of the source for tibanna gas, the abilities of the Mon Calamari refitted freighter/cruisers, and above all Potter and those with him.

And few people, despite the subtle propaganda the Sith have run for more than a thousand years will believe that the Jedi would take part in setting bombs to take out political targets. Republic intelligence, yes. But not the GDL. Still what does that matter?

Shaking off his suddenly maudlin thoughts, Dominus gestured, and a bottle of Alderaanian wine and a goblet floated into his hand. He sipped at the wine, watching emergency services arrive and rush into the building, hoping to find survivors. Considering how well the rest of Ror’s planning had gone, Dominus doubted they would find any.

With this act, Dominus had removed Bonteri and her power base, which had begun to be called the ‘loyal opposition’ made up of those senators who were not happy with the war, how it was being led, or the amount of atrocities that had already begun to occur. *I was most annoyed when my attempts to reach through the Force to manipulate Bonteri failed. I wonder how she*

knew that I needed a real time image of her to reach out that far and influence her mind? A minor mystery I would have liked solved. Still, all of the people with enough so-called moral fiber to stand up and try to really act as if they had any real power in the Confederacy are now gone. The Confederacy Council will continue to control the Confederacy without any further internal disputes coming from the parliament, which will in turn become a rubberstamp for whatever they and Dominus needed.

“Yes indeed, even with the Galactic war on this grand scale, it does sometimes pay for one to look at the little things,” Dominus mused, shuddering as he connected to the Dark Side again, feeling it’s power, its hate and rage and fear fueling him further.

With an abruptness that might have frightened most sentients, Dominus lunged to his feet like a far younger man, dropping his wine glass to the floor by his chair with a thump. Now on his feet, instead of summoning the various monitors to him, Dominus began to pace around the room diving deeper into several of the war fronts. Beyond that, he examined several of the reports from Confederacy Intelligence.

Once he was done with that, he moved onto looking at of the logistical minutiae of Project Undertow. That was the name that had been given for the secretly building new fleet Grievous was leading. Soon they would be lunging towards their main goal, by which time the majority of the Republic fleets in position to try and defend Thyferra would have been pulled too far out of position to face his real thrust. But the logistical side of things had been exacerbated thanks to Grievous removing (killing) Valta and the rest of the local government, the Givin were not as productive as they should be. Although cowed and not acting out, that was not the same as wholeheartedly supporting the cause. But Grievous’ plan was set now. It would only be a matter of time before Thyferra died.

“Master, you have fifteen minutes before you have a meeting with Commander T’folco and his team of analysts.” The same droid voice from before intoned, once more breaking into Dominus’ thoughts. “Do you wish me to order them to wait?”

“No. I should be presentable by then, and make certain the conference room is ready,” Dominus ordered the ship’s AI. It was called Dark Steward, or DS for short by the crew thanks to how much it handled on a daily basis. Little did they know it also watched every sentient aboard for Dominus.

Those fifteen minutes allowed Dominus to don his normal public persona, so when the human T’folco and his team, a group of two Bothans, a Muun and a Skakoan, saw him, Dominus once more looked like an elderly gentleman, who looked the part of a somewhat wild haired grandfather. This was a stark contrast to his previous appearance, as Dominus had donned clean clothing, having noticed a few stains on his robe, and had tied his hair back. Even his face had shifted into a more avuncular rather than intense and dark-eyed expression as he normally wore.

He smiled at each sentient in turn, calling them by name as he moved through the room to the head of the conference table. At the same time, unbeknownst to his awed 'guests' Dominus was also reaching out with the Force to each of them in turn. As he did so, he subtly changed the way their minds worked, as he did everyone he came into contact with.

Soon, these five, like everyone else aboard his flagship, would see serving Dominus personally as the greatest joy in their life. The pleasure centers in their brains would literally light up with every service they were able to perform for him. *And every time they fail me soon, they will feel pain, true physical pain created from the pain centers in their minds.*

This was the true power of the Force in his opinion, and it was endemic to the weakness of the Jedi that they only used small scale manipulations. The ability to literally dominate minds, to change them on a fundamental level was a power that was impossible to top. Dominus could do this in his sleep. He had been able to manipulate the minds of fellow force users. To manipulate minds that were unaware was child's play in comparison. Only distance and the number of minds needed to be changed at one time limiting him.

Here, he was doing it more as a matter of course than because any of these people were that important. T'folco and his team were analysts and computer technicians, and there were literally billions of such within the Confederacy. Right now, they were apparently the best he could gather on short notice, but despite that he was eager to hear what they had for him. "So, what can you tell me so far about the ability of the GDL flagship called the Tyrant's Bane? It has been in three battles so far, and while the GDL have done as good a job as possible to make certain no word of their abilities get out, they surely haven't been able to do such a good job no trace remains? Especially after this most recent battle in the space around Valahari."

When next the Tyrant's Pain met the ships of the Confederacy, Dominus intended for them to be as well prepared for it as could be possible. Regardless of whatever forced trick Potter and his former master had come up with for that ship.

OOOOOOO

Looking at the news coming out of Raxus Secundus, a middle-aged man snorted behind his coffee mug. He looked like any well off middle-aged man, with a ring on his finger, his hair long but done up in a braid and well kept. His shoulders were broad, but not overly so, his tan matching that of the locals, with nothing but his wedding ring and a small scar on his face to stand out from the crowd. "How much do you want to bet that it was the Sith who were behind that rather than Republic intelligence?"

"Bah, that's a sucker bet," that companion, a woman of similar age if not appearance, answered, not looking up from her own tablet, whispering her response as the man had her question. She too looked well-off, a bit younger than the man, but wearing a similar wedding band. Her hair, currently silver in keeping with local fashion, fell loose around her shoulders.

The woman tapped the top of her tablet in a set order, causing the man's eyes to narrow. When she spoke again, it was in a louder tone, more in keeping with the café they were sitting in and in code. "I am afraid that Uncle Lester won't be joining us on Galand. His wife is dealing with a death in the family, and he is going to be staying home to support her. Poor timing as he won't get his money back for the ticket either, although it says something of what he feels about the event if that is something he mentions specifically."

The owner of the first voice was master Quinlan, Alice's former master, who she and Harry were trying to set up a group to meet with, hoping that he and Komari, the owner of the second voice, would have information for them. They would, although currently Quinlan wasn't happy with the information Komari had just imparted to him. *So our chief contact with the Coruscant underworld is dead, along with his gang. But the connection to us and our web of informants and criminal families wasn't discovered. The bad outweighs the good there, as that removes the last eyes we had on Coruscant. Unless we want to start buying information from dirty Senators. Damn. While the information we are finding has us searching deeper into the Core Worlds for the Sith, Coruscant is still the center of the Republic and thus their ongoing manipulations. Having no eyes there is almost as bad as...*

Quinlan spoke the next thought aloud, also in code. "I'm sorry to hear that. Then again, the party on Galand was growing a bit too much for my liking anyway. I realize our announcement was important, but that much? Worse, every family member we've invited seems intent on bringing along five or more guests. If they expect us to pay for all of them that's going to get expensive quickly."

"You have a point there, but what can we do? So long as it isn't Aunt Jai and her brood, we can deal with it. I don't want her or anyone she's poisoned against us around ever again," Komari answered with a shrug. "I would say tell them family, no matter how distant, we can pay for, but significant others or friends have to pay their own way somehow."

"A good thought," Quinlan mused. "We will see what they think about it. But we will need to scramble ourselves if we want to meet up with my little sister on time."

The translation of this bit of back and forth read out as: there were more Republic Intelligence assets apparently showing up on planets within the Core Worlds looking into activities there than made sense to either Komari or Quinlan, and both were assuming it was because of their recent assassination of Arthur Dener, trillionaire, media mogul and Sith sympathizer. This meant that not only were the Sith onto them, but the Sith also still had their fingers in the Republic Intelligence pie. Which they should not have if the sole source of Sith infiltration into their ranks had been dealt with.

Komari's response meant that it was better to see RI agents than more Jedi, something Quinlan's response acknowledged before reminding Komari they were currently working under a deadline. There were already more than a few Jedi whose known opinions on the Jedi Shadows would prove annoying to deal with moving around the Core Worlds. To say nothing of

any normal Jedi's response to the means Quinlan and Komari had gone to in order to create their network... or kill Dener and a few other, far less important targets over the last few years in order to weaken the Sith.

At present, the pair were in a small café on the outskirts of Empress Teta's capital sector. The café was unremarkable, although the vista of the truly huge trees that had created a small city park here for millennia, growing as the ecumenopolis did, garnered quite a bit of attention from tourists. That made for a perfect spot for two lovers to have a quiet morning, something that worked well with their cover at present.

Although, that cover isn't so much a cover as an acknowledgment of fact, Quinlan thought to himself. It hadn't taken the two of them very long at all to throw off the Jedi concept of emotional celibacy, and become thoroughly involved with one another. That connection had been a strength for both of them as they dove deep into the seedy underbelly of the Republic, a source of love and tenderness as they began to act in a manner well beyond a Jedi's normal purview while creating the equivalent of the Black Sun. While not having as much physical power as that defunct entity, a large majority of the criminal underworld throughout Republic space now fed them information. Information that they would hopefully soon be in a position to pass along to the Jedi and the GDL. Information not only on the Sith but the war effort.

"Agreed on that score, but we still have some work to do before we can take our little vacation. One of which is to go into our investments and divest ourselves of some of them." Komari's lips, currently painted neon orange just like her hair had been turned silver, twitched at Quinlan's loud groan at that, but she went on firmly. "Seriously, husband of mine, we've lost money on nearly fifty of our current stocks. We need to downsize. Local conditions in some, and foreign competition in others mean a very volatile market."

This translated currently to the fact they had lost contact with twenty-five of the criminal groups they had access to going silent recently. Many were being killed in wars with other local criminals, undoubtedly started by the Sith. On top of that, others had fallen to Republic Intelligence or other assets the Sith had mobilized in the effort: local authorities at various levels, or sector government types getting involved in some fashion.

The pair paused in their discussion as a bell began to jingle in the café. Everyone within also paused in their chattering, looking towards the windows. That jingle was the signal for the start of one of the main draws of this particular café. The nearby park was made up of the top of trees the locals called "Hollow Branches". As they aged and grew to the size of mini towers, the tree branches hollowed out and their composition changed to act almost like iron, the wood solidifying outward as the innards hollowed for some biological reason neither Jedi understood. This left the trees to act almost like wind chimes when the weather picked up an enchanting sound that many tourists looked forward to.

A few seconds later, the wind picked up as the chimes had warned, flashing through the trees. The noise this created wasn't music, but it was actually quite beautiful. And covered up any chance of overhearing someone from more than a foot away.

Dropping all pretense, Quinlan hissed. "The Sith know we are hiding within the criminal element of the galaxy and are gunning for us. Is the Force telling you anything about our current mission?"

"I don't think they know we are involved," Komari demurred, pointing at herself and Quinlan with a finger of one hand as she raised a coffee mug to her face with the other. The local coffee was quite incredible, especially for Jedi who rarely if ever splurged on such things. *Although Quinlan's comments about the cooking not being up to Harry's standards make me wonder if we could force the young man to somehow cook for us in the future. Possibly make Potter cater our wedding, if such comes about after this war ends.*

Like her lover, Komari drew strength from their connection, and the idea of making it formal brought a warm sensation to her mind, as if the Force itself was acknowledging the fact that they were bound together, and that this was indeed a good thing. But such thoughts were for the far future. "Rather, I believe that the Sith know someone is out there, leading forces against their influence within the shadows of the galaxy. I do not think they know that we are Jedi, although they might suspect a connection to the Order. At the moment, we cannot afford to panic. The man we are here for is an important enough target that we need to see this through, and we can't use our criminal contacts for it."

Right now, the pair of Jedi Shadows had two goals in mind on this planet. One was to establish their current identities, a married pair of middle-class citizens from Fresia, who had previously run small time freighter companies, and had now joined their businesses together. They had in fact brought a cargo of high-end tech from Fresia, and if anyone looked at them and their movements, they would see a simple cargo transport ship moving along well-known lines. That cover would let them head out to the Sertar Sector and meet with Aayla and Harry in the future.

The second objective was to meet with a reporter who specialized in the industrial and economic sector, and more importantly in digging out corruption in those zones. His name was Ardo Zane, a human from Vuma, who had quite a large readership spread across the galaxy, specializing in digging into local corruption wherever he went. Since the Empress Teta system served as a waypoint deeper into the Core World from Coruscant and indeed beyond into the Deep Core via the Koros Trunk Line, the man's arrival here had seemed intriguing to many of the more well-connected criminal gangs.

So too did it to Komari and Quinlan, especially given the man's most recent article. An article that attacked Kuat and one of the houses specifically, along with wondering where several lines of credit to them had come from.

When Komari had read the article, both Jedi had almost overlooked it. But Komari had then looked into the man's background, and come away impressed. Impressed, and concerned. Ardo had been involved in taking down more than three dozen corrupt officials spread out throughout the Core Worlds, and many of them had been powerful players in sector politics. This was the first time he was aiming higher, considering Kuat's importance to the Republic as a whole, but it meant that his work and probity could be trusted.

The article in question spoke of how there had been a death among the Ten, the ruling houses of Kuat, that, looking into it, seemed almost as fake as the one that had let House Andrim's heir Tyris disappear years ago had recently turned out to be. Tyris had been entrusted to build the hidden shipyards, ships and logistics needed for the upcoming war.

Similarly, House Knylenn had not just lost prominent members, numerous well-known scientists and engineers, but apparently lost a large number ships, cargo ships since the war had begun. Too many in too short a time frame compared to the other Houses.

At first, Quinlan thought perhaps it was simply a sign of one of the other Ten Houses taking the opportunity to undermine their enemies within Kuat. But this article mentioned some of the ships by name as having been spotted since their 'official' destruction traveling deeper into the Core Worlds. There were even notes of them taking on cargo, what amounted to several fortunes worth of raw goods and materials.

And the man's research into where those goods were coming from was also telling. Not a single source had anything to do with the Republic's war efforts. Rather, beyond Empress Teta, the cargo had been picked up on planets that were still hotbeds of the humanocentric movement despite the Jedi and galaxy at large cracking down on it. A movement that, despite Quinlan and Komari's best efforts to bring it to the surface so it could be excised, still had a strong connection to the Sith.

All told, it felt to the two Jedi like the Sith had taken advantage of the war and the fact no one cared about industrial espionage that wasn't connected to the war to do something. What, was a question. But perhaps more importantly, the credit trail could lead the pair further into the Sith's own web even as their own organization was being attacked.

"True, our quarry this time might mean another thread directly back to the Sith. But it wouldn't do to become complacent. In fact, I believe that we should cut our time on this planet short. While the Force is silent on the matter when I look into the future, my own instincts make me think we are being hunted," Quinlan muttered, shaking his head.

Komari snorted at her lover's droll tone. "You were too used to working within the Ruusan Sector," she teased. "And if we go into an ambush with eyes open, how much of an ambush is it, really?"

"Just remember, no lightsabers unless we leave no witnesses," Quinlan warned mildly, giving up the argument, knowing that he was going to regardless.

An hour later, the two of them were walking through what looked like an extremely well-to-do suburban housing district near the topmost level of the ecumenopolis. It wasn't a rich district in comparison to their up-spire fellows, but the people here were well enough off to take care of their homes and the area, and were mostly law abiding. It was the perfect place for an off-worlder to stay like their target, who had taken a room in one of the local hostels.

For half an hour, the pair of them walked around the area as if they were just exercising. The clothing they now wore reflected that, and garnered the pair a few looks, but none beyond simply appreciative by other people who are out and about, admiring the obviously fit couple.

Soon enough, the two of them had cased the area and didn't see anything untoward. But despite the idyllic nature of the area, something was bothering both of them, and with a silent glance, they hastened their steps. Something was wrong. The Veil still blocked their senses enough to make the exact nature of the threat, but the two Jedi could feel a tension in the air that should not be there. It was worrisome, as neither could tell if it was directed at them, or the man they were here to meet. A silent conversation occurred and Komari then whispered, "Which is more worrisome, that the threat is directed at us, or at Arno?"

"Using Arno to target us," Quinlan answered to which Komari nodded grimly. Whether or not their cover identities had been blown was one thing, but the feeling of danger was more immediate than that. And had only begun when they came into this block from the nearby parks. Which meant the danger was centered around Arno yet directed their way. *We need our current covers to get off planet without using Force powers, but that doesn't mean we can't change our identities now, and then use the Force going forward.*

Pulling back and heading downward from their quarry deeper into the ecumenopolis, the pair began to use their Force Cloaks the moment they were away from the areas where security cameras were the norm, hiding from normal people's senses. There, Komari found a small alleyway which currently had no one residing within. There, the two changed their outfits, their gear going into a small bag on Quinlan's shoulders. It had been a gift from Harry, one of the first runic expanded items that Harry had made, and Quinlan had brought it with him when he left Harry and the rest on Serenno.

In their new disguises, the two Jedi looked more like a pair of rich snobs than anything else, their clothes dominated by garish colors. Komari had also changed her skin color and put on lots of makeup on, while Quinlan's hair was now loose and flowing down to his shoulders. His skin color had changed as well to a far lighter hue in comparison to Komari's new look, although his qucuff, the ceremonial tattoos that all Kiffar were given early in life, was still gone. That was one thing that never changed regardless of what type of disguise they wore. The Kiffar's facial tattoos were far too noticeable to work with any disguise, despite the advanced Force color change skills both could use.

The pair left the area, waiting until they were once more back up near where the majority of so-called law abiding citizens lived. From there, trusting in their physical disguise rather than the

Force to hide them from normal scrutiny, Komari and Quinlan once more made for the hotel that their quarry was staying in while on Empress Teta.

And as they did, their Force powers finally began to give them some more information, brought to their minds from the minds of those waiting in ambush.

Without a word spoken, Komari took out a security camera in the hall leading to Zane's room. Then both of them pulled out blasters from Quinlan's backpack, one rifle for Quinlan and two hand blasters for Komari. Neither said a word, as none was needed, the pair had been through this dance many times before, and both could tell the shape of the trap laid out for them here.

Racing forward they made to the door to the hotel room where Arno was staying, further feeling out what was going on within with the Force. Even as they did though, the feeling of danger grew, and both of them realized instantly that the jaws of the trap were already on them. *Thank the Force it isn't comprised of droids, or we would've sensed until now.* There were living minds behind this attack though, and that made all the difference, and Both reached out to a pair of doors, one at one end of the hall, the other leading into the emergency stairwell. The locks on both doors turned, much to the chagrin of the group of mercenaries or gangsters behind them who had been making to open the door.

It wouldn't hold them up long, but it would hold them just long enough.

"You deal with Arno and his captors, I will deal with the snipers, then we can deal with those coming in from out here," Quinlan ordered, and without further word, raised a hand, and with a force push, shattered the door, hurling it inward, directing it into one of the attackers within.

Komari slipped under his leg, launching herself forward with a Force Jump, her twin blaster rifles out and aiming in different directions the Force guiding her hands and shots as she took in the room with her physical senses for the first time. There were six attackers, five of whom were Trandoshans dressed up in the outfit she recognized as belonging to a mercenary group, one of the ones that the Trandoshans had created, and which had a rather stupid name in her opinion, the Red Tongues.

In a chair in front of the TV a middle-aged human man was tied, his mouth gagged, as a human knelt in front of him, holding up what looked like some kind of an acetylene torch used in construction the galaxy over. It was not being used for that purpose now, though, and one of Komari's first shots took the would-be torturer in the side of the head, causing him to fall limply to the floor at Zane's feet.

"GRAAHH!" one of the Trandoshans roared, falling to his knees and gasping in air at the pain of being shot. But Trandoshans were remarkably tough even to blaster fire, and the shot had taken him in the chest where their scales were toughest. His scales were actually able to absorb the shot enough heat to keep him alive.

Behind Komari, Quinlan had also lined up a few shots, but he wasn't aiming at anyone in the room even as the Trandoshans within began to attack in turn. But since all of them were aiming at Komari, the Trandoshans were her to deal with.

Rather, he was aiming through the window towards where a full sniper team, five more individuals, were aiming towards this room. Shots flickered back and forth, melting the glass of the window to the point where it began to entirely deform, but one of the snipers fell instantly, shot through the head despite Quinlan not using a sniper scope of his own. *We Jedi are truly blind when it comes to various combat oriented ways to use the Force*, he thought to the side, watching as some of the sniper fire passed through where he had been standing. Arno also would've been hit, if not for Komari kicking the chair leg out from underneath him.

"GRAAAA!" the man shouted into his gag, and Quinlan sensed a burst of agony from the man. Yet he was still alive at the moment and that was all Quinlan could note before rolling into cover.

Dodging around a series of shot from one Trandoshan Komari rose into a crouch, firing at a charging Trandoshan, taking him first in the crotch, then walking her fire up his body, until she could sense he was dead. Charging forward, Komari shoulder rushed the taller Trandoshan as his legs finally gave out, grabbing his body and using it as a shield from blaster fire from two of his companions. Both saw this, and charged forward but Komari used a Force Push to launch the body at them from point blank range, knocking both back onto their heels. Two vibro-knives flew from the hands of the charging Trandoshans, and a quick Force Grab brought both to Komari's hands. She hurled them unerringly down into the Trandoshans heads, straight into their brains before she had to dodge again from blaster fire from last standing Trandoshan and the one that she had downed earlier. Combined with the fire coming from the snipers through the window, she found herself pinned down in the small circular area that marked the sitting area, unable to move.

Meanwhile, Quinlan took cover in the suite's small kitchenette, with blaster fire sizzling through the air above him. However, unlike most droids or sentients, Quinlan didn't need to stick his head out to line up any shots. Instead, at the same time that Komari had charged a few of the Trandoshans, he had simply stuck his blaster up over the edge of the kitchenette, and lined up a shot that would have been entirely impossible for anyone who wasn't using the Force, closing his eyes and feeling where his opponents were. *The Veil might block the future from us, but I can still sense you all in the now!* Quinlan thought grimly as he went to work.

Two more snipers died before the remaining two decided to remain behind cover. By which point, Komari had dealt with one more of the Trandoshans, and had dragged Arno into cover behind a sofa. The last Trandoshan threw his rifle down and charged, another vibro-knife in one hand, the claws twitching with a desire to rend, lost in battle lust.

Meanwhile outside the suite, at the far end of the hallway and in the emergency staircase, the groups of gangsters got through the doors at last. More attackers flowed out, racing towards the room determined to box their quarry in.

With the snipers dealt with, and Komari more than capable of taking on the last Trandoshan on her own, Quinlan pushed back out through the doorway, his blaster rifle up and firing. Two of the twenty men strong squad coming from the right of the hallway fell. But the others poured fire his way in turn from both sides, causing him to duck back.

As he did, Quinlan sensed more trouble coming. A hover car with at least four sentients rising up from below towards the room. *Still, that will give us a way out of here too if we can take advantage of it.* "Shalla! Get undercover!"

While impressed Quinlan had remembered to use the made up name they had come up with for her as they changed to their current disguises, Komari realized instantly she couldn't get to actual cover in time. A millisecond after Quinlan's shouted warning the shadow of a hover car blocked it out the windows, and a crew served repeating blaster went to work on the windows wall and people within the suite, punching through everything with ease in a straight line across the room at chest height. Thanking the Force for small favors – in this case the indent in the design of the suite where the sofas and chairs were - Komari ducked down again, covering Arno's body with her own. A small Force Shield flashed out around them just in time to take several shots from the blaster as the man wielding it finally realized yes, he could depress his fire.

She hissed as her Force Shield absorbed the shots, funneling more of her energy into it in order to keep it up from the pounding, which continued as the repeating blaster strafed the room.

Quinlan had also been caught by the doorway, rather than near the kitchen at this time, and had to rely on his Force Shield. The attackers coming in from outside were dealt with however by a series of thermal detonators tossed outside and a smoke grenade. None were close enough to be downed by the explosions, but smoke, fire and debris slowed them down immensely.

The smoke swiftly billowed back out from the hallway into the room, blinding the attackers on the hover car not that this seemed to dissuade them from continuing to fire.

Quinlan once more lined up a shot by sticking his rifle out on the side of the kitchenette towards the window. This was actually easier than exchanging fire with the sniper team, the hover car being right outside the room. A second later, the man manning the repeating blaster slumped as his throat disappeared from a shot from Quinlan's blaster.

Sensing her lover's movement, Komari was already rolling off of Arno as Quinlan lined up his shot, the Force shield disappearing just as Quinlan took his shot. When the break in the enemy fire from outside came, Komari pushed off the ground in a Force Jump, launching out of the window, crashing into the back of the hover-truck that the attackers were using.

Grabbing onto the barrel of the repeating blaster, she hissed a bit at the heat from the metal, before launching herself upwards in a spinning kick. The kick caught one of the other men who had been funneling magazines into the blaster in the side of the head, hurling him out into open air with a scream.

Landing, Komari swept her leg out from under another man, who had been moving to take dead man's place at the repeating blaster. The kick caught him in his leg, dumping him, another human, onto the floor of the truck, whereupon Komari rolled on top of him, stabbing him through the stomach with it the vibroknife she had taken from the last Trandosha.

Hopping to her feet, Komari covered the intervening distance between the back of the truck and the small window that allowed the driver to look back into the hold of the cargo truck. Her vibroknife cut through it, while behind her, Quinlan and Arno landed, with Quinlan carrying Arno under one arm. The man was still tied up, but no longer tied to the chair. There wasn't enough time for more.

Unfortunately, Komari couldn't quite get at the driver even thrusting her hand through the hole she had cut, and the man, a Nautolan, panicked. Pulling down hard on the steering wheel, he dove straight down, hoping to dislodge his new and most very unwanted companions.

Quinlan felt his feet go out from under him as the truck dove down and quickly tossed Arno towards Komari, who dropped her vibroknife and caught the man, grunting as her back slammed into the rear of the cargo container. He floated for a moment, as the hover car left the area beside the hotel behind going down towards the lower levels of the ecumenopolis, before grabbing the hover-truck's back door, which was flapping in the wind of its passage.

The move nearly wrenched his arm out of its socket, but the Kiffar Jedi held on. When the hover truck began to right itself to enter a down-spire traffic stream, he flung himself forward. As they passed through the stream of other hover vehicles, he landed on top of the hover-truck's cab.

There, he flipped himself down, lashing out with a Force Push-assisted kick that shattered the windows on the passenger side of the truck, and continued on, catching the driver in the side. The Nautolan grunted in pain, before falling silent forever as Quinlan's blaster took him in the side of the head.

A few frost moments passed as he pulled the dead body out of the drivers position and grabbed the wheel, pulling himself in front of the controls, and righting their angle of descent, while behind him, Komari finally was able to get her feet under her. She gently placed Arno on the ground, and moved to close the trucks cargo door. Once that was done, Komari grimaced a bit, noticing she had taken a few burns from superheated glass and other things, but no real serious injuries.

Arno was faring a little worse, she could sense that his shoulder and elbow were broken on one side, and someone had broken the fingers of that same hand. He was one piece and of sound mind though, and he stared at her, then towards the front of the truck, fear radiating off him to the point even a Jedi who didn't have the empathic skill could tell.

Feeling this, Komari paused, holding up her hands, then slowly resting one at the small of her back, pulling out her lightsaber from where it was hidden under her clothing. She set it on her belt, noticing that the man calmed down at the sight of it. *The lightsaber might only be a simple*

tool, but it is also unfortunately a symbol two four two many of the galaxy, Komari held back a snort with difficulty at the irony of an order of peacekeepers and lawmen being known by a weapon of violence as she knelt in front of Arno, gently moving her hands toward his shoulder. "As you can see, I'm a Jedi. I have some healing ability, although not much. But I am going to try to heal your shoulder, and then I will take away the pain from your other wounds before removing your gag. After that, I believe we have much to discuss Arno. If your latest articles about corruption and missing funds and material from Cortina, Empress Teta and Thomor was at all accurate."

The man slumped in relief, then nodded, and Komari went to work.

Thankfully for the two Jedi and their new acquaintance, the attackers hadn't thought to have any means of tracking the truck that had brought some of their people to the ambush. And they seemingly hadn't had any observer teams around either beyond the two surviving snipers, who had retreated entirely from the area.

At least, as far as Quinlan and Komari could feel through the Force, anyway. Thanks to the Veil, that wasn't very far. But despite being tense and ready for more trouble, they were able to get back to the spaceport and ditch the truck with relative ease. "It seems as if we have pulled the teeth of our enemy at present."

"At present," Komari emphasized, shaking her head. "We need to remember that. This was probably no more than a quick reaction team."

"I, it won't be," Arno interjected, his voice taut with anxiety rather than pain. Komari had been true to her word, removing the sense of pain from his wounds. "E, Empress Teta, the Primogen, the ruling council, two have recently changed position. There's a power struggle going on, and both sides are trying to seem harsher on crime than the other. Offworlders especially... and aliens... will be in for it."

"So there will be a lot of middle and lower ranking criminals rounded up, while the real criminals will still be out there, just not acting as openly," Quinlan answered with a shake of his head. *Our contacts are still here, after all. For now. How long that will last I don't know.*

"Regardless, do you think going to the locals for help would be a good idea?"

"N, no. I don't think so. I posted my most recent article here on Empress Teta, and within a day those people came after me. They have to have someone in the local government."

"Good. In that case, let us leave Empress Teta for now. Unless... that article was more a Kuati House, but did you find something here?"

"No. Empress Teta was only used as a relay point. Someone was paid off to not notice certain ships passing though, but that's it," Arno answered. "Middlemen. I, if you mean to help me on my most recent expose, then we can come back for him or her."

So it was decided, and the hover truck headed towards Cinnigar's spaceport. After ditching the truck, Quinlan covered their acquaintance with Force Stealth as well as himself. With that, he was able to get Arno onto the ship Quinlan and Komari were using at present. This was a very well-made, semi-modern HWK-290 out of Corellia. It was perfect for their cover of being recently married middle-class entrepreneurs, who had bought the ship together, adding it to a small, but growing fleet of five. Or, at least, that was what the paper trail said.

Meanwhile, Komari shifted back into their primary disguise and headed off to deal with the spaceport operators, time to once more transform her appearance into that of their cover on this planet, rather than the pair of another do wells they had looked when they entered the hotel.

Luckily, Empress Teto was, despite apparently having a criminal element to it, a very well run, extremely organized star system. There was even any need to bribe anyone to change their time to leave. Komari simply filled out a few forms and handing over the ship's manifest and registry. Both of which were perfectly clean, although the identification that came with them was just as perfectly fabricated. Luckily, it passed muster, and the human manning the out system flight desk smiled, shook her hand, and bid 'Lilsala Vobaugn' a safe trip and a happy honeymoon.

Meeting up with Arno and Quinlan on the ship, she took over watching their new acquaintance and allowing Quinlan to change his own regular outfit, bar his face which he changed back into the guise of 'Patri Vobaugn', new husband. Quinlan handled the controls of the ship, moving into the queue to leave the airspace above Cinnagar, heading out to space.

Meanwhile, Komari did what she could for Arno's injuries. They would take time to heal, as the two Jedi didn't have any access to a bacta tank onboard their ship, but none of them were life-threatening. "That is one thing we might want to do: see if we can buy a medical droid of some kind and stash it on whatever ship we're using. This time, neither of us were injured much, but it would surely have helped Arno here, and it was mostly the fact that we were ready and able to prepare for the battle that allowed us to get through it unscathed. If they had just a bit more time to prepare or we didn't sense the danger ahead of time, it would have been a different story."

"I thought much the same when we were finally able to fully feel out the trap. If they used droids, we might well have been lost, or forced to use more of our Force powers where it could be recorded. Which would be very bad if what we fear of the Sith infiltration of the Empress Teta system is correct."

Arno gasped, stumbling back in fear, but Quinlan was quick to shake his head at the other man. "No, don't worry. Looking into the Empress Teta systems government isn't why we grabbed you. We know you haven't written anything specifically about this system just yet, although given how quickly a team was sent to capture you, I presume you know you were stepping into some very deep waters, yes?"

"Are you sure that those people were there for me rather than you? The man torturing me, he didn't actually ask me any questions, he just seemed to, to enjoy doing it," Arno shot back, showing a fire that had previously been absent from the man, one that both Jedi were pleased to see. "And who are you two? This one at least bears the lightsaber of a Jedi, but given events in the galaxy, forgive me for thinking that isn't the guarantee of safety it might once have been."

"Sound thinking. For myself, my my name is Jedi Master Quinlan Vos. This is Jedi Master Komari Vosa. The two of us are members of an Order of Jedi called the Shadows, and we work in the underbelly of the galaxy to combat crime, and these days, to learn what we can have the Sith threat."

"I would think the threat was obvious. Master C'baoth and his followers among the Confederacy, and his conspirators within the Order. What's so strange or unusual about that? Or are you talking about where they had been before that?" Arno frowned thinking. "Before they had the Confederacy to back them openly, I mean. That... could be a fascinating line of investigation frankly."

"But only part of what we are really after. You see, many within the Jedi Order do not believe that C'baoth is the sole threat. And recently, we have discovered quite a lot of other threads leading not into the Confederacy, but to someone pulling the strings elsewhere, imbedded within the Republic. We're uncertain whether or not they are pulling the strings from some hidden location, from within the government and if so at what level, or from some other powerful position within society. Some business mogul or whoever. But it has become very clear as we have fought this shadow war that there is another threat out there," Komari took up the tale, before changing the subject. "Your fingers will heal appropriately now, but you won't be able to move them much, considering the knuckles and the other bones in them have also been broken and not just the forefingers as I first thought. It will be somewhat painful, but we have enough painkillers to help once I stop using the Force to deaden the pain for you."

Arno thanked her absentmindedly, but stayed silent thereafter, thinking about what the two Jedi had said. Meanwhile, Quinlan piloted the ship, passing through the planetary shield, and then out into space beyond. It was only as they exited the atmosphere that Arno spoke again. "Is that why you saved me? Because I have been looking into House Knylenn and its so-called missing members?"

"Yes and no. Yes, we were looking for you in order to speak to you on that matter, and perhaps to enlist your help in hunting down further strange expenditures of men and material shall we say throughout the galaxy. As we said before, we believe the Sith have been moving in the shadows of the galaxy for a very, very long time, and the Jedi need all the help we can get on the fiduciary side of things to hunt for clues," Quinlan amid admitted. "There are barely fifty Jedi who are that good with numbers, spreadsheets and so forth. And there are even less who have any ability to follow the money trail from one system to another."

Arno's eyes widened that, and Quinlan shook his head. "One of the greatest secrets of the galaxy is precisely how many Jedi there are. There are not many of us to say the least, while we are each of us extremely capable in certain areas, when it comes to programming, computers, and so forth, there are not very many Jedi you can use the Force to aid in any way, which means it falls back on skill and inclination. We usually use the Republic for such things, but considering that it might well be the Republic government we end up investigating, of that seems counterproductive in this case.

With the pain of his wounds gone, and now on firmer ground as to why the Jedi were there, and there overall goals aligning with his, Arno replied instantly to this, his voice is certain, his mannerisms becoming much more confident.

"It is almost certainly someone in the Republic government, at least if you're speaking of my most recent investigations. I was able to discover who had transferred quite a lot of the funds, and why. Apparently, someone from the Republic government, with full credentials, told them to do so, and then will wipe all records."

"Who?" Komari asked instantly, leaning forward. "Do you have a description of the man in question, or even just a partial one would help."

"I'm afraid not. The man I spoke to, a security guard who worked for that company before it apparently ran into local legal troubles and had to shut down... Barely two weeks after this order was placed and the equipment picked up. Rather curious timing don't you think?" Arno allowed one eyebrow to rise in question, and both of the Jedi snorted, nodding their heads in unison to his point. But when he went on, they sobered. "The description I got was of a man so totally nondescript the security guard wouldn't be able to point him out if he was standing right next to him. Nondescript height, nondescript hair, eyes everything. The only thing that grabbed the man's attention was an earring in one ear, and the fact that he wore a pair of sunglasses."

"Which are almost certainly disguises, visual cues to fool the eye," Quinlan grunted.

Arno nodded. "Exactly. Unfortunately, I couldn't find anyone willing to allow me to look at the local spaceport inflow, and even if I did, that kind of description wouldn't have helped me much."

"It would have us if we were there at the time," Quinlan grumbled. "But after so long, any Force trace would have disappeared. We might be able to pick out the right picture, but that is it, and would not be enough for us to follow further. So that is a dead end. But where did the money come from?"

Here, Arno looked a little embarrassed. "While that was the line of inquiry I was pursuing at first, and the one that told me there was something unusual occurring, I switched to tracking the equipment after the most recent purchase. The equipment in question is somewhat bizarre,

in fact, extremely so. There is a reason why that company went bankrupt so quickly after it was told to hand over the equipment and then erase all data pertaining to the sale.”

“What kind of equipment are we talking about here? Parts for turbolasers, ships?”

“There was a lot of those kinds of purchases back when house Knylenn was on Kuat, both directly before and after the disappearance of Loftor, their best ship designer, and a large portion of their fleet. But no, this particular purchase, and the items which were then taken aboard those ships I spotted were not weapons systems or anything of that nature. No, they were parts for a series of S-thread boosters.”

Both Jedi looked blank and Arno smiled, the smile of someone happy that he gets to share a secret. “You don’t know what those are? Well, there is really no need, most have no idea what they are. They are an insanely expensive set of equipment for certain. You see, S-thread boosters forcefully create hyperspace lanes.”

At that, Quinlan blinked in surprise, sharing a look with Komari. “That’s incredible. But you say they are expensive?”

“Yes.” Arno frowned a bit, staring down at his pants pocket, shaking his head. “If only we had been able to get my computer back. It had a lot of information on it. Still, I had dropped off a backup copy on the planet of Metellos. If we head there, I can show you all of my records.”

“We will do so, but first, give us a broad outline of what you’re talking about.” Komari ordered.

“Well, think of these S thread boosters as the equivalent of a Hypercom network relay center. There are simply too expensive for any single system polity to support. Indeed, even creating the parts for them is difficult, very expensive. They are large structures, on the scale of space stations, and you have to make a certain number of them to build the... I’ve heard it called a hyperspace tunnel, rather than simply a hyperspace lane. It’s what established the lane between Coruscant and the Empress Teta system. What it does is create a gravitic zone in between the areas in a funnel shape between two points, removing all items between them that could stop a ship from continuing on its course through hyperspace,” Arno explained.

“It sounds fascinating. And I can understand why you changed the thrust of your investigation to tracking these parts. We will look over your data about that with interest. But, before that, did you discover anything on this planet that wasn’t yet in that report?”

“...” Arno paused, suddenly wary, then slowly nodded. “I did. It was thought that the last series of parts for the S-thread booster was bought here in Empress Teta by... Well, a Jedi.”

That wasn’t good, but it didn’t exactly surprise either Quinlan or Komari. Given the number of Blank Jedi that C’baoth had somehow created throughout the order before leaving the order and beginning his rise to leadership of the Confederacy of Independent systems, it didn’t actually mean much either. “We had hoped that the Order had found all of the Blanked. But it appears as if we missed one. Do you have a picture of this Jedi?”

"I'm sorry, but no. My contact was only able to tell me that he was a Miraluka and male."

"That narrows it down some, there what, ten such within the order at the moment?" Quinlan mused. Given that most of the Miralukas were Force Sensitive, there were always at least two dozen or more within the Jedi Order, and more within the Agricultural Corps. "But it's a start at least. We can clandestinely send that onto the temple, have them try to find if any such ever had contact with C'baoth."

"True. But for now, what more can you tell us about the money side of this trail? Where did that start from, and have you found any other similar trails?" Komari asked. It felt as if they were closer to figuring out the big picture here, but that before they reached that big picture, they would have to dive down many different rabbit holes.

Arno "The money came from many places. Some so small an amount that the locals didn't notice, others covered up so adroitly the shift of funds to another account was barely noticeable. A large segment of the money comes from devastated worlds. Worlds where many people had died, but who had bank accounts off world..."

What followed was a long rambling conversation about how the man had discovered the existence of the various monetary transfers in the first place, one that only Komari could really follow. Quinlan might have developed a head for numbers during their time basically conquering large segments of the underworld, but that didn't mean that he had any particular knack in that area. Instead, he concentrated on the images that the man had picked up from the hyper net of the S-thread boosters in the Empress Teta system, staring at the massive, space station-sized constructs in thought. *What could they be used for? And where did House Knylenn go?*

OOOOOOO

Lightsabers flashed and banged against one another, the familiar *FzzCRK* noise of energy field meeting energy field echoing across the training deck, as Harry and his young padawan Ahsoka trained together. Harry's style, a mix of Djem So and Makashi currently was far more stolid and immobile than Ahsoka preferred, and she knew Harry had taken the style as a way to let Ahsoka push herself offensively, to work on her Jar'Kai style. Ahsoka had grabbed that chance with both hands. She seemed to danced around him, her strikes fast fluid and almost beautiful, while incorporating far more Force powers than a normal Jar'Kai user would. It was very hard to use two lightsabers and also call on the Force for specific techniques.

And yet a each strike was parried, each Force Trick matched, Ahsoka found herself struggling more and more to contain her irritation. His Force Precognition was also simply better than hers, which while not exactly surprising considering that he was her master, was also quite annoying

Grumbling, Ahsoka pulled back from her latest attack, watching as Harry settled into a defensive stance. It wasn't quite Soresu or Shien, but was certainly defensive in nature, she could tell that.

Instantly, she decided to try another offensive assault. *I'll summon up some fire from behind and to the left, then...*

But before she could complete the thought, Harry took the offensive shocking her as he closed the distance with a Fore Jump. She barely got her first lightsaber up to block his first blow, then found it carried to the side, as Harry's Djem So strike nearly knocked the lightsaber entirely out of position. Her second lightsaber was pushed to the side as well, and then, she found her Masters lightsaber point thrusting towards her chest, faster than she could dodge, or block. "B, but how! Your stance, the way you were holding your lightsaber, it..."

"You allowed yourself to see what you wished to see, not attempting to feel out my intentions through the Force," Harry said, smiling slightly. "Yet again as the battle continues Ahsoka, you tend to concentrate on the physical aspect of the battle, ignoring the Force side of things outside of attacks."

The younger girl was going to retort sharply to that, but a raised eyebrow caused her to pause, and think about what he had said. The acknowledging smile she got warmed her a little inside, still unused to Harry's positive reinforcement, the small things he did to show she was making progress. Calming down, she thought for several moments before saying slowly, "I neglected to continue using my force precognition right?"

"Yes and no. You were using it well enough to discern my physical movements. Even when I launched that last attack, you were already moving one of your lightsaber's into the proper position to block my strike." Ahsoka blinked, not realizing that until Harry pointed it out. "But you were not reading my intent. I gave you the visual clues needed for you to fool yourself, and you couldn't see that I was playing you. Always look underneath, my padawan."

Ahsoka nodded glumly, then raised her at lightsabers speculatively. "Another bout, master?"

Chuckling at her attitude, Harry examined the younger girl closely. "No, I think you need some more recovery time. We're going to shift focus. You've come a long way in lightsaber combat, and from now on, only more sparring and experience will help in that area. But one aspect that we need to emphasize especially with this war going on is combat against blasters, and we haven't done so yet. You've proven several times you can handle yourself in that arena too, but I want to build on that foundation to the point you can do it against more, and more importantly, better trained opponents than that scum you dealt with on Valahari."

Ahsoka grinned, flourishing her lightsabers to either side. "Sounds like fun, master."

Harry grinned back at her, reaching out to stroke along one of her montrals then gently pushed her lightly towards the side of the training area. "It does, but it is also extremely important. You've proven several times that you can take on a few opponents at a time firing blasters at you. But that is a far cry from being involved in a real war zone. Threats can come from any side, and in overwhelming numbers." He looked at Ahsoka, who nodded, remembering how close she

had come to dying when the two of them went aboard the former CIS ship after the Tyrant's Bane's first battle.

"I understand master. And it is really hard to use Force Precognition against non-living opponents. It was way easier fighting my way through that gang on Valahari than fighting the droids when we were together or the infiltration team on Serenno," Ahsoka said.

"Exactly, although I will say some of that is personal growth, padawan." Looking away as Ahsoka tried not to show how pleased she was by that statement, Harry went on, his hand moving from the back of Ahsoka's head to her shoulder as he guided her forward. "So we need to push that aspect, and your awareness of your surroundings. We will work on your footing, on your ability to analyze which threat is the most dangerous, and your lightsaber abilities to block ever-increasing numbers of blaster bolts from all around you rather than from a single direction."

That all made sense to Ahsoka, and not for the first time Ahsoka thanked the Force and Master Yoda for assigning her to learn under Harry... and Aayla, of course. Aayla's help had let Ahsoka develop her Jar'Kai to the point where she could now use it in combat, although having her idea of holding one blade underhand beaten out of her had not been fun. And Harry... well, Harry was easily the best Master she could ask for outside of letting her get involved in space combat. "And my force shielding, Master?"

"That too. There, I want to work on shape, speed, and redirection, shifting a existing shield around. Today though let us concentrate on facing a company of Confederacy droids. We will practice your footing in a forest setting for now, and then shift to a more urban environment tomorrow. Desert the day after, and so forth. I may even start running you through specific training scenarios as we add to the enemy numbers. That will help you train your Force Precognition to look for what is truly real and what is most important."

The Tyrant's Bane had taken on several hundred examples of each type of droid the fleet they had bested back in their first battle had aboard. This included droidekas, B2 droids, and others. Many of the Jedi aboard had already begun to make use of them for training purposes, as the Verpine reprogrammed them in lots of a dozen each time.

Ahsoka smiled at that, well pleased with the new training offer to her. *It surely beats meditation.*

Her smile disappeared though as Harry, seemingly able to read her thoughts, went on smoothly. "And of course before training in the morning you will meditate, and you will meditate prior to going to bed. We will also take breaks from physical workouts occasionally to meditate and work on Force techniques as we have up to this point."

"I should have known it was too good to be true," Ahsoka grumbled, but still smiled as several dozen droids entered the training area under Harry's direction. Moments later, she entered the forest in the center of the farming zone, and the droids came after her.

Afterward, Ahsoka was allowed to go off and take a shower, before coming back and joining her master for a time of meditation, and a small late breakfast between the two of them. Aayla was busy all day that day with various communications throughout the GDL on the humanitarian side of things. Building on the fact that Ryloth had joined them – with Orn Fre Ta still staying as the Sector Senator, something she was both annoyed and happy about - Aayla had decided to get behind the idea of medical ships and push hard. Specifically, Aayla was currently organizing more medical aid to be sent to those planets which were under occupation from the Confederacy now that the Confederacy would need to allow such ships through their blockades. This would also keep open avenues of communication, making it easier to get information, general information about the occupation, out.

Shipments to such places, tier three planets for the most part, were going to be searched of course. But even the death of Senator Bonteri two days ago hadn't squashed the Confederacy's agreement to allow medical ships to ply their trade wherever they could. Far too many planets could not meet local demands for such, and finding alternate sources that didn't cross the war's divide was extremely difficult. No one wanted a plague to break out and spread through the galaxy, which meant everyone needed to keep medical supplies flowing.

I hope that Padme is feeling better today, Harry thought as he watched his young padawan scarfed down her meal with all the speed and eagerness of a teenager. She was practically inconsolable when Ahsoka and I contacted her to give her our condolences about Bonteri. Losing a mentor like that hit Padme hard. To say nothing of the allegations tossed at the Republic as to who had planted the bomb. None of us have any doubt about who was behind it, but proving it is a different story.

He felt Aayla responding to that thought, and a promise to meet up with Harry late that evening for another call with Padme whatever else they had going today, which was a lot admittedly. Then most of her attention was diverted again to the dozens of logistical lists that she was going through, and Harry rapidly pulled his own attention away. He had his own work with the GDL to get back to later today, but right now, he wanted to concentrate on his padawan.

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As they arrived in the communications room, Harry was not at all surprised to find Aayla already there, having known that she would be, and having spent the walk catching up on what she had been doing via their connection. After turning from the medical transport side of things, Aayla had been in a meeting with several industrialists in Corellia along with the system's Dictat. That discussion had primarily been about Aayla and the Dictat dealing with a push from within Corellia's industrial sector to shift some of their output away from creating planetary shield generators. It was eating up a significant portion of the civilian side's GDP, and their local resources, which many felt would be better served bolstering the defenses around Corellia. For any one planetary shield generator, you could refit seven or built four cruisers from the keel out.

But it was also still very, very necessary. There are still too many type III and even type II planets that didn't have planetary shields out there within the GDL, which could in fact support them from their local energy grid. Which was the point Aayla kept on repeating. Any planet that had sufficient industrial grid needed a planetary shield. And as Harry and Ahsoka entered, Aayla finished a small speech saying, "The bottom line here gentlemen is that the GDL is built on defending ourselves, and giving others within our league the ability to do the same. It is not about making more money for you, nor about building up local defenses which are already among the strongest in the known galaxy. I realize that Corellia is dealing with a serious threat from the Confederacy fleet boring in on it. But we have resources that you do not know about nor need to at this time to deal with such. Indeed, sending so much of their offensive firepower on such mission is a strategic mistake for them, though it might take a while for them to realize it."

The men and women in the pickup all subsided at last, with many of them simply nodding brusquely, and ending the transmission. They were not happy with how the conversation had gone, and unwilling to prolong it further. Others stayed to simply make social pleasantries for a time, especially when they saw that Harry had joined Aayla. While Aayla's position within the growing political structure of the Galactic Defense League was being kept deliberately vague, Harry's position was not, and everyone there wished, in Ahsoka's whispered words, "Make nice with the boss. Good for you, Master."

That earned her a stern glare from Harry, but since his eyes were twinkling, the glare lost much of its effect. Even so, Ahsoka moved back to take up a position near the walls, having no interest joining these discussions, and no real knowledge to do so in the first place. Meanwhile, Harry smiled and spoke to each of the individuals addressing him in turn, helping Aayla to bring the conversation to a close. While inside his head, he asked rhetorically, *"I wonder if any of them realize that there was a reason why the Republic didn't allow for the wholesale distribution of planetary shields. There are far more planets that could sustain such than had access to them. But it is so much easier to control your populace if you can control the orbitals."*

"That is a harsh and extremely cynical statement Harry, I wish that I didn't understand where it was coming from," Aayla answered with a wince.

Harry responded by pulling her mental avatar into a hug, kissing her cheek, allowing his appreciation of her taking over many of the social reforms that needed to be made within the GDL from his shoulders with that touch. Aayla's avatar responded by turning her head and eagerly capturing Harry's lips with her own, making Harry reflect that they needed to make some time for the physical side of the relationship. They hadn't been able to since arriving in Serenno after dropping off the younglings on Ruusan. Not only had the tempo of operations for the war picked up, but the political and bureaucratic side of things had also demanded a lot of their time both before they left to attack Ord Cestus and after they returned from Valahari a week ago. Something that both knew would not be changing today, although what they spent that time on would, hopefully.

Soon many of the civilian industrialists disappeared only to be replaced by several more talking heads almost immediately as their next meeting began. This was a meeting about the House of the Stars, and did not get off to an auspicious start, at least if you asked the man who used that name about it, given the deadpan stares he received from both Aayla and Harry. "Really?" Aayla murmured shaking her head. "Please don't tell me that name is set in stone. It sounds far too sententious."

"I agree wholeheartedly my lady," the man answered hurriedly, looking a little crestfallen. He had thought it sounded grand and inspirational.

"The name is a nice allusion, and perhaps it is something to shoot towards in the future, but right now, it does come off as being somewhat arrogant. We are not as important as the stars, nor do we speak for all such," the Dictat said, making a hand-patting motion with one hand. "But let us not get sidetracked by debates on the name. That will come in time. Let us instead dive into the issue of actually creating such a body in the first place."

This was a three-hour discussion on various measures and thoughts on the bureaucratic needs of the growing governmental side of the GDL. Here, Harry and Aayla worked in tandem, shooting down ideas, boosting others, and generally trying to streamline the whole process as best they could. Which, unfortunately given the size of the process involved, wasn't very much.

But as always, Harry and Aayla were very clear on a few things. First, that this would be the side of the GDL that would create laws, the legislative branch, which would impact the GDL as a whole. But no law could impugn upon the rights of the individual planets. Any laws passed by the 'House of the Stars' would need to be ratified by the planets themselves. Further, the representatives would be just that, representatives. No leader, no matter their title, would be allowed to join the legislative branch of the government. The Dictat, for example, could elect someone to represent Corellia on the House of the Stars, but would not be able to do so herself.

Aayla, buoyed by tales of what Lily had told her about Earth and lessons from her Master, suggested that instead of one overarching House, there needed to be two. Any law or mandate passed would then need to gather a two-thirds majority to get a bill passed. Population size would be used to determine the number of votes in one house, where systems which had more than seven billion people would be allowed to elect more representatives for every three billion thereafter. "Using Serenno as an example, this means that Serenno would be able to elect three speakers. Dac two, and one of our type two planets one. But the other house, call it a Parliament for now, like the CIS, will not follow the same rules. Instead, every system would be represented by a single vote."

In this manner the more populace systems would have greater say in the GDL as a whole, as befit their greater role in the League. But their power would also be checked by the sheer number of other systems.

“And there will be no allowances for each planet having a saying in that Parliament, nor will we go the other way and make it by sector. Each system, one vote, chosen by the locals however they choose to do so,” Harry agreed firmly. “Further, I believe that there should be limitations on how long someone can serve. Seven years before needing to be reelected. And they can only be reelected once by a popular vote. That will stop people from creating their own personal fiefdoms or power structures.”

The Jedi would not be involved in the leadership process of any of the planets within the GDL. Instead, the representatives to the GDL would be locally elected, although how those local elections were run, Harry and Aayla were more than willing to leave to the locals in question.

There was some pushback, indeed quite a bit of it. Many of the representatives who wanted to be involved in this process resented the limitation of terms and some of the other laws that were already in place for the legislative branch. Others wanted to halt the process entirely until the war was done. After all, there would be more than enough time after the war was won. So long as recruitment and taxes continued, who cared about the rest?

But the Dictat, Harry and Aayla were all of a similar mind on this, which Harry put into words at one point when someone bluntly stated that trying to create a new government during a war for their very survival was somewhat stupid and perhaps even vainglorious. “Vainglorious it might be, but we have a duty to start building that foundation now. If we want the GDL to remain as a body politic going forward, which I believe at this point is something all of us want, unless anyone here thinks we can merge back into the Republic?”

When snorts of derision and laughter were his response, Harry nodded somewhat sadly. He had more hope in Padme and those like her to truly start to change the Republic from within than many of these folk, but he wasn’t about to argue the point.

“Not when she had so much trouble pushing the Medical Ship Neutrality Act through the Senate, and had to use the specter of contagion and plague to do it,” Aayla agreed mentally, before smoothly taking over for Harry, the smoothness and shock of it putting their opponents even further off balance and they already were. “Then we need to build on our strong bedrock already. The military side of things is running like a well oiled machine, and creates inherent connections on the civilian side of things. But we cannot, I emphasize gentlemen, **cannot** become a military with the state. We must become a union with a united military.”

“And Aayla used the word union there specifically. The GDL will not replace the Republic as an overarching governmental body that controls everything going on beneath it. The sheer size of the Republic is just as at fault as the inherent biases built into it for amount of corruption and graft within. Rather, we will remain a league, a tightly knit society of different, but equal planets that have come together to defend ourselves from physical threats to our lives,” Harry intoned. “That is why any law that affects the GDL as a whole will need to be ratified by the governments of every planet within. If a planet does not, then it will not be held liable for that law, nor benefit from it. Our primary goal will always be defense, growth and maintaining free trade.”

Again there was some chagrin at that, and Aayla decided she wished to see at least four of the speakers replaced. The one for Serenno though, he could be trusted to keep an eye on governmental bloating and overreaching. *"If we can trust anyone to want to make certain the League's Congress doesn't grow to be a true governmental body it will be someone from Serenno,"* Aayla thought drolly, to which Harry laughingly agreed.

Eventually a kind of consensus was reached on the form of the Congress-to-be. More work would need to be done, but the foundation was now complete.

The screens began to flicker out and Aayla breathed a sigh of relief, letting her head fall against Harry's shoulder, feeling his arm move around her as well as the calming, soothing presence in their share mental space as their mental images copied their physical actions. The only connection remaining was that of the Dictat, and they had another fifteen minutes before a meeting with General Gam, and the rest of the military side of things.

The Dictat smiled at Aayla, shaking her head. "Thank you for saying that last bit, about us not becoming a new Republic. I had wanted to make that point plain, but as the leader of arguably the strongest star system within the GDL, anything I said on that score would be seen askance, or have far too much weight behind it." Her lips quirked a little. "Especially considering how often my predecessors have tried to make the term 'commercial empire' all too accurate."

That won laughter from her listeners, and they began a nice calming conversation about gardening. That was the Dictat's hobby when she wasn't ruling a five-planet system, and how the Dictat, who was still merely a young thirty-something at this point, unwound after a hard day's work. But knowing that the two had another meeting they would need to get to, the Dictat shifted the discussion back to something else after around fifteen minutes. "I know you two are friends with Padme, but has she made any mention of how, her sector was seriously debating joining the League before it became treason for planets to secede even to the GDL?"

"We knew about that actually," Harry said nodding. "We approached the Queen of Naboo and others before the war began. While Naboo rebuffed us, I got the impression that a few others were thinking of joining as individual polities, rather than as a sector wide movement. I wonder, would that have meant that Padme would be forced to give up her position as a senator, or join the 'house of the stars'?"

He snickered at the name even now, although a powerful feeling of delight at the idea of Padme joining them like that also rose within the pair of Force-joined lovers. Politically, the idea of Padme, who had by this point become the figurehead of the Peace Party within the Republic, lending her weight the political side of things was almost an intoxicating idea, to say nothing of their personal reasons to wish to speak in person with you b. So much so they ignored the fact it was literally impossible now, thanks to Aayla overreaching with Ryloth and angering its influential Senator. Harry tightened his hold on Aayla as that thought passed between them, making it clear he didn't blame her for that even as she tried to blame herself.

But they had to realize that politically, Padme would always be on the side of the Senate as a whole.

"The life of a Jedi is never easy," Aayla quoted mentally, to which Harry could only nod his head as the pair shared a hug in their mental realm. *"Padme sees her duty as being that to the Republic as a whole, as well as her sector. Its admirable, but she will always feel herself constrained by their laws rather than anything else."*

"I agree that working with Padme would have been quite nice. Remember she's my friend too, you two," the Dictat reminded them with a snort. "But it isn't going to happen so don't go losing yourself in fantasies." *Whatever type that may be. Honestly, what is going on with these three?* "No, that wasn't why I brought it up. Rather, I brought Padme and the Chommell Sector up because I think we need to build our own Peace Party."

Harry and Aayla frowned at that, trying to parse out what she meant, before Aayla got it, clicking her fingers, and relaying the information instantly to Harry who spoke up for the pair once more. "You mean people in the legislative branch working towards ending the war," he stated. "Someone looking to mitigate the violence, just like Senator Bonteri was trying when she was apparently murdered."

The Dictat winced, but nodded her head. "While I realize that the connection to Bonteri is a sad one, I think it is necessary we start to think along those lines. To have someone thinking about both limiting the violence within this war, and the future. This war is not even a year old, and is already bloody beyond imagining. We need to be able to put a halt to that now while we still can, rather than trying to do so after hatred and vilification have cemented opinions of our enemies in the public mind."

Aayla both agreed, and for the next hour the three of them spoke about how to go about doing so, and who could lead such a party. Eventually, it was decided that the former senator for Dac would make a good candidate for that. He was called up immediately, and the Mon Calamari man agreed with the idea wholeheartedly before signing off once more, along with the Dictat, eager to go over the notes the trio had made.

The Dictat's face was replaced instantly by her fellow Corellian's, and Garm's aspect in turn was joined by several other men and women wearing the uniform of the GDL. All of them paused in their discussion,, but before anyone could speak up, Harry held up his hand. "General, gentlemen and ladies, sorry that we have taken so long to join this conversation. Don't bother going over information that you have already discussed amongst yourselves, we can get the precis later. For now, continue the meeting."

Behind them, Ahsoka shifted in place paying attention at last. The other stuff had been important, she knew, but Ahsoka also knew she didn't know enough about how the Galaxy ran to really have anything to contribute. The

At first, this meeting was mainly about the overall state of the war, both the logistical side of things and the hundreds of combat zones, and both Aayla and Harry were able to follow along easily. Already, Harry and Aayla's decision weeks ago to concentrate on creating destroyers rather than heavier ships was bearing fruit. The missile destroyers, the upgraded Archer class and the Courageous class out of Corellia along with homegrown versions could be rolled out in mere weeks from Corellia, Serenno or most of the Core Worlds. Crewing them also wouldn't be difficult. While the GDL's starfighter corps was constantly on the edge of annihilation, the combat doctrine kept their capital ships alive most of the time. Not always, but there was already a growing core of trained, experienced ship personnel, to say nothing of the growing number of civilians swarming into recruitment centers.

And they were giving the enemies fits in conjunction with growing hordes of gunboats to blunt and decimate their vulture heavy assault wings. There was even talk of a newer, larger version of the Braha'tok class coming out soon. A frigate version, it would replace the original Archer class in the GDL's order of battle and work even better, it was hoped to blunt the starfighter swarms the CIS used.

Meanwhile, the Mon Calamari shipyards were retooling their freighter fleets as quickly as possible. And already, there were five newly built cruisers that had recently rejoined the warfront, built from the keel out as warships, ships they had laid down as the war began. That shocked even Harry and Aayla, but the Mon Calamari had followed up on the discussion weeks ago on this point. They had forgone their typical need to make their ships just as much art as ship and embraced standardization. Such was their dedication to the GDL and its goals.

This was a good thing, and Harry reflected that the general ignorance of how good Dac's shipyards remained a godsend. People knew that the Mon Calamari built decent shields and good ships, but few beyond the Dac sector understood the industrial capacity they had. They would never be able to match the speed of Corellia or Rendili. Their construction design was simply not as efficient even now. But the ships would in the main be better which was why only Dac was building new battlecruisers at all. Every other system was building destroyers, frigates, and the Braha'tok gunboats as fast as possible, to say nothing about starfighters.

But the starfighter front of the war was still grim. "If not for the Braha'tok gunboats backing them up, the Arrow fighters would be getting wiped out in every action," Aayla murmured mentally, her astral projection looking appalled at the number of dead the Starfighter corps had suffered. More than three million so far, and that was a low estimate. It could be as high as twice that. *"The damn vultures don't have to be better than any of our fighters six to one if they can field enough to face us twenty to one!"*

"I know, but we have Valahari with us now. With them, and Herren and the rest, we can hope to get some new designs off the table, to go with our growing Bomber wings," Harry soothed. It didn't help either of them if he was honest. Staring at these numbers on a screen might well have worked to deaden the fact those numbers represented people's lives to others, but not to

Harry or Aayla. The knowledge of how bloody this war as and would continue to get was something that horrified both of them. For a moment on their shared mental plane, the pair was silent, simply taking solace in one another, before turning to the conversation at hand as it got down to specific fronts.

News on the warfront was particularly telling when it came to Corellia, and more than one of the men and women involved in the discussion was thinking that perhaps Harry should take the Tyrant's Bane into that conflict, and blunt that offensive. But Harry was adamant that they did not need to, and that the secret weapon on the Tyrant's Bane -even here they would not be talking directly about the expansion runic arrays - was already being emplaced on other ships under Jedi supervision. This would allow the Tyrant's Bane to go on the offensive.

He added this last in a pointed tone, looking at Garm, who nodded, causing Harry to smile.

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"... So I believe the 501st performed extremely well, as did Anakin despite this being by far the largest battle he's ever been in, and their trial by fire," Mace concluded his report on the mission to Caaratos and looked around the room, calmly assessing everyone's expressions. "But that is not why you called Anakin and I back to the temple. You wish my impression of him, whether or not I believe he has finished his retraining to my satisfaction, and the impact of combat on this scale on his emotional control."

"See correctly you do. Hide it, we have not," Yoda answered, his eyes remaining closed. They had been closed all along, and a faint frown was on his face. But Mace, like the other Jedi Masters around the room, felt that frown had nothing to do with the topic in question.

And when the Grand Master fell silent, that served as proof of that fact. Instead, Master Juro Del, a Lorrdian who was serving as a temporary member of the high Council while so many were away on missions pertaining to the war, spoke up, looking around at the others before doing so. "It is not just young Anakin that we are concerned about obviously. Many of our Jedi, regardless of what sect they are a part of, have been shocked by the impact of this war on our mental faculties, our emotional control and how we use the Force in general. I know for example that my own padawan has requested that we not be posted to the front any longer. He feels unable to withstand the rigors of conflict on such a scale. And I personally agree with them. We did not cover ourselves in glory to say the least, unlike you and young Anakin. But Anakin has a... history of emotional difficulties so..."

"You are being most diplomatic Juro, and I thank you for it. But I well understand the emotional issues my padawan has faced. It was why he and I did not take part in this war from the start. The death of his mother, when he was so close to saving Shmi, the impact to his emotional control cannot be overstated. But the months spent within the temple helped to renew his

emotional control, his connection to the Force, and to the Order. Indeed, his helping the younglings was one of the best things to happen to Anakin in a long while.”

Mace was calm as he answered, knowing that his agreement to go along with the Chancellor’s idea of the 501st, and perforce himself and Anakin, to take part in the battle of Caaratos had not been a popular one among the High Council. Even Yoda had disapproved somewhat. “As for the impact of this war on Anakin, I believe that he will be able to deal with it.”

He paused thinking. “While Anakin still has issues with the intensity of his emotions, he was able to deal with the intensity of combat quite well, using the f=Force to great effect. His combat instincts are amazing, as good as my own. I believe that he and I should retain command of the 501^s. Anakin was able to build a sense of camaraderie with the clones, particularly Rex and the other commanders ,that served us in good stead during this campaign. Connections like that to people outside the Order do open Anakin up to the pain of loss and the anger of said loss in the future once more, but the military style regimentation of that connection will serve to blunt those emotions if such a time comes.”

The Council fell silent thinking on that score, before asking some probing questions about Anakin’s actual actions in detail rather than as a broad overview. Eventually though, they were satisfied. Anakin had led not only the first infiltration, but the first of many defensive dogfights after the Caaratos’s planetary defenses had fallen into the Republic’s hands.

“If only that one blasted reporter hadn’t started to coin the term The Hero Without Fear, I don’t think any of us would have issues with how Anakin actually performed,” Depa Billaba grumbled, shaking her head and looking at her former master. “I’m sorry Mace, but that term is going to cause issues, and I hope that you continue to keep a sharp lid on Anakin’s ego.”

“I will do so, never fear. I cannot outright forbid him from giving interviews, but I can make it increasingly difficult to get to them to do so. And keep Anakin a bit too busy besides,” Mace answered with a wry twist of his lips. “Do you have any more questions, or another assignment for us? Personally, I would like some time to meet with Admiral Yularen. There are a few observations we made about fighting the droids on the ground that I didn’t have the time to put into my initial report.”

Again everyone there looked to the Grand Master, but he was silent, and since Master Rancisis was over at the Republic High Command meeting with Yularen and the rest of high command, none of them had any real seniority over one another. Depa spoke up once more, thanking her former master for giving them his impressions on young Anakin, and advising Mace that both he and the 501st would indeed have some time before they would be thrown back into combat once more, ending teasingly, “No matter how fond of it ,you and Skywalker are.”

Soon, most of the Council left. After all, all of them had duties they needed to get back to. But despite having been the reason for the meeting to begin with, Mace was one of the last to leave, looking over his shoulder at the ancient Grand Master. He had served as Master of the

Order for many years, and had formed a close companionship with Yoda. He did not need to reach out to the Force now to know that the ancient Jedi was worried about something.

“Master Yoda?”

Yoda opened his eyes, staring back at Mace. “Hrhrhrhm, a shatterpoint, think you, a galaxy could have?”

Mace paused, wondering what Yoda was thinking. But however he looked at the question, the answer came up the same. He had to fall back on his knowledge of shatterpoints in general.

“Anything can have a shatterpoint, Master Yoda. People, buildings, battles, arguments. Anything. That is what I was told when I discovered I had the ability to see shatterpoints. Do you think that there is such existing?”

“Sense... A tipping point I do.” Yoda said slowly. “Pinpoint it, I cannot. An action it is, not a person. What action, where, these questions, elude to me they do. The veil, impossible it is to see through to discern the truth. But death following. Death, unknown to me the scale it is in this.”

Mace winced at that. He knew it irked his old friend that he had not been able to perform the same kind of Force Light tricks that Mace had been told Harry and Aayla could perform, which could beat back the Veil for short amounts of time. Yoda simply didn’t feel the same amount of love and devotion to another person than a pair of lovers could call on, so while he had been able to duplicate the Force Light and Force Needle technique, Force Light constructs were beyond his abilities.

Still, there was only one response to this as well. Mace moved back into the room, taking up his normal place before he had stepped down as Master of the Order to Master Rancisis. “In that case, let me help. Perhaps together, we can discern where this shatterpoint might be, and what precisely it could pertain to. The galaxy, after all, is a very big thing to break.”

Yoda snorted at that, and watched as Mace pulled out a communicator, sending Anakin a request that he take Mace’s place in meeting with the admiral and the high command to go over their impressions of fighting droids on the ground. They were the first senior master and padawan pair to return to Coruscant, and they might have some impressions that others who had been in combat, like Plo Koon or Ki Adi Mundi, , hadn’t been able to convey in their reports.

After that, the pair of Jedi Masters fell into a companionable silence as they meditated on the force, trying to follow the thread that Yoda had barely been able to discern through the veil of the dark side. And when he returned, Master Rancisis joined them not meeting either to say anything, the troubled expressions on the two faces telling him all he needed to know.

Several hours later, Anakin returned from meeting with Yularen, having run into his friend the Chancellor at the high command center as well. He and Mace had a new assignment, one he told Mace later that evening after Mace returned to his rooms. “The 501st is going to be stood down for a few days here on Coruscant. But the Chancellor requested that we and the 501st’s

command team join a delegation heading to Thyferra to hammer out a wartime deal with the Houses there,” Anakin reported, scowling a little. “I wasn’t told who would be in charge of the actual delegation, only that we would meet them on site when we arrived. Why we aren’t... Or rather why **you** aren’t doing the actual deliberations is beyond me, master.”

“I do not know either Anakin, oh but I am certain we will discover it in time.” Mace said with a smile on his face. “Now come, there are many Jedi here among the temple who have not been able to get to Serenno for lightsaber retraining, and even those who have could do with a refresher. Let us go down and remind them of that like in every other aspect of using the force, lightsaber training is something they must continually work at.”

Anakin grinned, and the two of them left Mace’s rooms, heading deeper into the temple.

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Later that day, Aayla and Ahsoka were on Serenno in the command center. Aayla was momentarily surprised to note that Yaddle wasn’t around, but decided not to wonder. Wherever she was it was certain she was doing something for the war effort, either the one against the CIS or against the Sith.

There, Harry began to speak without preamble. “When we returned from Valahari, we told you to take a week to find a target for us, for the Tyrant’s Bane Garm. If you didn’t, we would simply be targeting one of the whole worlds for the Confederacy. Your nod earlier told me you had discovered such a target. I hope I’m not mistaken?”

“If you’re thinking of a single target that will cripple or even deeply wound the CIS war machine then you are, I’m afraid. And frankly, I didn’t think we would be able to find a target in so short a time. Our spy fleets are growing sure, but they’re not growing fast enough, and it is a big, wide galaxy. But I do have a new offensive planned for the Tyrant’s Bane and you, Harry. I Call it Operation Trident.”

He turned to one of his aides. Sena nodded back, and the command center’s central hologram shifted from showing the GDL’s territory to showing two planetary systems side to side. Another screen flared to life a moment later, and information on the two systems joined the central hologram to hover in the air. “These are the planets of Deltro and Mudar.”

Both systems were within the Rendili Sector, and were the only two systems that had not joined the GDL along with their capital system. Harry and Aayla had actually been on Deltro at one point trying to convince the Planetary President to join with the GDL, but the man had a vituperative hatred for Serenno and had refused to listen. His advisors were not so blind though, and many had agreed that going with the majority of the sector was a very good idea in the long run.

“These planets form the forward bases for the ongoing blockade of Rendili and the war throughout the Rendili Sector. I propose that the Tyrant’s Bane hit these planets. Just like you

said Harry, smash any fleets within, batter the planetary shield back. The local CIS admiral will almost be forced to send more fleets to try and stop you. Once they do, we will have forces ready to take advantage of things, not only from the overall GDL, but from within Rendili itself.”

Garm outlined an overall plan of misdirection and attacks coming in from multiple angles, the same kind of thing the GDL had been doing from the start, only this time, the fleets in question would be each individually larger, and have offensive type targets to go for. The Tyrant's Bane would strike first, openly moving toward Mudar along the Hylian Way, the Hyperspace Lane passing through that system and three more in the Rendili sector, although not the eponymous system itself. They would deal with any forces that faced them, then attack Mudar itself.

In this fashion they would draw in further forces, which the rest of the GDL forces in the sector would use to their advantage, pushing the hit and run strikes they had been running and instead destroying any target they could without getting bogged down, including occupation forces, such as on Loretto, another system on Hydian Way and which was the only type two planet in the sector to have fallen to the CIS. Other military targets were deep space military outposts, repair ports, and more.

But the real punch would be the Tyrant's Bane and the GDL fleet brought together to push this campaign. If they succeeded, it would allow them to retake control of the entire Rendili sector, fortify it, and break the blockade on Rendili, freeing its industrial capacity to help with the greater war effort just like Corellia, Serenno, Dac and the Core World Sectors that had joined them.

Aayla and Harry thought about it for several moments, then began to ask questions about this or that aspect of the operation, but the general staff's planning had been meticulous, and the two of them could only point out a few areas where he might be mistaken in terms of up-to-date data, rather than anything on their own logistical side of things. It would be interesting to work more closely with the Mon calamari too, as they would be forming the bulk of the capital ship portion of this attack beyond the Tyrant's Bane itself.

The plan was also audacious, because it called for actually **taking** both of the planets in question. Considering they were within the Rendili sector, and any hope of controlling the entire sector meant that they would need to be broken off from the Confederacy, that meant boots on the ground. For the first time in this war, the GDL would be sending its land-based troops to fight on enemy soil.

The rest of the Eighth Fleet would be coming in with troop transports, loaded with around sixty percent of the total GDL land-based forces. This didn't include those planets which had raised their own armies of course, but before this, infantry and land forces were not a priority for the GDL. But six divisions of troops, including heavy tanks, artillery, and air support to go with the infantry was quite a big force.

This matched the rest of Eighth Fleet, which, while only existing on paper before this, would match any of the Theater Command Fleets the GDL currently used as a means to organize itself.

Twenty-nine destroyer divisions, fifty-eight gunboat divisions, thirty-six frigate divisions, and at the other end of the spectrum, sixteen Mon Calamari cruiser divisions of four ships apiece. It would be the single largest concentration of GDL ships in one contiguous armada, considering how the GDL fought its various battles before this. And it would be an immense show of force to go along with the revelation of the Tyrant's Bane and its abilities.

"We will want to talk to the officers in charge, gentlemen. But this plan seems sound. When do we start, and where will we meet up with the fleet?" Aayla asked, her eyes locked on the two target systems.

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"You know, this can cause us problems later on," Aayla said as the trio of Jedi returned to the Tyrant's Bane. "If we can convince Deltro to join us willingly demanding the removal of their President, add Deltro to the GDL and conquer Mudar, the Republic will notice. The CIS won't be happy, but it's the Republic's response I am not certain about. They might demand that any CIS planet that we claim be turned over to them."

Harry hadn't thought of that, and he frowned, turning over the controls of the shuttle to Ahsoka. "Take over, Ahsoka. Aayla just thought of something, and I want us to follow the concept down the rabbit hole while it's fresh in our minds."

Ahsoka gleefully reached forward to the controls on her side of the cockpit, having taken the copilot's chair by dint of having been faster to reach it than either of the older Jedi. In fact, she would have taken the pilot's chair if not for the fact that she knew Harry would not allow her to pilot. *I would object to how often he takes over flying us all around, if I didn't know that Master uses it as a bit of escapism.* "Got it Master, you and Aayla think deep thoughts, I've got this."

Harry snorted at that, and then turned his attention back to the point that Aayla had made, the pair of them leaning back in their chairs as they shifted their attention more to their shared mental plane than the physical world. Their astral projections appeared in a small replica of their room on the Tyrant's Bane, with Aayla laying out on the bed and Harry taking a seat next to her, propping his feet on the bed.

"Okay, how bad could this be?" Harry asked. "I've been so deep in the military and manufactory side of things that I haven't really kept up on the Republic's response to Valahari and that law they passed to make it treasonous to join us after Ryloth did."

"It was before Orn Fre Ta pushed through that law that would make any more planets joining us as treasonous as joining the Confederacy, and because we were so open about the fact that they were thinking of joining the Confederacy, Valahari joining us played into our hands with the

reporters and with the public on most planets at the time in a way my 'coercing' Ryloth to do the same later... really didn't." Ayala grimaced, a flash of annoyance and regret filling her as that really hadn't looked very good to the Republic or its citizens.

"As for how they view us now, well, just look at the new agencies from the Core Worlds." Here, Aayla shifted their talk to the dark side of Ryloth, and quickly finding the right memory crystal, shared some of her memories of watching reporters from the Core Worlds. These varied wildly in scope. Some of them were touting Harry as a Jedi hero, and Aayla chuckled as she felt the embarrassment Harry felt at that thought.

Others vilified him. Too many, especially to many Core World senators, Harry Potter was simply a more photogenic version of C'baoth, one who preferred soft words and weakening from within in comparison to outright military conquest. Still others hated him, and did not even hide the fact that it was because he had an 'alien' lover.

"Okay, that gives me the civilian population's response to it, but what about the Senate? Note I am not asking for the names of the reporters and anchors who want me to disappear for loving a 'kriffing slave race'. I can find those on my own."

"No Harry, no planning murder." The two chuckled at that, but Aayla went on quickly. *"And as for the Senate, they aren't happy."* Again Aayla shared some of her memories, at the same time gently remonstrated with Harry about how he should have been aware of them at the time she was watching them. But at the time, he had been busily discussing the Corellian front with Admiral D'Richelu and Alecto. *"Just because we can split our attention so much doesn't mean we need to lose track of what one or the others doing Harry. We need to be aware of that as more and more is piled on our plates."*

"What we need is a staff like what Garm has. I wonder if we could poach Sena..." Harry said, his tone musing even as their mental realm rippled with a feeling of apology and love towards Aayla, as well as self-recrimination on his part.

Aayla accepted his apology and the emotions that it brought, but laughed off his suggestion. *"I think that Garm would quit on the spot if we start poaching his people. Especially Sena. But maybe she could recommend someone else to us? You're right, I think we do need a full staff to help us. We've done a good job of letting Garm and the high command get on with things in terms of the war, simply acting as another voice on that counsel, and in our roles as captains of the Tyrant's Bane. The GDL has a PR department, but we need our own public relations secretary, our own political analyst, industrial analyst, and so on."*

"I think we also need to find a Jedi who can help us discern what is most important on the societal front. Or maybe a Jedi to lead such a staff, to help us to pick out what is most important." Harry mused.

Both of them allowed a wash of sadness to cause further discussion for a moment as they remembered how master Coleman Trebor, who had been handling the PR angle for the entire

Order. But he had died on Brentaal when that planet fell to the Confederacy, despite apparently killing both of the Dark Jedi facing him. They knew that the Republic was planning an offensive to reclaim the planet, but that wouldn't bring back the Jedi Master, or any of the others that had died when the planet fell to the Separatists.

"All right, that makes sense. But do you think we'll have time in the next few days to do so?" Aayla said skeptically.

"No. But I think we need to delegate looking for such people to someone else if we don't," Harry rejoined gently. *"You said it yourself, love. We need to start delegating even more than we already have."*

Aayla agreed to that, and to Harry's suggestion of contacting the temple and asking Master Nu if she could recommend a Jedi who would be able to do that kind of thing. Given that she was the keeper of the Jedi Archives, Jocasta Nu would know any Jedi who could sift through information on computers like that through the Force. It was an extremely useful skill, but with the Veil blanketing everything, it'd become one that was particularly difficult, just like peering into the future.

The discussion continued as both of them pondered on conquering a planet, wondering how that would go, both on the planet itself, and with the greater galaxy. The GDL was built, as they had always said, on defending itself, not conquest. Both Jedi ruefully admitted that this was something they probably should've brought up with Garm and the rest of the high command, as it had major strategic implications along with political ones. But it hadn't occurred to Aayla until they were already on board the shuttle and had taken off. Still, this was something they could rectify easily enough.

"I think... I think the best thing to do would be to figure out some way to hold a public referendum the moment we move into orbit over Deltro. As for the other planet, Mudar? We might need to use binding agreements, with representatives of the Republic there to witness, that we will only hold the planet for as long as hostilities with the Confederacy continue. If we also bring in our own defenses, which we will have to, because that planet is also on the Hylia Way which works as the easiest way in and out of the sector, the Republic might be willing to go along with things," Harry mused.

"If we bring in Republic officials to sell their own position on Deltro as well, that actually might work," Aayla mused. *"After all, when you get right down to it, the Republic might have more to offer them in the long term. Will be able to bring in fixed defenses faster, especially if we can break the blockade on Rendili. But in the long term, the Republic might be able to help their infrastructure repair itself better, and cheaper. And if we do that, we have a plan going forward for when we have to take the fight to other Confederacy systems, which will keep that issue from happening again."*

Harry agreed, and the lover went over the information they had on both planets, trying to find out why Mudar had joined the Confederacy rather than going with the majority of the sector. They also wanted to make certain that their memories were right about the rest of Deltro's government having been against the idea of joining the CIS. Which, thankfully they were.

They were still working on this when the shuttle broke out of the atmosphere and made towards the Tyrant's Bane. Given the ship's size, and the fact that it wasn't unloading anything at the moment, it wasn't in direct orbit over the planet. Instead the shuttle had to pass through the industrial area directly above the planet. While this would have resulted in some maneuvers, it should not have been at any speed, and the pair of lovers quickly pulled themselves out of their mental communications when the shuttle lurched to the side and then dove down, before whipping upwards quickly, far quicker than a shuttle of this type was supposed to move.

"Sorry master, Aayla, something just locked onto us!" Ahsoka shouted, gripping the controls hard, a wild grin on her face even as she flinched, knowing Harry would probably take the controls back. "I broke the lock but..."

"Keep evading, Ahsoka," Harry ordered, not making to take the controls back, instead concentrating on the sensors while Aayla concentrated on the Force, pushing out using their paired Force senses to try and discover the mind behind what was going on. "I have three concussion missiles launching towards us."

"This will be a great time for this shuttle to have some kind of defenses master," Ahsoka muttered, guiding the shuttle around and through a series of gantries, the space-going equivalent of a drydock. Judging by its size, it was originally designed to build the archer class forges, but was currently empty, portions of it being taken apart to be added on to other docks, enlarging them in turn.

This was a good thing, as when the explosion of a concussion missile hitting a gantry went off, no one was in the vicinity.

"Serenno space control, this is TB 1 on outbound flight to TB, we have come under attack. Repeat, we have come under attack. Concussion missiles launched at short range. One explosion, no injuries. We are evading," Aayla said from behind the pilot and copilot chair into the coms.

"Response team is already on its way, Master Secura. We won't tell you to keep the course you're on, but what we are sending you IFF information," the man on the other side said calmly. "Two teams, four Arrows heading your way, another two flights heading towards where the concussion missiles were launched from. We caught the launch, although we didn't catch them locking onto your shuttle."

"More concussion missiles inbound, same trajectory as the last time," Harry warned, looking at the sensors. "At least that means we're only facing one attempt on our lives right now."

He could feel his padawan waiver for a moment, looking over at him, but again Harry made no effort to take the controls back from her, showing a trust that buoyed Ahsoka's spirits more than any verbal response could have. He then smirked. "And, my young padawan, this shuttle does have an offensive weapon. Aayla and I. Keep evading as best you can, if the concussion missiles get close, we'll detonate them before they hit us."

Ahsoka nodded and then drove the shuttle forward even faster, aiming to bring the shuttle out and away from the dockyards and everything else cluttering near orbit around Serenno. For several moments, she was forced to put the shuttle through a series of complex maneuvers, the internal gravitic control of the shuttle shifting noticeably, the shuttle itself starting to issue a keening noise that hurt Ahsoka's montrals.

Three of the concussion missiles came close, slamming into bits of debris and construction droids and exploding on impact. They were so close that the shuttle should've been damaged, slowing it down so their fellows could catch up and destroy it. As the explosions occurred, however, a Force Shield rose in place around the shuttle as the explosions went off.

At the same time, Aayla reached through the Force, carrying several bits of floating debris left behind from those explosions into the path of two more concussion missiles, detonating them before they could hit Harry's shield.

And just like that, with a last twist around a large construction droids almost the same size as the shuttle, the ship broke out into open space. Ahsoka floored it even more now, the shuttle's engine straining under her orders. The remaining concussion missiles, four more of them, were put into a stern chase, and were easy meat for the Arrow starfighters that swooped down on them. "You're clear, TB 1!" One of the arrow fighter pilots said. "Scoot along back to your barn."

Rolling his eyes at that, Harry concentrated on the sensors again, watching what was going on behind them. Two pallets on a small freighter had opened up, one of them disgorging what looks like a defense satellite, linked to several concussion missile launchers. That's an interesting design..." He murmured aloud. "We might want to look into something like that. Linking concussion missile or proton torpedo satellites to single starfighters, it would make for one heck of a first punch."

Such satellites were extremely cheap in comparison to starfighters or anything larger. It was why they, and mines, were used so often in ambushes or around less wealthy planets. But they did have problems. They could only shoot their load once after which they didn't have enough internal space to carry more. The satellites were also easily destroyed by any competent starfighter pilot, let alone anything heavier. But enough of them could give someone a very bad day, as everyone in this war had learned by this point.

"Focus Harry," Aayla reproved gently, leaning over the chair and resting her chin on his shoulder as she watched the sensors, trusting Aayla to get them home. Even if she hadn't ever actually brought the shuttle down into a landing before. Aayla allowed a faint smile on her face as she

felt the young girl's appreciation for their trust, but kept all of her attention on the screen at present as the other pallet disgorged what looks like five vultures.

But whoever had designed the trap had overstepped a bit there as there were too many of them in too small a space. The Vultures could launch, but couldn't do so quickly, and the last two were blown up in the pallet by the avenging Arrows as they soared in. And even the others who had disgorged themselves couldn't do so quickly enough to activate their shielding before coming under fire.

As the last vulture blew up, Aayla shook her head. "Whoever thought this idea up was extremely bright in terms of how they engineered it, but failed on the execution side of things."

"True. But it is a sign that Serenno still isn't as free of spies and assassins as we would like." Harry grinned then, smacking his padawan lightly on the shoulder as the shuttle settled down gently into the hangar bay. "But I will say that it definitely served as a nice bit of excitement for the day. What do you think?"

Ahsoka laughed, and the trio left the shuttle quickly, even as the generator aboard died, overused by the maneuvers she'd had to pull.

OOOOOOO

"What you mean they're not on the planet any longer, Two!?" Acolyte One said to Acolyte Two, anger and resentment going through both of them as they used the hated monikers that Dominus had forced on them.

But they didn't curse him, oh no. That would be unthinkable. It had been Dominus who had opened up their minds to the weakness within the Jedi, how weak they had become under the so-called tutelage of their former masters. No, the trio of Acolytes took that hatred as they did all such, turning it to the purpose of gaining Dominus's respect, and thus earning those names back. Hence the even greater degree of normal anger in his voice as he growled at his companion.

Acolyte Two shrugged, having had more than an hour to go through the data and vent his own anger before meeting up with his fellows. "I do not know. All I know is that Skywalker and Windu are no longer on the planet. They and the 501st lifted off last night in dribs and drabs so that any observer missed it. We would still be ignorant but I got close enough to the command center to sense that there was no Jedi within the period if you look at the clones who are now guarding this planet, you can see their decals are different."

Acolyte Three felt none of the anger of his companions. Rather, he felt a sense of vindication. He had been assigned to act as a lowly porter at the spaceport, but now? It would be through his actions that they would be able to continue this mission, and eventually win back their names. "Then it is a very lucky thing that I spread so many tracking devices among the Republic

ships, isn't it? Unless they remain on Coruscant, we will have them soon enough. And if they are going to an active war zone, that will make our mission all the simpler, will it not?"

At that, the simmering rage and anger all three acolytes felt every moment of every day subsided slightly, and his two companions nodded to him in thanks. With that, all three of them turned their attention to their droid companions, hidden in various places around the planet. Orders began to go out, and late that night, a nondescript freighter jumped to hyperspace from Caaratos. The assassination of Master Mace Windu and Anakin Skywalker was still on. And woe betide anyone who got in their way.

OOOOOOO

When it came to it four days later, Harry and Aayla were both quite pleased with the command teams for the four aspects of this operation: themselves, the Rendili Sector Security Forces, the Rendili defense fleet and the Eighth Fleet. By this point, Admiral Niver and Master Ti were an excellent team, and could be trusted to get the timing for that aspect correct if they saw an opening. If not, again, it would be up to them to decide whether or not enough of the Confederacy ships had been pulled away from the blockade to allow them to punch through, or isolate what remained and defeat them in detail. The same could be said for the various local commanders. All of them answered to central command, but knew their forces and were eager to go toe-to-toe with the CIS rather than continue dancing around them.

And after speaking to them, Harry was pleased enough with Admiral Rustac and his command group, all of whom had been recommended by the Fourth Fleet's Dulnor. The Mon Calamari officers were professionals, and Aayla had given the ground commanders her okay as well, having met with them personally as Harry did the same with the Mon Calamari.

This separation had been deliberate. Harry would be able to get a feel for the abilities and effectiveness of the Mon Calamari under Rustac without Aayla's empathy, which wouldn't work over the Hypercom anyway. Not with complete strangers anyway. Aayla had been able to pick up things about Padme and a few of their other friends and Shaak Ti occasionally, but those were the exception, not the rule.

In contrast, in person Aayla's empathy would be a big help in vetting the ground commanders, as she and Harry had spent the past four days doing while the Tyrant's Bane moved around the D'Astan Sector, picking up gunboat divisions which would never reach the destination they thought they had been assigned to. Each of them needed to be vetted to be allowed aboard the Tyrant's Bane. While many of its secrets would be shown to the galaxy in this campaign, the big secret of the expanded space runes would need to be kept as long as possible.

But perhaps even more importantly, this would be the first time GDL troops engaged CIS troops on their own planet. One with a local CIS civilian population. The two of them wanted no issues on that score, and Aayla made certain that not only did everyone know the rules of engagement going in, but she could trust they would obey those rules.

Once that was done, in keeping with the overall Operation Trident, the Tyrant's Bane made its way through to where the Hylia Way clipped the outer edge of the Rendili sector. During this, they stuck to GDL space as much as possible, and deep space otherwise. Thus their appearance in the hyperspace lane leading into the Rendili Sector would come as a complete surprise, right before they started to batter through whatever hyperspace traps were on their way toward Mudar. The traps were not of a size to need anything special in terms of the Bane's abilities, as, unlike the GDL, such traps were made more from mines and vultures than anything heavier. Such things would not matter at all to the Tyrant's Bane.

As co-captains of the battleship, Harry and Aayla were on the bridge for the final jump that would take them into direct conflict with one of the known hyperspace traps set up by the CIS. This was the final moment, and building up to that moment, Harry and Aayla set about their duties. Aayla checking in with the rest of the crew to make sure everyone was ready to go, both in the ship and in the divisions of gunboats they had brought aboard over the past few days. Meanwhile, Harry went over all the information on the Rendili sector, and their target of Mudar, as well as going through the latest data dump from the GDL's high command on the overall strategic picture.

He was doing that as Aayla and Ahsoka both returned to the bridge after a round of meetings with the gunboat captains, but both paused in their steps, staring at Harry as she felt a spike of unease from him. "*Harry, what is it?*" Aayla asked mentally as she hurried over to him, frowning and looking at the galactic map he was studying.

"I don't know," Harry said aloud, looking at both his lover and his padawan, before turning back to the tactical hologram. The image changed, going back to their last strategic update from the day before, and then going forward. The differences were highlighted, then enlarged, separating into different areas of the holographic screen. "Something is off. Something here... It is big enough thing that I can still feel it through the Veil of the Dark Side..."

Aayla frowned, looking at the information herself, before closing her eyes, and reaching out with the Force. Almost instantly, she too could feel it, a building threat, not a physical one, not to them or their ship, but dread, great existential dread building in the future. Like some kind of horror was about to be unleashed. "Arjen, Orel, Casahk, Master Zaal, if you could join us over here, I believe we want some more opinions on this."

A wordless splash of thankful emotions rushed through Aayla from Harry at that, and he nodded firmly, gesturing Ahsoka forward too. "Look at this data, look at what changes. Can you feel what we are feeling? It could just be something that the veil is making us feel, something directed towards the two of us, but..."

However, all of the Jedi aboard the bridge reported the same thing, with Ahsoka going so far as to shiver in place as she explained what she was feeling. "I've never felt something so strong and yet so diffuse at the same time master. Great dread, a warning of something big, but I can't... there's nothing certain there."

Harry and Aayla looked at one another, and nodded as one. "Communications, hold on any calls. Including anything from the High Command. I think we need to get to the bottom of this before we launch the operation." He scanned the room, and picked out the most senior Jedi there, asking them to join Aayla and himself in the meditation room.

Moments later, Harry and Aayla stood on different sides of a circle, with Ahsoka by Harry's side. Just like before when Yoda was aboard, the others sat equidistant from one another in that circle, waiting patiently.

The two lovers reached out to the Force, not just the Force though, but their own connections with one another. Their memories of one another, the good times they had shared, their love most of all calling on the Light Side. As they projected the Force Guardians into being. The Force Light constructs exploded into being behind the circle, massive, glowing white projections of armored knights, complete with lightsabers.

This time, the Veil did not dissipate like oil on water as it had before. Instead, it clung on fighting back against the Light Side, trying to drown it out. But together, Harry and Aayla powered through it, grimacing at how much strength it was taking. But eventually the Veil could not withstand the natural weakness the Dark Side had when confronted by the Light.

And for just a few moments, the Veil was pressed back and away from the Jedi within the room.

As Harry and Aayla had thought, it wasn't a danger to the ship, it wasn't even a danger to anyone on board the ship. Rather, what dominated that exploration into the Force was a vision of the future. A planet, bright green with life, orbited by several dozen massive space stations. Space stations under attack, a planet burning. Burning, and death. Slow death to be certain, but death throughout the galaxy on a scale that had never been seen since the New Sith Wars. It was like that one planet would spell the doom of trillions in time.

Worse for Harry and Aayla though, was a familiar face. Padme was on one of the space stations, leading the defense alongside Zule and several Jedi that Harry had not met before. And all of them were doomed if this future came to pass.

Aayla shook herself out of the vision as the space station that Tricia had been on exploded, shaking her head and staring across the circle at Harry, who was recovering a bit slower than her, having been the one powering the Force Light constructs. "That, that was a very strong vision. Did everyone else see, a, a planet burning..."

"Thyferra," Casahk said, scowling. "I was there at one point, hunting down a murderer who had hoped to hide among the populace there. I would recognize that planet easily."

"And Padme was there to meet with representatives of the two Houses which rule the planet to talk about making certain that price hikes for back that didn't occur due to the war," Aayla recalled mentally to Harry, who still looked a little stunned by how much effort it had taken out of them to punch through the Veil that time.

He quickly got over it though, nodding his head a wave of sadness and horror going through their link as the strategic implications of the vision came to him faster than Aayla. "So, the CIS never really intended to limit this war, did they? This... they've been planning this for a long time. It's not a spur of the moment thing, thought up after Bonteri died. No, the CIS is going to fight this war without any mercy or rules whatsoever. That is going to have a lot of implications in the future."

Looking around at the others, he pushed himself to his feet. "But right now, we need to deal with what is going on now. And that means we need to cancel Operation Trident and turn this ship towards Thyferra. If we felt that initial dread when we saw the latest strategic data package, we might be the only ships in place to stop it."

Ahsoka moved over to a nearby hologram projector, connecting it to the one on the bridge quickly, zooming in on the Jaso sector. "You're right master, look at this. Lots of little attacks, all spread out, pulling the nearby Republic fleets that could defend Thyferra out of position and entirely out of the sector! The CIS would never be able to hold the planet, but if they were planning to just bombard from orbit... Does it even have a planetary shield generator?"

"No. It has some decent defenses, mostly against pirates, but the Vratix natives who work with the alhazi and their own kavam bacterial spores have never been all that at home with technology from what I know," Harry said, before admitting mentally that was precious little. He'd never been to that planet, and had have rarely ever actually needed even bacta himself from wounds.

Ahsoka already moved on, as Aayla worked with the other Jedi to tell the rest of the crew and the gunboat crews that there had been a change of plans. Harry meanwhile contacted Garm, while the extrication officers began to make out a plan. Within the hour, Operation Trident had been put on pause, and the Tyrant's Bane shifted, turning its attention towards the distant planet of Thyferra's as every sentient on board hoped that they would be in time.

End Chapter

This is the last of the setup type chapters. I had hoped to dive right into the war/action in this chapter, but, well, my combat scenes, most of which were around the Tyrant's Bane, fucking sucked gentlefolk. I just couldn't put them in. Further, I felt that Dominus would be able to tell Sidious was interested in Skywalker, and unlike Dominus in canon, would be more than willing to attack him despite Skywalker not being important just yet in any real manner. Hence that bit of plot. In the same vein, Sidious would, given the number of moving parts, be aware of the plot to attack Thyferra, and, while not having any care for others, would move forces in so at least, if the planet is attacked, he can make some more political hay from it.

I also wanted to show Quinlan and Komari in action, and that Harry and co. still need to deal with the occasional threat to their lives in terms of assassinations. As for what Quinlan and Komari are investigating, well... let that be a little test of your True SW knowledge. Not that

Disney sh*t, but the books made with love by real authors who understood the lore and enjoyed building on it, not spitting on it.

Regardless, I promise from this point on, we will be diving more into the war itself and action going forward. From now on, only mentions will be made of the growing GDL efforts to make itself into a government, and the issues there, though I might need to show what is going on in the Senate. The attack on Thyferra occurs, along with several other things, and the war continues on in various fronts.

I have also decided that this work doesn't get the love it deserves. Hopefully it will from now on, but with FILFy in direct competition, I doubt it. That being said, I will try to update it every four months from now on... we will see how that goes. Watch it never win ever again...